

## The Temporal Aura of Improvisation: It's Time to Play Jazz!

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A few years before the beginning of the Second World War, Walter Benjamin published a prominent essay in the history of art theory, called “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility.” In his essay, Benjamin argues that the introduction of modern technology in the reproduction of artistic creations, such as photography, music, and cinema, has caused the decay of the so-called authenticity and, consequently, what Benjamin terms as the ‘aura’ of the work of art. Authenticity refers to the “here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in a particular place” (21). Aura emanates from this uniqueness, creating a “strange tissue of space and time” that separates the spectator from the artwork (23). Benjamin considers the decay of aura as a revolutionary transformation of art and perception with profound social and political implications, but technology has also diminished the role of art as a repository of tradition, cultural heritage, and ritual: “*the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art always has its basis in ritual,*” Benjamin stresses (24). Ritual has the ability to establish ways of behaving and interacting, both between individuals and within social institutions. Authenticity divides some groups of people from others, emphasizing the importance of individual work.

Benjamin suggests that art has played an important role in the creation, maintenance and reinforcement of socio-political systems, which are, in many cases, exclusionary and power-ridden. The unapproachable aura establishes certain spatial and temporal qualities to be respected by the spectator. In its own shape, an art piece may resemble the clock that dictates the time without any form of relationship with the ‘viewer’ of time. Whereas Benjamin observes that the technological reproduction of artworks implies a progressive change in the “*relation of the masses to art*” (36), I argue that the continuous technological development has resulted in the standardization of art forms and individual expressions. In other words, the decay of aura has rendered uniqueness into sameness, both in the case of art and humankind: the ‘mass’ itself is an expression of the technology of reproduction that sustains the continual capitalist system.

Although Benjamin is correct to warn us about the “capitalist exploitation of film” that profits from a “*highly productive use of the human being’s self-alienation,*” technology, in itself, has not rendered art more approachable (34, 32). It is still in the hands of the few that control both the film and music industry. Here, I attempt to demonstrate that a music expression such as jazz improvisation embodies a structure of play that integrates diverse understandings of time and space. By jazz I am not referring to any specific music tendency within the jazz movement, but rather to the corresponding usage of improvisation techniques and structures in the general music form known as jazz. Such structures and techniques, I argue, have the potential to liberate the perception of the musician and the listener, opening the process of reproduction that Benjamin describes, to the benefit of the improvisation

collective. Improvisation is not entirely performed by one individual. Rather, it implies various participants, creating an aura that is approachable by communicating a temporal sensation that is shared among many and a space in which every actor has the right and time to play jazz.

### **Time**

As David Sterritt points out in his analysis of the aura of improvisatory art, it is important to note that jazz beginnings coincide with the development of the recording industry (164). Notwithstanding the advance of technological reproduction, jazz has been able to maintain and strengthen its aura. The improvisation process appears as a site from which aura emanates in a rather approachable form. The aura of improvisation disseminates a temporal alteration in musicians and listeners, challenging the norms and standards of the everyday understanding of ‘time’. The temporal dimension that improvisation opens is characterized by its collective synchrony and intuitive response. It differs from the time that is dictated by a machine; rather, it is founded upon the natural reactions of the human body and the interaction between individuals. It is a time that is created through an inclusive dialogue that connects performers, composers and listeners.

Jazz music in effect involves a ‘groove’ or ‘time feel’ that, according to jazz scholar Ed Sarath, is “internalized in the entire body as much as in the ears and mind.” Such improvisatory ‘grooves’, Sarath adds, escape transcription in musical notation form (*Music Theory* 50). The ‘grooves’ can change according to the musician, and are not established by a language or norms to be followed. Improvisation recognizes the creativity and inventive abilities of each musician. As Sarath argues, to emulate the ‘grooves’ of the improvisation, ‘master artists’ provide “tools that allow our individuality to blossom” (*Music Theory* 52). Improvisation appears as a formation of a collective that values difference and uniqueness. Hence, it recovers the aura while at the same time taking advantage of the technological reproducibility of the music piece in order to propagate across boundaries and integrate more listeners into the conversation, and hence influence other musicians.

Sarath points out that it is not uncommon for musicians to describe certain moments of creativity as being ‘in the zone’, the ‘flow’, or in ‘the moment’. According to Sarath, improvisation allows musicians to achieve a level of ‘heightened consciousness’ that is characterized by “enhanced fluidity of performance, presence, mental clarity, freedom from conditioning, well-being, mind-body coordination, group interaction” (*Music Theory* 13). Such characteristics are for Sarath “naturally high priorities for improvisers” (*Music Theory* 13). Improvisation, following Sarath’s description, alters the day-to-day perception of time, space, and individuality – fundamental aspects that define the subjectivity of the musician. The improviser, he argues in his article entitled “A New Look at Improvisation,” enters into a ‘vertical’ experience of time, in which “temporal sequences are subsumed within an overarching present” (15). Past and future are integrated into a present that is created and transformed by the

musician, who through this transcendental experience “reintegrates the personal self with its unbounded source” (15). As in the case of Benjamin’s of aura, improvisation is for Sarath a door into a reconceptualization of time and selfhood.

Is this aura, however, approachable for other musicians and large audiences? Not according to Sarath. He differentiates between the act of improvisation and that of composing. Whereas improvisation is defined as the “spontaneous creation of musical materials in a real-time format,” composition is the “discontinuous process of creation and iteration [of] musical ideas” (“New Look” 2-3). Such division becomes problematic if improvisation is to break the definitions of time and subjectivity imposed by the capitalist system. While improvisation is for Sarath able to open a temporal dimension that differs from the normal conception of time, it is measured in ‘real-time format’. The same applies in the case of composition, which is conceptualized as a ‘discontinuous process’. Both of these definitions follow what for Sarath is a “localized past-present-future sequence” that informs “ordinary consciousness” (“New Look” 14). The time of the clock is placed above and used to define improvisation. It neither takes into account the role of the listener nor offers a picture of the interaction between musicians in the improvisatory process. It is the listener who perceives the aura of the music, and for whom the audio or video is produced; or in the case of live performance, the audience responds and interacts with the performers. It is with the coordinated effort of the musicians that the aura becomes approachable through the creation of a temporal dimension that is shared across the collective. This is possible due to the structure of play that is found in improvisation: diverse individuals come together to form a team that communicates between each other and allows everyone to perform freely and creatively, without external norms of time and/or space that may curtail the improvisatory process.

### Play

Benjamin was among the first to analyze the impact of film in both art and political theory. The technology of reproduction, Benjamin asserts, “*detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition*” (22). This detachment involves a major alteration in human perception. Through the genre of film, the value of tradition is eliminated from cultural heritage. This is what Benjamin terms the ‘cathartic side’ of film: art is now to serve the market of large audiences. The economic system creates a mass of individuals that expect a product at their reach and, in this process, strengthen the market for artworks reproduction. Importantly, the market and its masses are not enclosed in one country or region; rather, it propagates and reproduces itself across boundaries. Through the analysis of film, Benjamin was able to identify a transnational market directed by a capitalist exploitative industry that makes possible a “*highly productive use of the human being’s self-alienation*” (32). The masses are large groups of self-alienated individuals who are not able to recognize uniqueness.

Benjamin argues that the self-alienated form of perception “extracts sameness even from what is unique” (23). Such is the case with our concept of time. The standardization of time around the globe

has resulted in an arbitrary and ruling concept of temporality – it does not recognize differences in perception, ability, tradition, or culture, and in the case of the past-present-future paradigm, it oversimplifies an array of phenomena and experiences that may affect and influence a person's life. Improvisation provides a different concept of time, and offers alternatives for the creation of a collective that acknowledges differences and uniqueness. This section will explore the structure of play, embodied in the improvisatory process, which has the power to alter the rigid norms of time established by the capitalist socio-economic system.

It should be noted that technology has played a major role in the popularization of improvisation music, namely jazz. On the other side of Benjamin's analysis of film genre, lies an argument for technology and the way it has strengthened the aura of jazz. When recording in the studio, David Sterritt argues, the product retains a degree of specificity as it was captured during "its sole moment of existence" (165). Sterritt also says that the ability in the studio to use technology to 'improve' a performance invites the musicians to avoid this option and to concentrate on their spontaneity and musical skills (165). Improvisers utilize technology in order to reach large audiences; however, they do so without seeking to satisfy the market.

Improvisation plays with the technology created for the advantage of the music industry and, at the same time, demonstrates the emancipatory role that technology has to offer, as argued by Benjamin. Through the appropriate use of technology, Benjamin asserts, "the individual sees his scope for play, his field of action, immeasurably expanded" (45n). Technology provides an increasing number of tools and instruments that musicians can use in their improvisation. As an example, Jonathan Kramer observes that the spread of electronic instruments allows "virtually anyone to compose." Kramer has found that many of his students of electronic music with no previous musical training are able to "produce extremely imaginative compositions" (80). Play, technology shows, is present in the compositional process as well.

The structure of play in improvisation, through the participation of composers, performers, and listeners, creates its own rhythm and duration, establishing an alternative sense of temporality that is shared with the collective. However, I am not seeking to argue that every member of the collective ought to experience time in the same way. For instance, Bruce Ellis Benson approaches music making as "*fundamentally* improvisational," in which "composers, performers, and listeners [are] partners in dialogue" and "no one partner has exclusive control" (x-xii). It resembles a dialogue in which all participants are conversing and sharing ideas using group coordination, individual innovation, and musical expertise. Benson follows Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of ideal dialogue, which is defined by its 'logical structure of openness'. The conversation brings "something into the open," allowing the participants to "shed new light on what is being discussed [and] to think about it (or, in this case, *hear* it) in a new way" (15). Importantly, the dialogue must itself be open: that is, its "outcome cannot be settled in advance" (15). It requires a degree of "loose-play or uncertainty," and is governed by rules that are

“open to continuing modifications” (15). Improvisation takes the form of this ideal dialogue, with a flexible nature that contrasts with the rigidity of clock-time and the past-present-future paradigm. In the play, performers and listeners are able to relate to their own space and time, that is, their uniqueness.

Technology appears here as an excellent vehicle to enter into a conversation with those who popularized improvisation. The reproduction of improvisatory art allows musicians and listeners to approach their aura and create a collective which emancipates participants from the rules of the capitalist system. Time becomes participatory and invites us to play jazz.

### **Jazz!**

When performing in a film, Benjamin states, the actor is placed “not in front of an audience but in front of an apparatus” (30). He adds that to accomplish the performance is to “preserve one’s humanity in the face of the apparatus” (30-31). The apparatus is formed of technicians, staff, director, and technological equipment. The actor must obey carefully the orders of the apparatus while surrendering himself to the massive reproduction of his image without any type of input from the actor. As Benjamin puts it, the actor “must operate with this whole living person, while forgoing its aura” (31). The reproduction of the actor in the film only transmits the physical aspects of the person. The aura is discarded with the unique temporal and spatial aspects of the performer. The actor, however, recognizes that behind the apparatus, the camera, and the director, it is the audience who is in control. “Those who are not visible,” Benjamin argues, “are precisely the ones who control” the performance (33). Without the knowledge of the apparatus, the actor enters into a dialogue with his public. However, this conversation cannot be of much influence until the performer is liberated from the direction of the apparatus. The performer is then free to improvise, to play, and to participate in the result of the process. Improvisation is found in both process and product. And it is through the product that those that are not visible are able to challenge the rigidity of the system. The performer and the composer can learn from the ‘pull of the other’.

Jazz, by acknowledging the Other – the invisible agent in the performance – recognizes the role of each participant of the improvisation collective. As Benson argues, music making is “something we inevitably do with others,” and, hence, “musical dialogue is *fundamentally* ethical in nature” (164). This implies recognition of every voice in the dialogue – none of their voices can silence other participants. Is such a dialogue viable in reality? Improvisation takes two forms, one physical among the members of the band, and another based on its aura and the otherness of its collective. In *Interaction, Improvisation, and Interplay in Jazz*, Robert Hodson proposes a model of jazz improvisation in which a jazz musician is defined as “being simultaneously a listener, composer, and performer” (40). Each musician partakes in the improvisation process by listening to other band members and adapting or modifying his or her own improvisation based on what he or she perceives. The band performs as a group, composing by listening, and performing by the composition of the moment.

The dialogue in this case is established physically and perceptually. Improvising musicians, Hodson argues, “engage in a dynamic, interactive process of deciding what to play, playing it, hearing what other musicians are playing, and adapting what they play” (20). Such improvisation is regarded as an “in-time phenomenon,” where a “transfer of ideas between players in real time” takes place (21). Relevant to this paper is the notion of ‘in-time’, as it proves that improvisation follows neither a past-present-future time division nor an ‘over-arching’ present as in Sarath’s model. By ‘in-time’ I envision a holistic conceptualization of time that encapsulates the aural qualities of the improvisatory piece: a here and now that does not refer to the physical site or the arbitrary clock-time of the performance; rather, a time that takes into account the complex and different perceptions of place and temporality that are transmitted through the music.

The alteration of temporality reaches the listener through the aura of improvisation. The listener absent from the place of performance appears as the other to the musician, and vice-versa. Benson argues that “as composer or performer or listener I open myself to the other when I feel the pull of the other that demands my respect” (170). However, Benson reminds the reader that ‘openness’ cannot mean “complete giving in to the other” (170). The dialogue can only be maintained if “there is a pull by both sides,” which requires that both parties pay attention, listen, in order to feel the pull (170-1). A similar pull is found by James Dennen in his research regarding the reception of improvised music. He argues that when listening to improvised music, there emerges an “unbroken temporal-spatial field” that is shared alike by the spectator and the performer. This shared temporality may encourage the spectator to “identify with the performer/composer” (146). The audience of the performance co-creates an aura that pulls both sides into an improvisatory process. This process, in turn, alters the solitary and egoistical values that drive the masses of the economic market. As Dennen concludes, “what reveals itself in the coproduced uncertainty of concurrent contemporaneous production is perhaps something emancipatory – something non-egoic and truly free” (148). As we have seen in this paper, time is one of those elements that emerge freely from the improvisatory process that connects a diverse collective of participants. Jazz provides an excellent model for the recognition of differences while at the same time integrating various participants within a shared, and authentic, temporal dimension.

By playing jazz, either at home as listeners, or during a performance as musicians, an approachable aura arises through a temporality that is open to continuous modifications. Performers, composers, and listeners, take part in the emergence of the improvisation aura. The physical and temporal division between musicians and listeners is rendered meaningless through the co-creation of the aura. The otherness is respected by both sides, adding value to the dialogue that respects differences while establishing a musical collective. The time experienced by this collective is not measured by the clock that is part of the apparatus that seeks to exploit human beings through the constant reproduction of their image according to standards and norms. Improvisation is able to utilize the technology of the apparatus in order to reach a larger audience and disseminate its aura. The opportunities for resistance

that improvisation offers resemble Benjamin's objective to politicize art, in lieu of the aestheticizing of politics as practiced by fascism (42). Modern technology provides larger opportunities for the alteration of arbitrary time and the propagation of improvisation, accompanied with the dialogue it opens and its playful temporality.<sup>1</sup>

### Works Cited

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<sup>1</sup> For further studies, it would be interesting to explore the possible connections between Benjamin's aura and jazz improvisation through his other texts. In my essay, I focused on Benjamin's "Work of Art;" however, his concept of aura varies in meaning in other works.