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Keywords: Deleuze; Nietzsche; improvisation; subversion; stratification

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Subversion and stratification: the importance of improvisation

Alistair Macaulay¹

Abstract

Unlike composition, improvisation offers performers greater flexibility and freedom. Improvisation subverts musical structures and considers the ethical implications of improvisation. This diminishes the status of mistakes, which serve as platforms for further improvisation. Improvisation resists and subverts traditional musical structures while using the same musical material and processes as composition. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's conceptual geometry of stratification and looking at the role of improvisation in their philosophy more generally, this article illustrates how improvisation and composition transform musical material in the same way while having different aesthetic aims. An improviser's aesthetic aims are not strictly-defined but are open-ended, subverting traditional conceptions of control and artistic genius. Besides witnessing how it subverts the musical structures that enable it, this illustrates the importance of improvising, in seeing the limits of a way of thinking and appreciating a multiplicity of perspectives.

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Introduction

During an interview with Free Jazz pioneer Ornette Coleman, Jacques Derrida was heckled off the stage. Unfamiliar with his wider philosophical project, Coleman's followers took umbrage with Derrida's analysis of pure spontaneity as a criticism of Coleman's practice. Coleman's improvisations were subversive, grounded in an aesthetic of the 1960s civil rights movement, challenging encultured musical norms about harmony, melody, form, and instrumentation. In criticising its spontaneity, Derrida seemingly challenged improvisation's capacity for subversion. Noting the aporia of pure spontaneity and negative freedom

Derrida hinted that improvisation employed the same processes and patterns as composed musical practices. In what sense, then, is improvisation subversive?

The audience's reaction does not reflect the convergence of Derrida and Coleman's thought. Although Derrida presses Coleman to explain improvisation's spontaneity and freedom, they both agree that improvisation is enabled by intense preparation, facilitated by patterns in the music and the habits of its practitioners. An improviser is not expected to create new musical elements like notes or rhythms. They arrange existing material spontaneously. Coleman answers that unlike composition, improvisation is a "democratic relationship".² In

¹ Deakin University.

² Timothy Murphy, "The Other's language; Jacques Derrida interviews Ornette Coleman, 23 June 1997", 319.

the liner notes of his seminal album, *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, Coleman instructs his fellow improvisors to play music not theory. Improvisors are not bound by the hierarchy of the composer and conductor mediating the contributions of orchestral musicians. In improvisation, there is a democratic relationship between the musician and the music being played.

Often perceived as anarchic and contrary to established musical routines, improvisation embodies an ethics of kindness and openness. While it resists the traditional Western hierarchy, practitioners are sensitive to the issue of freedom. Gary Peters quotes the saxophonist Anthony Braxton who warns against interpreting this freedom as a justification for violence, a being free to ignore or “kill” another’s contribution, writing that “this so-called freedom has not helped us a family”.³ Free improvisors are generous to one another’s ideas, not ignoring a contribution but using it as a platform for further improvisation. Peters aptly summarises that they demonstrate “a continuing commitment to a collectivity”.⁴

Improvisation challenges the ontological status of musical works. Unlike an orchestra’s replication of a musical work, improvisors must differentiate their improvisations. Improvisors cannot play it safe but must take risks. Here, the performance of a composition and the act of composing must be distinguished. Fidelity to the score drives classical performance. Here, musicians follow the musical work as precisely as possible, per the conductor’s instruction. By contrast, composing and improvising arrange and transform musical structures to produce a new musical work. This dictates the task of this article – to determine the sense in which an improvisation is subversive in distinction to composition.

This opposes Theodor Adorno’s analysis of jazz improvisation. Adorno separates classical

music from that of entertainment, criticising the latter for its standardised operation. Citing instances of the early swing orchestras, such as that of Paul Whiteman, Adorno criticises jazz improvisation on this basis. Despite its claims to novelty, jazz music depends on a series of “pre-digested” and expected patterns.⁵ Improvisation does not present anything new, but simply repeats what is already familiar. As such, its practice does not subvert musical structures – it repeats them. For Adorno, with its standardisation of musical patterns, improvisation is a form of pseudo-individualisation. Far from expressing themselves, improvisors do not have anything to say.

I agree with Adorno that habitually reacting to musical epithets does not challenge our appreciation of music and art more generally. In my view, irrespective of whether Adorno’s characterisation of jazz is accurate, improvisation has evolved out of the realm of entertainment to accomplish aesthetic goals of a different nature to that of composition. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s system of stratification, I argue that composition and improvisation transform musical material in the same way. Expanding this conceptual geometry with Friedrich Nietzsche’s discussion of habit exhibits how improvisation subverts the patterns that enable it. Besides clarifying an improvisor’s aesthetic aims, this illustrates how improvisation is subversive. Intentional and serendipitous improvisation challenges how we locate artistic genius. This demonstrates the importance of improvisation as a practice that endorses the appreciation of a multiplicity of perspectives.

Stratification

One might suppose that in its resistance to existing musical structures and the hierarchy of

³ As quoted in Gary Peters, *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Theodor Adorno, “On popular music”, 201.

the conductor's baton, that improvisation subverts musical structures in how it transforms musical structures. Although explaining the difference between reciting a composed work and improvising, locating subversion in improvisation's transformation of musical material, does not distinguish improvising from composing. The task of this section is to lay the groundwork to understand how musical material is transformed. Deleuze and Guattari's notion of stratification is useful here, as it describes the similarity between improvised and composed practices.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari elaborate a musical metaphysics of refrains, rhythms, meters, milieux, assemblages, territories and strata in which difference is ontologically primary. There are no identities, only assemblages, assembled multiplicities. The process of stratification responds to the problem of consistency, explaining how differential elements cohere. Stratification describes a processual reality and accounts for the relative stability of objects and their evolution. It is underpinned by the notions of the plane of consistency, the abstract machine, assemblage, double articulation, and territorialisation (and deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation).

Stratification and destratification are processes of becoming and transformation, taking place between two interdependent poles – the plane of consistency and the plane of organisation. Stratification describes an increase in organisation, a movement to the plane of organisation. Destratification does not describe a devolution into chaos, but a movement to the plane of consistency. This, as Sean Bowden describes, is a genetic medium of “yet-to-be-formed matter-in-motion”, existing and transforming alongside assemblages.⁶ It is not a primordial soup from which assemblages are sculpted, but the condition of their potentiality

to become–other, comprised of conjunctions of material flows.

Inseparable, and virtually indistinguishable from the plane of consistency, is the abstract machine. This is a principle of distribution that consolidates and differentiates the material flows of the plane of consistency, producing milieux, territories and strata. The abstract machine functions by means of coding and territorialisation. Coding describes a repetition that enables a point of order to germinate. Unformed matters are coded, trained, and retrained by a repetition, in milieux so that they behave in particular ways from particular impulses, describing an object's extended properties. While always of difference, Deleuze and Guattari distinguish two kinds of repetition in meter and rhythm. Meter, as Eugene Holland explains, is a “measured, homogenous repetition of the same”.⁷ This presents diverse instances of similar assemblages that populate strata. By contrast, rhythm is a repetition of difference that “ties together critical moments or ties itself together in passing from one milieu to another”.⁸ In short, rhythm is a repetition of difference that recapitulates difference and productive of a third body.

The distributive operations of the abstract machine result in concrete assemblages – the extended entities we encounter in everyday life. Embracing a tendency towards fixity and fluctuation, assemblages are immanent to the operations of the abstract machine, presupposing the processes of stratification and destratification. Intersecting milieux, measured and rhythmic repetitions, make the assemblage cohere structurally, but also cause it to transform. Assemblages embrace a regime of bodies and a regime of signs. Every assemblage, every milieu, is an assembled multiplicity composed of other bodies. However, these bodies embrace a series of signs “that express the relations be-

⁶ Sean Bowden, “Assembling agency”, 387.

⁷ Eugene Holland, *Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus*, 67.

⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Vol. 2: A Thousand Plateaus*, 313.

tween the bodies constitutive of the assemblage as well as the processes of development and change to which the assemblage is subject”.⁹

Transforming musical milieux

Stratification occurs by means of double articulation. This explains how assemblages imbricate an order of bodies and signs. The first articulation concerns its content, describing how fluid matter is stabilised to comprise a regime of bodies. The second articulation concerns how these bodies are expressed. Territorialisation describes the structuration of milieux stabilised in the first articulation, with a system of signs to become expressive. Deterritorialisation describes how milieu-components are disarticulated. Each articulation, however, is itself double, each with a form and substance. Although Deleuze and Guattari illustrate this with an example of sedimentary rock, let us take a more musical example with the double articulation of a musical note. In the first articulation, the substance of content is vibrating particles. Through repetition these are coded into the form of content, a certain kind of vibration that oscillates at a certain frequency to constitute a soundwave. In the second articulation, these noises are territorialised, overcoded to become musical. The form of expression is the structure of the musical note, how it is tied to social and cultural norms that make it musical, emerging from particular instruments in certain contexts, and the substance of expression is its execution.

An assemblage comes to be what it is by processes of territorialisation, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. Territorialisation and reterritorialisation describe the stabilisation of milieux into assemblages by establishing an immanent relation between the form of content and the form of expression. In deterritorialisation, milieu-components are dislocated from

an assemblage, and in this dislocation from the regime of signs, are asignifying until they are rearticulated anew. These are not successive movements but concurrent processes that describe an assemblage’s impulse to stability and to change.

Stratification sketches a complex, intersecting and interlocking system of milieux. With this brief outline, we can explain how improvisation transforms the patterns that enable it. In an improvisation, improvisors deterritorialise musical milieux from their history of sedimented usages to be rearticulated in the performance. Holland explains that improvisors will take a familiar tune, or collection of musical material and “de-code it by playing it a different way each time – sometimes to the point of making the once-familiar tune almost unrecognisable.”¹⁰ In the subsequent reterritorialisation, improvisors couple heterogenous milieux together in a way that resists the pre-existing musical structure. The improvisor’s performance presents a sound organisation, an assemblage of musical material that has been produced through this process of double articulation. The substance of content are various soundwaves. The form of content concerns how these soundwaves intersect. These pitches are deterritorialised from a former usage and reterritorialised in accordance with stylistic norms and aesthetic goals, the form of expression. The sounds performed are the substance of expression. Improvisors are not creating new notes or rhythms, but through this system of stratification, are transforming existing musical material.

The performance of a composition, by contrast, presents diverse instances of the same musical work. The minor differences that occur in separate performances do not dislocate or deterritorialise musical milieux to the same degree. This presents a metered repetition of

⁹ Bowden, “Assembling agency,” 387.

¹⁰ Holland, *Deleuze and Guattari’s A Thousand Plateaus*, 9.

the same. Here, we see the importance of the concept of rhythm to improvisation. Territorialisation is the transcoding and overcoding of a rhythmical relation insofar that it links a regime of bodies with a regime of signs. An improviser territorialises and is territorialised by musical material. Yet, metered repetitions enable improvisation. The student will strive to replicate scales through this bare repetition of the same until they reach a certain level of proficiency, where they might start practising certain etudes and musical works. When a particular threshold of technical skill is acquired, as Holland elucidates, “the ratio of difference to repetition increases exponentially”, allowing the improviser to deterritorialise and reterritorialise musical milieux.¹¹

Since it is anathema in improvisation to simply repeat what has been played before, Jeremy Gilbert compellingly argues improvisation has an increased aptitude for deterritorialisation.¹² This provides an initial sense in which improvisation is subversive. Dislocating musical material from established usages, an improviser uncovers novel musical relations and transforms existing musical structures. Although explaining how improvisation transforms musical material to a greater extent than performance or extemporisation, this cannot be taken as a hallmark peculiar to improvisation. Composers deterritorialise and reterritorialise existing musical structures to produce new musical works. Whether improvisation’s capacity for subversion is unique cannot be found in its transformation of musical milieux alone. To uncover how subversion in composition and improvisation differ, we must account for the aesthetic goals of their practitioners.

Aesthetic aims in improvisation and composition

Improvisors continue to practise not just technical material to improve their skills as an instrumentalist, but rehearse melodic, harmonic and rhythmic patterns that reflect their aesthetic tastes. With this practice, it is implausible to say that improvisors do not have general aesthetic aims. Indeed, it is by these metered repetitions that improvisors maintain an idiosyncratic style. Further, these habits enable an improviser to make sense of the unforeseen and unexpected. Rhythmical relations, underpinning the processes of territorialisation and deterritorialisation, speak to the novelty in improvisation and composition, and their capacity for transformation. To explain how rhythmical relations arise and demonstrate improvisation’s peculiar aptitude to subvert existing musical structures, I expand the Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts of meter and rhythm with Nietzsche’s distinction between short-lived and permanent habits.

The issue of freedom alluded to in the Derrida-Coleman debate appears in Nietzsche’s discussion of artistic action. Nietzsche writes that every artist knows that despite “letting themselves go”, they must “obey a thousand laws” in their trained behaviour.¹³ Seeing its use in creative processes, Nietzsche distinguishes permanent habits, which stifle and inhibit creativity, from short-lived habits which provide ways of escape. Permanent habits are described as a “tyrant”, condensing behaviour to fit a particular mould. Noting a metaphysical tendency towards this kind of neat organisation, Nietzsche is grateful for all his “misery and sickness, and to whatever is imperfect in me, because such things leave me a hundred back-

¹¹ Holland, *Deleuze and Guattari’s A Thousand Plateaus*, 9.

¹² Jeremy Gilbert, “Becoming-music: the rhizomatic moment of improvisation”, *Deleuze and Music*, 126.

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 188.

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 295.

doors through which I can escape from permanent habits” and making difference and creativity possible.¹⁴ Imperfection comes about from the complex of backdoors as these habits intersect. Short-lived habits nourish Nietzsche’s disposition, providing new insight and depart peacefully, replaced by some other habit.

This is suggestive of productivity of rhythm – giving insight into novel ways differences can be coupled. Conversely, permanent habits present diverse instances of the same, reflecting the dogmatism of meter.¹⁵ However, rhythm is not identical to short-lived habits, nor is meter equivalent to permanent habits. Rhythm describes the back-doors that allow permanent habits to be derailed, extended and modified. Amidst a complex of stratified routines backdoors arise, providing opportunities for transformation in short-lived habits. With these short-lived habits, and through a system of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, improvisors and composers realize novel ways of thinking about musical material. Besides explaining how rhythmical relations arise, this denotes how patterns underpinning musical improvisation and composition are extended and warped by their creative processes.

In the parallel between Nietzsche’s backdoors and Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of rhythm, we witness the similarities and differences between improvised and composed practices. Deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, rhythms that decode, transcode and overcode account for the evolution of musical material and how a performer impacts and is affected by the music. At a critical point a poor performance of a musical work simply becomes another musical work. Improvisation and composition, in developing a new musical work, begin at this juncture, where the modification of musical structures becomes possible and where the ratio of rhythm to meter

is maximised. How rhythmical relations arise has ramifications for the aesthetic goals of the improvisor and the composer.

Gilbert argues that an “orchestra works to generate the most sonic power possible and to contain it most rigidly: the whole orchestra tied to the univocity of a single theme.”¹⁶ This cannot be taken to literally. The discussion of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation suggests that compositions are constructed of diverging and intersecting themes and patterns. Gilbert’s point is that orchestras are composed and have a specific goal in mind. Namely, emulate and embody the musical ideas contained within the composer’s score. Intuitively, then, composers write musical works that can be repeated. More precisely, in a composition, a composer tries to accomplish a particular kind of rhythmical relation. The rhythmical relation between musical milieux denotes an aesthetic goal for the orchestra in performance. Of course, this will be interpreted in various ways by different conductors and orchestras. This can be extended to contemporary compositions that embrace indeterminacy. Here, composers specify a particular rhythmical relation but does not necessarily instruct performers to adhere to stratified musical patterns, playing certain themes at certain times. Nevertheless, graphic scores and other non-traditional composition techniques, prompt the performer towards a particular kind of rhythmical relation.

Improvisors and composers have different aesthetic aims. The improvisor does not have the luxury of time to critique and rework their ideas. This is no trivial difference, but it does not follow that they have no aesthetic goals. Indeed, and as the discussion of habit alludes, improvisors adhere to musical styles like jazz and maintain individual idiosyncrasies. Peters compellingly argues that an improvisor tries

¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 313.

¹⁶ Gilbert, “Becoming-music,” 125.

¹⁷ Peters, *Improvising Improvisation*, 4.

to preserve their rehearsed patterns.¹⁷ While I concur with Peters, it is important to note that the focus shifts from their determinate aesthetic aims to how these might be transformed and rethought. Instead of trying to bring about a particular rhythmical relation, by inserting metered patterns in a dynamic performance environment, improvisors open a multitude of backdoors. The attention is not on a particular transformation of musical milieu, but the backdoors and capacity for short-lived habits. Ira Gitler describes John Coltrane's saxophone improvisations as "sheets of sound", superimposing harmonic structures on top of each other.¹⁸ These allude to a myriad of musical routes that could be explored. Coltrane's solos sound like "sheets", instead of discrete, coherent musical themes because he refuses to isolate one musical idea but fosters a multitude of backdoors. Backdoors underpin the dynamism of improvisation, opening musical material and its practitioners to change. There are instances of improvisation that are repetitive, quoting examples of students rehashing the solos of luminaries. The notion of backdoor, giving rise to rhythm, explains how an improvisation is exciting. Conversely, it explains how improvisation can be familiar while being spontaneously produced. In these cases, no new backdoors are engendered.

Capacity for subversion

The system of stratification, and the differing aesthetic aims of composers and improvisors outline the sense in which their respective practices are subversive. A composition is subversive in its transformation of musical milieu with respect to social and cultural strata. Improvisation transforms milieu in a similar way while threatening the composer's supposed control in two respects. First, improvisation subverts notions of artistic genius. Us-

ing the same musical patterns, improvisation and composition operate via deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. As the analysis of habit indicates, improvisors are more open to being transformed themselves, from moment-to-moment, as they territorialise musical material. Suggestively, Deleuze and Guattari write that "to improvise is to the join with the World."¹⁹ This inverts Adorno's criticism of improvisation as pseudo-individualisation. An improvisor opens themselves up to change and considers the intersecting milieu and territories of which they are themselves composed. For Deleuze and Guattari improvisation is a process of de-individualisation.

The criticism that an improvisor has nothing considered to say supposes that with more time to rework and hone the musical work, the composer has more control. With this it locates artistic genius within this control. Whereas improvisors have their habits extended and modified by the circumstance, composers control a collection of permanent habits, the conjunction and intersection of which manifest specific aesthetic aims and germinate a particular rhythmical relation. Control, here, denotes some capacity that guards against certain transformations. Given the similarity of their practice, improvisation makes the challenge that composers are not in complete control. Symphonies are not composed in their entirety and subsequently written down. Like improvisors, composers respond to the demands of action, affected by the development of the work.

Secondly, improvisation is subversive in its aesthetic aims. This dispels with the criticism that improvisors do not have anything to say. Stratification provides a system that explains how pre-existing musical structures, repetitions of meter, enabled improvisation. At a critical point, as these patterns interconnect, rhythmical repetitions become possible. Impro-

¹⁸ Val Wilmer, *As Serious as Your Life*, 35.

¹⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 363.

visors maximise opportunities for short-lived habits in musical material and in themselves. In this sense, an improviser is making it up as they go along. Their aesthetic impulse is to open backdoors.²⁰ Because of its spontaneity, an improviser cannot have concretely-defined aesthetic goals. In opening opportunities for change, improvisors are open to unexpected and unforeseen interjections.

Territorialisation, for Deleuze and Guattari, is an impersonal process. As such, rhythm need not be intentional but can be serendipitous. Depending on the musical genre and social conditions to which it adheres, improvisation is open to impersonal contributions. This speaks to the risks of improvisation, of stagnating into a metered repetition of the same and of being incoherent. The composer expresses their intentions and aesthetic aims in their composition. The composer's actions are geared towards a metered repetition – performances that present their transformation of musical milieu. Maximising its capacity for rhythm, improvisation occurs intentionally and serendipitously, forcing the audience to rethink creativity and artistic genius. Given that territorialisation ties bodies with signs, its capacity for spontaneous change is expressed immanently and is not mediated by the authority of a conductor.

The importance of improvising

Improvisation's unsettling power to subvert musical structures does not stem from how it transforms musical milieu, but the ways in which the improvisation can serve as a platform for further improvisation. This is why Holland describes its performance "like an arrow in flight ... freed from both its point of origin ... and its point of impact."²¹ What is subversive is not the deterritorialisation and

reterritorialisation of milieu, but how this is achieved. Like a composer, an improviser relies on their permanent habits. In both instances, a rhythmical relation is engendered to develop a new musical work. Composers use their permanent habits to set forth future repetitions carefully and rigidly – the composition functions as a permanent habit. There is a stability of composition that the improviser eschews. Improvisors use their permanent habits to get the improvisation to a critical point where its backdoors and rhythmical relations give rise to a complex of short-lived habits so that it takes on a life of its own. The stability of permanent habits is used to engender the instability of short-lived habits.

Generating backdoors and letting go of control demonstrates the importance of improvisation. Improvisors embrace an ethics of generosity and openness to other points of view that allow them to interrogate the impacts of their habituated behaviour and to see how these habits arise. In calling improvisation democratic, Coleman insinuates that an improviser is doing philosophy. Improvisors consider how their contributions affect the collective, and the collective's constraints on what the individual can perform. Although there are soloists, an improvisation is not controlled by a sovereign individual. It is democratic insofar that all its contributors work to make the improvisation cohere as a collective.

Through the alteration of musical patterns, and the improvisor's habits, improvisors learn about musical material and about themselves. Backdoors and short-lived habits serve as opportunities that take us from one established routine to another. Turning permanent habits into short-lived habits, improvisors ask how and why permanent habits arise and what they can become. The backdoor establishes a relation between musical ideas in a way that inter-

²⁰ David Bell observes that improvisation is characterised by its "open-endedness." ("Improvisation as anarchist organization", 1013).

²¹ Holland, *Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus*, 104.

rogates why and how certain patterns arise under particular conditions, and what they can turn into. Improvisation is important because it provides a map of backdoors to see the converges and divergences of various ways of thinking. The backdoors of improvisation delineate the limits of a particular habit. The significance of improvisation lies in its instability. It embraces an ethic of openness and involves a generous attitude towards change. Improvisation illustrates how stratified ways of thinking can be subverted and prompts an appreciation for other points of view and how one might think differently.

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