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Collective intentionality and the further challenge of collective free improvisation

Lucia Angelino

Abstract

The kind of collective improvisation attained by free jazz at the beginning of the sixties appears interesting from the perspective of contemporary debates on collective intentionality for several reasons. The most notable of these, is that it holds a mirror up to what analytical philosophers of action identify as “the complexly interwoven sets of collective intentions” that make a group more than the sum of its parts. But at the same time, free jazz poses a challenge to these philosophical theories of collective intentionality, because what happens is not planned in advance but arises from spontaneous interactions in the group. The second and no less decisive reason is that jazz musicians act together in a very distinctive way, which casts into clear relief the interplay between togetherness and agonism, individual freedom and group commitment, which is contained in every human interaction. In other words, in free jazz we find what Hannah Arendt calls the “paradoxical” or “twofold” character of “human plurality.” Starting with the analysis of two paradigmatic case studies—Charles Mingus’s *Folk Forms No. 1* and Ornette Coleman’s *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation*—my main concern in this paper is to provide a phenomenological account of the individual-yet-plural intentionality that emerges and runs through the improvisatory process in the free jazz case. After having made the negative point that this phenomenon represents a challenge to the analytical theories of collective intentionality, I shall argue that it can be accounted for from a phenomenological perspective. My basic thesis is that the overall cohesiveness of the improvisatory process must be regarded as a meaningful realization of an overall feeling, shared and shaped together by musicians over time—and not as the execution of an advanced plan.

Keywords Phenomenology · Edmund Husserl · Alfred Schutz · Collective intentionality · Collective free improvisation · Collective action · Togetherness and agonism · Individual freedom and group commitment · Motivic chain associations

1 Introduction

The kind of collective improvisation attained by free jazz at the beginning of the sixties¹ appears interesting from the perspective of contemporary debates on collective intentionality for several reasons. The most notable of these is that it holds a mirror up to what analytical philosophers of action identify as “the complexly interwoven sets of collective intentions”² that make a group more than the sum total of its parts. But at the same time, free jazz poses a challenge to these philosophical theories of collective intentionality.

The second, and no less decisive reason is that free jazz musicians act together in a very distinctive way which casts into clear relief the interplay between individual freedom and group commitment, togetherness and agonism, which is contained in every human interaction.³ In other words, in the “free jazz” case we find what Hannah Arendt calls the “paradoxical” or “twofold” character of “human plurality,” which is like a kind of song “for more than one voice”⁴ whose melodic principle is the reciprocal distinction of the unmistakable timbre of each.⁵

This interplay is fairly evident on the levels of sound and embodied action. It is something we hear and also see taking place on the stage. But the conceptual articulation of it—that is, the articulation of its conditions of emergence—is a more difficult matter. What is of interest for present consideration is that we are in a completely new dimension—which is neither that of “an individual swallowed up in a group situation,”⁶ nor that of one dominant soloist “out front soloing”⁷ against the background of a composed ensemble accompanying him as a “sound-carpet.”⁸

¹ Around 1960 when free jazz appeared, the evolution of jazz took a sudden turn. This article is concerned with these developments, and specifically with the development of collective improvisation in free jazz. In this turn, the main novelty lies in the emancipation from traditional jazz laws and conventions as well as from the general framework which had established itself soon after the birth of jazz as a more or less incontestable norm. This framework consisted of a code of agreements—related to theme, chordal and time patterns, chorus lengths, and rhythmic and harmonic structures — which made up the basis of improvisation.

² Hagberg (2016, p. 484).

³ I have started to develop the critical argument by drawing on the paradigmatic case of Ornette Coleman’s *Free Jazz. A Collective Improvisation* in a previous article entitled “A frame of analysis for collective free improvisation on the bridge between Husserl’s phenomenology of time and some recent readings of the predictive coding model,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-019-09640-7>. Here I wish to focus on the conditions of emergence of an individual-yet-plural collective intentionality. My main concern in this paper is to provide a phenomenological account of the interplay between togetherness and agonism, individual freedom and group commitment that free jazz reveals so clearly and to propose an alternative model for group interaction, drawing on the phenomenological tradition.

⁴ According to an expression that intentionally echoes intentionally the title of a book by Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice. Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (2005).

⁵ Barthes (1975 p. 20).

⁶ According to an expression introduced by Ornette Coleman (1959).

⁷ Coleman (1959).

⁸ Coleman (1959).

Although each player goes his own way and makes a distinctly personal contribution, he adds tellingly to the group endeavor, thus forming a whole that is always more than the sum of its parts. And here—precisely here—lies the riddle.

2 Two case studies: Charles Mingus's *Folk Forms No. 1* and Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz, A Collective Improvisation*

In the following section, I will go into some detail, and with the help of two musical examples,⁹ give an account of the riddle I am seeking to solve. These examples are: Charles Mingus' *Folk Forms No. 1*,¹⁰ “whose most important features anticipated some of the basic elements from which varieties of free jazz later crystallized”¹¹; and Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz, A Collective Improvisation*¹² “whose title named a whole musical era.”¹³

Although “it cannot be said for certain whether in *Free Jazz, A Collective Improvisation* Ornette Coleman had in mind the new directions in collective improvisation evolved by Charles Mingus [...] “the conceptions of the two have much in common.”¹⁴ And even if the musical results of those conceptions are quite different, “one marked tendency bearing on the evolution of free jazz, is present in both: the move from individual monologuizing soloists toward a kind of collective conversation.”¹⁵

In this respect, Charles Mingus¹⁶ (a bassist and composer) is regarded as a pioneer of free jazz, and the musical piece entitled *Folk Forms No. 1* as one of the most important milestones in the development of new forms of collective free improvisation, insofar as it “contains long stretches in which the traditional roles of the rhythm section and soloists are set aside in a way unknown even in the early music of Ornette Coleman, the most talked about exponent of free jazz at the time.”¹⁷

The characteristic features of this musical piece can be described as follows. In the collective improvisations of *Folk Forms No. 1*, “one rarely hears a steady beat,

⁹ The musical analysis in this section is based mainly on a book by Jost (1994). And particularly on chapters 2: “Charles Mingus” and 3: “Ornette Coleman.”

¹⁰ The musical piece entitled *Folk Forms No. 1* was first recorded live at the Antibes Jazz Festival on July 13, 1960 and later recorded in studio on October 20, 1960. Consequently, there are two slightly different versions of the same musical piece: the first one (from the concert) is included in the album entitled *Mingus at Antibes*, and the second one recorded in the studio in October 1960 and released in 1961 is included in the album entitled *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus*.

¹¹ Jost (1994, p. 35).

¹² The musical piece entitled *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* was recorded in December 1960 in the studio of Atlantic Records and released in 1961. It presents strong similarities but also important differences in relation to *Folk Forms No.1*.

¹³ Jost (1994, p. 59).

¹⁴ Jost (1994, p. 60).

¹⁵ Jost (1994, p. 61).

¹⁶ Charles Mingus (a bassist and composer) is regarded as a pioneer of free jazz, whose most significant achievements are his approach to collective improvisation, and his treatment of form and tempo. This comes about not so much by departing from prevailing bar patterns, but by breaking away from the conventional formula of “theme – improvisation – theme.” See Jost (1994, pp. 35–44).

¹⁷ Jost (1994, pp. 42–43).

and hardly any continuous harmonic basis. Nobody accompanies, nobody solos. The general mood of this music is hectic, nervous, but not chaotic.”¹⁸ Although each player is “on a par with all the others,” he adapts himself to the rest, “forming a whole whose conciseness stems not so much from” any convention or plan agreed upon beforehand “as from an intuitive understanding between the musicians.”¹⁹ As Dannie Richmond—the drummer in Mingus’ ensembles—said, the players in the Mingus group “feel each other out.”²⁰ as they go. “The parts they play are autonomous but *not independent*”²¹ so the fusion of folk forms in Mingus’ work is surprisingly spontaneous and startlingly logical.

As in a collective conversation, once entered in dialogue with each other in the form of duets, the four instruments “pass through a series of spontaneously changing groupings”²² until they reach a climax ending in a consonant polyphony of the full ensemble. Passages from one instrument to another point toward an emotional culmination (climax) by a continuous intensification of tempo and dynamics, thereby forming social units that “signify much more than just a change from one soloist to the next.”²³

In this respect—as already mentioned—we are in a completely new dimension which is neither that of an individual swallowed up in a group situation nor that of one dominant soloist out front soloing against the background of a composed ensemble accompanying him as a sound-carpet.

This aspect is even strongly evident in Ornette Coleman’s double quartet *Free Jazz, A Collective Improvisation*, which consists of a continuous free improvisation with only a few, brief pre-set sections. Designed for a double quartet, *Free Jazz* offers a striking illustration of how two full quartets can integrate their improvisations into a unified unity.

The great novelty of this piece is well explained by the title. Each musician is free to enter or leave at any time. And there were no preconceptions as to themes, chordal and time patterns, chorus lengths and harmonic structures.

As Ornette Coleman explains in his notes for *The Change of the Century* (recorded in October 1959):

Perhaps the most important new element in our music is our conception of *free* group improvisation. The idea of group improvisation, in itself, is not at all new: it played a big role in New Orleans’ early bands. The big bands of the swing period changed all that. Today, still, the individual is either *swallowed up in a group situation*, or else he is *out front soloing*, with none of the other horns doing anything but calmly awaiting their turn for *their* solos. [...] When our group plays, before we start out to play, we do not have any idea what the end result will be. Each player is free to contribute what he feels in the music

¹⁸ Jost (1994, p. 43).

¹⁹ Jost (1994, p. 43).

²⁰ Quoted by Jost (1994, p. 43).

²¹ Jost (1994, p. 43).

²² Jost (1994, p. 40).

²³ Jost (1994, p. 40).

at any given moment. [...] I don't tell the members of my group what to do. I want them to play what they hear in the piece for themselves. I let everyone express himself just as he wants to. The musicians have complete freedom, and so, of course, our final results depend entirely on the musicianship, emotional make-up and taste of the individual member.²⁴

This creates a collective dimension totally different from the Mingusian one, where there is a marked tendency to maintain an overall cohesiveness and direction, to bring thematic (or motivic) and structural unity into improvisation. To begin with, in *Free Jazz, A Collective Improvisation* there is what we might describe as a multiplicity of spontaneously evolving lines crossing each other wildly and freely and, occasionally, running counter to each other: an overlapping of free lines, sometimes chaotic, that intertwines with the soloist's trajectory, without implying any form of reference and any discursive direction.

In a nutshell, the striking feature of *Free Jazz* lies in its multi-directional or multi-centered and open structure, as compared to the overall cohesiveness and sonic density of *Folk Forms No. 1*.

What is of interest for present consideration is that in both cases "each player goes his own way and still adds tellingly to the group endeavor."²⁵ Therefore, in spite of some stylistic differences, the phenomenon in question here is not reducible to the action of any of its single members nor to the sum total of all the juxtaposed actions. And here—precisely here—lies the riddle. How do individuals come to act, feel, think and perform *qua* members of a team?

3 The riddle of collective intentionality

In response to this question, an answer that has become increasingly popular in the past two or three decades refers to the notion of collective intentionality; and, at this point, there seem to be a considerable number of accounts among which to choose.

They lie on a continuum ranging from accounts that regard "shared cooperative actions" as being reducible to appropriately interrelated individual intentions (M. Bratman), to accounts that lean toward the idea that there is something irreducible about group intentions, over and above the aggregations of individual intentions (M. Gilbert).

The four (also called the "Big Four") most influential theories of collective intentionality are those of Michael Bratman, Raimo Tuomela, John Searle and Margaret Gilbert.²⁶

²⁴ Coleman (1959).

²⁵ Coleman (1959).

²⁶ For a more detailed overview of contemporary approaches to collective intentionality, the so-called "Big Four of collective intentionality" see the excellent article by Tollefsen (2002 pp. 25-50), also published online at the following address: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/coll-int/> Accessed 07 October 2019. See also Preston (2013 pp. 74-89).

All these theories go well together against the summative, social-contract model according to which, as Garry L. Hagberg nicely points out: “the collective is no more than a convergence of individuals who, as individuals first, choose one at a time to join a group that offers benefits (in our case musical) [...] in exchange for a corresponding reduction in individual or autonomous freedom.”²⁷

Not, all of these accounts, however, agree about the explanatory part of the theory and more specifically about the conditions under which a collective intentionality might emerge.

For instance, in Gilbert’s view²⁸—who stands toward the irreducible-group-intentions end of the spectrum—the main principle that holds together the group action is a “joint commitment” to do something together—as a body—which entails reciprocal obligations to uphold the relevant collective attitude.

Gilbert uses the expression “as a body” precisely to signal that the joint commitment to achieve a particular goal (e.g., taking a walk together) creates a “plural subject,” the parts of which act as if they were the limbs of a single person.

On the opposite side—more toward the aggregated-individual-intentions end of the spectrum—Bratman²⁹ argues that at the heart of these phenomena—also called “modest forms of sociality”—is not a “joint commitment,”³⁰ but rather a “shared intention” which involves an interlocking of individual intentions in favor of an advanced action plan.

Behind this approach there is an underlying model of planning agency—the planning theory³¹—which sees intentions as parts of “larger—and, typically, partial, hierarchical and future-directed, plans.”³² According to this model the interlocking of individual intentions (e.g.: the interdependence characteristic of a shared intention) is mainly allowed by such a future-directed plan which engages a “rational pressure” toward a common goal as well as a “rational demand” on each part involved to make his own plan consistent with those of the others.

4 The further challenge of collective free improvisation

The discussion on this point could be long and—given the work these philosophers have done on shared agency—somewhat complicated. For the present focus I will not enter into this debate here. I just want to argue that free jazz poses a challenge to these philosophical theories of collective intentionality, and that, precisely because of this challenge, can generate new insights which should be developed further.

²⁷ Hagberg (2016, p. 481).

²⁸ Gilbert (1989; 1996; 2003; 1990, pp. 1–14).

²⁹ Bratman (2009, pp. 42–59).

³⁰ Bratman (1999, pp. 130–141).

³¹ For a more recent synthesis of the building blocks of shared intentions and shared cooperative action, see Bratman (2014, pp. 151–157).

³² Bratman (1999, p. 43). This point has been clearly made and discussed by Preston (2013) in chapter 2 entitled “Taking Improvisation Seriously.”

The characteristic features of collective free improvisation—as exemplified in *Folk Forms No. 1* and *Free Jazz, A Collective Improvisation*—which run counter to the basic requirements [building blocks] of collective [shared] intentionality, set out by the standard accounts considered (e.g.: Bratman’s model and Gilbert’s model), can be summarized as follows:

- First, players begin without a pre-conceived notion as to what kind of effect or goal they want to achieve. Consequently, what happens musically is not planned in advance,³³ but arises from improvisation (e.g.: from spontaneous interactions within the group), and is molded to a large extent by the emotions of the people who play it. As Dannie Richmond—the drummer in Mingus’ ensembles—has said, the players in the Mingus group “feel each other out.”³⁴ And this “feeling each other out” also plays an important role also in Coleman’s *Free Jazz*.
- Second, each player is “free to contribute what he feels in the music at any given moment,”³⁵ not only in solos, which will be individual in any case but, more importantly, in collective ensemble playing.
- Third, players are not committed to a peaceful dialogue. Rather, they are also adversaries who challenge each other and challenge themselves to listen and take note of what they are saying musically.
- In spite of this fundamental freedom and in spite of this multi-directional, open structure, an inner cohesion is created through a free association of melodic lines, in such a way that the fusion of sonic forms in both Mingus’ and Coleman’s work is surprisingly spontaneous and startlingly logical at the same time. In the words of Ornette Coleman, “there is a continuity of expression, certain continually evolving strands of thought that link”³⁶ all parts together.

Drawing upon these features, I want to bring to the point the following three insights:

- First, it would be a mistake to approach the phenomenon of collective free improvisation solely from the future-directed perspective, which is typically adopted by the above-mentioned analytical theories of collective intentionality.
- Second, the practice of free jazz is probably better understood as the intentional continuation of something which has already started or has spontaneously emerged in the performance.
- Third, there is no need to postulate a “rational pressure” toward a common goal, as well as to be responsive to and coordinate with others, since improvising musicians seem to be much more suited to feel each other out as they play.

Still, the following questions remain to be answered/addressed:

³³ The only “plan” agreed upon in advance among musicians is to play together for a certain duration of time.

³⁴ Quoted by Jost (1994, p. 43) from Hentoff (1960).

³⁵ Coleman (1959).

³⁶ Coleman (1959).

- How can a group of improvisers take up the challenge of making music together on the basis of these agreements?
- If each player is free to go his own way, where to find a source of order on the brink of chaos?
- What kind of strategies—other than plans and joint commitments—are used by improvising musicians to organize and integrate their improvisations?

According to Charles Mingus,³⁷ the kind of bond that holds together the collective improvisation in *Folk Forms No. 1* stems not so much from a melodic and harmonic structure—whose imperatives have been relieved—as from a general emotional and tonal frame³⁸ usually sketched out at the piano, within which “each note’s rhythmic value could be pulled slightly forward or backward into the domain of the adjacent note”³⁹ without affecting the melodic flow and its stylistic and dynamic development.

This kind of bond—based “on the principle that each note had potential for stretching into the domain of the others just above or below it”⁴⁰—provides a very flexible basis that allows improvising musicians to evolve free lines while serving at the same time as a point or frame of reference.

Without going into great detail in what is necessarily a quick look at the practice of improvisation in free jazz, it is important to emphasize that even though this general frame is set up at the start as a formal design by the bandleader, it gives players plenty of freedom to contribute what they feel in the music at any given moment. In this way, a feedback process is set up in which the musicians’ actions and the original bandleader’s design or frame are equally important.⁴¹ As Mingus says: “As long as they start where I start and end where I end, the musicians can change the composition if they feel like it. They add themselves, they add how they feel, while we’re playing.”⁴²

One immediate consequence is that the music played on the basis of these agreements depends for its coherence almost exclusively on the players’ readiness to interact. The moment the convention of a pre-composed melodic and harmonic structure is dropped, the members of a group are forced to listen to each other with intensified concentration. Each of them has to foresee by listening to the Other, any turn or change the Other’s part may take in the course of his improvisation and to

³⁷ Jost (1994, p. 38); Hentoff (1961, p. 166): “I play them the ‘framework’ on the piano so that they are all familiar with my interpretation and feeling [...] Each man’s particular style is taken into consideration.”

³⁸ It should be stressed that this kind of framework – usually played on the piano – is different from a head arrangement, such as those used in a jam session or at informal recording sessions, where the order of solos, riffs, endings, etc. is given. Here what is given is closer to a musical and emotional atmosphere.

³⁹ Berliner (1994, pp. 150–51).

⁴⁰ Berliner (1994, p. 68).

⁴¹ Jost (1994, p. 38).

⁴² Quoted by Hentoff (1961).

be prepared at any time to adapt its part to it, by intending past/present and future stages in the performance.

On closer inspection, however, we realize that this principle associated with Mingus' *Folk Forms No. 1* is probably insufficient to account for the unrelated simultaneity between the different, multi-directional and multicentered, interactive frameworks that Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* brings about. Indeed, precisely because it unfolds in plurality and encourages each player to be free, *Free Jazz* develops a logic of boundlessness which could also end in chaos.

At this point, it must be said that Coleman was aware of this danger and developed one essential strategy—which is of the utmost importance for the understanding of his ensembles—in order to obviate this risk and reach an overall sonic coherence: the “motivic chain association,”⁴³ where a “chain of association” denotes a series of free associations linking the ending of a given phrase to a new one derived from it in a way “that is comparable to the stream of consciousness in Joyce or to the ‘automatic writing’ in the surrealists.”⁴⁴ One important aspect of this strategy is that through the motivic chain associations a linkage is created between the ending of a melodic line (phrase) introduced by a given musician and its possible implications which, in turn, provide a clue (musical affordance) for another musician, who then draws upon one of these implications, triggering a circular process, which can be called collaborative emergence because it arises from interactions among the members of the collective.

The first essential point to be retained is that the motivic chain-associations—worked out by Coleman's ensembles—are not guided by any rational criterion, such as a sonic similarity to previous, well-known and habitual formulas (schemes), but depend strictly on the stream of consciousness of the musicians performing the association.

The second essential point to keep in mind is that the motivic chain associations are not limited in advance by a given theme, as they are in modern jazz.⁴⁵ Instead, any motif which a player happens to come across in the course of his improvisation can be taken up by one player or contrasted by another. As a result,

⁴³ The term “motivic chain associations” could evoke the “semantic relations” that Bratman mention explicitly in his work. However, in spite of this linguistic similarity, there is a clear and substantial difference between these two notions. Indeed, as Bratman conceives them, semantic interconnections are relations between intentions in that the content of my intention refers to the role of your intention, and vice versa. In his own terms, “it is part of what each intends that the other's intention be realized in the right way, according to the rational pressure specified in the plan we are pursuing together.” See for instance, Bratman (1999, p. 48).

⁴⁴ Jost (1994, p. 50).

⁴⁵ There is an important distinction to be made between the motivic improvisation as worked out in modern jazz by Sonny Rollins who is the recognized father of this procedure and the motivic chain associations created by Coleman. As E. Jost clearly pointed out, “while Rollins derives his motivic material as a rule from the themes he uses, thus making recognition easier for his listener (the so-called “aha effect”), Coleman invents, as he goes along, motives independent of the theme. [...]” Jost (1994, p. 50). In other words, while Sonny Rollins' approach to motivic improvisation consists of simply extending and developing all the motifs that a given theme implies in such a way that the associations reveal many subtle relationships to the main theme, Coleman's approach consists of developing and varying any motif or phrase which a player happens to hit upon in the course of his improvisation and which in itself could be unrelated to the head of the musical piece. As a result, it might create elements of surprise, crossing and contrasting ideas that run counter to expectations.

the motivic chain associations do not only bear harmonious relationships, but also create elements of surprise and conflict by contrasting and juxtaposing motifs in a way that may run counter to expectations. In other words, through this procedure, motifs produced by different players are not only related to each other, but also juxtaposed and contrasted to one another.

“Moreover and, occasionally,” as E. Jost explains, “Coleman does not limit his motivic associations to phrases that follow one another directly, but takes up ideas that are, so to speak, several links back in the chain, and creates larger contexts in this way.”

All in all, the most relevant and striking features of the “motivic chain associations”—as worked out by Coleman’s ensembles in *Free Jazz*—can be summarized as follows:

- First, in *Free Jazz* the motivic chain associations are evolved by the group as a whole. Ideas introduced by the soloist of a given section are spontaneously paraphrased by the other players, developed further, and handed back to the originator in altered form. In other cases, ideas (or motifs) presented by a given musician (e.g.: Coleman) are taken up by another player (e.g.: Cherry) and, simultaneously counterpointed by another (e.g.: Dolphy)
- Second, this process gives rise to an interlocking collective. By crossing and connecting melodic lines, a continuous exchange of thoughts, feelings and musical ideas... takes place among musicians which builds a multilayered collective intentionality, continuously shaped and worked out across the span of its enactment.

To sum up: the insight, expressed pre-theoretically in this example but now to be explicated in more theoretical terms, is that what makes the practice of collective free improvisation, intentionally joint, is the striving for a synthesis between each sound played (or phrase ending—e.g.: past) and new forward motifs derived from it (e.g.: future), in a way that no doubt obeys to the intentional structure of time described by Husserl.

In what follows, I will explore to which extent some core ideas of Edmund Husserl’s analysis of time⁴⁶—namely the interplay between backward-looking retention and forward-looking protention—can be applied to shed light on this process (the

⁴⁶ There have been multiple applications of Husserl’s phenomenology of time and his notion of time-consciousness to music performance, including: Ed Sarath (1996, pp. 1-38); D. Clarke (2011, pp. 1-28); Montague (2011, pp. 29-46), among others. Moreover, some form of protention and retention seems to underlie the account of music, emotion and expectation present in Meyer (1956) and in Narmour (1990). However, none of these accounts have addressed the issue of how the Husserlian overall theoretical architecture—namely the co-constitutive interplay between backward-looking retention and forward-looking protention—can be transposed into a relational, transindividual framework in order to account for the collective dynamics that take place in parallel among players. Nor have they addressed/explored the links between this phenomenological perspective and some recent philosophical readings of the predictive coding model in order to make visible the dynamics of group synchronization at play not only in improvising ensembles but also in many everyday scenes of social interaction. One important motivation for the present endeavor lies precisely here: to analyze and make visible the nature and role of temporal affordances in these low-level, often unconscious, interactive mechanisms.

“motivic logic”)—whereby a chain of free motivic associations evolved by the group as a whole—give rise to an emergent and rapidly evolving group-intentionality.

But before entering into the phenomenological analysis of this process, which implies an extension of the original Husserlian frame, let me begin by presenting some details of Edmund Husserl’s *Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*⁴⁷ and draw from it what I think to be useful and to the point.

5 Beyond plans and commitments, the multiple temporalities (temporal affordances) immanent in the musical process

In his *Lectures* Husserl introduced the notion of inner time consciousness to denote the flow of time constituting our field of experience or experiencing (*Erleben*) which encompasses the present, the past and the future.

He employed the following three technical terms to describe this temporal structure of internal time consciousness⁴⁸:

- The “*primal impression*,” which intends the now phase of a present sensation.
- A “*retention*,” which keeps alive immediately past sensations for a short time, although weakening in intensity.
- A “*protention*,” which anticipates, in a more-or-less indefinite way, what will be sensed in immediately future instants.

This structure composed by protention/primal impression/retention forms an unbroken and interconnected continuum for the duration of a temporal event. Husserl is absolutely clear on this point: primal impression, retention and protention weld together present, past and future, thus ensuring the experience of continuity and flow that enables the experience of freedom and free expression to emerge.

The first important aspect to keep in mind is that the experience of time presents itself as having a complex and multi-layered texture. Like a “comet’s tail” as Husserl describes it, *retention* attaches itself immediately and without interruption to the primal impression⁴⁹ which itself promises something more to come in the near future. One interesting case of retention—very important for the experience of music—is the experience of a sound, which lasts for a certain period of time. The just-past sound (i.e. the sound that has just passed) is in the present: it is there conditioning the now phase, its meaning and its passage into the future phase.

On the other hand, the anticipation of what is about to come is equally rooted—through *protention*—in the primal impression, but in a manner that does not close down the assumed openness of improvisation, because protention leaves *open* the

⁴⁷ Husserl (1964).

⁴⁸ For an in-depth and very clear analysis of this structure see Zahavi (2010, pp. 319–339).

⁴⁹ In this respect, as Derrida strongly emphasizes, there is a radical difference between retention and secondary memory or memory in the usual sense, in which there is the mediation of a recalled image. Derrida (2011).

way in which what is coming may exist. In other words, the horizon of protention left open either that the coming event may differ from what was expected or even that nothing happens: “The only thing fixed is that without exception something will come.”⁵⁰

All in all, as Merleau-Ponty nicely resumes: “Time is not a line but a network of intentionalities.”⁵¹ Therefore, “Temporalisation is not a succession of ecstasies. The future is not posterior to the past, or the past anterior to the present. Temporality temporalizes itself as future-which-lapses-into-the-past-by-coming-into-the-present.”⁵²

In Husserl’s language, beneath the intentionality of the act, which is the thetic consciousness of an object [...] we must recognize an ‘operative’ intentionality,” which makes the former possible and which Levinas calls the intentionality of sensation.⁵³ Loosely formulated, it consists of chains of associations between sensory inputs or primal impressions, which result in the constitution of shapes, *Gestaltung*, outlines, sketches, that “come in” with their own network of alterations or variations.

At this point, one might ask: why is this analysis productive?

Because the interplay between backward-looking retention and forward-looking protention reflects the functioning of the motivic chain-associations underscored by Ornette Coleman as a driving force for its collective improvisation and, allows us to make sense of the progressive generation of an overall motivic and sonic cohesiveness, as well as of the interdependence and interplay between performers that I will now describe in detail.

6 Back to the riddle of collective free improvisation

If we now return to the context of free jazz, how do such ideas help us to solve the riddle of collective free improvisation we are after?

My main hypothesis is that the above-mentioned dynamic interplay between protention/primal impression/retention can be applied to understand the dialogical “turn-and-take” between co-performers.

It goes without saying that this implies an extension of the original Husserlian frame, in a way that develops a line of thinking sketched by Schütz in the essay entitled *Making Music Together*. Instead of looking at the dynamic loop between backward-looking retention and forward-looking protention (Husserl) as something which is confined purely to each individual consciousness, we apply it to understand the interlocking of streams of consciousness that takes place among players through the motivic chain associations. It must be added, however, that in performing this process the stream of consciousness of each player flows alongside, but never into

⁵⁰ Husserl (1964, p. 106).

⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty (2013, p. 484).

⁵² Merleau-Ponty (2013, p. 488).

⁵³ Merleau-Ponty (2013, p. 486).

the internal-time consciousness of another, even though it is constantly colored and challenged by the others' ideas, moods and feelings in the process.⁵⁴

Imagine and recall the situation previously described when considering *Free Jazz, A Collective Improvisation*, whereby a link between different and continually evolving strands of thought is created through a free association of melodic lines—the “motivic chain-associations”—that is comparable to a kind of collective conversation: as in a conversation, musicians play parts that are autonomous, but not independent, interdependent and yet free.

In the case of free jazz, which departs from all that is standard and preconceived in jazz, the musical organization and overall coherence of a performance is entrusted almost exclusively to this associative mechanism, which, as we have seen, presupposes the Husserlian co-constitutive interplay between backward-looking retention and forward-looking protention.

In spite of these considerations, we must not overlook the fact that this kind of bond relates and separates musicians at the same time, revealing their plural condition. Indeed, a phenomenological perspective confronting each improviser within a single “sphere of ownness” that flows alongside, but never into the internal time consciousness of another, is forced to recognize a poly-temporality within which different streams of consciousness slip into the other or interlock, but never end in a fusion of time strands.

In other words, Husserl's argument is implicitly committed to the idea that the interlocking of the self and the others ultimately breaks down under the weight of a difference.

What should be said, however, is that this failure or gap (*écart*) brings players into a *process* of motivic associations which result in a multi-perspective or multi-directional disposition of narratives.

What makes the individual to merge into a collective intentionality, then, is on a second level: the emergence of a *chain* of free motivic associations that link all parts together.

This point leads me to say something about the distinctive character of the collective intentionality involved in free jazz.

In contrast to the analytic-Bratman's like model of collective intentionality which is built on an interlocking of intentions—narrowly viewed/regarded as synonymous of plans—I argue that two more layers are needed:

- the first layer emerges from the sharing of auditory percepts (sonic features) over time, a sharing of sonic features that allows players to infer each other's feelings and to better respond to each other's playing, and
- the second layer emerges from a chain of free motivic associations which, by continuing and contrasting melodic lines and motifs, generate a rich tapestry

⁵⁴ As D. Zahavi clearly points out: “Rather than entailing metaphysical fusion, what Schutz has in mind here is the fact that our respective streams of consciousness in such situations are *interlocked* to such an extent that each of our respective experiences are colored by our mutual involvement,” Zahavi (2014, p. 245).

(palette) of mutually colored and interlocking ideas, feelings and affective moods or atmospheres.

7 Conclusion

Let me now summarize and conclude.

I began this article by suggesting that free jazz poses a challenge to analytical theories of collective intentionality, owing of two fundamental features.

The first of these is that what happens musically is not planned in advance, but arises from spontaneous interactions among players and is molded to a great extent by the emotions of the people who play together.

The second feature, is that the players are free to contribute what they feel in the music at any given moment, even though jointly engaged in a collaborative action. And because not all these clues can be taken as invitations to develop themes, one will encounter, not just sensitivity and support, but also interference and antagonism.

By looking at the way jazz improvisers take up the challenge of making music together on the basis of these agreements, my aim has been to clarify what kind of strategies—other than plans and joint commitments—are used by improvising musicians to integrate their improvisations into a unified shared activity and reach an overall sonic coherence.

In developing this proposal, I initially drew pre-theoretically on two paradigmatic case studies: Charles *Mingus' Folk Forms No.1* and Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz, A Collective Improvisation*.

The analysis has shown that the interlocking of attitudes among individual participants characteristic of a shared cooperative action (according to Bratman) is not determined by a future-directed plan and the rational pressure toward a common goal, it typically engages.

Instead, in free jazz, the performers' connection and interplay depend on the players' readiness to feel each other out by listening to each other playing with intensified concentration, in a way that no doubt presupposes the Husserlian retention-protection scheme.

Drawing on this analysis, my basic thesis is that the free jazz case makes it possible to discern—beyond future-directed plans and joint commitments—a dynamic interaction between two levels of intentions, that go much deeper than the kind of shared intentions identified by the analytic-Bratman's like model of collective intentionality: the first layer of them emerges from the sharing of sonic features (sensory signals and inputs) and auditory percepts over time, while the second layer emerges from a chain of free motivic associations.

At this point, one may ask: why is this analysis productive? My answer is:

First, because it makes it possible to discern—beyond shared intentions, plans, and joint commitments—an even more fundamental and original sharing: the sharing of a well-sustained overall feeling, from which the first layer of collective intentionality might arise.

Second, because it brings into view the plural viewpoints of collaborating improvisers—including the potential conflicts between them—by contrast with traditional

accounts that often emphasize the participants' sharing of a common goal as centrally important.

And precisely this point in turn makes it possible to develop an alternative perspective on collective intentionality that lies between Bratman's theory of shared agency, which clearly gives undue weight to the individual (and the individual's planning, rational capacities), and Gilbert's theory of plural subject that falls in the opposite danger of giving the privilege to the group as a whole.

This point leads me to say something about the kind of community that the practice of free collective improvisation can ultimately create.

Can it create a community in which everyone is on a par with all the others?

Can it bring into view the model of a community where no voice is simply absorbed or drowned out by any of the others?

Although these questions can be hardly answered here, what certainly is clear is that the community that results from free jazz, as depicted in *Folk Forms No. 1* and in *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation*, is a community in dialogue with itself, which emphasizes and valorizes the singularity of its voices and their mutual refractions.

Like a kind of song for more than one voice whose melodic principle is the reciprocal distinction of the unmistakable timbre of each participant, the community that results from Mingus' and Coleman's group improvisations is a community in which individuals are called to distinguish themselves, while actively and reciprocally communicating with others in a shared space of reciprocal exhibition.

In this respect, it offers an example of the Arendtian concept of relational plurality whereby the plurality of human beings, is translated into a multiperspective and active reciprocation of worldviews through speech and deeds.

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