

Echoing Opacity: Unsettling the Theory- Practice Divide

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«Quite simply, two conditions have come together here: a culture that projected onto the world (with the aim of dominating it) and a language that was presented as universal (with the aim of providing legitimacy to the attempt at domination). These two intentions, not without some acknowledged portion of largesse, culminated in the thought of an empire. Under these conditions poetic thought went on the alert: beneath the fantasy of domination it sought the really livable world.»
Édouard Glissant (1997: 28)

This essay argues that Édouard Glissant's notion of opacity provides a framework for thinking a philosophy of the arts beyond the persistent division between theory and practice. Through a close listening of Cecil Taylor's ensemble improvisation, I propose that his artistic practice operates as a mode of philosophical inquiry: a form of situated thinking-and-doing anchored in social life.

The very separation of *theoria* as abstract, «pure» thought from artistic practices understood as occurring solely

through «doing» constitutes a problematic stance. Equally problematic is an account of artistic practices that idealises the artistic gesture through an appeal to a sovereign potentiality, while treating those practices as non-discursive and non-political entities. Both positions attempt to maintain a division between theory and practice, either by separating them outright, or by approaching them as already separate, and both fail to acknowledge their inevitable entanglements. This text therefore asks why these separations persist as such, and whether an artistic gesture as embodied by Cecil Taylor might instead unsettle them through practices of opacity and improvisation. As I will argue, such practices are not separated from theory and are deeply anchored in social life.

Opacity

- 04 Édouard Glissant can be read as proposing opacity as a stance opposed to the singularizing logic of Western hegemonic knowledge production—a logic that upholds transparency as a necessity, naming fields of practice through a single, stabilizing category, and thereby revealing its incapacity to engage the multiplicity of Relations:
- 05 «This same transparency, in Western History, predicts that a common truth of Mankind exists and maintains that what approaches it most closely is action that projects, whereby the world is realized at the same time that it is caught in the act of its foundation. Against this reductive transparency, a force of opacity is at work. No longer the opacity that enveloped and reactivated the mystery of filiation but another, considerate of all the threatened and delicious things joining one another (without conjoining, that is, without merging) in the expanse of Relation. Thus, that which protects the Diverse we call opacity» (Glissant 1997: 62).
- 06 Glissant traces the genealogy of the epistemic forces at stake in the articulation of opacity within practices of creolisation that emerge in tension with colonial cultures and languages such as French and English (to which German or Spanish might be added in different historical registers)—cultures historically organized through mechanisms of filiation and legitimacy. At the same time, he insists that opacity should not be understood as a closed crystallization. Rather, it names a productive and affirmative force that

arises through the necessity of other grammars and other languages, resisting homogenization or unification while activating relational formations that remain open and heterogeneous. Opacity resists the demand that practices be rendered fully transparent through subjection to stable languages and categories. In what follows, I approach opacity primarily as an epistemic-political stance that resists the demand for transparency without abandoning legibility. Opacity here does not indicate obscurity or withdrawal from meaning, but a refusal of a single and totalizing explanation.

I am interested in attending to this stance of opacity as it engages a necessary critique of the separation between theory and practice, and in considering what such a critique might imply for a philosophy of the arts. Although Glissant does not explicitly address the theory—practice divide, his sustained critique of transparency and his insistence on a politics and a poetics of Relation—both of which become operative through opacity—are crucial in this regard. As Glissant writes, «Relation struggles and states itself in opacity. It deters self-importance» (Glissant 1997: 186). The emphasis on struggle foregrounds the historical and political conditions under which Glissant's thought emerges; conditions in which dominant mechanisms of power are confronted through practices of refusal that respond to the need for a different political order. Understood in relation to creolisation as an anti-colonial practice, opacity thus emerges as a radically political mode of Relation and knowing that remains inseparable from social life.

In what follows, I will try to articulate the notion of opacity and its implications for artistic practices. This understanding of such a philosophical concept as anchored in social life is central to engaging artistic fields. Here, the question of what a philosophy of the arts might be emerges radically. If philosophy's task, within its ancient Greek tradition, is to reflect on the ontological—*ti esti?* as the primal question—and to create concepts, it becomes complicated to articulate what philosophical practice might be when engaging artistic practices. Very often, the philosopher thinks about artistic practices and aesthetic dimensions which might already hint at a separation of roles: the philosopher writes or thinks about a practice, while the artistic practitioner carries out their craft. In this situation, a separation of fields appears: a *theoria* that writes, and a *praxis* that carries out its work. But what if these two roles become

blurry through their inevitable entanglements and radical interrelations? What if the *about* becomes *with*? A philosophy of the arts informed by opacity might then become a situated practice in which the separation between distinct roles—and disciplinary fields—is troubled. This becomes particularly visible in sonic improvisational settings, where thinking and doing unfold in entanglement through sound to form a space of shared inquiry and mutual amplification. The «with» is articulated through ensemble sounding, rehearsal, and speech, approached not as objects to be engaged from outside but as constitutive of conceptual production. It is here that opacity emerges as the noise of an indisciplinarity that troubles any attempt to stabilize, separate, identify, name, or fix either philosophy or artistic fields. Opacity can be understood here as epistemic dissonance, unsettling stable fields of knowledge production and transforming them into contested and contesting forces.

- 09 I would like to listen further to how such Relations might occur at the intersection of philosophy and artistic gesture, where theory and practice converge into complex articulations. To this end, I engage with Cecil Taylor in *Les Grandes Répétitions*, a documentary produced by the *Institut National de l'Audiovisuel / Groupe de Recherches Musicales* that features Taylor and his quartet rehearsing in Paris in 1968—a year that carries particular historical and political weight. The film forms part of a broader documentary series directed by Gérard Patris in collaboration with composer Luc Ferrari, which features portrait films of figures such as Olivier Messiaen, Hermann Scherchen, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Edgard Varèse, all captured in moments of rehearsal—besides Varèse, who passed before the production had been completed—hence the series' title. Within this context, Taylor occupies a singular position. As the only artist working within Black Atlantic¹ cultures in the series, his presence articulates an idiosyncratic relation to the other portraits, which are situated largely within the frame of European (contemporary) classical music. This positional difference is not merely biographical but epistemic and aesthetic, foregrounding divergent conceptions of improvisation, composition, and the relation between

1 See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993).

thought and sound—extending, as I will try to demonstrate, to philosophy and art, and ultimately to the blurring of theory and practice. Taylor's practice offers a concrete example in which opacity can be observed not merely as a concept but as an embodied philosophical method.

Cecil Taylor à Paris

The documentary opens with a masculine voice-over naming those involved in the film, beginning with Pierre Schaeffer, then director of the *Groupe de Recherches Musicales*, and proceeding to list the other contributors to the production. This spoken introduction unfolds over a sequence of static shots (*plans fixes*) of a Parisian location, followed by a lateral tracking that eventually reveals a plaque identifying the location as *Place des Vosges, 3rd arrondissement*. A cut introduces a new frame: Cecil Taylor sits in front of a wall, wearing dark sunglasses and a black pullover, his head resting on his hand as he holds a cigarette. He remains still, allowing the smoke to linger. An off-screen voice, speaking English with a pronounced French accent and accompanied by French subtitles, asks: «What did your father play? He played an instrument?» Taylor responds calmly, «He played pots and pans.» The interviewer repeats, «Pots and pans?» Taylor affirms, «Pots and pans.» The voice then asks, «Was your mother playing?» Taylor replies, «You mean, uh?» «I mean music,» the voice clarifies. Taylor answers: «Well, it is all music, isn't it? I mean, the way one cooks bread, prepares the dishes that we eat—it could be something that causes the senses to create what we color by calling, uh, emotions.» Another cut, revealing a new frame in which the alto saxophonist Jimmy Lyons, positioned in the corner of a vast room and facing a wall, articulates multiple motivic lines. He stands beside a large fireplace, a chair, and a painting depicting a flower. As he continues to play, Lyons gradually turns away from the wall and begins to walk through the space. The sound now features the full quartet—Cecil Taylor on piano, Lyons on alto saxophone, Alan Silva on double bass, and Andrew Cyrille on drums—performing in what appears to be a large apartment, possibly within one of the aristocratic residences surrounding Place des Vosges. The sound is intense and forceful. Lyons's alto saxophone traces sharp, gravity-defying lines—circular and repetitive

yet continuously mutating into new motives. Taylor's piano articulates dense clusters, insistently shaping dissonances that search for difference within repetition. Silva's bass oscillates between lower and higher registers, alternately anchoring the ensemble and contributing to its ongoing sonic negotiation. Andrew Cyrille's polyrhythmic percussion propels the group through elastic time, opening spaces through drums and cymbals. What emerges is a sustained collective conversation in which sound replaces speech. Complex textures continually collide and reconfigure, producing a language in which dissonance articulates a mode of existence through ensemble improvisation—a way of shaping sound, bodies, space, time, and social life. Taylor's voice then returns: «An instrument is just an object. The music comes from inside. The instrument is the tool that makes a particular language.» The interviewer follows by asking, «What did you study?» Taylor responds: «The people.» The music resumes, with renewed intensity. Taylor continues: «Well, the study has to be divided into two categories: those of the academy and those of the areas usually located across the railroad tracks.»

- 14 Although the documentary, as a mediated form, goes on to offer further insight into Cecil Taylor's artistic practice—engaging radical sonic languages, philosophical reflection, and poetry—I focus here on its opening section, as it already provides a crucial entry point into my central claim. I propose that Taylor unsettles singular disciplinary fields by performing opacity through improvisation: a political gesture that refuses academic regimes of transparency, and the separation between artistic performance and social life. In this context, sound/music is not a mere medium but the enactment of entanglements between epistemic and aesthetic production, inseparable from ways of living, relating, and being. This refusal begins with an understanding of music not as a medium or discipline, but as an affective and political sonic force—one that is not only articulated in the moment of performance, but that echoes through everyday life: in cooking, eating, hanging out, or struggling together. The racialized reference to practices «across the railroad tracks» gestures toward the color line and the social struggles within communities that have long faced persistent racist and classist violence. In such racialized spaces produced through economic dispossession and struggle, artistic practice tends to be inseparable from social life; it

is not confined to the bandstand. Music never stops after performance—it continues to sound while reading, discussing, exchanging, cooking, thinking, and living. Music is therefore not a discipline, but a way of being in the world(s), and opacity here blurs the separation between practices. At the same time, it positions particular languages and cultural forms in opposition to dominant norms: to academia, to disciplinary separations such as music or philosophy, and ultimately to the divide between theory and practice. When Taylor speaks, he activates certain registers; when he improvises at the piano, he activates others. And when he performs his poetry—as heard in the later moments of the documentary—he radically troubles what language can do. Yet these (sonic) layers remain entangled, «delicious things joining one another without merging but co-joining,» to echo Édouard Glissant. These entanglements are further underscored when Taylor recalls that his father played «pots and pans,» a remark that directly challenges hierarchies of musical instruments and artistic fields. Here, «pots and pans» when activated through everyday practices such as cooking become as valid a musical setup as the pianoforte. Life and sound are inseparable.

When ensemble improvisation unfolds within the collective 15 conversation of the quartet, the atmosphere intensifies. The musicians speak through an instituted practice—improvisation that performs the outside—that conveys dissonance, recalling Duke Ellington's assertion that «dissonance is our way of life» (Singh 2004: 63). Insofar as it is produced through collective negotiation and particular modes of subjectivation, musical dissonance becomes social dissonance crystallized through improvisation. Improvisation thus emerges as a practice of refusal—not notated on a score but unfolding through sound and listening in the moment—deeply anchored in struggle and articulated through sophisticated aesthetic forms that resist confinement and perform an excess of sound. There is no separation between theory and practice here, because an artistic field cannot be approached outside of social life. A chromaticism outside tonal centers resonates, relating directly to embodied affects and feelings. Textures and dissonances acquire an existential meaning. Sound produces a fragmented multiplicity of layers, echoing inside and outside performance. These fragments form a politics of Relation, connecting bodies, spaces, and times in

non-linear ways. What comes before and after performance becomes difficult to determine, as plural temporalities are at stake within sonic practice. Opacity, ultimately, is performed through ensemble improvisation.

- 16 Whether through musical languages that articulate deep aesthetic and social dimensions, through the double articulation of joy and trauma, or through the deconstruction of language in his poetry, Cecil Taylor is also, I would argue, a philosopher insofar as his practice produces conceptual relations through performance rather than academic form. To call Taylor a philosopher is not to erase distinctions between artistic and philosophical practices, but to recognize forms of conceptual production that occur through performance, situated experimentation, and embodied collective sonic conversation. Here, philosophy becomes a social practice rather than textual production. Taylor produces transversal interrelations between artistic practice and epistemic-ontological inquiry, always echoing social and political questions whether through his practice of poetry, improvising with his ensemble or talking to an interviewer. Taylor's philosophy unfolds through a radical reconfiguration of dominant understandings of philosophy itself: as the interruption of the separation between theory and practice, and between artistic practice and social life in all its multidimensional complexity. This approach resonates with positions that understand philosophy as a practice rather than solely a textual activity. Fred Moten insightfully understands the practice of improvisation as exactly what unsettles philosophy: «This unconscious, or, more precisely, this thing of darkness that philosophy has seemed incapable of acknowledging as its own, is improvisation» (Moten 1997: 77). Through improvisation, whether talking, performing music, hanging out or reciting poetry, Cecil Taylor unsettles clear boundaries between separate fields of knowledge production. Ensemble improvisation, understood as an affective and socio-political force, operates in and through opacity by troubling and queering attempts to name, identify, or fix dimensions that are fundamentally open, anarchic, minor, and transversal. As Fred Moten—who has thought attentively with Taylor's sound—further puts it:
- 17 «Now we might easily be speaking of the song form as that de/centered structure that Taylor radically reformulates, if not abandons, precisely by rethinking its status as the

singular site of order in improvised music. For the point here is that in his aesthetic Taylor deals in what has truly been the unthinkable of the event-determined circularity of the history/narrative of the West and its thinking: the structure or totality that is un(de)composed by a center or its absence, by the event or The Event and their absences. This is a possibility given in ensemble tone, in the improvisation through a certain tradition of temporization and tympanization, through that tradition's injunction to keep time in a simple way, on the beat (of the event), in that simplest (mis)conception—excusable because of the terminology (and we could all see why Plato would be misled by James Brown in the first place)—of the one» (Moten 2003: 54).

Following Moten, Cecil Taylor's ensemble improvisation 18 operates as a philosophical practice that performs opacity as a political and epistemic refusal—undoing dominant colonial, academic, and disciplinary separations between theory and practice, sound and social life, art and politics. This is not to suggest that improvisation is inherently resistant; like any artistic practice, it can be institutionalized or commodified. What interests me instead is how Taylor mobilizes it as a relational and epistemic strategy. I hear this improvisational practice in relation to Glissant's notion of opacity as an invitation to operate against «that simplest (mis)conception of the One», against transparency, against the center and the singular moment that uphold the linear authority of Western metaphysics, and against all attempts to erase the minor poetics and politics of Relation. This critique is not directed at philosophy as a totalizing or homogeneous tradition, but at dominant regimes of philosophical authority that privilege transparency and disciplinary exclusion. Opacity operates through improvisation like many echoes, sounding social layers there to unsettle discourses which close or confine artistic practices, philosophy, the separation of theory and practice and, ultimately, sociality itself. Through opacity and improvisation, philosophy with artistic performances/artistic performances with philosophy become always double: the inseparable Relation between theory as/with practice and practice as/with theory.

- 19 There is much to be learned from such approaches, particularly within academic contexts that continue to operate under the authority of clearly delimited disciplines and a persistent opposition between theory and practice, increasingly shaped by economized regimes of academic «governance». This is especially visible in research regimes where artistic work is required to translate itself into quantitative and qualitative evaluative languages of method, output, and impact. These dominant paradigms continue to consolidate a demand for transparency through imperatives of excellence and economization, alongside the precarization of academic labor and the expansion of bureaucratic procedures tied to ongoing cuts in public funding. These dynamics are not homogeneous across institutions, but they shape the conditions under which artistic research is increasingly evaluated, and intensify processes of privatization and economization that are also affecting artistic fields beyond the academy. In this sense, the logic that Édouard Glissant and Cecil Taylor resist in their respective practices appear not only to persist but to have been reabsorbed and institutionalized through the totalizing logistics of capital.
- 20 An attempt to perform opacity within academic discourse risks reproducing the very demands for legibility it attempts to resist. One is thus confronted with an aporia: how to perform a gesture of opacity that might be co-opted as soon as it unfolds? Such an aporia should not invalidate the desire to resist transparency; rather, it addresses the conditions under which both a philosophy of the arts and artistic research might operate.

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