

Amodern 6: Reading the Illegible

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ON TRYING

André Hodeir and the Music Essay

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I

Judging by the flurry of recent publications in English alone - Corrigan's *The Essay Film*, Rascaroli's *The Personal Camera* and a recent issue of *Sight and Sound* - the essay has returned.^[1] As Corrigan's subtitle - "From Montaigne, After Marker" - makes plain, the return of the essay has figured cortically in the labors of cinema studies as it has focused renewed interest on the endlessly perplexing phenomenon of the "essay film." Although there is broad consensus that either Bazin's characterization of Marker's *Sans Soleil* as "an essay documented by film," or Hans Richter's "Der Filmessay: Eine neue Form des Dokumentarfilms" is the founding splice of the terms "film" and "essay," Réda Bensmaïa's *The Barthes Effect* powerfully reminds us that the value and pertinence of this splice depend deeply on how one thinks about both film and the essay.^[2] What are they? What are they together?

To engage such questions without simply repeating them, this study concerns itself with the certainly eccentric and perhaps even inadmissible phenomenon of the "music essay." It does so not merely to draw attention to an articulation of essayism that might otherwise escape notice, but to follow Bensmaïa's hunch and insist that the music essay prompts those of us who care about such things to consider carefully how it might invite renewed reflection upon the essay as such. In fact, given that reflection on the essay has belonged to the form from its inception (as Adorno, in "The Essay as Form" stressed) it may precisely require an eccentric articulation of essayism to agitate anew the essay's formal and generic profile and provoke some fresh thought about what an essay might be today.^[3] Here I will be trying to pursue

this more ontological matter through the figure and event of the criss-cross or chiasmus, two terms whose importance will emerge in my subsequent engagement with André Hodeir's corpus.

Be that as it may, if the essay has returned, where has it returned from and why has it returned now? As Corrigan's subtitle, with its inventive play of prepositions suggests, the essay has (re)turned from one medium, literature, to another, film. In effect, the essay film might be said to "remediate" the literary essay; the complication that the essay always had a fraught relation with literature notwithstanding.^[4] Certainly, the literary essay has long seemed to bear an essential relation with print and with the public sphere mediated by print capitalism more specifically. From this perspective, the essay could be said to have returned from the space-time of what Derrida once portentously called, "the end of the book and the beginning of writing."^[5] Little wonder then that it had to be written in light as opposed to ink.

Although easy to overlook, the circulation of printed essays not only occurs in public, but this circulation produces a public. This public was never simply an empirical result of the congregation of private individuals. It was an ontological incarnation of a distinctly rational way of thinking the human subject. Put differently, playing with or trying out a self in public (an especially compressed way to say "essay") is always already a registration of the constraining presence of the public *in* the self. To this extent, the essay belongs cortically to the history of subjectivation, and for those critical of this history from a Left perspective, print capitalism, as capitalism, has - in the course of the last century - largely destroyed the rational and secular forms of subjectivation that the transition from Feudalism had installed in Europe if nowhere else. To retrieve a recent chapter of this critique, the struggle for personal expression is no longer a struggle over the means, but over the very contents of the personal. Is the "selfie" a self at all?

This implies that one way to think about where the essay has returned from is in terms of the problem – both theoretical and political – of subjectivation. More specifically, if we are to make sense of the renewed interest in the essay *film*, we might consider in what way it has taken up the theme of subjectivation, especially as the essay expresses itself in the medium of film, a medium confronting a sustained identity crisis of late. According to some it is even dead. Be that as it may, how might we thematize the subjectivation motif in the return of *this* essay?

Perhaps because a certain “auteurism” is now typically invoked with caution if at all, Corrigan and his colleagues do not appeal to it to think the subjective expressivity of the essay film, but this does not prevent him from subscribing to Michael Renov’s notion that “to express” is one of the defining ambitions of the genre.^[6] Rascaroli, for her part, appeals directly to the concept of the “personal” to avoid “auteurism.”^[7] All of which is to say that if the essay has returned from a certain legacy of pondering the socio-political dynamics of subjectivation, this is due both to an increasingly vivid sense that the contemporary status of subjectivation remains pressing, and to a somewhat more theoretical conviction that grasping the actual dynamics of subjectivation has become more urgent.

Of the many ways in which this begs declensions of the “why” question, I will concentrate here on the comparatively recent encounter with the work of Gilbert Simondon, an encounter mediated through the likes of Deleuze and Stiegler to be sure, but one that has confronted the motif of subjectivation with the thematics of “individuation.” Put differently, if the essay has returned *through* the genre of the essay film, then perhaps this is because new pressure is being brought to bear on the very concept of the subject, a subject thought to be playing with a self in the analogue or digital medium of the film. In the spirit of Heidegger’s commentary on Nietzsche where much is made of the formulation, “the wasteland or desert (*Wüste*) grows,” one might say that the new pressure being brought to bear on subjectivation both as concept and as process results from the ontological fact that the “Web grows,” a reformulation of the desert that attempts to grasp the medium and effect of globalization as well as the general nihilism working to establish itself as a result.^[8] As my title may have led one to expect, André Hodeir’s music essay engages this in original and provocative ways. Indeed, his work prompts us to reconsider whether and to what extent the subject of the essay remains legible today.

II

In summer of 1977, Foucault was interviewed by the members of the department of psychoanalysis at Vincennes, a campus of the university of Paris whose department of philosophy he was charged with organizing. Ostensibly about the first volume of his history of sexuality, the interview turns at a certain point to Foucault's relation to Marxism and the status of class in his study. There follows the following perplexing exchange:

J.-A. Miller: So who ultimately, in your view, are the subjects who oppose each other?

Foucault: This is just a hypothesis, but I would say it's all against all. There aren't immediately given subjects of the struggle, one the proletariat, the other the bourgeoisie. Who fights against whom? We all fight each other. And there is always within each of us something that fights something else.

J.-A. Miller: Which would mean that there are only ever transitory coalitions, some of which immediately break up, but others of which persist, but that strictly speaking individuals would be the first and last components?

Foucault: Yes, individuals or even sub-individuals.

J.-A. Miller: Sub-individuals?

Foucault: Why not?^[9]

At first glance, Foucault's response seems oddly yet clearly Hobbesian. But as if anticipating the later demand that he declare himself on the concept of the unconscious, Foucault complicates the "war of all against all" by insisting that this war is fought both between and within each of us. He then complicates this

complication by invoking what he calls “sub-individuals,” a formulation that startles Miller and allows Foucault to turn the tables of the interview. “Why not?”

Although it is not made explicit by either Miller or Foucault, this exchange about individuals and sub-individuals is deeply inspired by the work of Simondon whose two-part thesis, on the mode of existence of technical objects and the psycho-biological genesis of the individual, was submitted to Georges Canguilhem (also Foucault’s supervisor) in 1958.^[10] If I present Simondon as a figure applying new pressure on the concept of the subject, it is not simply because his work has only been recently translated into English and commented upon, but also because, as the exchange with Miller makes plain, his way of thinking the ontogenesis of the heterogeneous subject has no necessary recourse to psychoanalysis and this despite the fact that his first academic post was in a provincial department of psychology. Put differently, Simondon complicates the figure of the sovereign subject, not through madness, or reification, or desire, but through what he understands by the principle and process of individuation. And, as the recent translation of his work into English might suggest, this difference is understood (by Brian Massumi among others) to have acquired fresh urgency as, to use my formulation, the Web grows.^[11]

To be sure, Simondon does not deploy the term, “sub-individual.” Instead, he favors what he calls the “pre-individual,” but what he seeks to capture through it – namely, an emphasis on the relational components that converge in the formation of real individuals – supplies the same complication of class identity that Foucault is referring to: as Marx himself would argue, the classes do not enter whole and preformed into the relation of their struggle, they are produced as agents of struggle through a relation that exceeds them. Moreover, for Simondon, the component elements of individuation include – as they do in Marx and Freud, although in quite different ways – what he calls “technical objects.”^[12]

A thorough encounter with the intricate and ambitious work of Simondon is not one that I will attempt here, but for the sake of clarifying its importance for rethinking the essay, and its particular pertinence for thinking about Hodeir’s music essay, a few preliminary precisions are essential. The first of these bear on the motif, also crucial to Deleuze’s appraisal, of ontogenesis, in effect, the becoming of being. As if following an instruction manual, Simondon thinks ontogenesis by attempting to outmaneuver two stale options. One that attempts to grasp the reality of being by thinking its essential self-consistency, its insistent non-derivation, in effect, its always-

already-wasness. Simondon calls this option substantialism. The other is the hylomorphic option in which being results from the convergence of form and matter. Being becomes but through the encounter between two more primordial elements or principles whose own becoming is left unthought. Against this, Simondon insists that we not presuppose the individuated character of being, a presupposition that separates individuated entities from the principle of their individuation, because this prompts us to think the principles *in terms of their results*. Instead, we need to think the coterminous becoming of both the principles and results of individuation, recognizing that both arise out of and in constant relation to a field of potentiality that Simondon calls the “pre-individual.” It is true, of course, that one might legitimately insist on a similar theoretical precaution here, but Simondon is at least consistent in demanding that the “pre-individual” not be conceived from the vantage point of the individual, but from the vantage point of the general economy of what does and *what does not* result in individuated being. Regardless, this discussion is the clear subtext of Foucault’s evocation of the “sub-individual” in the exchange with Miller, the fact of his preference for *dispositif* (apparatus) over *agencement* (assemblage, as deployed by Deleuze and Guattari) notwithstanding.^[13]

Second, and last, preliminary precision. Ontogenesis is twinned with reflection on the mode of existence of technical objects in Simondon’s corpus. When the Collège International de la Philosophie (CIPH) was formed in Paris in the early eighties, he wrote its director the late Jacques Derrida, urging Derrida to include both religion and aesthetics within the purview of the *collège*, arguing that no fundamental critique of the discipline of philosophy could proceed in their absence. True to form, this letter arrived at its destination only belatedly. Derrida received it from Simondon’s widow.^[14] In it Simondon unfolds the theme of aesthetics by appealing to the concept of technics, drawing out the importance of the mode of existence of objects – whether aesthetic or not – at once constituting and populating the domain of technicity. The letter is brief, but terse enough to bring clearly to Derrida’s mind the part of Simondon’s dissertation dedicated to producing the ontological relation between technical objects and what Simondon called “phase shifts.”^[15]

Similar to the discussion of ontogenesis, the discussion of phase shifts is set opposite an inadequate alternative, in this case, dialectics. As this pairing might suggest, phase shifting is a different way of thinking precisely the becoming, the genesis of being. In particular, Simondon wants to free the concept of becoming both from Hegelian teleology, the notion that beings are oriented toward and defined in

relation to a goal, and the principle of negation, that is, the logical maxim of beings defined in relation to what they are not. In a delicate and difficult to stabilize maneuver, Simondon tries to displace teleology with the concept of the phase, that is, the principle that being becomes, not through the pure passage of time but by entering compound and eccentric relations with itself, relations that Simondon uses the acoustical engineering principle of the phase to designate. In other words, if stereo speakers can be out of phase with each other, it is not because the signals they transmit are not synchronized, but because the waveforms that organize these signals are vibrating differently. Crests and troughs are out of alignment. Phase thus seeks to grasp a distinctly spatial, even operational dynamic within the unfolding of being. And, as this might virtually imply, for Simondon this spatial dynamic finds its persistent realization in the pervasive and systematic technical mediation of being. If time was the medium of being's pure self-relating, then phase shifts express the rhythm of becoming in the impure space of technical objects. Like Bernard Stiegler (who has written powerfully about Simondon and Heidegger on this very matter), Simondon refuses to treat technology as something that befalls humanity or being more generally, from outside.^[16] It is, by contrast, the very operation of becoming insofar as the latter participates in a structured shifting among phases.

If this discussion is properly characterized as "delicate," it is to acknowledge that Simondon is occasionally tempted to treat phases as temporal or developmental entities thereby complicating if not actually defeating the purpose of his critique of Hegel. But be that as it may, what constitutes the breakthrough of his thinking as it might be brought to bear on the essay, is the powerful and intriguing spin it puts on Montaigne's famous formulation in the address to the reader that heads his *Essays*: "Thus, reader, I am myself the matter of this book." In other words, Simondon might well urge that we grasp the essay as a technical object, that is, not just the materialized expression of a writing subject, but as is implied by the reflexive pronoun itself ("I am myself"), a form of the phasic encounter between the human subject and its becoming as mediated by the operations of language, print, and literacy. It is not that the essays are the trace of Montaigne's experiments with truth, the records of his doxological adventures. Rather, the essay is an object that in routing the subject through itself and others (including things), behaves like what Lacan famously designated the "small a object," that is, a piece of the speaking subject that approaches from elsewhere and remains perpetually alien to the very subject whose speech it stirs.^[17] Of course, the encounter between psychoanalysis

and Montaigne is a familiar one and one of little interest to Simondon, so let me here simply signal that instead of further elaborating this family romance, I will try to tease out of the notion of the essay as a technical object what I hope will represent a novel theory of the essay, a theory that will make sense of why the effort to think its distinctly generic character has relentlessly failed.

Turning then to the music essay as such, it is proper to introduce a name earlier set aside when noting Anglophone contributions to theorizing the essay – and to be clear, I have no interest in downplaying much less denigrating texts like Peter Zima’s *Essay/Essayismus*, George Stanitzek’s *Essay BRD*, or *L’Essai et le cinéma* edited by Suzanne Liandrot-Guigues and Murielle Gagnebin, that is, non-Anglophone writers on the essay.^[18] The name is that of Nora M. Alter, a scholar known for her work on German non-fiction film, but who has been concentrating of late on the place of music and sound in the essay film. A recent piece, “Composing in Fragments,” is a quite subtle treatment of the Eisler score for Resnais and Marker’s *Nuit et brouillard*, especially as it drifted from one film to another.^[19] Without saying as much, she traces what Michel Chion would call the “magnetization” of the music by the image, a process that compels the “same” music to say different things, to realize different effects.^[20] What such attention allows her to do is to tease out not only the way sound matters to the form and therefore content of particular film essays, but how sound poses the question of the properly “essayistic” character of such films. It is this part of what Alter cares about that matters to me.

What Alter has not yet, at least to my knowledge, broached is the question of whether we can speak, not of music *in* the essay film, but the music essay as such. It is with this in mind that I wish to turn attention to the work of André Hodeir. I will explain why. For those unfamiliar with this figure there is a thorough accounting of his life and importance in Jean-Louis Pautrot’s *The André Hodeir Jazz Reader*, a collection of essays (yes, essays) that span the entirety of Hodeir’s career as the editor of *Le Jazz Hot*, a post-war journal of jazz performance reviews and criticism. For my purposes two aspects of this trajectory are salient: first, the fact that Hodeir was a professionally trained musician – he played violin – whose musicological competence factored centrally in his criticism; and second, that when he formed “Le Jazz Groupe de Paris” in the mid-fifties, he composed and recorded a series of pieces he titled “Essais.” He does not say as much, but his inspiration here might well have been Samuel Barber, who between 1938 and 1978 also composed three pieces he called, “Essays for Orchestra,” by which he seems to have meant compressed

“symphonic” compositions. My question is twofold: what makes these pieces “essays,” but also, insofar as they are essays what do they give us to think about the essay as a form or even a genre?

In Alter’s study of Richter and Farocki (among others), she deploys the concept of “translation” to explore the possibility of the literary essay morphing into either a film or an installation.^[21] She draws on Benjamin’s well-combed text, “The Task of the Translator” to enable her thought experiment, and while this helps her think about the problem of media specificity under the broad rubric of the “untranslatable,” it complicates her life by depriving her of Jakobson’s concept of semiotic translation, that is, the transposition of a particular message from one medium (as opposed to code) to another.^[22] If she were more interested in theorizing the challenges to subjectivation posed by translation even in its ordinary sense this would be crucial to her discussion, but she is not, and one might certainly expect this in a meditation on the essay. By contrast, Hodeir confronts the matter head on and seems to think it bears an essential (a term he does not shy away from) relation to the music essay.

III

This is the point at which readers typically begin to wonder whether one is making a mountain out of a molehill, that is, whether Hodeir’s work merits the emphasis I have placed on it, so consider this remarkable characterization of his project in *Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence* from 1956, two years after composing the first pieces in his “Essais” series.

There is a deep interpenetration between what is called “inspiration” and the “technique” it uses to find expression. It is no doubt (*Sans doute*) arbitrary to separate them in order to explain through analysis what should be explained through synthesis. If I choose the former method, it is because the tools of jazz criticism are still too crude. Within the limits of current conceptions, much remains to be done. What I should like is for this book to become, in its small way, the *Discourse on Method* of jazz. I know, long before finishing the volume, that Descartes’ achievement is

well beyond me; there are many problems I won't be able to touch. But perhaps some other musician, one more gifted for criticism, more erudite than I, will take up where I leave off and carry this idea further.[23]

Later he clarifies, writing: "The time has come to subject this notion [that jazz realized its essence in New Orleans, that is, at its putative origin] to radical doubt about which we spoke in the Introduction." [24]

I suggest that we should find this at once reassuring and provocative for three reasons. First, although predictable, his invocation of Descartes makes it clear that when, in an important later chapter he examines what he calls "musical thought," he is quite seriously thinking about the *cogito* as a theory of subjectivation. Indeed, the French title, literally, "men and the problems of jazz," only reinforces this. True, he is not reading Simondon, but he is clearly worrying about the place of jazz in the ontogenesis of individuation.

Second, by calling out the Descartes of the Discourse, as opposed to *The Meditations*, he is pursuing the problem of subjectivation in relation to that of method, a key moment of which involves what Descartes called "radical doubt," that is, the doubt that obliges one to consider that the certainties he or she affirms are, in fact, manipulations effected, in the last instance, by *le malin génie*. [25] More typically, Hodeir's method is simply understood to be rigorously musicological, a point conceded by all of his contemporaneous critics, say Leonard Feather, who, like Hodeir, was a musician who wrote popular jazz criticism, and thought distinctive because it engaged music, even in its popular idioms, as a coded, rather than a directly felt practice. But this suggests that like Adorno, Hodeir conceives of music as a locus of what most radically challenges thought itself. As with the missed proletarian revolution that so resonated in the work of members of the *Institut für Sozialforschung*, the dispute between Adorno and Hodeir over jazz was likewise, if quite differently, missed.

Third, in insisting on grasping the "essence" of jazz, and on this basis refuting those who believe it died in New Orleans toward the beginning of the last century, Hodeir situates his Cartesianism within the framework established by the French reception of phenomenology. As he says explicitly when defining essence in chapter 15: "Lucien Malson puts the problem in these Husserl-like terms: 'the essence of a thing consists of the elements that it would be impossible to suppose absent without

destroying the thing itself.”^[26] Again, there is no risk in overstating the philosophical rigor of a writer who identifies with it so explicitly, not simply rhetorically, but as a fundamental aspect of his methodological encounter with jazz sonorities.

That said, it is important to acknowledge that this risk (or its absence) is shared differently by Hodeir and myself. For beyond justifying my approach to his work, Hodeir’s theoretical commitments also expose his text to the implacable protocols of reading. Specifically, one is invited to consider why it is that a composer of essays – whether musical or critical – would align, and deliberately align, his project with Descartes rather than Montaigne, a pairing treated by historians of all stripes as one structuring the very emergence of modern Western thought. In the passage cited from *Jazz, its Evolution and Essence*, this alignment is presented in terms of authorizing a certain practice of skepticism: Hodeir wants to find the concepts by which to disagree – not as a matter of taste, but as a matter of judgment – with those contemporaries who refuse to consider the innovations of Charlie Parker, Thelonius Monk and other bebop artists as jazz. But one might also want to insist that Hodeir embraces Descartes because he distinguishes between his writing and his essayistic musicking (to invoke Christopher Small’s work), but this is untenable for two reasons: one, Hodeir does actually refer to his writings as essays (see, for example, the contrast he draws between articles and essays in “Monk or the Misunderstanding”), and two, in the course of his own compositional work he encroached more and more insistently on literary writing producing both musical settings of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, and ultimately his own novels.^[27] No, if Hodeir insists upon aligning with Descartes, it is for reasons that he himself does not understand. This illegibility of his own practice demands a reading that recognizes the considerable challenges posed therein.

To justify this assertion, let me draw attention to a rather curious rhetorical tic that both consistently marks Hodeir’s study and gestures beneath its surface to something that may definitively establish them as essays, and of precisely the sort I am seeking here to establish. In the passage from *Jazz* cited above, Hodeir writes: “It is no doubt (*Sans doubt*) arbitrary to separate them in order to explain through analysis what should be explained through synthesis.” Various incarnations of this salient turn of phrase dot his text: “it is no doubt,” “without doubt,” “doubtless,” “it is beyond doubt,” even “it is incontestable.” Generally, these occur precisely as he is rather self-consciously passing judgment in the form of an assertion of taste

preferences. For example: “The professional virtues of the Kenton machinery are admirable, without a doubt, it would be good to see them put to work on arrangements that were purer and bolder in style.”^[28] What makes these formulations conspicuous is the fact that his Cartesianism is explicitly founded on the methodological principle of “radical doubt,” that is the foundational move of calling into question all values whether doxological or not. So, how can he say, repeatedly and effortlessly, “without a doubt”?

Here again one might be tempted to urge that he is not a careful thinker, and therefore not a careful writer, but I think I have dispensed with this option by showing that he not only is a careful thinker, but that this very quality is what distinguishes his writing from that of his contemporaries, even those like Feather, who approach the material from, as it were, the inside. So, something else is going on. Allow me to propose that it is possible to doubt everything and nothing “at the same time” if one treats the essay as a technical object that holds different moments of subjectivation, different phases of individuation, together in the labor of a certain expressive practice. Put differently, the subject of Hodeir is the phase shift that oscillates, perhaps even swings, between Montaigne and Descartes, or even more suggestively, that it is through this shift that he proposes both to think the essence of jazz, and to compose in concert with this essence.

What then *is* the essence of jazz? Hodeir’s answer – that it swings and is hot – either says little, or says something so dated, so hopelessly passé, that it is barely worth repeating. However, a bit more reflection allows one to tease out an idea well worth thinking about in listening to one of Hodeir’s music essays. Specifically, what he is trying to capture through these terms is the formal tension between ensemble playing and soloing, a tension that is both crucial to what he means by “musical thought” in the chapter of *Jazz* dedicated to it, and cortical to one of his very last essays on jazz, “Improvisation Simulation” from 1986.^[29] To be clear, both “swing” and “hot” refer to ways of handling sound and thus thread performance, perhaps even technique, across and between ensemble playing and soloing: an orchestra can both swing and play hot, as can a soloist.

In light of the long association between the essay and personal expression, or self experimentation, the temptation is strong here to think about improvisation as the decisive essayistic element of music, but this presumes an account of the person, the individual that, as I have been suggesting, neither Hodeir nor Simondon affirms.

Instead, what is crucial is what Hodeir tries to capture in the notion of simulated improvisation, that is, not notated, but formally organized, on-the-spot musical thinking. In many ways this rhymes with one of the themes that arises in the strained dialogue between Ornette Coleman and Derrida where in response to Derrida's observation: "Perhaps you will agree with me on the fact that the very concept of improvisation verges upon reading, since what we often understand by improvisation is the creation of something new, yet something which doesn't exclude the pre-written framework that excludes it."^[30] Coleman simply says, "That's true."

Such formulations raise any number of crucial questions and while Coleman makes only the briefest appearance in Fred Moten's astonishing *In the Break*, this text takes us directly to the core of several such questions.^[31] To begin with, Moten's analysis of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's essay on Burton Greene (a white, indeed Jewish, pianist committed to free form improvisation), "Applecore No. 5, The Burton Greene Affair," draws out a decisive point about the tie between improvisation and thought.^[32] Repudiating without dismissing Baraka's excommunication of Greene (white people cannot play jazz because they lack spiritual contact with it), Moten draws out precisely in what way improvisation as a way of surviving the unlivable belongs not only to the realm of experience – it is not "just" an approach to playing music – but it takes place, even during a musical performance in a space where race and gender lose their hold on the subjects of experience. Like Coleman, who he situates in relation to the recidivist destiny of the Enlightenment, Moten gets how reading in the dark, that is, under conditions of strained or impossible legibility, requires not only a practice of improvisation but a way of being that is itself a play with, a move upon the world. In this, he gives us an angle on Hodeir who, as a white man in jazz, might be seen as missing improvisation's link to experience, but who precisely as an essayist is moved by or caught up in a black aesthetic tradition. Despite the strong accent Moten places on both slavery and literature, he doesn't quite grasp the significance of Hodeir's music *essay* and its engagement with and articulation of improvisation. That said, he is underscoring how improvisation necessarily broaches the problem of subjectivation, thus clarifying why Hodeir's essays cannot operate without it.

What emerges here is a variation on a problem crucial to Hodeir's thought namely the conditions of possibility for improvisation as such, a problem that complicates George Lewis' otherwise helpful distinction between Afrological (spontaneous) and Eurological (indeterminate) improvisation.^[33] Coleman's technique of "harmolodics"

goes at this by calling for collective improvisation (a practice now associated with free jazz), but what he, Derrida and Hodeir agree on is the fact that improvisation is radically and properly conditioned by the constraints giving shape to the event of performance. Moten, of course, thinks these constraints on a macrological level, but concern for the enabling constraints of improvisation oblige Hodeir to concentrate on the formal structure of how performing subjects can, to use his phraseology, think together musically, that is, in and with music. Indeed, this is what he means by simulated improvisation, that is, how do we render legible, that is, write music so that it orders the field of intersubjectivity, as technically mediated through musical instruments, in a way that enables soloing marked by the constraints that condition it?[34]

Why then am I harping on this? If we want to make sense of Hodeir's characterization of his own compositions as "essays," then I think we ought to attend to the way they, on the one hand, disconnect essayism from personal expression or "soloing," while also finding something like the essay in the technically mediated forms of individuation that simulated improvisation achieves. Cartesian "radical doubt" gives way here to a scripted practice of perpetual guessing where even the *cogito* succumbs to its distribution across a performative network in relation to which its location at any given phase of the event is anybody's guess.

<http://amodern.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/18-01-Cross-Criss.m4a>

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This piece dates from the earliest recording sessions of the Jazz Groupe de Paris. It is titled "Cross Criss," and for those of you with well-trained, or small (as Nietzsche called them) ears, you may have heard why, namely, that the melodic material that forms the "verse" portion (conspicuous in the introduction), repeats in "chorus" portions but often not as ensemble playing, but as part of the instrumental soloing. There is, in other words, a certain crisscrossing of the song structure, an effect that might even be said to grip the voicing in the melodic material itself. More than that though the jazz fans among you will also have heard in the title of the piece its reversal (and this is a hugely important theme that I'll not be able to do justice to here) of a piece composed by Monk titled, "Criss Cross." Although Monk is mentioned only in passing in *Jazz*, Hodeir later devotes, "Monk, Or the Misunderstanding" (to which I have already referred), to the Monk discography arguing for its decisive role in posing the vexing and thus decisive question of jazz's status as a popular music. Again, the missed encounter with Adorno looms large here.

Monk's piece (and there are numerous live performances of it available on YouTube for your listening pleasure) bears little musical resemblance to Hodeir's. Even the formal structure, such as it is, is largely organized around Monk's utterly distinctive piano style with its off-key notes and chords and, at times, utterly perplexing rhythmic phrasing. But for this reason, Hodeir's "Cross Criss" can be heard as a conspicuous and quite intricate reversal of Monk; not in the sense of reintroducing a swing, that is popular, element (although it does do that), but in the sense of re-writing the logic of soloing both in the sense of disconnecting the solo and its subject, but also in the sense of de-temporalizing soloing, that is, treating its happenings more like phase shifts continuously occurring in the performance than "turns." But again, not as free jazz; as what then deserves to be called music essays.

I do not wish to suggest that the question of the popularity of jazz is irrelevant here. The matter figures cortically in Hodeir's appraisal of Monk's importance, and one of the bolder gestures of *Jazz* is the chapter in which Hodeir brings jazz and what Adorno called, "modern music" into alignment essentially for the purpose of ridiculing the likes of Stravinsky, Ravel and Milhaud for failing to recognize the real power of jazz sonorities. Jazz has much to teach the musical avant-garde, a factor underscored by the fact that its partisans were such poor listeners. But the question of jazz's relation to its audience, or more broadly, the relation between music and society, is engaged by Hodeir in provocatively formal terms; notably in and through

the problem of the criss cross/cross criss.

Having already underscored the illegitimacy of separating Hodeir's criticizing from his composing as two modalities of writing, I turn now to a fascinating late essay of his called, "Crabwise."^[35] Linger here will help establish how the Moebian "criss cross" operates as a principle for thinking both the crossroads of various modalities of writing, and, more decisively still, the way "essay" names the technically mediated encounter between subject and object, consciousness and life. As Pautrot has noted, "Crabwise" is a chapter in *The Worlds of Jazz*, a text initially conceived as a series of chapters each "simulating" a particular musical form.^[36] The form "Crabwise" simulates is the obscure, but ingenious "Crab Cantata" by J. S. Bach. As with "Criss Cross" by Monk, this too - complete with a "follow-the-bouncing-ball" instructional diagram-is available on the Web. In essence, what happens in the Cantata is that the "subjects" (thinking here in the vocabulary of the fugue) defining the melodic material unfold as if in front of what Kaja Silverman once called an "acoustic mirror." In effect, to employ a more literary figure, a boustrophedon. Either way, what is crucial here is the paradox of reversibility where signifiers, as Saussure insisted, relentlessly advance even as they repeat themselves (or their relations) in reverse order. I would argue that this is even more dramatic in a sonic register than a specular one due to the normative illusion of the instantaneity of one's perception of an image and the fact that a reversed, even inverted image remains "legible."

What is striking about Hodeir's "Crabwise" are the particular writing strategies it deploys. Although there is no obvious sign, the printed form of the text might well have served as the template followed by Derrida in *Glas* or, on a smaller scale, "Tympan" (the modest "exergue" that heads *Margins of Philosophy*) in that the text contains two columns.^[37] They are meant to be read in observance of their separation, but not in ignorance of their proximity, at once graphic and thematic. In Western practice, the left-hand column seems personal, even autobiographical. It begins: "My life. This is the story of my life. It's high time it was written. The little memory I've got left is going."^[38] Opposite is the right hand column that begins: "Sleep. It would be such a relief to get some sleep, it was a hard day and tomorrow will be the same, there'll still be that road in front of us, right now it's winding, hilly, bumpy, at each turn we're thrown against each other, at each jolt the dream that was coming through goes away again" (ibid.). The "personal column," (ambiguous by design) winds around to the assertion that "music was my life" and ends as if drifting off, "Farewell music"^[39]. As this might suggest, the person in question here is oddly

and importantly *impersonal*, that is, more of an “it” than the “I” or “me.” One is led to expect and in fact, as Pautrot notes, this column presents a thumbnail sketch of the history of jazz told in reverse order, that is, as if narrated by a time traveler moving from the present into the past. The right-hand column, peopled with “us” and “we,” is essentially a journal or diary of a road trip undertaken by a band. It is in that sense oddly more personal, but – and the caveat is decisive – it is a collective or group subject. Not “I” but “we.” This column winds around to the tour bus’ arrival at Pnotspadamh palace, “where the musician prince Angkor, Angkor faster forget dawn dawn sleep.”^[40] In effect, the right-hand column circles around on itself, beginning and ending with the exact same word/note (?), but thereby providing crossover points to the left-handed material at, as were, both ends.

There would be much to say here, but I will restrict myself to those aspects of “Crabwise” that bear on the concept of the music essay. Thematically, of course, one is struck immediately by the way the dynamics of individuation are staged in the text. We have a person – perhaps music “it-self”^[41] – who is actually a third person, an impersonal, that is, non-person person, who crosses over and back with a person who only appears as a group presented in quest of a dream – and the Cartesian resonances should not be downplayed – a dream that is, by virtue of the rigors of the quest itself, persistently perturbed. The text thus manifests as a technical object in which potential individuation is not only posited, but by virtue of the formal, that is, retrograde or regressive structure, this potential is allowed to enter in and out of phase with itself. This draws attention not to the perceptions or trials of *an* individual, but to the possible modes of individuation held in tension and thus “played” with within the text.

Recall here that “Crabwise” is also a simulation of music – specifically of the medieval form of the crab canon later tempered by Bach – and, crucially, that it speaks in the name of music “itself.”^[42] Thematically, through the device of the third person, “it” calls itself in such a way as to call up its own concept, music. But more than that, the ensemble of its *procedures*, both thematic and formal, call up the music essay called, “Cross Criss.” As a simulation (and recall Hodeir’s fascination with simulated improvisation) it effectively deconstructs (and I mean this rigorously, not just as another name for criticism) the distinction between the signifier and the signified, form and content, music and writing, the autographical and the sociographical, the expressive subject and the technical object, the past of “Criss Cross” and the present of “Cross Criss.” And, what strikes me as hugely suggestive is

that Hodeir wants to think this practice under the name of the essay. To be precise, if he calls his compositions *and* his criticism essays, it is because they share something that belongs to neither and what they share solicits, calls for the concept of the essay. To my mind Pautrot neglects this insight in favor of a rather thought-less stress put on Hodeir's turn to literature in the form of novels. Yes, he wrote some, but they do not by any means contain his most provocative thinking about the articulation of literature and music.

So what is it that compositions and criticisms share without controlling that deserves the name essay? They appear to share a crossroads, a relay or transfer point, that Hodeir insists upon calling the cross criss or criss cross. This is also referred to in the Greek as *chiasmus*, or, to invoke the rhetorical term, *antemetabole*. This is, of course, important and rich, but if one is seeking to tease out what Hodeir has to teach us about *the essay* through his music essays, then what must be stressed is the fact that the *chiasmus* is a site of trafficking. Specifically, what it enables and facilitates is what Simondon is trying to capture through the logic of individuation, that is, the movement of possible elements of individuation some of which take the form of expressive subjects, some do not. Those that do not, linger as what Foucault called "sub-individuals," aspects of which endure as elements of the technical objects that stimulate the becoming of so-called sub-individuals. To put the matter simply: the essay precedes the individual, or, put more carefully, whatever experiences an individual is thought to have, or opinions s/he/it is thought to hold, are compossible with the simulated improvisation that allows them to materialize. As this Deleuzianism might suggest, the essay is difficult if not impossible to theorize in generic terms, because each essay is subject to a form of singularization that registers its potential for individuation. In effect, each essay is its own genre. This helps make sense of the relentless yet fruitless effort to think the generic character of the essay, an effort that, as I have suggested here, complicates the work of "translating" (to use Alter's term) *the essay* from one medium to another. This is a false problem. What is, however, a real problem is thinking the law of a genre comprised of nothing but indefinite instances of itself.

But that's another essay.

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33. George Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological



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34. George Lewis and Fred Moten belong to a large group of musicians and scholars, both black and white, who have thought long and hard about the nature of improvisation. Figures such as Paul Berliner, Eddie Prévost and Derek Bailey spring to mind. In all these cases, improvisation is studiously separated from what in another context might simply be called, "jamming," as if even the most basic technical consideration of how to approach the event of improvisation would be impossible without thinking more deeply about how chance, risk, turn taking and virtuosity arise in human expression. In the near background here one senses the presence of Friedrich Schiller who famously compared society to a dance, preemptively complicating any subsequent attempt to ground social facts in rule or laws, but also inviting those thinking about musical performance, "musicking," to recognize the immediately

“human” aspect of sonic art making. Hodeir is an eccentric. He certainly belongs to the group I am invoking here, but he perversely insists upon *reading* improvisation, that is, figuring its conditions and constraints into a composition that is iterable, as if to say: look “pure” improvisation is a fiction, so let’s play with the range and scale of impurities including those impurities that arise in



the act of denying that anything is illegible in principle. Image type unknown
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Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990). Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass



(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), ix. Image type unknown
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41.

One might reasonably object here that Hodeir is talking about jazz, not music as such. While true in certain respects two points are worth mentioning: first, he says “music,” not jazz or even jazz music. But more importantly, one of

Hodeir's chief arguments in *Jazz* is that the Eurocentric tendency to exclude jazz from the domain of music by stressing its harmonic and formal limitations, is an expression of prejudice. He does not say racism, but he could. While he is similarly careful not to treat jazz as the authentic outpouring of the "souls of black folks" (he resists the notion that jazz derives from blues), his whole corpus demonstrates that this music is music and must be respected as such.

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42.

An important feature of this mode of reflexivity is the way it joins naming and memory. In a figure that evokes Stiegler's post-Husserlian concept of "tertiary retention" (the network of mnemonic systems that remember "for" us, including archives of all sorts, but also media like film and television), "Crab Wise" presents the memory of music failing as it struggles to reconstruct the proper names of germinal figures in then *contemporary* jazz performance (recall that "music" narrates its history backwards), that is precisely where one might expect memory to be most reliable. This would then appear to have much to do with specifically remembering names including, I would suggest, the impersonal name of music itself. See pages 201-02 on the left-hand, that is,

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This text owes an enormous amount to three interlocutors: Anaïs Nony, Barbara Engh and Cesare Casarino. While some may conclude that you have much to answer for, I could not have done it without you. Thank you.

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Image: [Kristen Mueller](#), "Solitude in the World," from *Partially Removing the Remove of Literature*, 2014.