

Improvisation and Identity: A Qualitative Study

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Introduction

This paper discusses how the construction and representation of identity can be observed within improvisational practice. Based on qualitative idiographic case studies,¹ it is an analysis that explores the psychological characteristics of improvisation and their significance. It describes a type of musical meaning associated with the ongoing and cyclical process of self-construction and representation: where identity is negotiated within the dialectical phenomena of this particular musical activity. To these ends, the analytic method used is one appropriate for the exploration of music as an experienced phenomenon.²

Since Joseph Kerman's book, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology*, in 1985, analytic musicology has undergone a thorough critique of the philosophical and epistemological assumptions that provide its basis for constructing knowledge and understanding. Additionally, the analytic influence of disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and psychology has led to a significant review and improvement of the aims and methods of empirical musicology.³ A great deal of contemporary musicology and ethnomusicology contextualises such analysis within more post-structuralist informed approaches. As Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist state, "after being absorbed with issues of method and technique [. . .] analysis is moving outwards to embrace the issues of value, meaning, and difference" (xii). As such, the question of meaning has come to emphasise the texts of musical *practice* rather than just musical *texts*. At the heart of this shift is a redefinition of ideas about individual consciousness through a questioning of the relation between the self and the social brought about by post-structuralism. This change is also integral to the rationale behind the analytic orientation of this paper. Additionally, it is important to note that further steps are taken not only towards the texts of musical *practice*, but also *into* the associated psychological and experiential dynamics of practice, thus legitimizing an idiographic approach with its focus upon the experiences of individuals. As will be clear from the methodology, the analytic emphasis here is the "psychological text" rather than the "musical text."

It will become evident that the notion of dialectical interplay, where apparently oppositional forces, concepts and qualities co-exist and dynamically interact, is of particular significance to this paper. Bearing this in mind, it is useful to note that the interacting forces and various continua described fall within a paradigm of both/and relationships rather than binary and oppositional either/or relationships.⁴ The exploration of dialectical phenomena associated with the musical encounter calls for an analytic method adapted to and respectful of the constructive nature of the interactions between improvising musicians. To facilitate this, a hermeneutic and idiographic analytic approach is adopted so that individual and distinct instances of perception and states of awareness can be explored. Following, and in deference to, Kristeva's notion of *semanalysis*,⁵ the aim is a study of the *productivity* in musical communication, and looks to the interactions (their type and function) belonging to *experiences* of music.

Methodology

The method of data collection used is adapted from an educational model known as Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR). IPR is a training method used to develop interpersonal skills and self-awareness. Developed by Norman Kagan, it uses videotape recording and playback to allow people to reflect on how they interact. Commonly used to train nurses and counsellors, it helps the student become more conscious of the relation between intentions and behaviour. The procedure involves the trainee being videotaped attending to a patient or in session with a client. Following this, the trainee is asked, upon viewing the video, to stop the tape and comment on the interaction. The incidents captured on video trigger the inner thoughts and feelings experienced at the time of the original interaction. The distancing provided by this method enables frank discussion of issues, which ideally leads to an honest self-appraisal. It is a self-reflective method that draws on the individual's experiences, feelings, thoughts, and processes. The open-ended method of facilitating self-reflection in this model provided a central influence upon the procedure that was used. Of the many different methods by which qualitative analysis is carried out—for

example, by participant observation, semi-structured interviews, keeping diaries, etc.—the combination of freely improvised musical activity with an adapted version of IPR was considered an especially appropriate method.

The experimental method required two musicians to freely improvise a piece of music together. Given a time limit of half an hour, they improvised until they felt it appropriate to stop. Upon playback of a performance's recording, each musician was asked to individually comment on anything that they remembered thinking or feeling during the performance itself. The aim was to encourage individuality and the disclosure of subjective and personally significant aspects. Each participant's comments were recorded and transcribed. The final portfolio of data consisted of two transcripts annotated in relation to performance-time; a description of the musical events, again with timings; a commentary of my own thoughts and observations taken during the performance; a recording of the piece; and a biographical summary of each participant. This experimental model allows participants to enter into a dialogue with the music and themselves based on the recording's ability to re-evolve the thoughts and feelings of the encounter; this is further supported and validated by the close proximity of the event to reflection upon it. A total of nine studies were carried out and documented.

The analytic method involved working primarily with the transcripts to carry out an "interpretative phenomenological analysis" or IPA⁶ (Smith 123). The complexity exhibited by each transcript, its subtleties, detail, ambiguity, contradictions, etc., are valued qualities in this form of analysis. They are focused upon in order to aid the interpretation of each participant's "story" (by virtue of the way such aspects of speech function to rupture and fragment more obvious and seemingly straightforward meanings). Initially, the transcripts were read many times over to establish a high degree of familiarity, augmented by my presence during the performance, with the aim of making a strong connection with the participant's experiences. The first stage of the analysis⁷ involved underlining key words within the text and annotating any interesting and/or significant points. Summary terms and descriptive phrases were then written in the margins to begin identifying emerging themes. These were listed separately and then ordered based on prominence within the texts. These themes, always linked with specific quotations and instances within the transcripts, were then considered in relation to each other—exploring the inevitably interrelated nature of emergent themes, clarifying key areas of importance and ways in which main themes move between seemingly unrelated sub-themes. In this case, dealing with two interrelated texts and a mutually produced experience (the musical "object," documented by a recording and descriptive analysis) rather than a semi-structured interview with a single respondent, further stages of analysis were necessary. Having considered the two transcripts individually, the emergent themes were considered alongside each other to explore the relationship and interactions between participants. In order to provide further support and insight into themes associated with interactive qualities, musical events were then also considered in relation to the transcripts. Finally, master themes were established under which related emergent themes and sub-themes were linked and drawn together.⁸

PART I

Improvisation as Self-invention

Free Improvisation, with its roots in the American Experimental tradition, European avant-garde and the Free Jazz of the 1960s, refuses many of the traditional definitions of Western music. In addition to the conflation of composer-performer roles, it demands a relaxation of conscious control and emphasises process over and above structural design and specifically located broader cultural function. These factors encourage a potential for higher and more varied levels of experiential awareness. Through the immediacy and demands of the evolving musical situation, the needs and aspirations, both musical and interpersonal, of the performer/composer become fore-grounded. On the basis of this, one can contend that the interactions and processes shaping the musical content are connected in some way with what, at this point, can be loosely termed self-invention.

In his article "AMM and the Practice of Self-Invention," Eddie Prévost provides a useful description of the idea of self-invention (9-29). He explains how the improvisational activities of the group AMM reflected the needs and aspirations of the musicians involved. He suggests that for each of the members of AMM, identity was implicitly acknowledged as something offered to the group with openness towards how roles would form and develop.⁹ The discipline and commitment involved is organised around the ways in which individuals exercise the freedom to assert *and* subordinate themselves:

There is a tacit acknowledgement that AMM's strength comes from each member

allowing other voices to impinge upon individual aspirations and sensibilities. No one is subdued or subordinated unless they allow themselves to be. Fundamental to this experience is the maintenance and development of a sense of “self” that can bear, even enjoy, sublimation—but does not fear annihilation. (25-6)

Prévost’s description cites heurism, dialogue, and experimentation as the guiding practices of improvisational activity. However, it is the notion of self-invention which is understood to contribute to music’s content and identity by holding off the development of orthodoxy, emphasising individual responses to continually evolving musical situations.

Approaching the self as a reflexively constituted and ongoing project—through which we learn to situate ourselves within the world in order to enjoy some kind of functional orientation and relatedness within the self-other dialectic—improvisational practice can be understood as a short-term and localised setting in which a musically mediated instance of the self-other dialectic can be determined. Although an apparent mirroring or playful enactment of weightier and more consequential realities, improvisational experience can, nevertheless, at certain times, contain especially tangible and significant qualities.

Analysis

The experimental evidence and analysis that follows helps amplify and support this initial framework of the self in improvisation and is observed within a web of relational dynamics and in the characteristics of its interactions. The relational basis emerges from the participants’ descriptions of how particular actions, emotions, and thoughts are connected with each other and to other aspects of the event. These can be categorised as existing between the individual and the musical object (most often in relation to its formal content), and between the presence, contributions, and instrument, of the other performer. A more inward dynamic is apparent in descriptions of emotional content, desires, internal conflicts, perceived needs, the relationship with the body, and with the respondent’s own musical instrument.

Relational Categories

Musical Object

Although linked with all the relational categories that emerge from the analysis, this relational dynamic is especially present across an axis of socially determined characteristics on the one hand, and more individually discrete elements on the other. For example, musical content is described with a sense of ownership and personal attachment in some instances and at other times as belonging to the other participant. Additionally, straddling and transcending both the personal and the social, apparent autonomy is attributed to the created musical object during occurrences of musical synergy.

Heart/Mind

Other accounts from the transcripts reveal content concerned with the emotional vicissitudes of the encounter. These tend to cluster around the consequences of individual aesthetic preference and certain emotional needs. Tensions arise where the desire for a “successful” interaction meets with more instinctual modes of self-expression (either within the individual or across musical interactions). Due to their more regressive nature, these instinctual modes encourage less negotiation and compromise and tend to flow against the more intellectual demands of interactive, aesthetic, and idealised goals and preferences.

Body

In contrast with such inner machinations, the next emergent category expresses the event’s physicality through the body and, in particular, its role within aspects of production. Its relevance to improvisational experience is described in terms of limitations, connection with experimental techniques, and as a site of experience. Understood as an “instrument” that fundamentally mediates experience, it is described as something that must first be “warmed-up” and “tuned-in”:

and I was trying to relax and sit comfortably . . . and it did take, it took a few minutes for everything to subside and just relax into what we were doing. (TLNS - TL 0’18)

I found this time, a very short space of time to “tune-in” and relax, erm . . . Although I like a long period to calm down and relax, it was the right place to start today. (NWDA - NW 0’39)

The body as the instrument of action and effect is revealed through its application and extended use to facilitate surprise and arbitrary content:

I started just using this trigger [on the trombone] wiggling my thumb quite naturally and I remember thinking that it’s something that can’t be done on mine. (DSDA - DS 8’52)

I found it interesting and different to try playing just by placing my hands over the keys in any haphazard way, just to see what notes came out. (NWDA - 15’15)

That was when I was doing the plectrum against my finger, finger-nails . . . I thought I’d try and do something a bit different and try and get as many different sounds out of it as I could. Which wasn’t too many but I was doing it against my knee, and my watch, and my teeth, and then against the guitar. (TLNS - NS 1’01)

As well as its physical potential for new musical possibilities, the body is also experienced and defined through limitations. Although the boundaries of physical existence are obviously continual and implicit, the following quotes reveal such boundaries in respect to musical production:

I remember when I got into that thing that I was feeling quite out of breath, in some way a physical limitation . . . and I remember that throughout the piece I was conscious of leaving gaps because I had to take a breath. Sometimes I used this to stop the musical idea and to do something different but this time I wanted to carry on the idea, so I took a breath and carried on what I was doing before. (DSDA - DS 1’58)

I remember at this point being all the way down the slide and thinking that I wouldn’t be able to go lower but I was surprised that the note went lower . . . it surprised me physically. (DSDA - DS 13’24)

Instruments

References to musical instruments extend the characteristic of the event’s physicality. There is a tendency for comments concerning musical instruments to focus on moments when they do not “work,” where limitations are encountered, or when objective considerations, such as aesthetic or musicological evaluations, receive priority. Additionally, comparisons of differences and similarities between instruments occur alongside more involved and personally reflective comments.

Continuing the theme of experimentation, the opportunity to explore and try new and spontaneously discovered techniques is again a common reference, and is specifically connected with the role of the instrument:

I found all these different keys here [demonstrates]—so many different sounds I thought it was great. I enjoyed investigating that bit. (NWDA - NW 2’24)

*I think one thing that you do notice is that with the guitar, having a reasonable range, if you concentrate on the bottom strings and then whiz up to the higher end it creates a very different mood. It’s good, I like it . . . still. (DSDA - DA 9’00)

In terms of practical musicianship, the benefits of improving confidence, instrumental knowledge, and practical skills are increasingly understood within music education. In the following revealing and detailed comment some of the issues concerning this form of musical learning are both raised and answered:

I found it interesting, good that I found so many sounds on the clarinet that I never knew were there before. On the saxophone after doing free improvisations I’ve been able to discover so much about how the instrument works . . . er, I think as a result I feel more in control of the instrument because I know it a lot better . . . and I suppose less worried about making mistakes, partly because they don’t seem so bad if I make them perhaps. I think it’s far too much of my classical conditioning to get a perfect piece—and I think I

started to discover the same things on my clarinet and I'm rather pleased about that because I was a bit concerned about bringing my clarinet because I didn't think I'd be so good on it. I consider the saxophone to be my "improvisation" instrument—my saxophone is the one for jazz and improvising and clarinet is the one I play classical on. I don't mix the two, but I'm pleased I'm doing so. Hearing the recording I don't think it compromises my tone which is always the thing I'm concerned about. (NWDA - NW 6'58)

Mentioned earlier and as with the previous quote (*), many instrumental references emphasise productive concerns. The following example demonstrates the link between such an emphasis in terms of anticipation and mental planning and the instruments involved:

Actually at the beginning I was trying to envisage the different sounds that the instruments make. Trying to imagine the possibilities the clarinet's got compared to a guitar—thinking what single notes could come out of it and comparing it to what I could get out of a guitar. (NWDA - DA 0'05)

It is significant this develops into an awareness of the two instruments' technical and productive differences and similarities and their impact upon the musical interaction.

I'm very aware of the fact that there are two very different instruments. Guitarists tend to stick to notes that are fairly close together, that's because of the technical reasons for it really and probably tend to arpeggiate less . . . in some ways that makes playing with this type of instrument difficult, if you're trying to copy or play the same type of thing. I don't think I really thought about notes very much while we were doing that, I was more conscious of how we would interplay. (NWDA - DA 9'08)

Continuing this emphasis on production, in the interactive dynamics of the improvisation, the awareness of difference between instruments is central to achieving musical unity. Attempts to "meet" musically are achieved by finding and deriving instrumental similarities and exploiting them:

What I was hoping to do there, not knowing much about a trombone, but I presume you can slide from one note to the other and I was trying to do that hoping that David would do that on his trombone. I suppose it wasn't totally obvious at all but that was the hope, it didn't quite work that way. (DSDA - DA 10'02)

What I'd done there was to de-tune the guitar so as to match the trombone in depth of pitch. I wanted to carry on, I was probably a bit frightened of leaving too long a gap at some points, I wanted to leave gaps for David to play on his own and for me to play very little but I didn't want the danger of it ending too soon because I was enjoying it. (DSDA - DA 11'02)

Partner

The overriding characteristic of this relational category is the presence and working-out of an aesthetic of interaction (described by Charles Ford as improvisation's "interactionist ethic").¹⁰ This is articulated through comments that place great emphasis and value upon moments variously described as communication, interplay, dialogue, and unity.

I think you derive some kind of satisfaction from the fact the person you're playing with responds in the way you'd hope they would . . . I was thinking to try and not force Neil but was hoping that he would return with something rhythmic rather than actual pitches, and fortunately he did. Set it off to a good start anyway. (NWDA - DA 2'32)

That section there with the phrases together, then the pauses together . . . That was quite interesting because the two things interplayed together, without looking at each other the phrases and pauses came together at the same time. I quite enjoyed that, that's the intangible essence of what is music and interplay I suppose, that you can do that. That you can actually pin-down why—for me that was one of the best bits—of actually playing together. (NWDA - DA 17'38)

Part of this was a real relief when I, we actually, we were like, as if we were singing to

each other and yet we both had something different to say and yet it was like echoing in a way . . . and it was really, very, I don't know, seemed very natural and quiet . . . and . . . I think I felt completely at ease for the first time then. (TLNS - TL 4'23)

Thoughts reflecting the initial “sorting out” of the interaction range from comments concerning whether one should “play to fit in a tonal way rather than just play sounds that felt physically right to play” (DSDA - DS 0'16) to anxieties and apprehension regarding “the thought of [the] relationship and whether it would work out” (NWDA - NW 0'02). In this performance, practical devices of manipulation (employing traditional musical cues such as accompanying figures and imitation) follow the initial phase of questioning, which aim to establish a sense of balance and dialogue:

Yeah, again that bit's the same thing, me trying to provide a rough rhythmic framework for him to play over, and David's done that well really and then interestingly it's become a kind of interplay thing . . . and I think that worked as well. (DSDA - DA 2'41)

At this point I must admit that I was trying to create some kind of chordal atmosphere. I was thinking, hurry up and play something . . . it seemed like a long time before he joined in. I wasn't really intending to play some kind of solo section; I wanted it to be an interplay. (NWDA - DA 14'32)

The harmonics and just the plucking of the strings there I wanted in some way . . . to make the same sound or in some way . . . began to sing and then stop as though I had been plucked and then dampened or something . . . and it was quite hard trying, I was trying to follow the notes and sing but not quite. (TLNS - TL 6'46)

Oh that's right . . . we swapped here. After he'd played on his own for a while I took over the thing of responding to that afterwards, a bit like a traditional jazz thing of taking eights. (DSDA - DS 7'41)

The consequences of such interactions were considered in more detail in the case study that follows where a clash of approaches leads at first to compromise, then to annoyance, and finally to furtive antagonism. When the pursuit of successful interaction is hindered a number of emotional, musical, and intellectual consequences develop. Examples include:

an increased desire to know what is going on in the partner's mind;

I think at this point I was trying to get a breathing sound by scraping and er . . . I think the effect's good but I was aware of thinking will Neil know that I'm trying to make a breathy sound. (NWDA - DA 13'53)

But I knew that I could only just hear how the chords were changing, I was wondering whether Mick could hear . . . so I was wondering could he hear or not. (MBRL - RL 12'14)

anger and resentment;

I think that by this time I thought that maybe . . . not that it should have been rounded off . . . but that maybe it should of really stopped by then and that when Dave came in again I was almost a bit angry . . . I don't know if it was this occasion or the next one, but I suddenly came back in very, very loudly—I could have just stopped but it was almost as if the anger had channeled back into the music and I just played a loud and angry thing. I was aware of playing against what he was doing rather than with him. (DSDA - DS 9'20)

There's a comment I can't get out of my head, it might go if I say it . . . erm . . . erm . . . I don't know whether it happened right at the start or very early on, something along the lines of either knowing where the natural endings are and something about the natural spaces as well . . . er . . . almost resenting Dave in a way because of this and I did feel that Dave didn't stop very much. I feel a bit bad about it really because I was trying to get it out of my mind but it just didn't seem to go. I feel bad about being slightly annoyed with Dave and not allowing myself to be as free as I would like to have been. I did try and take some breaks during it and stock up again or “tune-in” Dave kept playing and I felt

compelled to start again shortly after I'd stopped, coming in perhaps earlier than I would have done. Perhaps I should have had more conviction and held out longer . . . yeah, that's it. (NWDA - NW 3'11)

and finally, a self-conscious sense of one's own contribution;

I remember times when Dave had been playing quite a lot and then he'd suddenly dropped out on several occasions, that being the first one. I felt a bit self conscious about playing and I felt a pull to drop out myself. (DSDA - DS 2'14)

The *relationship* between the players upon the development of the music is absolute and integral. So much so that, in the second last example, after a participant takes the music in a direction contrary to the other's wishes, and due to the priority placed upon maintaining an interaction by his fellow participant, he is able to exert a noticeable degree of influence over the direction of the music and the other individual: "Dave kept playing and I felt compelled to start again shortly after I'd stopped, coming in perhaps earlier than I would have done. Perhaps I should have had more conviction and held out longer" (NWDA - NW 3'11).

Environment

In the studies carried out, this final relational category is referred to twice. Both instances involve shifts of awareness: on the one hand, from an absorbed unawareness to a clear distinction of the room's acoustics, and on the other, from a vague "tuning-in" of awareness to a heightened sense of the room's sounds. The first example, discussed in detail in the second study below, was the result of a surprising and intrusive musical element (a "distortion note") and seemed to increase the level of the participant's objective perceptions. The second example occurs early in the improvisation as the participant senses that his partner is about to start:

I found this time, a very short space of time to "tune-in" and relax, erm . . . just before Dave started playing I sensed that it was about to start. It's like suddenly I became aware of the sounds in the room, erm . . . particularly aware of Dave's amp, it's as if it had just been turned up a lot just ten to fifteen seconds before we started. That time always feels to me like—right, we're about to start and I'm ready for it even if I'm not the first to come in, I know that it's about to happen, you know in the next twenty seconds or something. Although, I like a long period to calm down and relax it was the right place to start today. (NWDA - NW 0'39)

In this case, the relationship with aspects of the environment is strongly associated with the anticipation of the event. This highlights the role of, and need for, concentrated listening and openness toward the possibilities of aural phenomena to be used in shaping the improvisation.

Considered together, these categories give a clear picture of the relational qualities that determine the context for the improvisational encounter. In addition to this reasonably straightforward and schematic relational context, the analyses suggest further and more subtly defined relationships. Better described as continua, they start to outline the qualitative processes serving the construction and representation of self in improvised music making.

Case Study 1

In the first case study, between two participants, Mick (saxophone) and Ross (electric guitar), what can be best described as "processual involvement" reveals a dialectic-interplay in the distinction between participant and musical object. This is seen in the difference of the capacity for critical judgment when *in* the process, on the one hand, and reflecting *upon* it, on the other. For example, following frustrated efforts at self-assertion, Ross becomes absorbed in his own method of production. This "reactive absorption" then results in a narrowing of attention. After describing his attempts to provoke Mick with an irritating tone picture he discovers a new technique:

Right, this is another new technique which I've never used before . . . Barring the strings, I think it was on the thirteenth fret, and using my finger as a capo. Doing a sort of . . . er . . . what do you call it when the two lines move . . . counterpoint . . . yeah, doing a contrapuntal thing. (13'38)

Becoming engrossed in the interaction between himself and the “two lines,” he states twenty-five seconds later: “Didn’t really hear what Mick was doing here, I must have been concentrating too hard on this new discovery [laughs] (14’03).

Furthermore, the brevity of some sections displaying this kind of absorption, sections *experienced as considerably longer*, surprises Ross: I stopped that technique . . . I stopped it . . . I expected erm, *I thought that I went on punching the thing for a long time but obviously I didn’t* . . . I’ve gone on to a new thing, I must have decided that it wasn’t going to work (emphasis mine, 12’40).

The distinction between roles of following and leading, or accompanying and soloing, reveals a second continuum. For Mick there is a concern and need for balance: I always have a, I mean there’s always, there’s always, erm a balance to be struck between, er, listening to the other person and, and er sort of following in a sense . . . er . . . and striking up doing something completely different (2’27).

More complex variants on this tension between following and leading emerge between each participant’s musical and conceptual ideals, and where practical limitations and habitual aspects of their playing interact with idealised artistic goals. Related to this, Mick’s approach combines intellectual and controlling responses with more intuitive responses:

When I’ve played with Ross before we’ve . . . we’ve sometimes, I’ve felt, we tend to get stuck on the bass root of E and, erm as I didn’t want to do that on this occasion then the notes that I was playing there were deliberately chosen to try and avoid getting into that trap straight away [laughter] (0’56);

and,

These trills and things I do them partly, they excite me, I do them partly because sometimes they go off in a direction that you don’t expect so that I can surprise myself by what comes out and you know that’s kind of interesting. Erm . . . and that probably, they’re one of the ways I have of getting off on that, erm, there is a greater chance of the random. (7’25)

These examples begin to establish the idea of how relational continua, as both context and process, contribute to identity formation through opportunities for the discovery and expression of self, its denial, rejection, affirmation, acknowledgement, acceptance, and so on.

Further support is given to this by the importance Ross places upon his opening and spontaneously emerging material and its continual significance throughout the improvisation. It is used in a variety of situations, and where it does emerge as the principal musical idea, for example, right at the end, it is greeted with pleasure and satisfaction. Ross comments:

I often use the material I came upon at the beginning of it again . . . the first thing you play I think has a lot of importance. You don’t . . . it’s a completely unconscious thing that you arrive at and it’s generally appropriate for the moment and it’s er . . . worth remembering. Actually, you don’t have to remember it, you can just forget it, because when you come across it as important you think, later on, “Why do I do that?” in the course of the piece. You know, “Why did I begin there? What was it about *that* which was the thing to start from after total silence?” . . . So I revisit again . . . convinced [laughs] of its importance. (8’53)

The importance placed upon spontaneity and ownership of ideas, successful self-assertions, and control over intuitive desires (Mick’s “like to do”) in order to create musical coherence (Mick’s “should do”), helps emphasise the role of feelings of authenticity, ownership, and individual identity. Qualitatively, the way these continua are played out begins to suggest their link with identity. As Ross says in a revealing contrast with Mick’s need to avoid the key-centre of E quoted earlier (0’56):¹¹

That last piece, that last little bit was sort of “rootless.” I see these things where you have whole keys that you return to as being rooted in identity or something like that . . . and some people never hit a home key at all, or never reinforce a tonic or anything. They never want to do it; they always want to be moving. They don’t want to make . . . they don’t

want to have any history or something like that [laughs]. (5'40)

Case Study 2

In the second case study, between participants John (electric guitar) and Charlie (saxophone), the distinction between following and leading is given quite a different emphasis. Although references to accompanying and soloing do occur, much more is made of a mode of interaction described as “duo playing.” They talk of an interdependent and intuitive “interlocking” and hold it in greater esteem than the more conventionally understood roles of solo and accompaniment:

Yeah, I remember thinking there that I'd accompany John for a while and laid back a bit, while John played across what I did *rather than actually duo together*. (emphasis mine, 7'25)

From John,

Er, yeah at that point, I guess because of the . . . the way that we play as a duo is very sort of . . . this, I don't know, its very kind of, er, like the two lines are really interlocking the whole time or chasing each other around or something. At points when there is only one of us it does feel very kind of . . . empty, you know, it's like, “Oh my God!” . . . you know . . . “Where's the saxophone gone?” (12'47)

The significance of this “duo playing” is apparent following its return after a section, described by both participants, of more differentiated roles. Here John describes a pronounced somatic intensity:

This bit felt really . . . the equivalent of sort of doing a sprint. I mean, you know, I just kind of hearing it back made me, just, remember the er . . . sort of speeding up pulse-rate, feeling *really* kind, you know, *really* kind of “getting a dab-on” [sweating], really getting warm and hot and . . . felt very physical. I mean it was like some kind of, that physical thing, was like *to do with the interaction between the two instruments rather than just my own line* [my emphasis]. It was like, almost like, strange analogy really but taking part in some kind of *sport* [laughs]. (John - 9'04)

A related area concerns the basis upon which responses are made. Here, the more highly valued responses arise from deeply felt processual involvement and intuitive connections; its counterpart arises from a more controlled detachment, concerned with practical and formal issues. Significantly, each of these response formations display differing states of awareness. On the one hand, an ambiguous undifferentiated sense of awareness characterises the intuitive-absorbed mode of response:

At this point I guess I was really getting involved in how, the way that the two lines are hooking up there and er . . . getting, almost getting lost as to who was playing what line and getting lost as far as . . . the overall sound of the duo and what contribution my sort of moving fingers were making to it there. (John - 8'20)

Yeah, at that point I couldn't work out who was doing what. I couldn't work out whether the harmonics are mine or John's. So I had to, I was really concentrating hard and trying to work out, and in the end I just gave up and just kept going. But I still can't, can't, well it's easy to tell now because they're separated out but it was very, it was very very difficult to tell who was doing what there. (Charlie - 10'34)

In contrast, other responses arise from a clear and focused objectivity:

I remember thinking I'd have to stop that because it was too near to free jazz [laughs] . . . the running lines, I hate playing running lines. (Charlie - 4'43)

Yeah, I actually took the decision before I played that that I was going to change the direction of that completely because it could go on forever like that if we just let it go. (Charlie - 8'36)

I was thinking about, again it's sort of like just . . . just temporarily kind of partly stepping

outside of the thing and thinking about the need to find an opportunity to kind of get rid of the loop without it being, you know, leaving a big hole all of a sudden. (John - 11'29)

In contrast to the heat and confusion of the previous examples, these responses demonstrate a form of real-time process-based critical distance that enables formal and aesthetic requirements to be addressed during the performance.

Summary

These examples help demonstrate how freely improvised music emerges from a number of interrelated continua. Parallels and connections across these continua bring into focus the activity's characteristic and definitive relational context and processual dynamic.

One last example helps unpack this in relation to musical meaning. John describes the following experience in considerable detail:

I felt sort of somehow or other a feeling similar to that kind of, I don't know "swimming-around" feeling that was happening in the music there somehow or other!? I mean er . . . it, it felt at that point like I was sort of playing automatically, that that wasn't actually . . . erm . . . I wasn't sort of making decisions about where I was putting my fingers and all that kind of thing, it was kind of just happening automatically somehow or other . . . and I was kind of really getting *lost* in it there but at the same time part of me was like outside of it! [laughs]. (6'39)

It is significant that out of this deeply embedded and automated-intuitive state, John's awareness and sense of involvement becomes located both *within* and, at the same time, *apart* from the event. Such juxtaposition between differentiated and undifferentiated states of consciousness is valuable evidence of the dialectical nature of the event's interactions. Its significance receives confirmation fifty seconds later when John describes, again with some difficulty, a heightened moment of expressive musical meaning:

I mean this particular bit felt very kind of erm . . . well, I mean I don't know how else to put it . . . it felt very emotionally direct to me, it felt like I was you know, really . . . it was really coming from *somewhere deep*, without, I don't know how else to put it really. That kind of thing. (7'29)

The directness of his sense of connection and self-expression in addition to the validity of the experience and resulting music is especially revealing; it helps pinpoint a kind of musical meaning characterised by the transformational potential of dialectical processes. The experience of encountering and participating in processes (as an active agent) that fuse *and* make distinct (often opposed) qualities of experience, productive aspects, mental states, attitudes, aesthetic preference, etc., can be identified as the basis for this particular kind of musical meaning. It is seen to emerge from identifiable relational dynamics and the qualities of their interactions. Within the event, many continua can be identified: between connected and detached states of involvement; between intuitive and intellectual responses; in sound produced along a continuum between automated-intuitive and controlled-deliberate methods;¹² between outward expression and internal involvement; and between stages of processual involvement and detached observation where a loss of self and more objective states of awareness fluctuate.

Together, the interactions of these continua—varying in terms of relational context, time span, and levels of consciousness—constitute (by actively situating and defining the self) the overall experience's transformational potential and what can be described as its ontological meaning. Following the psychoanalytic identification of a dynamic unconscious as central to these kinds of operations, the interactive dynamics of the musical event described above can be understood as contributing to the ongoing restructuring, definition, and representation of consciousness and identity. From the perspective of psychoanalytically informed social theory, it is through the interactions within the individual psyche and between the individual psyche and the social field that qualities of meaning associated with processes of self-definition may be understood. As Anthony Elliot explains, this would include the psychical functioning of the unconscious as "a constitutive imaginary dimension of psychical life and subjectivity, a dimension through which the subject 'opens out' to the self, others, reason, and society" (11). The preceding analysis explores the idea that such an opening out of the self is fundamental to moments and continuities of experienced musical meaning within improvisational practice.

Theorising the Self

The theoretical foundation for connecting the observed dialectical processes with the notion of ontological meaning rests in the work of Julia Kristeva. The following explanation will help demonstrate more extensively how musical meaning's ontological significance is arrived at from this ethnographic work. Kristeva's notion of meaning as signifying process in contrast to a more positivist and structuralist approach (meaning as signifying practice),¹³ identifies meaning not as the result of a practice's underlying structural relations, but in the relation between social constraints (forms of systematicity—social laws, family structures, modes of production, etc.) and that which can be seen to continually disrupt and subvert that order (“those forces extraneous to the logic of the system” (Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* 28)). Within a particular practice, Kristeva holds that the characteristic operations of this relation are especially available for analysis during moments of parody, innovation, creativity, and revolution: in short, where systematised order is subverted. This approach forms a consideration of the role the imaginary plays in meaningful experience and the process of meaning-making—ultimately residing in the formation and development of subjectivity.

By way of example, the relation between systemic constraint and its disruption is apparent in Surrealism's backlash against bourgeois rationalism, its use of dream images and free handling of materials sought to liberate artists from what they perceived as the stifling effects of logic and reason upon the imagination. It is an agenda which Kristeva links fundamentally with avant-garde practice. Likewise, free improvisation exhibits a commitment to the exploration of form—in terms of its spontaneous emergence as a fragmenting force and its power to dominate and control by virtue of repetition and idiomatic suggestion. In free improvisation's openness towards possibilities of expression and order, tensions between abstracted informal elements and structurally defined formal elements are integral not only to its quality, function, and of course meaning, but also to what shapes the artist's motivation. It is Kristeva's view that all systems of communication and/or meaning embody such tensions. Whether it is a system of state, church, family or a representational system such as painting, music, poetry, or film, there exists a reliance on a rule-governed systematic coding of energetic, disorganised, fragmented forces (Grosz 52). Avant-garde practices which hover on the borders of sense and nonsense push at the limits of an established system, its rules and procedures. For Kristeva, art does not reflect life; it is rather the exploration and experimentation of its own governing conventions (54). In the same way that subjectivity is *made* and *unmade* through language,¹⁴ so in free improvisation (as a practice of the musical avant-garde) the continual crisis of subjectivity (in that it is never a fixed entity) finds its sublimated expression.

Kristeva's interpretation of meaning as a process and “significance”¹⁵ brings together the semiotic (“the drive representative contingent on biology and on the archaic bond with the maternal object” (Kristeva, *Interviews* 265)) and the symbolic (“the linguistic representative contingent on the oedipal stage, castration, and the paternal function” (265)). Kristeva's notion of the semiotic (*le sémiotique*) extends Freud's view of the unconscious primary process as a source of wild untamed elements awaiting the superior rational ordering and expression of the secondary process. By way of the semiotic she has “elaborate[d] a level of psychic representation that for Freud remains extremely primitive and imprecise, which is the representation of affects that are psychic inscriptions” (22). Kristeva refers to drive and affect-based modalities of infantile experience prior to language acquisition and holds that these modes of experience and perception continue into adult life and subsist within structured systems of representation, establishing the dynamic tension at the heart of creativity and meaning.

The developmental phases, termed the *thetic*, which bring together, and in turn distinguish between the semiotic and the symbolic, are rooted in Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts.¹⁶ The central aspect of Kristeva's theory of concern here is in the relation between the semiotic and the symbolic. For Kristeva the semiotic and the symbolic, as two energies or movements, enable the subject to produce and use signifying systems and become a socially situated being. Beyond this, the importance of the semiotic level is that it addresses phenomena of everyday life and aesthetic practice where signification disintegrates to lower thresholds of meaning. Kristeva comments that in avant-garde literature and poetry (citing in particular the poetry of Mallarmé) “the reading of the poem implies that we either project our own ideas onto the place of meaning's rhythm or that we let ourselves be carried by the rhythm, by the intonation, by an almost vocal gesturing. This is a semiotic weft having no symbolic meaning, but that constitutes, in fact, an extremely important level in aesthetic communication” (*Interviews* 22). The semiotic is, therefore, not only the rhythms, movements, and spasms prior to conscious corporeal control which structure the drives (in their polymorphous undifferentiated state), but is also their *return* in adult form. The semiotic is

identified as maternal and feminine, whereas the symbolic, in its association with the symbolic father, is paternal. The symbolic establishes itself via the repression of the maternal, with its stability being dependent upon the silence of the semiotic. Together they form two inseparable modalities or heterogeneous orders involved in (i) the constitution of the subject, (ii) the production of discourse, and (iii) the regulation of social relations. Where the semiotic threatens to transgress its boundaries, the symbolic ordering of the libidinal drives into sexual, linguistic, and subjective economies, is threatened with the breakdown of identity in psychosis, of meaning and coherence in the arts, and of sexual convention in perversion and fetishism (Grosz 48).

It is in art that the transgressive pleasures of the semiotic are legitimised. Within its symbolic unity, art contains expressions of the *jouissance*¹⁷ of pre-oedipal maternal attachments.¹⁸ Art is the “semiotisation of the symbolic” (Kristeva, *Interviews* 213), but avant-garde art goes a step further. Art’s newest and most progressive expressions introduce levels of *jouissance* that exceed socially tolerable boundaries. While not without its risks for the artist,¹⁹ the breaking down of the symbolic’s hold on the semiotic does not obliterate, but re-positions the limits of signification (Grosz 56). Acting as a kind of index of social stability, art, and especially the avant-garde, accompanies and anticipates social transformations. At the heart of this view of art is the dialectic interaction between the semiotic and the symbolic, two contradictory forces enabling change to occur.

In Kristeva’s principal exposition of the semiotic and the symbolic, her doctoral thesis now published as *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she writes:

We shall call the first “the semiotic” and the second “the symbolic.” These two modalities are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.) involved; in other words, so-called “natural” language allows for different modes of articulation of the semiotic and the symbolic. On the other hand, there are nonverbal signifying systems that are constituted exclusively on the basis of the semiotic (music, for example). But, as we shall see, this exclusivity is relative, precisely because of the necessary dialectic between the two modalities of the signifying process, which are constitutive of the subject. Because the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either “exclusively” semiotic or “exclusively” symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both. (24)

Here, the untenable and rather odd statement that music is constructed exclusively on the basis of the semiotic is immediately qualified by drawing attention to the inescapable relativity of such an emphasis. The unavoidable dialectic between the two modalities of signification, shaping the meaningful/communicative functions of differing systems, is just as present in the essentially non-communicative, but meaningful nature of music as in the direct communication of scientific discourse. The tendency for the repression of the semiotic and the movement of the symbolic towards dominance occurs in differing degrees, but always along the same single continuum. The specific question regarding musical meaning that presents itself is then, how is this relationship revealed within the creation of freely improvised music?

Before going on to consider this question in the light of the qualitative investigations it should be stated, in summary, that the conceptual framework for what follows relies on the three related theoretical positions that: (i) the traditional unity of the sign is replaced with the notion of its radical alterity, its always open-ended difference; (ii) meaning is a “becoming” or process, rather than being based solely on a structural and rule-bound system; and (iii) such a process is fundamentally bound to subject formation, the construction of personal identity. This leads to the second question of how such a process is revealed in relation to personal identity within the creation of freely improvised music.

Dialectics

It has been suggested that the notion of ontological meaning in music can be identified in the dialectical interplay of free improvisation. This is clearly analogous to Kristeva’s understanding of how lower thresholds of meaning (“*signifiante*”) and aesthetic communication function. The central process of such functioning has been named as the relation between the semiotic and the symbolic. The final example of the second case study discusses an episode of significant intensity (in terms of the authenticity, emotion, and expressive-weight associated with it) where John describes a simultaneous loss of self *and* a sense

of objective distance from the event. This provides a lucid example of the process that involves the differentiation *and* blurring of boundaries fundamentally linked with the formation and awareness of subjectivity. Beyond what has already been identified with the semiotic and the symbolic in free improvisation (its exploration of form and openness towards possibilities of expression), the second study reveals a number of other continua sharing with the semiotic and symbolic, a characteristic relativity in their relational functioning. Whilst it is held that they all contribute, ultimately, to the formation of subjectivity, they should, however, be conceived of as augmentations to, or as elaborations upon, the semiotic/symbolic relation—that is, as the return of the semiotic in adult form.²⁰ Involving differing aspects of musical creativity (or the process of meaning-making in music), they exhibit the relativity of the two principal modalities, and are linked with, and evocative of, affective and drive-based aspects of experience. As such, they contribute, in varying degrees and strengths, to the constitution of free improvisation's ontological meaning.

The semiotic/symbolic relation is fundamentally linked with the individual's experience of external reality. It is the process of mediation from a sense of total unity and lack of distinction to the development of social awareness and a relationship with what is perceived objectively as otherness. The relational categories apparent across a number of the case studies describe experiences and perceptions relating to a variety of external factors. They define each respondent's relationship with external reality and facilitate creative involvement. The dialectical relationships considered bring together and define *boundaries* existing within the event's interactive, responsive, and productive mechanisms. As such, they describe processual qualities akin to the semiotic/symbolic relation. For example, the need to function from within defined roles as required patterns of interaction (leader/follower or solo/accompaniment) and with a predetermined attitude towards musical development is contrasted with a flexible approach towards aesthetic and formal goals which enables specific roles to exist as emergent possibilities. In the performers' accounts, a functional distinction exists between the need for definitive boundaries (symbolic) and the acceptance of blurred and undifferentiated categories of interaction (semiotic). Significantly, tolerance of the more semiotic side of the event's processual qualities is seen to be a central means of facilitating individual creative involvement in free improvisation. In terms of production, the semiotic is represented by automated-intuitive processes which, normally repressed by the technical control of deliberately learnt processes, encourage involuntary movements and sonic content.

The demands of improvisation's immediacy encourage the emergence of unanticipated form-elements. By relinquishing a degree of conscious control, the (archaic) drive-based movements, rhythms, and intonations associated with the semiotic obtain greater significance within the resultant music and the developing interactions and responses of each performer.²¹ The second case study establishes a connection between emotionally weighted and authentic experiences with the loss of subject/object boundaries, as it does with a "hardening" of objective perception with the appreciation of structural and formal qualities. In this case, the semiotic, characterised by a diffuse sense of boundaries, is associated with an "embedded processual" stance and significant changes in time perception, awareness, and emotional intensity. The symbolic, on the other hand, is associated with the constitution and maintenance of boundaries, seen in moments of pronounced reflexivity and critical distance in which the success and/or failure of aesthetic goals is assessed. In the same way that the semiotic in the symbolic constitutes a "return" for Kristeva (*Interviews* 213), so it is that free improvisation facilitates a regressive return of archaic forms of experiencing, perceiving, and reacting. Beyond the inherent sense of evocation and remembering that such processual qualities exhibit (micro), the second study's improvisation demonstrates how the overall formal/interactive development of a free improvisation (macro) can be representative of the semiotic/symbolic relation and, in particular, the tendency of the symbolic to dominate. The participants' comments begin by emphasising an open-ended processual involvement with an associated interactive energy and excitement, this gradually diminishing to incorporate formal and aesthetic requirements. Responses are initially formed on the basis of a thorough immersion in the event's interactive qualities with little differentiation existing between elements—be they environmental factors or intrapsychic components (described in the relational categories). Towards the end of an improvisation, largely dictated by the need to provide a satisfactory formal end to the piece, this changes to an increasing number of clearly thought-out responses to unambiguously perceived external elements and objectively described thoughts and feelings. The eventual dominance of the symbolic in the piece's latter stages emerges as inevitable and unavoidable, and serves to repress the more highly valued excitable unpredictability of the earlier semiotic mode of connectivity and interplay—significantly, often referred to as a kind of intersubjective phenomenon.²²

Together, these dialectic interplays constitute the dynamics behind free improvisation's ontological meaning. Through the evolution and dissolution of the tensions observed between these various

relationships the music becomes representative of the dialectical and creative process central to the formation of identity. Such content demonstrates the overt ontological emphasis to be found in the meaning of free improvisation—in as far as it is a creative and music-making activity. As a participant in a musical interaction which simultaneously seeks and denies stable symbolic ordering, the improvising musician is caught up in a real-time exploration of and experimentation in the relation between the semiotic and the symbolic—art not reflecting life, but exploring the governing conventions of life. This translates to an artistic problem in which symbolic unities (on a variety of levels) are allowed to develop and emerge only to fall into conflict with the highly valued and emphasised presence of semiotic energies. This not only relates to the music's resultant formal dimensions, but is central to the process of its production. Free improvisation's productive emphasis, and more importantly its purpose and meaning (or teleology), centre on the dynamic of creativity in its earliest form.

It is in the movement and interaction of continua that the production of meaning in musical communication exists, and that through these processes the subject finds degrees of definition and form. In the interactive and relational dynamics of the event, it can be argued that identity is defined through active mechanisms that serve to orientate the social self. On a more profoundly psychological level, it can be argued that such operations evoke qualities of meaning associated with more primordial experiences^{2,3} in which the distinctions between self and other, *I* and *you*, the personal and the social are first felt.

Notes

¹ As the paper will go on to explain, “qualitative idiographic case studies” refers to a research methodology concerned with trying to understand specific instances of human experience based on individual accounts rather than trying to derive generalised explanations of more objectively definable phenomena (which, in contrast, would produce quantitative and nomothetic studies).

² This paper would not have been possible without the generous help and commitment of the musicians who participated in its experimental studies. I wish to thank them for granting permission to reproduce, here, excerpts of their transcripts.

³ See Clarke, E. and Cook, N.

⁴ This holistic emphasis, not without epistemological significance, upholds a diversity of and interaction between different kinds of meaning: conscious and unconscious; surface and hidden; subjective and systematic; obvious and indirect; literal and figurative and so on (Kearney 179).

⁵ First used by Julia Kristeva in the paper Σημειωτική [Séméiotiké] *Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (1969), semanalysis provides a critique of “classical” or structuralist semiotics. In relation to positivist musicology and alternatives to it, Kristeva's account of semanalysis (or “semiotics of production”) provides a lucid explanation of the limitations and possibilities of both perspectives.

⁶ Used in social, health and clinical psychology, IPA, like many qualitative methods, aims to explore an individual's personal perception or account of an event or state rather than attempting to produce an objective record of the event or state itself. (Smith, Harré, and Langenhove 3). Simply put, its theoretical foundations of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and symbolic-interactionism serve to establish the value of idiographic studies by acknowledging that access to another person's world is limited and dependent upon one's own conceptions and interpretive activities. Typically, IPA uses open-ended and neutral questioning within a semi-structured interview to generate transcripts. In this case, the transcripts arose from reflective comments upon audition of the performance's recording.

⁷ The stages outlined here follow the method of qualitative analysis described by Jonathan Smith in chapter two of *Rethinking Methods in Psychology* (18-25).

⁸ It is useful to note the significance of the background of the musicians that took part in this research. Of the studies that were carried out, two involved four experienced “professional” free improvisers with no formal music education. As experienced musicians, in both cases friends, and in one case a long-term duo partnership, their comments displayed a depth and thoughtfulness that provided especially rich material for analysis. The resulting analysis forms the majority of the material contained within this paper [listed as RL, MB, JJ and CC in transcript quotations]. The other participants, music students with little experience of improvising beyond rudimentary idiomatic jazz and some workshop-based collective/free

improvisation, provided less descriptive material for analysis, but, nevertheless, many common themes, particularly with regard to “relational categories,” were apparent.

⁹ “There are no soloists or leaders, and no rhythm section. Decision-making and identity comes from the manner in which AMM treats its own history. It is beholden on each player to find a role within AMM” (Prévost 25).

¹⁰ See Ford.

¹¹ The only basis by which Ross might know about Mick’s agenda would have had to have been through Mick’s “key-avoiding” playing. This is quite reasonable to assume given the timings of the two comments.

¹² At the more intuitive end of this continuum, response and production become barely distinguishable (itself another continuum).

¹³ A central part of Kristeva’s contribution to a critique on “classical” or structuralist semiotics, meaning as *signifying process* is identified as within transgressions of systematicity on the “threshold” site between order and its subversion. Such transgressions were initially considered as the struggle between monological and polyphonic discourse within language (see “Word, Dialogue, and the Novel”—an essay on Bakhtin—in *Desire in Language*, 1981) and later became the distinction Kristeva makes between the semiotic and the symbolic (see *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984)). Additionally, the “threshold” site between order and its subversion is described as the “traversable boundary” between order and its subversion (inside and outside, body and culture, mother and child, semiotic and symbolic, etc.) is termed the abject. See Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982).

¹⁴ Psychoanalysis sees language as a signifying system in which “the speaking subject *makes* and *unmakes* himself” (Kristeva, *Language: The Unknown: An Initiation into Linguistic* 265). Speech is the object of psychoanalysis: through it the conscious and unconscious functioning of the subject is explored. The psychoanalyst, by listening to what is and is not said, to the fictitious and the real, discovers in this discourse the unconscious and then the more or less conscious motivation producing the symptoms. This is the subject-in-process: “The subject *is* not; he makes and unmakes himself in a complex topology where the other and his discourse are included” (*Interviews* 275).

¹⁵ Kristeva’s use of the term *signifiante* (usually translated as “significance”) refers to the function of language that enables a text to signify what representative and communicative speech does not say (*Desire in Language, a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, 18).

¹⁶ The imaginary mirror-stage and the symbolic Oedipal complex/castration threat serve as phases of unification which organise the drives into amenable forms. These provide temporary, but strategic moments where the semiotic is harnessed to the organising structures of the symbolic. Firstly, the child is provided with an unstable identity, provisional and imaginary, as the mirror image of the mother (other). This first identificatory investment in the image detaches the subject from lived experience and makes possible the symbolic operations that bring the social subject into being. It is the earliest division of the infant’s world and opens up the gap between unmediated felt experience and representation, between reality and signs, and is the precondition for signification and the signified. Marked by pure difference, the mirror-stage is seen to initiate the field of signifiers. The castration complex, occurring later, goes on to generate signs that order and render these signifiers meaningful (Grosz 45). It is as a result of this phase that the subject’s separation from lived experience and its immediacy is secured by the capacity to designate and replace experience with representations. Simply put, the symbolic father and phallic lawgiver demands the child’s renunciation of the mother and submission to an authority greater than its own or the mother’s. The negotiation of this exclusion, along with the effects of the mirror-stage, establish the organisation and unity of the subject, constraining drives and forcing compromise or partial satisfaction through the dictates of reality (the reality principle) (47). It is at this point that Lacan and Kristeva differ: for Lacan entry into the symbolic severs any pre-oedipal attachment with the mother, whereas Kristeva sees an intimate connection between the two. The symbolic, for Kristeva, is already anticipated in the thetic and results in the semiotic’s continual presence within the symbolic: “the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic” (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 24). This is expanded in Kristeva’s work on abjection in *Powers of Horror* (1980). Abjection marks the thetic phase both as a condition and a sensation testifying to, on the one hand, a break between the subject and the corporeal and, on the other, a merging of self and other. It is where boundaries are constituted *and* blurred in the mother-child

dynamic. "Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which the body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (Kristeva 10). The ego formed by its recognition of the body (mirror-stage) recoils at the idea of being tied or limited by the body's form. Abjection is a sickness at one's own body, a reaction to the failure of the subject/object opposition to express adequately the subject's corporeality and its tenuous bodily boundaries (Grosz 70). For Kristeva, this border between the sacred and profane is seen in the functions of holiness, madness, and poetry. Abjection is displaced by religion, repressed in socialisation, and art attempts its sublimation.

¹⁷ A Lacanian term combining sexual, spiritual, physical, and conceptual forms of pleasure into a single concept. For Kristeva, *jouissance* is total joy or ecstasy (without any mystical connotation) and also implies the presence of meaning. (*Desire in Language, a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* 16).

¹⁸ "By semiotic, I mean, for example, the child's echolalia before the appearance of language, but also the play of colours in an abstract painting or a piece of music that lacks signification but has a meaning" (Kristeva, *Interviews* 21).

¹⁹ In Kristeva's view the artist is exposed to possible psychosis and/or fetishism: unable to break with the semiotic pre-oedipal attachment to the mother, the psychotic/fetishist refuses the symbolic law of the father—in Freudian terms, the "no" of the incest taboo.

²⁰ Kristeva states that the semiotic's presence in the symbolic is not only a return, but also a regression, a transformation, and an elaboration: "The way in which the semiotic enters the symbolic constitutes a return, a repetition of language in its origins, in its past, and thus a regression. At the same time, it is a transformation, revolution, then, in the sense of repetition of children's language, of the repetition of oneiric regression, of the unconscious, of the most archaic elements: fear, passion, abjection [. . .] It is also the elaboration of the archaic material in an outlook of revolt, insubmission, and defiance" (*Interviews* 213).

²¹ The first study revealed that productive techniques which encourage accidental and "random" occurrences function as a source of considerable inspiration and pleasure: "These trills and things I do them partly, they excite me, I do them partly because sometimes they go off in a direction that you don't expect so that I can surprise myself by what comes out and you know that's kind of interesting. Erm . . . and that probably, they're one of the ways I have of getting off on that (7'25 - Mick). More significantly, Mick uses such techniques as a counter-balance to his feelings that he is dominating and controlling the musical development; again, revealing the functional level of the semiotic/symbolic relation in musical production.

²² The idea that the semiotic/symbolic relation can be viewed as a larger-scale interaction of forces shaping an improvisation's overall formal and interactive dimensions is also supported by the first study. The semiotic origins of an improvisation's initial stages are apparent in Ross' statement that "the first thing you play I think has a lot of importance. You don't . . . it's a completely unconscious thing that you arrive at and its generally appropriate for the moment and its er . . . worth remembering. Actually, you don't have to remember it, you can just forget it, because when you come across it as important you think, later on, "Why do I do that, in the course of the piece?" You know, "Why did I begin there? What was it about that which was the thing to start from after total silence? . . . so I revisit again . . . convinced [laughs] of its importance" (8'53). For Mick, the final stages of the piece also reveal the tension between a semiotic *jouissance* and the piece's formal (social and symbolic) requirements: "Yes, I quite didn't want to finish, in a way, because I'd enjoyed it a lot, more than I'd expected to and er, I wondered if it could take up again. But it was such a reposeful end it, you know, I, it had to be the end [laughs]. For me, I mean I could have started off doing some kind of different noise . . . er . . . but I thought that would have been artificial. It was an actual end-point for me" (17'35).

²³ What I might term "primary ontological continua."

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Appendix

Case Study 1

Participants: MBRL (MB, tenor saxophone; RL, electric guitar). Conducted in Lecture Room 1, University of Sheffield, April 11, 1994. Listen to the [audio recording](#) of Study 1. View the HTML version of this [transcript](#).

Case Study 2

Participants: CCJJ (CC, alto saxophone & clarinet; JJ, electric guitar, electric 12-string soprano guitar and loop effects pedal). Conducted in Lecture Room 1, University of Sheffield, January 24, 1996. Listen to the [audio recording](#) of Study 2. View the HTML version of this [transcript](#).

Other Studies

Participants: DSDA (DS, trombone; DA, electric guitar). Conducted in Lecture Room 1, University of Sheffield, December 7, 1993. View the HTML version of this [transcript](#).

Participants: NWDA (NW, clarinet; DA, electric guitar). Conducted in Lecture Room 1, University of Sheffield, March 24, 1994. View the HTML version of this [transcript](#).

Participants: TLNS (TL, voice; NS, acoustic guitar). Conducted in Lecture Room 1, University of Sheffield, May 6, 1994. View the HTML version of this [transcript](#).