

Culture, Consciousness, and the Body: The Notion of Embodied Consciousness as a Site of Cultural Mediation in Thinking About Musical Free Improvisation.

Bennett Hogg

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Jerzy Grotowski was one of the best known individual voices in a proliferating experimental theatre scene that emerged throughout the 1960s. Grotowski's so-called "Poor Theatre",¹ focusses upon the body of the actor, and a specialized conception of the correct training of that body so that actors may develop a sense of physical *intelligence*. Rather than thinking and then acting his actors should strive for the "total act" defined as the point at which "consciousness and instinct are united".² It is worth observing from the start, then, that consciousness and instinct are implicitly, for Grotowski, separate things.

The actor's training should bring the "natural" capabilities of each actor to a point of absolute deployability:

"We are not after recipes, the stereotypes which are the prerogative of professionals . . . one must ask the actor: 'What are the obstacles blocking you on your way towards the total act which must engage all your psycho-physical resources, from the most instinctive to the most rational?'. We must find out what it is that hinders him in the way of respiration, movement and - most important of all - human contact. What resistances are there? How can they be eliminated? I want to take away, steal from the actor all that disturbs him."³

¹ *get some statements on the constitution of Poor Theatre by G.*

² Grotowski, Jerzy, "The Actor's Technique" in Grotowski, Jerzy, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Eugenio Barba (ed.) (Holstebro: Odin Teatrets Forlag, 1968), p. 210.

³ Grotowski, "Actor's Technique", p. 209.

This elimination of blockages is attained by putting the mind into abeyance: “My main principle is . . . react - react with the body”.⁴ “. . . there is one absolute rule. Bodily activity comes first, and then vocal expression . . . First you bang on the table and afterwards you shout!”.⁵

This privileging of the body over the (rational?) mind offers up a challenge, on the face of things, to a culture that had historically placed the mind *over* matter. Grotowski clearly does not conform to the reductive view that locates intelligence, self-awareness, and consciousness in the “mind” alone, with the body as little more than the site of mind, its physical home. Grotowski’s method is to access spontaneity and creativity by training the “whole” actor as an intelligent body through a rigorous discipline; on this basis he is critical of the word “improvisation, dismissing it as “a pretentious word serving as a substitute for work”.⁶

Derek Bailey also notes negative responses to the term improvisation with reference to music, particularly as it is figured as “making it up as you go along”, a lazy, work-shy way of producing music - “a substitute for work”. According to Bailey there are musicians for whom improvisation is an integral part of their practice, but who are reluctant to use the term because of the “widely accepted connotations which imply that

⁴ Marijnen, “Actor’s Training (1966)”, p. 185.

⁵ Marijnen, “Actor’s Training (1966)”, p. 183.

⁶ needs ref - see Kumiega!!! *find reference to this quote in Kumiega’s book!!!*

improvisation is . . . a completely ad hoc activity, frivolous and inconsequential”,⁷ a “conjuring trick, a doubtful expedient, or even a vulgar habit”,⁸ a word that “completely misrepresents the depth and complexity of their work”.⁹

The foundations of Grotowski’s “Poor Theatre” were developed around the same time as the emergence of free improvisation,¹⁰ a time when the unequal binarism of mind and body was being interrogated, particularly in the popular culture of the period whose valorization of a hedonistic and experiential corporeality seemed to push rationalism and intellectual control to the margins.¹¹ Karlheinz Stockhausen, less sceptical than some of his colleagues of “the counter culture”, stages this destabilization of the supremacy of thought at the same time that he, too, seems to resist the term improvisation. By the later sixties Stockhausen had consolidated a group of musicians for what he called his “Intuitive Music”, the text scores *Aus den Sieben Tagen* and *Für Kommende Zeiten*. Choosing the term “Intuitive Music” rather than improvisation suggests a distancing from any pejorative associations of the word. The choice to align this music with intuition, with its connotations of a “natural” or biological basis is also significant. The texts carry injunctions to meditate, and to expand one’s consciousness, in conjunction

⁷ Bailey, Derek, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, revised edition, 1993), p. xii.

⁸ Bailey, *Improvisation*, p. ix.

⁹ Bailey, *Improvisation*, p. xii.

¹⁰ Bailey, *Improvisation*, p. 84.

¹¹ Parenthetically but nevertheless suggestive, the phrase “sex and drugs and Rock and Roll” became, through the British punk/new wave singer Ian Dury’s song of the same name, emblematic of what may have been the second wave (for white, British youth, at least) of the countercultural reaction in the late 1970s, a cultural moment that, in ways reminiscent of the sixties’ countercultural appropriation of Surrealism for popular culture, appropriated Surrealism’s oft-cited precursor, Dada, in a worldview that claimed that “all my brain and body need” were sensual, embodied pleasures.

with more explicitly physical, material factors - to “Play a vibration . . .”.¹² Consciousness in this period of Stockhausen’s work, in common with the ways it was also represented in popular culture, is couched in terms of a spiritual or mystical phenomenon, a “cosmic consciousness”, beside which the quotidian consciousness concerned with thinking, the brain, and the waking mind, is an obstacle to those states of consciousness required by Intuitive Music: “acting, or listening, or doing something *without thinking* is the state of pure intuitive activity, not requiring to use the brain as a control”.¹³

Grotowski’s position reinforces this *Zeitgeist* where thinking is concerned; “. . . thought must be excluded. The pupils are to speak the text without thinking.¹⁴ . . . If you think, you must think with your body. However, it is better not to think but to act, to take risks. . . . Of course you must think, but with the body, You must think with the whole body by means of actions”.¹⁵ Close in spirit, if not praxis, Stockhausen writes that “[t]he most profound moments in musical interpretation and composition are those which are not the result of mental processes, are not derived from what we already know, nor are they simply deducible from what has happened in the past”.

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[1, 357 so far - 090411]

¹² *ref to Aus den Sieben Tagen score!!!*

¹³ *Stockhausen on Music*, p. 124 *needs refs!!! (emphasis added)*

¹⁴ Marijnen, “Actor’s Training (1966)”, p. 176.

¹⁵ Marijnen, “Actor’s Training (1966)”, p. 204.

For Stockhausen, then, there is a corporeal awareness of the physicality of the universe and the body,¹⁶ and a valorization of the the intuitive, that is paralleled on Grotowski's part by a suppression of mental thought in favour of a "thinking" body, attained by unblocking culturally-learned obstacles.¹⁷ Similar positions can be found in free improvisation, constituting significant frames for how many improvisers think about their practice. One critical strategy against the allegations that there is no "work" in improvisation has been to neutralize the criticism by figuring improvisation as something that comes "naturally", and thus *needs* no "work" - "work" thus configured in contrast to "the natural" would amount to learning, preparing, and practising in order to occupy a culturally determined space. Bailey underwrites this "naturalness" of improvisation, saying it is "a basic instinct, an essential force in sustaining life."¹⁸ Improvisation, it is claimed, taps into primordial, natural capacities, a "creative appetite that is a *natural part* of being a performing musician".¹⁹ As "natural", improvisation is imagined in terms that situate it as pre-cultural, closer to origins; "[t]ransient musical fashion . . . is unlikely to have any effect on something as fundamental as the nature of improvisation";²⁰ "as regards method, the improviser employs the oldest in music-making. . . . it pre-dates any other music - mankind's first musical performance couldn't have been anything other than a free improvisation".²¹

¹⁶ Within the more general epistemological context of Western culture that assigns matter, the body, and physicality in general to the subordinate position of the structuring binarism Nature-Culture. See M. A. Quintana Paz - *gets refs for this!!!*

¹⁷ Grotowski, "Actor's Technique", p. 209.

¹⁸ Bailey, *Improvisation*, p. 140.

¹⁹ Bailey, *Improvisation*, p. 142 [emphases added].

²⁰ Bailey, *Improvisation*, p. xiii.

²¹ Bailey, *Improvisation*, p. 83

To summarize at this point, we have on the one hand phenomena that seem to fulfill the criteria of improvisation (even if they resist using the word itself) that define themselves against cerebral thinking, and have an avowed intent not to repeat learned materials. These positions against the cerebral appeal to the bodily, and invoke the natural; this invocation of Nature is then redoubled as the binary opposite of Culture, reductively figured as the cerebral, and symptomised in the repetition of pre-existent, learned materials. Appeals to Nature, particularly in contexts that position them against (usually contemporary) Culture are often figured as returns to a prelapsarian state, and Bailey's comments to the effect that it "predates any other music" make this explicit.

Derrida

"The enterprise of returning 'strategically', 'ideally', to an origin or to a priority thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. . . . is not just one metaphysical gesture among others, it is the metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent" (Literature Inc., p. 236).

Derrida's philosophical inquiries are now well known, particularly his sustained interrogation of the way that the binaristic structures of Western culture presuppose an inequality of power relations; oppositions not of equals but of dominant and subordinate pairings. The "most potent" of the metaphysical consequences of binaristic thinking is the notion that the dominant side of the equation is originary, ideal and pure, temporally and epistemologically preceding the subordinate element, which is figured in terms of a degeneration, or a fall. The expulsion from Eden is thus a paradigm case for Western culture, and in their different particular articulations Grotowski, Stockhausen and Bailey all play to this agenda. What Derrida has named as "the metaphysics of presence"

presupposes that there is thought - primary and originary - which is then put into words and communicated. Speech, seeming to the speaker to be coterminous with thought, seems therefore closer to the presence of the origin than writing. This implicates speech in a “metaphysics of presence” with respect to which writing is inferior, subsequent to speech and distanced from presence. However,

“A word’s meaning within the system of a language . . . is a result of the meaning speakers have given it in past acts of communication. . . . the structure of a language, its system of norms and regularities, is . . . the result of prior speech acts. However, when we take this argument seriously and . . . look at the events which are said to determine structures, we find that every event is . . . already determined and made possible by prior structures. The possibility of meaning something by an utterance is already inscribed in the structure of the language. . . . however far back we try to push, even when we try to imagine the “birth” of language . . . we discover that we must assume prior organisation, prior differentiation” (Culler, *On Deconstruction*, pp. 95-96).

What this means is that no matter how much speech might be claimed to be closer to the truth of thought than writing - with its ambiguities and distractions - in the name of a “metaphysics of presence”, speech is structured by language, just as writing is, and therefore however close to an originary “truth” it might imagine itself to be, this truth cannot come before its articulation. There are no signifieds, only signifiers.

The first move in a deconstructive approach is often to reverse the existent binarisms, *en route*, as it were, to interrogating the “text”. To place writing before speech might be one such preliminary strategy. We might imagine Grotowski and Stockhausen to have initiated such a deconstructive move in positioning the body before the mind, their respective marginalizations of thinking, for example, are staged to appeal to the “natural” as *prior* to, and therefore originary with respect to culture, against which culturally

established instances of theatrical or musical practice are derivations or deteriorations. Reversing the subordinate status of body with respect to mind, the subordinate position is invoked as originary, pre-cerebral, pre-cultural, and therefore superordinate. The emphasis on the non-cerebrating body as the true site of consciousness in Grotowski, and the conflation of expanded consciousness with the vibrations of a material universe in Stockhausen both seem to be striving to reclaim a more fundamental state lost under the regimes of rationalism and linguistically ordered thought that would position Nature and the body before Culture and the mind.

Recent theories of consciousness have, however, not been content to reduce the body to Nature - or to its scientific avatar, biology - and leave Culture to the mind. Just as Derrida's deconstruction is not content merely to reverse the terms of a binarism, but to critically dissolve the binaristic ground upon which "the metaphysics of presence" stands, Gibson's "environmental consciousness" and Varela's "enactive cognition" fundamentally problematize the notion of binaristic thinking, in particular that body and mind are separable, and that an embodied consciousness is separable from the environment in which it exists. Wayne Bowman, for example, puts it that "*the body is in the mind*. Mind is rendered possible by bodily sensations and actions, from whose patterns it emerges At the same time, the *mind is in the body*, in the sense that mind is coextensive with the body's neural pathways and the cognitive templates they comprise".²²

Varela questions not only the idea that consciousness is fundamentally concerned with *mental* representations, but the “three fundamental assumptions” that stand behind it:

- that we inhabit a world with particular properties, such as length, color, movement, sound, etc. . . .
- that we pick up or recover these properties by internally representing them . . .
- that there is a separate subjective “we” who does these things.

Against this he proposes an *enactive* cognition, “to emphasize the growing conviction that cognition is not the representation of a pregiven world by a pregiven mind but is rather the enactment of a world *and a mind* on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs”.²³

My own experience of improvisation at first seems to confirm the claims that it is something instinctive and pre-conscious - when I am improvising well, I do not consciously make decisions, decisions happen. It seems like my inner state is projected onto the violin as onto a screen in directly felt physical gestures. I have imagined my violin as a scientific device, almost, a seismograph of my inner state, a weather station tracing fluctuations in my body’s chaotic systems, or a lie detector when the violin exposes me faking it, just “going through the motions”, and not really listening.

However, one thing is certain; the violin is not - and can never be - a neutral screen; it is saturated with cultural meanings, as an object as much as a sound, and although I am not a trained violinist I have nevertheless *learned* to play the violin as something positioned

²² Borgo, p. 42, citing Bowman, Wayne, “Cognition and the Body: Perspectives from Music Education”, in Bresler, Liora (ed.), *Knowing Bodies, Moving Minds: Towards Embodied Teaching and Learning (Place of publication not known!!!:Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004)*, p. 36)

²³ Varela et al, p, 9

within my culture, and this shapes what it is possible for me to do with it. However extended my techniques, the meanings they generate come as much from the fact that it is a violin that I am interacting with, as from any sheer physicality of the bodily gestures that the resultant sounds encode. Though some might hope that improvisation taps into something closer to our “true natures”, the fact of our our own cultural situatedness, and that of the tools, objects, and instruments we use, means that whatever we do is always-already culturally mediated, always-already distanced from any putative natural source.

David Borgo, based on contemporary neuroscientific understandings of the close relationship between hearing and motion,²⁴ suggests that sonic gestures can be meaningful because there are common neurological roots to listening and motion. Neuroscience, though, cannot exhaust the issue, for gestures are always culturally encoded and are intertextual. Though “residues” of physicality inhabit sounds,²⁵ it would be a mistake to invest too much in the notion that this physicality is simply biological or natural. Gesture is not something “out there” that we perceive, but something we know and do as embodied and - crucially - social beings. If consciousness is enactive - something we do - then we do this within limits set not only physiologically but also culturally and imaginatively. My use of the violin *qua* violin passes through and is formed by personally internalized cultural filters of sonority, history, learning,

²⁴ Though dancing to music is perhaps the most obvious expression of this, or the way that infants seem to instinctively move to rhythmical sounds, the conceptual repercussions of this are extensive. Consider, for example, the notion that speech may be as much the product of this (apparently) neurological relationship between sound and muscular action. This has been offered as one possible explanation of how infants acquire the capacity to speak through imitation, though for a composer such as myself the idea that phonemes are the sonic resultants of muscular gestures is very suggestive in terms of deploying such ideas creatively. *there may be some refs to trawl up here from the CogSci notes when there's time!!!*

expectation, listening, watching, and acting. My physical reactions to the sounds coming from my fellow improvisers (and, of course, my own sounds too) are filtered through the violin which, from the point of view of enactive consciousness, is not just a physical object with finite properties but something that is only fully constituted *as* a violin in its inter-relationship to my bodily consciousness (my ears and right forearm are as much a part of the violin bow, in cultural terms, as the wood and horse hair) and the culture I am from²⁶ - this might be something similar to what Vilém Flusser has called the “apparatus-operator complex”.

Improvisation, then, is not originary but represents a play across memory, history, embodiment, and a culturally situated consciousness. The conditions of possibility of improvisation are the palimpsests of what music *is* or *has been*. In terms of a theory of an enactive consciousness that refuses the separation of the mind from the body, or the self from its material/cultural environment, these palimpsests are multisensory. Alan Durant has observed how our bodies and personal histories can be figured as a form of “psychical ‘notation’ or ‘score’”,²⁷ and this resonates strongly with Culler’s interpretation of Derrida cited earlier, that “however far back we try to push . . . we must assume prior organisation, prior differentiation”. Such a - dare we say it - ontological condition of “Music” sets up the possibility of something - an improvisation, for example - to *be* music. Might we imagine, then, that an enactive model of consciousness allows for a

²⁵ This is something that is essential, for example, to the process of reduced listening advocated by Pierre Schaeffer, where the typologies, at least, of sounds are determined by their apparent physical behaviours.
refs!!!

²⁶ “Every single individual who raises himself out of his natural being to the spiritual finds in the language, customs, and institutions of his people a pre-given body of material which, as in learning to speak, he has to make his own. . . . the world into which he is growing is one that is humanly constituted through language and custom” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 13). *needs full refs as first citation*

similar deconstruction of binaristic thought as that which might “in another place” be termed intertextuality. Consciousnesses, figured as a factor of cognizing, acting, social bodies becomes then a site where intertextuality takes place - where transductions occurring across culturally mediated knowledges, experiences, and imaginings efface the boundaries between, and strengthen the interdependences of practices, bodies and thoughts. This is not to claim that enactive cognition and intertextuality are interchangeable, but rather that they name and account for, in different cultural and conceptual registers, historically and culturally contingent understandings of how we make “new” things.

It is only on the last page of his book that Bailey can admit that “in spite of earlier arguments . . . All improvisation takes place in relation to the known whether the known is traditional or newly acquired”.²⁸ To think of improvising as a site where texts of all sorts coincide through the (embodied and enactive) consciousness of the improviser is to unseat improvisation from its privileged claims to presence or origins, and to return it to its proper place, as a cultural practice.

(2, 982 words)

²⁷ (Durant, in Norris, p. 273)

²⁸ Bailey, *Improvisation*, p. 142.