

Improvisation and System from inside and outside: Steve Coleman's music through Adorno's critical philosophy¹

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Abstract: *In this article we propose to analyse some aspects of the music and musical thought of the musician Steve Coleman through the philosophy of Theodor Adorno. We will deal with Coleman's relationship to tradition and the concept of jazz, the practice of improvisation and the systematicity of his music. These questions will be treated under the prism of the dialectics of identity and non-identity dear to Adorno's Negative Dialectics. The objective is to try to demonstrate some of the contradictions that circumscribe Coleman's work and how it is built through them. We will deal with Coleman's relationship to the jazz tradition, his practice of improvisation and the systematicity of his music.*

Keywords: *Steve Coleman; Adorno; Improvisation; Identity; Jazz*

Improvisação, Identidade e Sistema pelo exterior: a não-identidade da música de Steve Coleman através da filosofia de Adorno

Resumo: *Neste artigo propomos analisar alguns aspectos da música e do pensamento musical do músico Steve Coleman através da filosofia de Theodor Adorno. Tratamos da relação de Coleman com a tradição e conceito do jazz, da sua prática de improvisação e a sistematicidade da sua música. Essas questões serão abordadas sob o prisma da dialética da identidade e da não-identidade cara à Dialética Negativa de Adorno. O objetivo é tentar demonstrar algumas das contradições que circunscrevem a obra de Coleman e de como ela se constrói através delas.*

Palavras-Chave: *Steve Coleman; Adorno; Improvisação; Identidade; Jazz*

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Composer and saxophonist Steve Coleman appears to be one of the most original and important contemporary jazz musicians. One of his singularities lies in how he develops a particular compositional and improvisational language, as well as a theoretical and pedagogical corpus that afford opportunities for a dialectical engagement with their productive internal contradictions. For this reason, I find the critical philosophy of Theodor W. Adorno particularly well-suited to the task of understanding Coleman's ideas and also, to the ways he implements them through his music. The aim of this article is to analyse some aspects of Steve Coleman's music; thus, we will not engage in a detailed analysis of Adorno's texts, we will engage in the Adornian method of investigating objects in detail as an attempt to identify their internal contradictions. I will thus try to follow an Adornian gesture that preaches that the dialectical movement must be set in motion by the objects it deals with. The dialectical preponderance is of the object, he used to say (Adorno, 2007, p. 183). Following that idea, my point of departure is Coleman's music and texts.

Steve Coleman can be seen as a paradigmatic jazz musician of the recent decades. Born in Chicago, saxophonist Coleman has been one of the leading jazz musicians since the late 1980s, the same period in which he founded, together with some colleagues the M-Base collective³. Since then, he has anticipated and actively participated in the theoretical and practical elaboration of several aspects that are important in a considerable part of contemporary jazz. An innovative composer and improviser, his music is recognized above all by its rhythmic richness and the intricate structure of its form. Following a trend inaugurated in the 1950s by George Russell with his *Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*, Coleman has also been theorizing and writing about diverse aspects of his music: rhythm, harmony, timbre, improvisation and the social conditions surrounding the music. One of the objectives of this article is to call attention not only to Coleman's music, but to the theoretical contributions Coleman has made in relation to these subjects. The literature dealing with Steve Coleman is not as broad as that of some other musicians, though he has been a significant object of research. I can highlight, for example, the works of Vijay Iyer (1996), Michael Dessen (2009), Matthew Daniel Clayton (2009) and Jesse Stewart

³ An acronym for Macro – Basic Array of Structured Extemporizations.

(2010). I will return briefly to some of them, but for now, it is important to note that all these works contain important analysis and musicological discussions. It seems to me that the main difference between their approaches and the one I propose is that besides analyzing the saxophonist's music, I will also treat his writings in detail, an element not considered by these authors. In this article I will be following the path proposed by Fumi Okiji (2018), Eric Oberle (2018) and Nick Nesbitt (1999) in their approach which tries to analyse different elements of jazz through Adorno. Okiji focuses on Adorno's critical approach when treating jazz as criticism, Oberle focuses on the critique of identity and Nesbitt on an analysis of John Coltrane's music through Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. I will address these and other Adornian questions through the music of Steve Coleman.

Coleman embodies several tensions operating in the contemporary of jazz music. The dialectic that emerges from the relations between tradition and avant-garde, but also between content and form, are at the heart of the problems that he invites us to think about. Just like John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Cecil Taylor and others before him, Coleman is a musician who calls simultaneously for a high degree of precision and a high degree of spontaneity in the improvisation. That is to say, he proposes the possibility to be both very precise and spontaneous at the same time, while improvising to its limits. On the one hand, improvisation has a high degree of centrality in its music, on the other hand, the music is also well structured in most of its parameters. In order to make the spontaneity and precision possible, he is obliged to develop a whole series of musical material and to organize it as a type of musical system that imposes certain limits. His system covers different aspects and parameters of music. He even gives it the same name as his former collective: M-Base. When improvising, Coleman plays with the limits that he imposes on himself. That is, he sometimes plays within the rules and other times outside the parameters that constitute his system. The way that Coleman improvises has been developed by his confrontation with a system. To keep the music flowing, the limits are in a certain way, an overcoming without being abolished, since they always remain in place organizing the music. This type of movement demands an engagement in a "self-reflection of dialectics" (ADORNO, 2007, p. 405–408), a negative one, that materialized itself not in

a process of continuous overcoming, but on the juxtaposition of different and contradictory elements. A negative dialectic is one that prevents itself from being grasped and that continuously escapes the gesture of synthesis in order to situate itself in a juxtaposition between extremes. It is a type of dialectic that tries to open the possibility of revealing what is non-identical in identity, passing through the continuous gesture of self-reflection in which the subject places himself inside the process. Traditional Hegelian dialectics works with the idea of overcoming and subsuming all contradiction, but what is interesting about the Adornian conceptualization of negative dialectics is that the moment of overcoming is itself suppressed, which allows the process not only to be continuous, but open. This type of self-reflective approach appears to be analogous to the way Coleman conceives of improvisation and deals theoretically and in practice with his music. It is in this sense that I will try to develop the hypothesis that although Coleman's subjectivity leads him to build a very detailed musical system, the objectivity of improvisation deposes the closure of the system at the same time that it poses it. That is to say, despite being an identifiable system that tends to lock it into itself, the improvisation allows Coleman to open it from inside, preventing its reification. He has to be at *the same time* inside and outside it. It is inside this contradiction that he builds his improvisation and it is the general lines of that contradiction that I will try to describe in this article.

In my hypothesis, what Steve Coleman does with his music is to be at the same time inside and outside of his artistic object. My reason for using Adorno lies in how he allows us to deal critically with Coleman's writing, influences and music. It seems that in all those aspects, the saxophonist embodies some contradictions in relation to certain established norms of the jazz world. These cannot be reduced to pure differences as they are often in conflict with what is pre-established as norms on a collective or individual level. That is, even if he is very much inside the jazz world, Coleman is always creating a dissonance, which is not always reintegrated with what is established. On top of that, he is sometimes in contradiction with himself. Enabling to free, let's say, the nonidentity of his subject, Coleman embodies a rich and complex constellation that therefore demands a thorough analysis.

In this article, I will focus on three aspects of Steve Coleman work. First, I will deal with his relationship with the concept and tradition of jazz. Second, I will consider in more detail how he thinks about improvisation. Ultimately, I will briefly explore the way the saxophonist tries to bring new musical material and ideas to his music in order to build his own musical system. Before concluding I will try to show by means of a brief musical analysis some of the hypotheses raised throughout the text. My attempt is to demonstrate the dialectical nature of the different relationships within Coleman's music and how it is through those tensions that his music has developed.

Steve Coleman and Jazz

Even if Steve Coleman assumes without any problem that, by far, his most important musical references are musicians normally associated with the tradition known as jazz, he often points out that he refuses the name and concept of "jazz". For him the term should not be taken for granted, neither be seen as an obvious one. For the saxophonist, this term tends to refer to the market, even more than to the music. It is important to note that Coleman is not alone in this criticism. As Alexander Pierrepont shows in his book *Le Champs jazzistique*, where he deals with the jazz world from a Bourdieusian perspective, several musicians like Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, and Charlie Parker were also critics and did not easily use uncritically the term jazz (2002, pp. 23–27)⁴. The paradox that involves both Coleman and Pierrepont is that in order to criticize a concept like jazz, it is necessary to make use of it. The criticism can only be immanent, as Adorno would also suggest. Although rejected, the term jazz cannot simply be discarded. The term itself embodies the history and contradictions of the music that comes under its name. Attempts like the one made by Nicolas Payton,

⁴ The complete list of important jazz musicians collected by Pierrepont includes: Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus, Sonny Rollins, Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, Lee Morgan, Charles Tolliver, Charles Tyler, Byron Allen, Lester Bowie, Henry Threadgill, Steve Coleman, Ornette Coleman, Jelly Roll Morton, John Lee Hooker, Miles Davis, Jimmy Giuffre, Dizzy Gillespie, Lennie Tristano, Horace Silver, Jackie McLean, Anthony Braxton, Julius Hemphill, Famoudou Don Moye.

who tried to propose another name like “Black American Music”, a gesture that Mary Kronfeld recalls (2019, p. 39), tend to be an action at the limit of authoritarianism. For good and for bad, jazz is a collective and contradictory construction that involves its most diverse agents. Not a single individual, even a great musician like Payton, can try to impose another name for the music. He could give a name to his own music, as Coleman in fact does, but a name for a collective expression coming from outside the immanence of history tends to be a violent act. Perhaps at some point the music that nowadays is put under the term jazz will be renamed *Great Black Music*, but this will have to be the fruit of commitment, not only by the musicians but of everyone involved in the music, the fruit of a historical and collective process.

The interest in investigating initiatives like Coleman's is that it can help us to clarify the limits and virtues of using a term loaded with history such as jazz. Steve Coleman wrote an article that dealt with it: “The nexus of a musical language and jazz” (2007a). He begins the article by raising his position unambiguously: “I never think about jazz”, adding that thinking about any label would restrain his creativity. He even goes as far as to say that he “refuses to accept that ‘jazz’ exists”. He adds without leaving any room for doubt: “I don’t call my music jazz, I don’t think about things like that”. He goes even so far as to tell us that what is nowadays often called “‘jazz’ for me [him] is the not-so-creative part that most people relate to when they hear some forms from the past”. The main aspect of this criticism seems to be the reification of music that the indiscriminate use of this term implies. To him, the use of the term jazz tends to become a pure nominalism without direct reference to any immediate content.

Coleman’s refusal is not only restrained to his personal use or to the historical and social context he is implicated. He is also critical of the nomination of the music of the past under such labels. For him, it is not obvious to use the name jazz to classify the historical tradition in which he assumes to belong. Even the music of the past should not be automatically identified as jazz. The difficulty is that he does not refuse to belong to a tradition which is well established and which is nevertheless recognized under that term, a musical tradition that places itself above all as improvisational. There is just the sound itself, and of course that sound is based on a

long tradition [...] there is a tradition of musicians, of music, that my thing is mostly coming out of" (PHILIP, 2013, p. 286). That is to say, he considers himself a part of a dynamic tradition, but from his perspective, it would be more of a resonant lineage not necessary with a given name. We can assume that ideally he would like to belong to a nameless tradition, identifiable only by the sound of the music. Unlike Payton, Coleman is more cautious and does not take risks of suggesting a generic name, like Great Black Music, which would replace another generic term, jazz. He leaves it open.

From his perspective, one of the major problems is the preconception most people tend to have of his music. He specified this problem in another interview: "In my case, people think the music is so-called "jazz", but I don't think it's jazz. By 'people', I mean the music industry. They think it's jazz, and that includes the club owners and the promoters, and so they have a jazz expectation" (PETERSON, 2012). People, in general, above all the music branch of the cultural industry, tend to imagine some specific type of music when hearing the name jazz. Coleman seems to suggest that when music is placed under such a category, it automatically carries a framework delimiting its possibilities. According to Coleman, not only the people involved in the promotion, but also the public and even the musicians are affected by this problem. They tend, for the most part, not to be open enough to the surprises inherent to a music that has improvisation as one of its most important presuppositions. For the most part, they tend to listen to this music carried with a priori and preconceived expectations. Ideally, the audience and the musicians should place themselves openly to receive the music as objectively as possible, as it manifests itself in real time. In this regard, they must be open not only to pleasant surprises.

As we can see, the use of the concept of "jazz" is something that really disturbs Coleman not only as an artist, but also from a conceptual perspective. It concerns not only the way his music is socially received by the public and by the jazz industry, but also the way he conceives and creates his music. He feels that he is not rarely limited by being classified as a jazz musician. We can imagine, for example, that if he had not been placed under this classification he would perhaps have a different kind of audience. However, he is also faced with a contradiction which he can hardly ignore or overcome. Even if his negative relation to the concept of jazz is evident, it is

also clear that he cannot simply avoid dealing with the music created under such labels. In this respect, it is important to note that even criticizing the term jazz, Coleman participates actively in its world. He records, gives interviews and tours all over the world under the jazz label. It is difficult to imagine if all this would have been possible, for the same music, under another label or none.

Coleman's criticism is a conceptual gesture, but it is above all a practical one. The way to continue developing this sound tradition, as Coleman says, is to engage in a simultaneous continuation and negation of it. In his discourses concerning jazz music, Coleman bears witness to a way of thinking that is at the same time radical and full of tension with it. However, I cannot call it a radical rupture in the proper sense of the term. On the contrary, he has never come out of the jazz world. The way Coleman updates this musical tradition comes from two directions at the same time. Firstly, in a negative mode, when refusing the name and concept. Then also in a positive mode when following the idea that an engaged form of continuity would, from his point of view, let him bring one other step forward in the development of the music. Assuming a position of working at the limits of the jazz tradition implies that Coleman makes an immanent critique of it in his musical practice. However, while he criticizes the music industry and a portion of the public, he is also dependent on them.

Steve Coleman: Improvisation and/or Spontaneous Composition

The way Steve Coleman deals with the practice and concept of improvisation seems to touch mainly on three subjects: the musical material, the terminology and freedom. In the following sections I will deal with each of these aspects separately in different sections and in the following sequence.

Musical material

In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno observes that when considering all types of arts one should remember that artistic "material is not natural material even if it

appears so to the artist; rather, it is thoroughly historical” (ADORNO, 1997, p. 148). As for other jazz musicians, this premise seems valid for the musical material used by Steve Coleman. By embodying history, the material creates a mediation between past and present. On the one hand, musical material has a dynamic character, modifying itself during its own use. On the other hand, it is not only musical but social. This is because the material does not belong to the musician as an individual, but it is shared by all those who participate in a tradition and make music in a particular time period. Somehow, the musical material is historically determined. From Adorno’s view, this means that, in artistic practice, not everything is possible to be done at any time. Over time, some materials can become banal or anachronistic while others appear or update themselves. It is important to observe that for Adorno the concept of material is not to be confused with the technical aspect of art creation. They are related, but the material cannot be reduced to the technique apparatus. For a musician like Coleman, the choice, at the same time subjective and objective, of the musical material used in certain compositions is fundamental. The limitations and the insistence on the development of a determined material are essential and particularize this musician.

The complex articulation in which a tradition is denied and at the same time moved forward reappears in Steve Coleman’s article *Timbral Improvisation* published in his blog in 2007. In this essay, the saxophonist discusses the choices that many students of this tradition of improvised music – jazz – were following. For him, they concentrate too much on the study of the timbre and effects, to the detriment of the rhythmic and melodic aspects that in his opinion are primarily characteristic of this tradition. Firstly, I must say that this criticism seems to be misplaced. I think that nowadays a good portion of the new generation of musicians that come out of jazz schools tend to end up having a less individual sound than previous ones. Rare are the young musicians who can be identified at first listening, which was almost the rule until at least the era of free jazz. Maybe Coleman would be criticizing the genre known as free improvisation, but in this case we must say that it would have little to do with the music he refers to. The fact is that Coleman calls our attention to something that he considers, correctly or not, to be a practical and theoretical musical problem. Although his criticism has a weak foundation, it is against it that he places himself and builds

his concept of improvisation. That is, it is important to note that his misconception has some practical effects that invite us to look closely.

For him, “early in the history of the spontaneously composed music in the United States (the Armstrong-Parker-Coltrane continuum, and probably in most music) there seemed to be more emphasis on the expression, therefore things like timbre and phrasing were the most important elements”. Furthermore, he adds that “with these musicians I feel that the timbral elements are aids for expressing the sophisticated rhythm and melodies”. He diagnoses that part of the “younger generation that are involved in creative music today are foregoing detailed rhythmic and melodic developments demonstrated by the older masters in favour of more ‘effects’” (COLEMAN, 2007b). This would be a major problem because if it had been true, these students, for Coleman, would be going out of jazz music. According to Coleman, timbre would be just a manner of amplifying ideas and should not be the principal focus of someone that wants to study jazz music. The element of timbre is not ignored by him, but he puts it at a secondary level. It is difficult to agree, however, with his premise that the emphasis on timbre or effects could not be expressive. By the end it would be only a different approach. Moreover, even from a historical point of view Coleman’s argument is debatable. It is not clear that for musicians like Monk, Rollins or Mingus, all very solid and sophisticated in melodic and rhythmic aspects, the sound aspect would be secondary. Most likely, for these earlier generations, the most determining factor was how to be singular in all musical aspects, without necessary hierarchy between them. It is undeniable that one of the main singularities of jazz music is its particular sound on the individual and collective levels. Musicians like John Coltrane, Max Roach, Charlie Parker or Coleman himself are immediately recognizable by the sound identities they have built up, as well as some groups like Monk’s quartet, Coltrane’s quartet or Miles Davis’s quintets. Nevertheless, when he speaks of his conceptualization, Coleman insists that following the musicians that inspires him the most, he spent most of his “career concentrating more on the rhythmic/pitch/form aspects of music versus timbral considerations” (COLEMAN, 2007b). He made clear that he does not ignore this last aspect, but he “prefers a more subtle expression of timbre”. This touches directly on which emphasis will or will not

be given to the process of improvising music. The content of improvisation changes radically if the emphasis is placed on the timbre or if it is placed on the melodic and rhythmic aspect. Although Coleman raises this issue against young students, this seems to be not only a dispute of generations, but much more like a dispute concerning the aesthetic dimension of the creation of the music. In some moments it seems that it is through his criticism of other musicians that he describes his music. That is, its conceptualization is built negatively.

It is also interesting to observe that, in this specific essay, Coleman does not talk about the harmonic aspects of music. As we have pointed before, from the point of view of improvisation, his main focuses are on the melody and rhythm and not on the harmony. This absence is important, since the harmonic aspect has been taught as the principal one by most of the educational institutions dedicated to the formal transmission of jazz. Most jazz books concentrate only on harmony, placing the melodic and rhythmic aspects in the background. This does not prevent Coleman from having a harmonic theory of his own, as we will see below, but it allows him to come up with an unusual perspective. He thus sets itself against what he considers a youthful tendency to accentuate the timbre and an institutional tendency to accentuate harmony. Although he makes a questionable criticism, what I am most interested in investigating here is the negative gesture sustained by Coleman and the effects it produces. He seems to need to stand against a tendency to develop his music and his theoretical reflection on it. Coming from a particular point of view and claiming to continue the tradition, he insists that for him the domains of rhythm and melody would be the most important innovations present in jazz.

Improvisation or spontaneous composition

One other important point is that sometimes, instead of using the concept of improvisation, Coleman prefers to use the term *spontaneous composition* to name the way he creates music in real time: "I call improvisation 'spontaneous composition'" (PHILIP, 2013, p. 280). In his words:

I consider improvisation « spontaneous composition », it is just a matter of the method of creation. Spontaneous Composition requires that you develop the ability to create things in real time, in the moment. So you need to develop skills that address these problems. But the things that I want to create spontaneous (sic) are no different than the things I want to create with preconceived compositions. Many of my so-called preconceived compositions start off as spontaneous compositions, and I may notate them later (or maybe not). (COLEMAN, 2007a).

On the one hand, the use of a term like *spontaneous composition* seems to better express the dialectic between the term spontaneous and the precision that the term composition usually implies. Its use obliges Coleman to insist on the contradictory aspect which circumscribes his conception. The emphasis given to the term composition allows him to escape from some less rigorous conceptions of improvisation that often seem to ignore complexity of this manner to create music. On the other hand, the usual distinction between improvisation and composition still operates, it has only been transferred to two new concepts: spontaneous composition and preconceived compositions. It seems to me that this action allows him to more clearly emphasize the different temporalities that involve preconception and spontaneity, but also shifts the focus from the practice itself to the terminology used by the saxophonist. It is as if the distinction between practices was transformed into a distinction of names, as Coleman shifts from action verbs to adjectives. We lose, in this sense, the accent on the difference in action between these two ways of making music.

Coleman justifies his conceptual choice, observing that the difference between improvisation and spontaneous composition would be explicit in the terms themselves as “improvising comes from the word ‘improve’” (PHILIP, 2013, p. 281). Improvising would be then basically doing variations with some musical material, improving something in a way that keeps the relation explicitly with this previous material. The problem with this justification is that improvising derives not from improving, it comes from Latin *improvisus*, which means unexpected. In this regard, improvisation would be a more adequate term for the way he thinks of improvisation. He could have insisted with it. Once again, the choice made by Coleman seems to be a strategy to try to find alternative terms to some that appear overloaded by preconceptions. As we saw, concerning jazz, he did not present an alternative term, here, however, he replaced the term of improvisation with that of spontaneous

composition. This gesture, however, brings to light another impasse of which a detailed analysis goes beyond the possibilities of this article. This is the old discussion between the similarities and differences between the act of improvising and composing music. The term spontaneous composition seems to make it even more difficult to distinguish the two practices by shifting the differences of the action verbs—improvise and compose—to two adjectives: spontaneous and preconceived. Instead of fighting against the prejudices around the notion of improvisation, Coleman prefers to try to deviate from it. The replacement of the term improvisation with spontaneous composition ends up erasing the differences between the two ways of making music by identifying precisely where they are different. Thus erasing the practical diversity that the use of the terms composition and improvisation suggest, the difference between the ways of making music becomes merely nominal. It seems that by matching the same term for two temporally and substantially different practices, one loses the possibility of seeing what is identical and what differentiates them more precisely.

Freedom

Concerning his approach to improvisation or spontaneous composition, Coleman tells us that “the entire point of ‘spontaneous composition’ is to play the idea that you want to play, even if you haven’t played it before”. For him, the main point is not to play something that you have practiced before, but to try to create new music in real time. Real creators “are able to play a melody the way they want to play it for the first time, even if they haven’t played it before” (PHILIP, 2013, p. 280). In doing so, he also displaces the goal of the usual practice of improvisation. The main thing is to be able to learn to do something for the first time. Instead of practicing things to play on the stage, to become a spontaneous composer, that is, an improviser, the musician practices the capacity to create the music he wants to play in real time. The ability to do it becomes as important as the musical content. Obviously, it is not an ability that one learns in one day. In doing that, the emphasis on the process is rendered even more explicit. By putting the emphasis on another way of practicing and performing, Coleman also implicitly affirms that, at least for him, “there’s no such

thing as completely free. There's not completely spontaneous composition" (PHILIP, 2013, p. 284). Being able to play something for the first time does not mean being completely free. Firstly, one cannot leave behind the limitation of the instrument and groups which the musician plays with. Even when someone does something like what he considers to be a spontaneous composition, or when people say that they are playing free, the musicians end up drawing upon certain techniques or forms worked on beforehand.

Contrary to what we might imagine, the constraints he self-imposes bring a personal contrast, complexity and even freedom—at least a different one—to Coleman's music. Each time material is brought to the table or reused as a point of departure for a spontaneous composition, it tends to be different from the previous uses. Coleman, in his works, tries to internalize all the possibilities and sees it similarly to a sportsman, who should make fast and precise decisions in the real time of play. Freedom would be the capacity to make choices and to invent during the play, and not just doing anything. Nevertheless, these choices are not absolutely subjective. His music is never purely open. These are to some extent determined by the context and the situation in which they are placed. Adorno would remark that a certain degree of negativity is demanded for doing things in this way; otherwise the musician tends to fall into pure habits and only repeat the same thing over and over. When insisting on the idea that there is no such thing as completely free, Coleman points to the basic contradiction of improvisation where the musician should be able to play what he imagines and wants to play, but that this should also make sense in the context of the performance. Even the possibility of negating the context, depends on the context in which the musician is inserted. As we can imagine, something that does not sound good in one situation may be the perfect choice for another. For Adorno, the freedom in unfree situations is revealed only when the subject is not completely adapted or submissive to the situation. Analogously, for Coleman, freedom in improvisation has to do with being *and* being against the spell of a determinate situation. Although subjectively determined, freedom in improvisation is primarily determined by the relation to the musical object and the situation in which the musician is inserted.

Toward an open system

Steve Coleman is undoubtedly someone that has a great knowledge of the history of jazz music. His main influences and musical references belong to this tradition, and most of the material he uses in his music comes from jazz. One of his particularities is that, like many other musicians like John Coltrane and Yusef Lateef, he will seek not only inspiration, but the musical material from other traditions to blend with the jazz elements. This is true for most musical parameters: rhythm, melody, the harmony and form. This does not mean, in any way, that he is abandoning the material inherited from the jazz tradition. On the contrary, it happens that the jazz material is confronted and in some way mixed with other material in a non-synthetic way. Both universes somehow cohabit, but the absolute primacy, of course, is the heritage of jazz. Those materials structure Steve Coleman's compositions and appear strongly in his improvisation. The way they are used gives a particular character to his music, expanding it. They are not only treated in music, but also in the form of theoretical writings. As each aspect would deserve an essay per se, I will describe these elements only in a very general way. Remembering that the aim of this article is to investigate ways of creating tension from the inside out of jazz, I will restrict myself to show where and how Coleman seeks certain musical materials.

Rhythm

Rhythm is the musical parameter by which Steve Coleman's music is most recognized. First of all, his music is organized from the rhythm, and not from harmony. It is as if the rhythm came first. He is very attentive to the way the rhythm develops in the jazz tradition. The principal aspects of the jazz rhythm such as the swing feel, the idea of playing behind the beat, the rhythmic placement during improvisation and rhythmical phrasing still operating in his music. One of his main influences is the jazz drummer Doug Hammond, who early in Coleman's career showed him some rhythmical skill that still guides the way he organizes his music. He learned with Hammond, among other things, how to displace some elements originally from the rhythm section to the soloist or to other musicians, without them

disappearing (GUILFOYLE, 2013). On the other hand, Coleman is very well known for picking up musical materials in other African diaspora traditions. In his music, they appear not as a simple addition of external elements inside some previous one, but as one attempt to do a combination of elements from different traditions. The way he experiences the identity of the rhythmic material organizes the new musical context, revealing its non-identity. Instead of looking at his work in the rhythms of jazz, we will focus on the way he works with the elements of these other traditions.

Looking for his music as coming from an African-American tradition, Steve Coleman sought materials from Africa and other African diaspora traditions, mainly: West Africa and Cuba. His first trip to Africa was in 1993 to do research in Ghana; following that he travelled to Senegal and to the Ivory Coast. From this tradition, he brings three basic concepts to structure his music. First, cyclic repetition, which consists of the reiteration of rhythmic raw material with a rigorous metric and, usually, a few variations. Since the '80s, the most part of Coleman's compositions are structured through the relation of two or more superimposed cycles of different lengths – we will come back to this when we discuss form. Second is rhythmic iso-periodicity, which consists of a variable or not continuous reiteration of identical musical material. Lastly, the absence of a regular and strong accent. This absence intends to break the symmetry of most parts of the usual rhythmic structure and, in doing so, change the feel of it. This opens the possibility for surprises not only for the audience, but also for the players. This rapprochement with Africa allows him to take even greater distance from European conceptions of rhythm. As a consequence, most of the time, traditional bar notation is not capable of well representing the rhythmic nuances of Coleman's music. During this period, Coleman also works with hip-hop musicians and develops a rhythmic work, associating these structures with the poetic rhythm of the vocalists. In his work on the rhythmic and musical structures developed at this meeting, Jesse Stewart (2010) draws attention above all to the album *A Tale of Three Cities*, recorded live in Paris in 1995. This relationship with hip-hop vocalist lasts until today, with the vocalist Kokayi taking part in the recording of another live album recorded in New York: *Live at Village Vanguard* (2018).

Coleman also went to Cuba to experience Cuban music in relation to its territory of origin. The first time he went to this country was in 1995 and he never stopped going back. Instead of going to meet salsa or rumba regular groups, as is most common, he went to Matanzas, an area in the countryside, to meet AfroCuba de Matanzas⁵, a folkloric group close to the Yoruba religion that plays and develops the Batá drums tradition⁶. Coleman found there, above all, an impressive flexibility and looseness in the rhythm and in the way they played the music. It inspired him to try to bring this flexibility in his music during the following years. In a process that has been very well described by Michael Dessen (2009), the encounter with AfroCuba de Matanzas gave Coleman's music a new breath and radically change it. As the title of the Dessen essay suggests, since then the saxophonist found himself "improvising in a different clave". His music loses some of its former character which was closer to funk music, which used to give it a more American flavour, so to speak, and gains in return a Cuban feel, becoming in the process more flexible.

What brought Coleman's attention firstly when he met Matanzas musicians were the phrasing and forms they played. Their music was, in a sense, more complex and had more space than the music he had found in Africa. It feels different. He realized that the musical dynamic was more a matter of relations between the different drums than simply an addition of different parts. They build a natural rhythmic counterpoint that could be transposed to other musical contexts, especially music where improvisation has a central place, which was also the case of the group AfroCuba de Matanzas. The form was derived from the relationship between the different drums but it has its own dynamics, it was not a pre-established form. Another important thing that he realized was that a lot of the material necessary to the music was only implicitly played. He discovered that there were some structures that even if necessary to the music were not manifested in sound. In a certain contradictory way, there were some inaudible sound structures able to structure the music that was far

⁵ This meeting was very prolific and he ends up recording with the group in 1996 the album: Steve Coleman & the Mystic Rhythm Society in collaboration with AfroCuba de Matanzas – The Sign and the Seal – Transmissions of the Metaphysics of a Culture, BMG, France.

⁶ The Batá drums is a group of three drums of different sizes used in some Cuban Yoruba rituals. The drums are called: *okónkolo* (the smaller one), *itólete* (medium one) and *iyà* (bigger one).

from common. They are still there even if silently. What was implicit was sometimes as important as what was really played. From the perspective of the *Negative dialectics*, this shift to an implicit presence is an important aspect. The idea of a dialectic that is negative also suggests that Adorno makes an effort not to show its own philosophical presuppositions. Coleman learned with the AfroCuba de Matanzas how make sophisticated musical presuppositions. The famous *clave*, for example, was not all the time externalized. It was sounding constantly only in the imagination of the musicians. Yet, without the *clave* the music would be impossible. By the end, it works as something able to bind the music, even if it is absent.

One other important device used by Steve Coleman to organize his rhythmic structures is what he called *rhythmic modes*. These provide a way of organizing the time giving a particular form to rhythm. As he says, rhythmic modes are “imaginary structures that the actual rhythms can reside in” (2007c). Rhythmic modes are the name of the structures consisting of combinations of one, two or three pulses, but not the proper rhythm. The rhythm properly is structured inside those modes. Coleman has a dialectical way of conceiving and using the rhythmic modes. This idea was made explicit already in the name of an essay: *Negative Rhythms* (2007c). In this text, he discusses the different polarities (or sides) that a rhythm structure has: one positive and the other one negative. A negative rhythm presupposes a positive one and they are not separated, but mutually mediated. The rhythmic mode usually represents the positive side of a music structure. In fact, this concept is derived from the concept of *clave*, it is like an extension of this last. It is neither syncope nor simply a way to name the rhythmic sound that comes first. The relationship is built between what sounds and what does not sound. As he learned from Cuban musicians, the relationship of the *clave* concept is between silence and sound, as they organize themselves in space. Silence can come first and predominate in a structure, what matters is the relationship between the poles.

According to Coleman, the rhythm becomes negative when it occupies a temporal space that was empty before. When sounds replace silence. This displacement creates a change of direction in the movement of the rhythm inside the structure of the rhythmic modes. For example, we can imagine that we have a basic

structure of two eighth notes plus three eighth notes (five subdivided in two plus three beats). If we made the second and the fifth eighth note sounds, we will be playing on the positive side. But, if we turn around and choose to play the first, third and fourth eighth notes – those that were silent before – we will be playing the negative side. Negative rhythm is a very simple idea that becomes more interesting when developed into larger structures and above all when played in real time. Coleman superimposes the negative rhythm on the other structures that command the music, first of all, the swing feel. This overlap is made in such a way that one structure does not confirm the former. The rhythmic structures of a different nature are thus by the end in contradiction with each other. This requires of the musician another way of listening and a particular reactive and inventive capacity. He must be able to put himself under different perspectives in relation to music, as if he were in two different places at the same time. But most of the time, one of them is sounding, while the other remains latent, within the musician's reach as a possibility. This type of situation can reveal a different perspective of the same rhythmic structure.

As a matter of fact, a good example is the way his group played the introduction of "Jan 18", from *The Mancy of Sounds* (2011). The first minutes are all built around a rhythmic ambiguity. When hearing the complex rhythmic mode structures of 99 eighth notes, the listener finds himself emerging in a contradictory position where he is constantly under pressure to alternate the perspective in which he hears the piece without being able to find a fixed point. Later, in this same piece, during his improvised solo, Coleman plays deeply with this ambiguity. As Coleman points out, the concept of negative rhythm changes the balance of the rhythm. In an improvised situation, it brings to the musician the possibility of quickly changing from the positive to the negative or vice versa, challenging not only the listener, but also the group he plays with and above all himself. The musician can move forward and backward changing the way he balances and hears the music. Coleman makes clear that the musician can choose to navigate between the two sides of the rhythm, the idea is to be able to change freely, in real time, from one side to the other (LYRA DE CARVALHO, 2014). By the end, the combination of those different rhythmic elements coming from

different horizons ends up not simply in another kind of Afro-Cuban jazz, but in a particular way of organizing the rhythm, which for Steve Coleman is the proper name.

Melody

For the melodic parameter of his music, Coleman develops what he calls a *Symmetrical Movement Concept* (no date), which is also the name of an essay where he presents the concept. As the name suggests, it is a particular melodic material working in a symmetrical way⁷. Coleman said that he “named it Symmetry because of the motion of the melodies and expansion and contraction of tones around an axis tone or axis tones” (n. d.). Space do not permit a detailed discussion of this system, as it would demand a full article, but it is important to say that the general idea of this melodic concept is to venture outside of tonality without completely abandoning it, expanding the possibilities for melodic constructions; it is an atonal concept in the common use of the term. Like in his rhythmic theory, Coleman developed, for the melody, a notion that deals with positive and negative intervals that turn around a moving axis. Coleman tells us that “this is basically a melodic system that obeys its own laws of motion” and that it “only deals with the laws of motion produced by the system without any regard for other types of tonality” (n. d.). Nevertheless, he said that “my goal was not to play in a totally symmetrical style (as this would be as boring as playing all major scales) but to integrate the style and give myself more options when I improvise” (n. d.). It is not a dogmatic concept, but a way to expand the possibilities of his improvisational vocabulary. We can observe that it is an auto-reflexive melodic system that is part of the combination of two tones, instead of longer structures as phrases, motifs or licks. To master this concept, the most important thing is to be able to think and hear intervals very fast. The intervals must be internalized and the musician must be able to perform it in both directions. For example, in relation to a C axis, an F is an ascending fourth, but also a descending fifth. With the G the opposite

⁷ This melodic concept is an interval system very similar to the one Béla Bartok developed, as Ernő Lendvai (1979) shows us in his book *Béla Bartok, an Analysis of His Music*. We cannot guarantee, but Steve Coleman possibly has studied this book and developed his ideas from that. However, he frequently points out that he is interested in Bartok’s music and as someone that studies a lot it is very possible that he knows this book.

occurs, it is an ascending fifth and a descending fourth. Finally, to be able to internalize Steve Coleman's system, it is necessary to play, listen and imagine the two directions to which the intervals can go *at the same time*. It has to be able to think in "both directions at once" (2018) as John Coltrane said.

Harmony

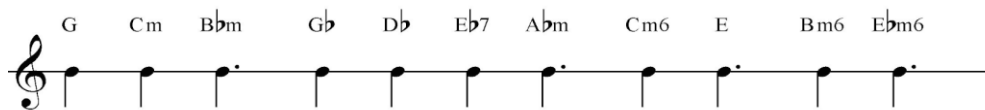
The composer and theoretician Ernst Levy is a vital influence on the way Steve Coleman deals with the harmonic parameter of the music. The second part of the same article we just came to discuss, *Symmetrical Movement Concept*, is a detailed reading and analysis of the book of Levy: *A Theory of Harmony* (1985). It seems to have been mainly through a detailed study of this book that Coleman discovered new harmonic possibilities for expanding tonal structures. Diverging from the dominant approach to harmony described in jazz theory books – that deals mostly with functional harmony and the subsequent extension and enrichment of the triads and tetrads with various extensions –, Coleman, using Levy as the point of departure, deals mostly with simple triads and two kinds of tetrads: seventh dominant chords and sixties minor chords, what he called the negative dominant. Chord structures are thought to have been positive or negative harmonic devices. The harmonic progressions are seen as a constant back and forth of two perspectives, the positive and the negative one. Without being able to develop this point in more detail, the most important thing to me is to highlight that Coleman manages to build complex and unusual harmonic progressions using mostly simple chords and that sought out a different harmonic source as the point of departure for his harmonic structures. In the end, Coleman found in Levy's ideas a different way to expand the harmonic parameter in a manner analogous to what he did with rhythm and melody.

Form

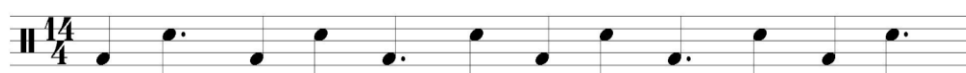
The formal structures of Steve Coleman compositions are often the result of the superposition of two or more different cycles occurring simultaneously. Each cycle normally has different sizes from the other. By the end, the musical form is the result of the relationship between the cycles. To demonstrate one of these formal structures,

we will briefly discuss the form of the composition “Ritual”⁸. Before, however, it is important to indicate that in their respective articles Dessen (2009) and Steward (2010) already have discussed some of these structures from previous periods of Coleman’s music.

Instead of a harmonic cadence or a determinate number of measures, *Ritual* is the result of the combination of two cycles: one made of 14 beats and another of 13 beats. In this composition, the 14-beat cycle is the drum cycle and the 13-beat cycle the harmonic one. As they will only meet up to 182 beats, it is the relation between them that brings out the form of the composition. No cycle prevails over the other, it is the relationship between them that matters. This relationship offers several possibilities for improvisers who can thus navigate from one cycle to the other, deal with both at the same time, or even play against them. Besides that, *Ritual* is also a good example of the way Coleman organizes a harmonic structure, something that I will not discuss here. Here the harmonic structure with its rhythmic modes:



And here is the drum cycle:



As we can see, in the harmonic cycle, there are eleven chords for 13 beats of quarter notes – which is the equivalent of 26 eighth notes. The rhythmic mode, which is here the harmonic rhythm, is thus: 2-2-3-2-2-2-3-2-3-2-3⁹. In this piece, each subdivision of the mode corresponds to a different chord. This causes further complication for the musician since he must deal with the relation between the cycles and with a harmonic progression that is not simple and with an intricate rhythm. In relation to that, the drum cycle is constituted by 14 beats quarter notes, or 28 eighth

⁸ Recording on five very different versions on the album *Weaving Symbolic* (Paris, Label Bleu, 2006).

⁹ Being 2 the equivalent of two eighth notes, and 3 the equivalent of three eighth notes.

notes. In this case the rhythmic mode is thus: 2-3-2-2-3-2-2-2-3-2-2-3. As we said, the two cycles will only meet 182 beats after they begin (assuming that they begin together). This long period of time makes it virtually impossible for the musician to direct himself counting the structure, so he must feel and internalize the relationship between the cycles.

It is also important to observe that we cannot find this way of formalizing a composition either in Ted Pease's book *Jazz Composition* (2003) or on *Analyser le Jazz* (2009), by Laurent Cugny, both mapping a wide range of forms of jazz compositions. It seems that this absence can be considered as a sign of the originality of this procedure, but also demonstrates that this kind of form is still not standardized in the jazz world. Nevertheless, this procedure of superposition of different cycles is relatively close to the old medieval technique of composition known as *Talea Color*. It also recalls, in some sense, the way American minimalist composers like Philip Glass and Steve Reich structure their music. However, the main difference is that, as a music that deals with improvisation, Steve Coleman's music has a dynamic that differentiates it from the others. The musician can navigate through the multiple cycles by varying them; they are structures that guide the playing, they are not just put there to be repeated. The possibility of improvisation allows the musician to make variations in each of the cycles he is playing. Furthermore, we can imagine that it would be even possible to choose *not* to play the cycle that one was supposed to play, something that would not be allowed in minimalist music.

Referring to his own music, Coleman insists that it is important to be able to play in the form and not in a completely "open" way. As we will see in more detail below, he improvises, in a certain way, against the form, not only to reproduce it but also to expand it. For him, it is vital to be, at the same time, precise and free in a predetermined form. This is something he admires most in improvisers such as Parker, Coltrane, Von Freeman or Sam Rivers. They were simultaneously precise and free when dealing with multiple kinds of preconceived composition. They could play at the moment and in a very precise way what they wanted to play and what was needed to play. They all develop new and difficult musical forms, pushing the music far ahead. On the other hand, because of the way he structured his music, in Coleman's case, the

contradiction involving the quest for freedom and the formalism becomes more visible than for these musicians. However, when rooted in improvisation formalism tends to be informal and not rigid. As we will see below, it is analogous to the way Adorno thinks of a dialectic that, despite its tendency to close itself in a system, manages to stay open. In the case of Adorno's philosophy it is the openness to different objects that leave the dialectic open; in Steve Coleman's music it is the centrality of improvisation that opens the systematization of the music.

Improvisation and constellation

Coleman's view of improvisation or spontaneous composition in relation to his musical structures seems close to the way Adorno describes the concept of "constellation" (2007, p. 162–164). A constellation is a manner of organizing concepts from multiple perspectives so that none of them presents itself as a fixed point or is seen as the foundation of the thing. For Adorno there is no first principle on which he builds his philosophical building, it is the relation between the concepts that counts the most. In Coleman's music, this constellation is expressed, first of all, in the relation between the different cycles that structure it, but it is also reflected on the playing level, that is, at the level of improvisation. Vijay Iyer observes that Coleman, following the best part of the jazz tradition, is someone that puts individual and collective perspective on the same level, without making a simple synthesis of them. He makes explicit the relation between them as both complementary and opposite. Reflecting on his experience playing in Coleman's group, Iyer says:

In performance, the musicians must be able to communicate freely and expressively within these textures. Preparation for performance involves learning to hear these contrasting rhythms simultaneously. Though this requires much self-study, the participants tend to learn a great deal from each other. Just as each musician has a different rhythmic group upon which to focus, each member also contributes a different perspective to the formation of the musical totality. (1996).

To which he adds that "when all members of the group have internalized and mastered the rhythms performed by all musicians, the possibilities are heightened

for improvised interactivity” (IYER, 1996). As we have said before, Coleman’s music is built from the rhythm. The way in which Coleman organizes different rhythmic layers to create the structure of the song, makes it possible to create a contrast between the musicians and enables a different kind of interaction, an interaction that is maintained not only between the musicians, but between the structures themselves and consequently between the musicians and the structures. The sensation of this type of interaction is summarized by Iyer elsewhere:

[...] an improviser develops an analytical take on a composition’s contents in order to improvise against it, to turn the composition against itself and against the composer. Improvising against (or, at the very least, ‘not with’) the composer becomes a path toward discovery – not of the composer’s intent (which is a useless concept), but of musical possibility. (IYER, 2009, p. 173).

In this essay, he tries to condense various ideas on which, from his perspective, would be the terms and conditions of improvisation. Demanding that one turn the composition against itself and against the composer is to demand for the improvisation to work as a type of auto-reflection. One of its sections, from which the above quote is taken, is titled: “Improvising Against the Composer” (IYER, 2009, p. 172). In this section Iyer starts from a traditional critique of the separation between composer and performer in the European musical tradition, pointing out that the performer is somehow trained to be afraid of transgressing the paper instructions and that the composer tends to own his material. After pointing out the possibility of composing open material intended for improvisation, he recalls that since the beginning of jazz, musicians confronted this limit by subverting the use of pre-existing material from Tin Pan Alley: “The point wasn’t to worship those songs or their authors, but rather to turn the songs into something they weren’t” (IYER, 2009, p. 173). That is to say, they immanently revealed something that exceeded the immediate identity of the material. This was only possible through a negative gesture where the priority for the improvisers was not working on the songs themselves, “but with their underlying architecture, finding new ways to navigate through these hidden forms, subverting and undoing them” (IYER, 2009, p. 173).

The moment when Steve Coleman best expressed this approach is, curiously, when he makes an analogy between jazz and boxing: “creative improvising

is very similar in many respects to the boxing techniques I describe here. While improvising one needs to respond not only to the dynamic structure of the composition that one is playing, but also to the possibilities that unfold because of the contributions of the other instrumentalists. In a sense the music itself is your ‘opponent’” (COLEMAN, no date 2). In a situation of a group playing music together, the improviser musician does different things. He deals mainly with a structure that is dynamic, that is always moving: “one of the challenges is to execute your responses in the currently functioning window of time while still dealing with the nuances of the structure. In addition to this, the musician must manage the details of spontaneously composing musical phrases that represent what you are trying to ‘say’ in your music” (COLEMAN, no date 2). Following Coleman’s and Iyer’s assertions, I could say that it is mainly *against* the situation in which one finds himself immersed that one actually plays. It is true, however, that it is often difficult to understand precisely what both Coleman and Iyer mean when they think of musical structures as adversaries. It is possible that it would be above all, a metaphorical use of the term. At the same time, all terminological use is never merely gratuitous. Although it is difficult to conceptualize precisely what they meant, the most important thing seems to underline that this is how they subjectively live the moment of improvisation. The fact is that both musicians affirm that they put themselves against music, that music is the opponent. The use of a terminology of confrontation denotes that they feel tension, even a contradiction, while improvising music. Perhaps they strongly insist on this negative side, because it is more neglected than what they called the positive one.

It is extremely difficult to demonstrate this idea of simultaneously negating and affirming in improvisation, but we can try to follow one descriptive analysis made by Vijay Iyer to suggest how we can translate the ideas raised by him and Coleman. This description is ideal because it well summarizes several of the aspects and parameters that we have been discussing here. In his 1996 essay, Iyer describes an improvised situation where Coleman seems to put some different perspectives into practice by exploiting the constitutive ambiguity of the structure of the song he is playing. Here is how he describes the saxophonist’s way of playing “Drop Kick” of the homonymous album that came out in 1992:

The pitch content of his lines plays with the ambiguity of the static « tonality » established by the other instruments. The sound may be called F# minor, though the most heavily accented bass note is F (or E#), as is the most frequent guitar note. The simultaneous presence of these two 'tonalities' provides much material for the improviser, if, again, he or she chooses to accept the 'challenges in life.' Coleman's initial improvised phrases sound roughly like F# minor, but gradually the pitch organization is explored in less direct ways. Later he plays with the ambiguity with a brief signifying reference to 'bebop' styles – a stock phrase in the key of F. As the rest of the improvisation shows, this kind of overt, humorous reference is quite rare in Coleman's playing, but it shows that his musical 'roots' indeed lie where he says they do – In the black creative musicians of this century. (1996).

Iyer describes that "Drop Kick" has a fixed six-beat rhythmic group in the bass and drums, the guitar has a nine beat structure and the piano and the saxophones different five-beat parts each. Their accents are constantly displaced. "So strong is the effect of this displacement, observes the pianist, that the main pulse is typically perceived by casual listeners to be one half-beat off from its true location. However, this may be corrected by careful attention to the other interlocking parts and to Coleman's improvisation within the overall structure" (1996). Even Iyer himself expresses in his interpretation the ambiguity of the structure of the tune. He says that what in the first glance appears to be wrong could be correct. Either it is a structure of six measures of five beats, or it is five measures of six beats. Actually, I can say that it is *both perspectives* at the same time. Moreover, we can observe by the analytical description made by Vijay Iyer that Coleman's improvisation in "Drop Kick" is built around the type of axis that we have mentioned above. The only static element of the music, points Iyer, is its tonality. However, rather than providing a supporting base for the improviser, as we might expect from a static tonality, this one is also ambiguous. Structured around a symmetrical axis it becomes a paradoxical and unstable static structure. The same ambiguity of the rhythm resurfaces in the harmonic aspect. Where although, at a first glance, the F# minor sound prevails, the note F played uninterruptedly by the bass and the guitar denotes the ambivalence of the structure. In the end, the musician is simultaneously confronted with two tonalities: being able to navigate from one to the other or to put one against the other. Following the presumption of Coleman and Iyer, this multiplicity of tensions builds a paradoxical constellation of musical forces that push the musician to play from different

perspectives at the same time *within* and *against* it. Perhaps this is a materialization of the negativity they have raised before.

Steve Coleman on the borders: material, system and improvisation.

The gesture of systematizing almost all musical parameters could have led Steve Coleman's music to lapse into a closed system. My hypothesis is that this does not occur due to the centrality that improvisation occupies in his music. Improvisation tends to break the primacy of systematicity. Coleman immerses in the musical material to bring it out modified, revealing that it is more than it appeared to be. For him, it is not about the musical material *per se*, but on how he can bring different musical colours out of it. The driving force of his music is the tension between what is inside and what comes from outside. The systematic character of Coleman's music manifests itself mainly in the structural organization of what he called preconceived compositions. In order to open up its structures, one must not only play the compositions, but, in some ways, also play against them. The musician can thus improvise in a double movement: from the system, but also against the system. Staying only within the system tends to create less variety. It must be a double movement coming from both directions at the same time.

From an Adornian perspective, when we are faced with such a configuration, we would have been facing something as an "open system" (Adorno, 2008, p. 31). A contradictory possibility on which the philosopher wagered all his life. The idea of an open system brings him outside the norms, and leads him to baptize his philosophy under the name of *Negative Dialectics*, which can be interpreted, as we saw, as an "open dialectic". It is a philosophy that continues to deal immanently with the whole philosophical tradition without totally breaking with it. What constitutes the framework of Negative Dialectics is to be both inside and outside the philosophical tradition, with and against it. This unstable and moving position results from a delicate non-synthetic balance between the subject and the object, where it is the latter that has

primacy. Thought occurs not about things, but “out of these things” (ADORNO, 2007, p. 33). Due to its continuous and uninterrupted movement of negation, a negative or open dialectic prevents itself from being reached, or to be fixed, thus escaping from the dominating force of the systematic tendencies it nevertheless has.

As we saw, Coleman questions the tradition – starting with its own name – and searches for musical material and techniques not only in jazz, but also in other musical lineages, absorbing and juxtaposing them with the jazz material. Hence, for example, his approach allows the rhythm to become a sort of jazz with a Cuban and West African taste. The harmony goes almost against the flow. And the formal and the melodic aspects are expanded carrying up new configurations. The improvisation brings diversity to the music, it allows him to bring to the light to what was not there before and what would be repressed in a pure systematic approach. He presents his music as is working within the limits of tradition. Coleman is, of course, not the first to deal with this issue in this way. Nevertheless, even if he appears as a paradigm of some current jazz trends, it is still not a hegemonic gesture inside jazz. At the same time, it is interesting to note that he works on the continuous development and transformation of the same material for years. But, as he is always bringing something new to the table; each particular moment is also discontinuous in relation to the previous and to the next one. Adorno would observe that it is precisely the discontinuity inside the continuity that constitutes a negative dialectic. The movement does not stop mainly because Coleman is always under self-reflection, trying not to repeat himself. It is a rational approach to composition and improvisation where each piece of music may be seen as a part of a major process. He does not fall into eclecticism like other artists, who frequently settle into a comfort zone and never leave it. Coleman is uninterruptedly negating to be fixed and always trying to move his music forward.

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