

Free Jazz: Deconstricing Derridean Genre Theory¹

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In 1997, Ornette Coleman, who had recently befriended philosopher Jacques Derrida, invited the philosopher to perform an improvised duet with him at a show he had been booked to play at the Paris Jazz Festival. Derrida, who was not a musician himself but was interested in jazz, accepted and composed a brief philosophical spoken-word piece, of sorts, to accompany whatever “free jazz” sounds Coleman would be producing. Derrida came to the show and, while Coleman was playing, he climbed onto the stage and began to read his philosophical piece. He was immediately booed off the stage. Though a great deal of scholarship has gone into discussing Derrida's relationship to musicality, and even improvisational jazz in particular, little or no thought has gone into probing the connection between Derrida's ideas about genre and his failure to win over the jazz audience.

In “Deconstructin(g) Jazz Improvisation: Derrida and the Law of the Singular Event,” a cogent article that covers much of the relevant terrain, Sara Ramshaw attempts to come to terms with this ill-fated event by situating Derrida's thoughts on the relationship between invention and the law within the context of improvisational jazz:

While improvisation and invention are by no means identical, they do share certain qualities that become extremely relevant when explored through a deconstructive framework. Both concepts describe “event[s] without precedent” (Derrida “Psyche” 43), “unique situation[s]” (60), which are constituted in their “singularity” (28). This singularity, albeit contested, can be starkly contrasted to the dominant conception of

¹ The author's neologism, a combination of “deconstruction” and “constriction,” conveys the ironic rigidity of Derrida's approach to genre. Though Derrida's philosophical strategy is intended to detect and traverse just these kinds of metaphysical fault lines in other thinkers' texts, his own constrictive prejudices, rather than a close reading of the text being scrutinized, occasionally so dominate his analyses that he could easily be accused of magical thinking. For more on this tendency, see Barbara Johnson's “The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida” and Paul de Man's “The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau.”

Western law, which privileges generality and universality over unpredictability and arbitrariness. (Ramshaw 2)

Ultimately, following Derrida, the conclusion that Ramshaw arrives at is that just as the law (and she, like Derrida, seems to be framing this concept primarily in terms of western democratic juridical laws here) is not a “pure determinacy” (ibid. 8) that is impervious to the vicissitudes of the world and unique demands for justice, there can be no purely singular moment of “spontaneous invention” (as improvisational jazz is often idealized to be) that does not emerge out of a relation to some generic forms of law. In other words, these philosophers have come to the epiphanic conclusion that pure improvisation is impossible but still worth pursuing.

Of course, this insight will come as no surprise to any improvisational jazz musician. Indeed, Coleman, who is for many, a paragon and founding father of dynamic improvisational jazz developed his idiosyncratic, ever-evolving form of “free jazz” out of years of diligent participation in the genres of gospel, blues, and bebop. It was only after arriving at a state of lubricious felicity with his violin, trumpet, and saxophone, as well as the discipline of composition, that he developed the ability to mix and match generic and spontaneous elements into a higher “free jazz” synthesis.

On the prickly issue of genres, in his famous essay, “The Law of Genre,” Derrida, who doesn't explicitly reference any particular theory of genre but likely has the classical concepts in mind, equates genre with the law:

The genre has always in all genres been able to play the role of order's principle: resemblance, analogy, identity and difference, taxonomic classification, organization and genealogical tree, order of reason, order of reasons, sense of sense, truth of truth, natural light and sense of history. (Derrida 252)

As anyone familiar with Derrida's work will understand from this list, he seeks to “make light of all the tranquil categories of genre-theory and history in order to upset their taxonomic certainties, the distribution of their classes, and the presumed stability of their classical nomenclatures” (ibid. 228) because “The law is mad, is madness; but madness is not the predicate of law. There is no madness without the law; madness cannot be conceived before its relation to law. Madness is law, the law is mad-ness” (ibid. 252).

Derrida supposes that genre theory consists of “tranquil categories” and “taxonomic certainties” and seeks to expose the unruly madness that under-lies such neat divisions.² Modern genre theory, however, sees nothing scandalous about such assertions of messiness.

In response to Derrida's paper, genre theorist Ralph Cohen wrote a paper entitled “History and Genre” in which he argues for a more pliable concept of genre:

genre concepts in theory and in practice arise, change, and decline for historical reasons. And since each genre is composed of texts that accrue, *the grouping is a process, not a determinate category*. Genres are open categories. Each member alters the genre by adding, contradicting, or changing constituents, especially those of members most closely related to it. The process by which genres are established always involves the human need for distinction and interrelation. Since the purposes of critics who establish genres vary, it is self-evident that the same texts can belong to different groupings of genres and serve different generic purposes. (Cohen 204; my italics)

Moreover, through participation in genres, participants of every variety (from 'active' writers or

² This putative “madness” invokes the spectacular scene at the end of “Plato's Pharmacy” (p.169-71) in which Plato's spectre frenetically attempts to separate poison from cure, good from evil, philosopher from sophist, ...; for Derrida, the implication would seem to be that the sifting operation of genrefication can only be a rigid hypostasis of “order's principle.”

musicians to 'passive' readers or listeners) develop what Hans Robert Jauss refers to as a “horizon of expectations,” a malleable, ever-evolving set of beliefs about what does or does not belong within a certain sphere of activity, a field that will always, after all, have emerged out of highly specific local contexts. Though there is nothing legally-binding about these expectations, they accrue nonetheless and persist as frames of reference which, in spite of their gravitational pull, participants can choose to conform to, subvert, expand, or expound upon at any given time.

Like critic Colin Nettelbeck, who eschews the “conservative reactions of an audience of so-called jazz lovers,” (Nettelbeck 201) Derrida was perplexed by the audience's response:

not only have I never had such an experience but--I'm an old man--I have given hundreds or even thousands of lectures, sometimes three hours long, in front of audiences that were at least as large and--I hardly dare to say it--you could hear a pin drop ... Clearly they were cult followers of Coleman. ("Musicien" 28; quoted by Wills)

Given his ideas about the mad tyranny of genre, however, it should perhaps come as no surprise that he was booed off the stage for reading his highly idiosyncratic philosophical piece to an audience that was “intolerant of this unaccustomed form” (Nettelbeck 198; quoted by Ramshaw 1). What he had not taken into account was that a “free jazz” audience, inured to the privileging of timbre and exuberant harmonologies³ over semantic content (or the deconstruction thereof), especially of the cryptic jargonish sort that Derrida excelled so brilliantly at, would naturally have radically different expectations and thresholds than a post-structuralist philosophy lecture audience (which would, in turn, have a radically different horizon of expectations from, say, an auditorium full of analytic or Marxist philosophers).

For example, at one point in the spoken word script, Derrida refers to “psycho-theologico-

3 A term coined by Coleman to describe a complex alchemy of harmony and melody.

spiritualist discourse” (Nettelbeck 200). I don't know why Derrida or Nettelbeck would think that an audience that had paid to hear “free jazz” would be receptive to such grandiloquent-sounding philosophizing, but Derrida's confoundedness bespeaks a certain ignorance of the fact that there could even be a genre, however elastic, of “free jazz.”

Bruce King, who was both at Coleman and Derrida's performance and reviewed Nettelbeck's book for the *Journal of Australian Studies*, put it succinctly:

The final three pages of *Dancing with DeBeauvoir* defend Derrida for trying to read a repetitious rambling monologue during an Ornette Coleman concert at the Cité de la Musique during July 1997. 'Derrida's conviction that all individual speech acts are bound to be a form of repetition within the context of existing verbal language coincides with Coleman's belief that within the flux of musical language there is no fixed frontier between jazz improvisation and written composition' (p 200). 'Coincides' and 'written composition' show how casually Nettelbeck moves from fact to fancy. I admit that I was a member of that audience booing Derrida to shut up. Derrida was not listed on the programme, he was not announced, and I paid my money to hear Coleman. Parisian intellectuals still believe that such planned 'happenings' are avant garde, alas. (King)

Still, it bears repeating that nothing about this particular audience's response is engraved in stone. It is easy enough to imagine any number of audiences, even jazz audiences, that would have been more receptive to Derrida's performance (after all, genres do, in fact, mix and mingle). Had Derrida instead performed his piece at a critical theory conference or an Avital Ronell book launch, this essay, which is essentially about the flaws in his ironically rigid ideas about genre, would have required a completely different launch pad.

Interestingly, many contemporary genre theorists believe that Derridean thought is highly

compatible with the more flexible modality of genre identified by Cohen et al. In *Genre*, John Frow, articulates a vision of genres as open-ended dynamic systems that are far from immune to differential play:

If we can still speak of system, it is because genres are not positive classes, defined only by their salient features, but are defined in relational terms which distinguish these features according to their place and function: a television advertisement is not a programme, and has a range of markers such as length, speed of cutting, production values, and commercial punch-line that differentiate it from programme segments; a newspaper editorial is differentially defined in relation to news stories or opinion columns ... We can identify a genre because we are at some level aware of other genres that it is not, and it is this relationship that is systemic. (Frow 125)

Seen through this lens, far from being stable, tranquil placeholders of discursive content, genres appear as fluid (but not unrestricted) differential systems that engage in complex relationships with other variably porous discursive systems. Indeed, recent research into the affinities between systems theory and Derridean thought suggests that genre and deconstruction are much less strange bedfellows than Derrida imagined.⁴

At the end of the day, I have, I'm afraid, said little about the generic expectations of the Paris jazz audience, above and beyond wanting to hear Coleman improvise on the sax rather than Derrida read a scripted philosophical treatise. A lot of ink has, in fact, been spilled trying to capture the precise nature of Ornette Coleman's sublime style, a style that continues to send out mimetic ripples precisely because of its singular combination of complex composition and refined technicity as well as

⁴ See, in particular, Cary Wolfe's extraordinarily nuanced and rewarding juxtapositions of Derridian thought and Niklas Luhmann's systems theory throughout *What is Posthumanism?*

Coleman's ineffably prismatic “spontaneous genius,” which refracts and diffracts complex compositions into the subtle, irreducibly sonorous admixture of melody, harmony, and timbre that the Paris Jazz Festival audience had paid good money to hear. Traversing such labyrinthine terrain is clearly far beyond the scope of this paper (and, to be honest, my abilities), but it is crucial that the theorists who choose to pursue this endeavour recognize that genrefication is not merely a reductive form of gentrification. With this in mind, we can and should continue to push thinking about such matters forward without falling victim to the inertia-bound pitfalls of taxonomic certainty that Derrida was so concerned about.

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