

## **S h a m a n i s m   a n d   I m p r o v i s a t i o n**

English version (not translation) of paper given on August 7<sup>th</sup> 2004 at Brassy, Nièvre, France at the Fruit de Mère Festival.

### **Introduction**

As a musician with a background in anthropology I was always tempted to connect my own artistic practice with the ritual customs to which other cultures give so much attention. These links have gradually firmed up over the years, and I now feel that the affinity between ritual and art, and their shared distinctness from other types of cultural activity, are even more consequent than I thought at first. The way I worked on this grew from my specific interests as a musician, in improvisation, and as an anthropologist, in shamanism.

Yet all this can also be thought of as the result of chance. Whilst sitting in a theatre in Moscow in 1989 another member of the audience noticed I was reading a music magazine and passed me a bit of paper with his hotel room number on it. The bit of paper turned out to be a poster advertising a music festival near the Amur river in what was then the Soviet Far East. This man, Boris Podkosov, finally organised a tour of Siberia for my duo with percussionist Ken Hyder. In the following years we made several trips around Siberia to play improvised music, to work with local musicians and increasingly to meet and interview shamans, in the Republics of Buryatia, Tuva, Altai and Yakutia. All this depended on a remarkable set of circumstances which included the rapid 'liberalisation' of the Soviet Union and the consequent growth of ethnic cultural nationalisms in Siberia, with an emphasis on the recovery and nurturing of past tradition, as well as the brief emergence of a network of independent music promoters to replace the old state monopoly.

Both improvisation and shamanism are deeply concerned with the limits of control and prediction. Both can be thought of as lying at the heart of their respective domains, in the sense of being strong forms of what becomes more diluted in other contexts. Shamanism has a loose claim to be the original "old-time" religion, and improvisation has a loose claim to be the source of all music, if not the model for all human experiment. My proposal today is that ritual and art, as revealed by shamanism and improvisation, are the workings of informational processes that are quite distinct within the total network of human culture.

The argument can be summarised as follows. The human being is a collision between a biological system and a cultural system. These two systems generate, retain, and transform, information in different ways and are radically discontinuous with one another. The resulting fractures in the human cognitive being struggle out into culture as the distinct cultural phases identified as ritual and art.

### **Experience**

Our biology as humans is present to us in a way other than the fact that we eat, sleep, bleed, drink, fuck, are born, get tired, age, die and so on. It is present to us as a psychosomatic inner life of continuous experience.

If we think about the life of experience in our own animal being we can imagine experience as a living system in which information continuously comes in and is continuously interpreted at different levels. There is a specific quality to how we experience which derives from the constant inflowing of new micro-sensations, and, rising up through the system, the constant synthesising of them into new sensations and so on. This quality is due to the informational 'character' of a biological system: an interpretation on any given level is never finished and exhaustive: it doesn't close itself off and say 'That's it: my knowledge of that thing is complete and finished.' but is always open to new input from below. So experience has a natural vividness which comes from this quality of openness - because everything we perceive is always haloed by the possibility of bringing forth other interpretations. Everything left open in this way seems to breathe with us.

Imagine listening to a sound, say a note on a clarinet. Let's suppose we are listening to this note in a concert of classical music so we are invited to identify the note primarily by its pitch. Without being aware of it we are actually hearing small fluctuations in the note, but these are being excluded on the level of our interpretative scheme which is telling us very clearly that it's a c# played on a clarinet. But as the small fluctuations go on, again without being aware of how it comes about, we get a feeling of the livingness of the note. We realise, without being aware of it, that our interpretation of the note is not self-sufficient and complete, that the note has so to speak a potential infinity of itself to reveal to us.

In terms of communication science, what is happening here is that what begins as an element of noise or indeterminacy in the signal later comes to be appreciated as an added complexity and as an increase in the amount of information in the total perception of the signal.

I have made this description sequential to make it clearer. In fact all these processes and movements between levels in the formation of experience are happening simultaneously: it's just that the upper levels are in principle working at a slower tempo. To illustrate this difference in tempo, if you calculate the speed at which humans can consciously synthesise images and project a film at this speed, the images still appear jerky because conscious image synthesis is the output of a system that needs a much faster input of data at the bottom end.

## **Sign**

How does this biological dimension of human experiencing relate to the use of signs? First of all we recognise the use of signs as the basis of everything that distinguishes cultural life from biological life. In contrast with the signals used by other animals, which refer to what is given in the immediate context, humans evolved the skill of using signs for representing absent things. Not only do signs represent absent things, but the whole relationship of signs to absent things, in other words of absence itself, is privileged in every act of sign-use. Even a sign that refers to something present can only achieve its effect via a system based on absence. Every sign speaks of absence itself. And instead of the one-to-one relations between stimulus and signal that characterise animal signalling we have the emergence of a whole set of connections between signs and objects, which works together as a system that we can call a language system. Everyone is familiar with this idea from de Saussure and Barthes.

How do we experience a sign? A strange question, but an important one, I think. The first thing a sign tells us is to shift our attention away from itself as a living experienced object. The sign tells us that in the moment of our perception of it as a sign, our perception of it is complete and exhaustive. So the sign dies to our attention in the moment of being interpreted as a sign. And there will not then be any further look at the sign, or further life in it. It will not be haloed by the possibility of being other than what it now is. So even in this moment of recognition, before we even consider what is meant by a sign, we are in a radically new situation. Suddenly, for the first time in the history of life, an animal is expected to not look at what is under his nose. Further, the habit of signs, the addiction to signs, works on the human psyche like an inductive model to make other kinds of perceptual interpretations of the world seem exhaustive in the same way. We have learned to inhabit a world of the absent, to be absent-minded. The use of signs brings about an exclusion and an impoverishment of potential experience.

From here I want to go directly to the idea that we humans feel a need to express, to share, and, above all, to think out, this excluded occluded experience and that the non-satisfaction of this need sets going an important motivation within the human being. And it is of course precisely the use of language that orientates us humans so much to expression and to sharing, whilst excluding by its very nature some of what we want to express and share from the possibility of doing so.

In the natural vividness of experience, things are haloed by the possibility of being other than how we have interpreted them at any moment. In this way they breath with us. Into this living process, representation cuts like a knife. This is the bargain we have made, or that has been made for us: in return for this wounding loss, we are given a new abstract world, whose elements are outside time and space, whose cognitions are no longer in a continuous interaction with immediate experience as such.

It is towards this new world that so much of our conscious life is directed. It is into this new social world that occluded experience, as the authentically antisocial, must struggle for a space of utterance. It finds this space of utterance exactly in the weaknesses, the fracture-zones, of cultural cognition.

### **Ritual and Art**

I want now to look at ritual and art in terms of what distinguishes them cybernetically from the surrounding field of human culture in general. What does this word 'cybernetic' mean? It means looking at them as processes or codes for transforming information, for applying sets of formal changes to an input of data.

To show what I am talking about, here are two examples. The process of preparing food happens every day in a non-ritual context. Ritualising this activity, for example in a ritual where food is prepared for the spirits, produces a set of formal changes which transform this activity. What are those changes? In other words, if you were watching someone prepare a meal for the spirits, what might you expect to be different from someone just cooking for the family?

Or take a landscape that we glance at every day to know where we are or what the weather is doing. What happens to the appearance of this landscape when it is put through the set of transformative rules defined by painting - or, more specifically, by painting in the style of Cézanne?

Unfortunately the sociological analysis of ritual has almost invariably been message-orientated rather than code-orientated. It has asked 'What does cooking for the spirits mean?' rather than 'How do you cook for the spirits?' I am arguing that this question, although interesting, is not the most fundamental one. My position is, in this sense, *anti-sociological*. I am arguing that ritual, as the performance, or simply the doing, of the sacred, is the mode of utterance of what is repressed in the human transition to sign-use. People do not make rituals to communicate meaning through signs (which they could, in any case, do by using language), but to work on the ontological problem which the nature of representation poses to them directly as human beings, and to work in particular on the moment at which the sign is read as a sign, the moment of its death as a living object, the moment of loss of potential experience.

Despite ethnography's historical preference for analysing the meaning of ritual, we can still take from the literature two important general observations about ritual as a transformative code. The first observation is that ritual is typically marked by exaggeration, stereotyping and repetition. This seems to indicate a kind of excessive ordering and formalisation in contrast with ordinary non-ritual behaviours. The second is the exact opposite of this: that ritual is often the occasion for chaos, madness, and disorder – or what one might call, in cybernetic terms, a very large input of noise. Both these aspects, excessive formalisation and excessive lack of formalisation, are disruptions in the formal surface of normal communicative modes.

In rough parallel we can say that art also has both excessive formalisation, in that it places a value on pattern and formal arrangement as such, and excessive indeterminacy - which comes from the two-way nature of its communication with its materials. What distinguishes making a piece of art from making a useful tool for example, is that artistic work doesn't treat materials as inert and simply to be knocked into shape, but as things whose material qualities are to be directly engaged with. An artist working with paint is dealing with the quality of paint itself. An artist working with film deals with the chemical quality of film itself. There is always a resistance of materials to ideas and therefore an element of indeterminacy for the interpretative schemes corresponding to the ideas.

We can understand ritual and art as special contexts for the workings of formal codes for transforming data. The data are objects, behaviours, etc which also occur in the functional contexts of daily life.

### **Primary Ideology**

If there is a common characteristic of all human cultures, it is that they are not neutral: they are persuasive and ideological: they project themselves as complete and logical wholes: they form our experience rather than making themselves available for the expression of raw experience. They don't wait to be reinvented by children: they take each child aside and say: "Speak me, do me, be me, and you'll be OK"

But it isn't OK.

If we have identified the repression of experience involved in sign-use, a number of things follow from the character of human cultures that motivate humans to do something about this repression. First, the experience of the sign is already the experience of social power because it is the pre-existing group, into which the individual

is born, that has already established the law of the sign. So when Derrida talks about the violence of the sign tearing meaning out of, and away from, the body, the social resonance of the term 'violence' seems just right. Then there is the primary ideology of continuous and integral order which I've just been speaking about. Then there is the guilt which society projects onto the individual whenever this order breaks down - because the inadequacy must always be represented as lying with the individual. Finally, major cultural anxieties come back towards the individual because the human body is itself the site of birth, sex and death - matters that endanger the static rigid categories of cultural systems. The individual carries the can for the rage of culture against nature. (But not all individuals equally: one of the off-shoots of this argument would describe the roots of mysogeny.)

In reality the continuous field of order and meaning projected by culture breaks down at specific points which we can call the fracture-zones of cultural cognition, the places where unavoidable discontinuity is concentrated. I suggest that in each culture, at each point in history, these are the same places as those at which we find the cybernetically distinct cultural phases of ritual and art. I am saying that the cybernetic footprint of ritual and art identifies them as the utterance of semiologically occluded experience. Like water looks for the weakest part of a wall, these strange behaviours burst out just where culture is least convincing.

### **Shamanism**

Turning now to the difference between ritual and art. The field of ambiguity and fluctuation is differently located in the two cases. Rituals are concrete procedures that refer to a world of the sacred which is temporarily realised in the imagination but which is otherwise 'out there' in the ideational space of cultural memory. Whereas works of art bring forwards in concrete terms the field of ambiguity and fluctuation as the outcome of an open dialogue between materials and ideas. A shaman imagines, an artist makes.

This difference between shaman and artist can be shown by the example of Alexander Salchak, an actor in the Tuvan theatre company specialising in the role of shaman in plays. He explained that sometimes when the theatre was visiting distant settlements people would come to him after the play and ask him to come back to their yurt to heal a sick person. He would tell them 'No'. A real shaman, he said, has to have inner vision: I don't see, so I refuse.

This was not something I understood at first. When I started to encounter shamans I assumed that the drumming and singing was an artistic performance in the western sense - I had thought shamans were doing something essentially like what John Coltrane and Albert Ayler were doing. In fact in a shamanic séance the real performance is invisible and inaudible to us: the real performance is in the shaman's mind: it is entering, communicating with, moving inside and seeing the sacred: the drumming activity is not directed outwards to an audience but inwards towards the inner performance of the sacred: the sound and activity interact with and dynamise the shaman's 'seeing'.

Which is also why I do not talk here about 'shamanic music': in principle such a thing is a contradiction in terms. In practice we do find circumstances in the world where we

can speak in a natural way about shamanic music – particularly the case of Korea, where shamanism became the state religion, but also in the case of Tibet, where the historical interaction between the Bon and the Buddhists was such as to generate hybrid forms. Forms which were then brought by the Lamas northwards into Mongolia and southern Siberia where they then interacted back, so to speak, with indigenous shamanic practices.

To understand what happens when a shaman shamanises, then. Experiences of vision are experienced as being outside the self, but are not simply externalised in the sense of being interpreted as events occurring in the external, physical world: they are marked off into a sacred realm. This involves what some anthropologists have called the ‘autonomous imagination’, which, like all imagination, forms images of external objects that are not present to the senses, but which, unlike normal imagination, goes on to imagine itself as autonomous from the self, as the faculty of an other, sacred Self. This sacred Self often takes the form of the ‘familiar’ spirit of the shaman.

Sacred worlds are, then, constructed from an interaction between a shared culture and the products of the individual’s autonomous imagination. The inputs from many individuals’ autonomous imaginings are constantly forming the sacred world of that culture. And the autonomous imaginings are drawing on the symbolic landscape provided by the cultural environment in general and the culture’s sacred world in particular.

What a shaman imagines in séance is non-linear and chaotic from the point of view of usual narrative interpretations. It can often be organised by non-verbal and synaesthetic levels of association connected with deeper emotional structures. Strong shamanic work is always emotionally overwhelming for the performer.

It will be useful at this point to return again to the problem of the sign in human cognition. We spoke about experience arising out of the different levels of interpretation, each level staying in living contact with its lower counterpart, each interpretation therefore breathing with the possibilities of the immediate world. And we spoke about how the sign cut into this, involving as it does the use of interpretative schemes that are adequate only to absent objects, only to the absence of objects.

Let us consider that foremost amongst all signs is the Self, which appears as the actor which disposes of all the other signs, the one who consciously thinks and talks, the one who must articulate the psychosomatic life of the individual with the rules of the culture. This self censors the micro-lapses in conscious continuity involved in movement between levels of interpretation. It papers over these micro-lapses and constitutes a retrospective continuity, so as to project to itself, and to others in society, an appearance of ongoing control. It strives to appear to itself and to others as an actor in a continuous narrative in which all of experience is given an integral meaning.

In shamanic seances this narrative self is temporarily given up. Instead, feelings are invested in a sacred self or familiar – an inner power expressed as a separate voice, with its own needs and motivations. Quickly, however - and in marked contrast with the narrative self - this Other self displays a gift for metamorphosis, and the familiar helping spirit gives way to a whole series of spirits speaking through the shaman. A shaman’s thoughts and words regarding this passing through different identities are both a deeply

personal dialogue with normally unaccessed areas of the psyche, and a retrospective narrative acted out to those present at the séance – but a narrative that weaves together both the possible and the impossible, both dreams and visions and secular events.

Often a séance will take the form of several travel episodes, during which the shaman journeys in the sacred world. In between these, the shaman sits down and tells stories about what he has seen on his journey, and the helping spirits take a break.

Here is a narrative by Nikolai, a Buryat shaman who we interviewed one night in his house in a small village on the shores of Lake Baikal in around 1992. He is speaking about his great grandmother, who is his ancestral spirit, his familiar.

‘She starts to shamanise: she’s in the yurt, she spins, she flies up and out of the square opening – with a stick – and she flies in a certain direction and she lands and where she lands is the source of the illness – someone hid the source there. Four young men have to run after her and try to tear out the illness: if they can’t, she bites it out, eats it, takes it back to her place, vomits, and burns the vomit. She flies out of the roof as sweet as a swallow, and she goes to the sick person; she has a special stick with her. People run out of the yurt and, after 300 meters, she lands like an airplane, she comes down where the wrong-doing is, where someone has hidden it; the four young men running... I only need pronounce her name and – claps his hands – in this second she is near me.’

These events are both in the distant past and in the present in Nikolai’s imagination, both the actions of his great grandmother and the actions of an Other part of himself.

We can imagine then that a shamanic séance involves a dipping in and out of the autonomous imagination. Direct encounters with the spirits require a lapse in the continuous unified narrative Self. We can imagine that the sequential organisation of the shamanic ritual is to disturb the rhythmic retrospective reconstruction of the continuity of the Self in day-to-day life. The micro-lapses of normal consciousness become, in the séance, substantial episodes of sacred experience, whilst the corresponding micro-acts of reconstitution become substantial episodes of excessive formalisation. A ritual sequence which involves aspects of over-formalisation and aspects of indeterminate experience is then a mode of reorganising the normal phase relations of human cognitive experience. The ritual institutes macro-phases, as against the micro-phases of normality.

### **Situation/Algysh**

There is a very concrete side to the way in which ritual frames the shamanic trance. The ritual situates and frames the trance in the now and the here. There is always the aspect of an attentive re-situation and restitution of the participant(s) into the moment and place in which they are present. As if withdrawing from the mobility of the sign offered by the cultural system.

At the same time the shaman ritually remembers and situates his or her sacred self by means of an algysh. (The word I’m using here is the Tuvan one.) The algysh is a song which is sung more-or-less the same each time, and each shaman has a personal algysh which is used for any occasion. They differ according to regional traditions and according to the status of the shaman. In general an algysh tells where a shaman comes from, where he was born, what are his/her ancestral spirits: it may also tell of special powers, and special equipment and clothing.

Here is the Algysh of Araptan Shaman as recorded by Kenin-Lopsan Mongoosh:

'Alaas. Alaas. Ooi. Ooi. Ooi. Ooi.  
The talismans of Aza origin!  
At the moon's rising and the sun's rising  
I mount the horse and put on my coat.

Pressing on my shoulderneck  
You, the Spirits of my shoulderlacings!  
My ancestors holding the orba!  
Innumerable shamans holding drums!

Pressing on my shoulderblade and head  
The Master-Eeren of my lacings!  
The Master- Spirits of my shoulderlacings!  
The things which have shamanic roots!

The Kaigaldar of Kara-Khol,  
Shaman-eaters of Aldyn-Khol!  
My fellow countrymen of the west and Altai,  
You who hold the drum!

I have taken my spotted horse.  
I've put on my eeren coat.  
Let us shamanize the path of the Aza.  
Let us shamanize the path of Erlik. '

*Alaas* means something like 'ready!' or 'now!' Probably what Malinowski would have called a 'phatic' word, a magic word that does something more than it says something, a word to bring the spirits. 'Mounting the horse' and 'putting on the coat' mean, respectively, playing the drum and wearing the shamanic costume. This costume typically has shoulderlacings with hanging *eerens* which are objects in which spirits reside: they are sometimes images in human form, sometimes teeth or claws of animals. The *orba* is the beater for the drum: like the drum itself this is a sacred power-object that must be made in special ways from special materials and spiritually vivified before use. *Aza* is a dark spirit and *Erlik* is the lower world where the spirit comes from.

Well, I have been decoding the message of the song for you, but if we think about the code itself we see straight away the excess formalisation of repetition and exaggeration. I have never found out how the melodies of the algyshes arise, but the attachment of words to melodies as we move from speech into song reflects the kind of cybernetic change typical of the switch from day-to-day functional communication to ritual or artistic communication.

### **Improvisation**

Returning now from Siberia to consider the aesthetic context within which western improvised music operates, improvisation is evidently a highly specific variant of the general principle of generating complexity by exploiting indeterminacy.



I have already spoken about how indeterminacy arises in the communication between idea and materials in an artistic process. But we also have to consider a factor I touched on earlier when speaking about the habit of sign-use. Habitual sign-use will, as an inductive model, tend to increase the autonomy of interpretative schemes of other types and to reduce their capacity for auto-regeneration. We can speak of these autonomous kinds of schemes of interpretation as 'rules of interpretation'.

Here is an example of a great artist bugging up the rules of interpretation established for his art:

'The first boy went on. His bare feet made no sound, falling softer than leaves in the thin dust. In the orchard the bees sounded like a wind getting up, a sound caught by a spell just under crescendo and sustained. The lane went along the wall, arched over, shattered with bloom, dissolving into trees. Sunlight slanted into it, sparse and eager. Yellow butterflies flickered along the shade like flecks of sun.'

This is from Faulkner's 'The Sound and the Fury'. Bourdieu said about Faulkner that he doesn't tell a story but rather puts into question the shared doxa which sustains the doxic experience of the world and of its novellistic representation.

It is then not difficult to imagine also how rules of interpretation have worked in the history of western music - for example to generate and maintain specific types of listening which privilege certain aspects of the potentially present totality of the sound whilst occluding other aspects. (Part of what makes a rule-derived musical experience vivid is of course the illusion that the interpretation is exhaustive and that there is nothing occluded.)

This can be taken as an example also of how art might accept certain rules to steady certain kinds of interpretative acts in order to go forwards on that ground to set up circulations and fluctuations between other kinds of interpretative acts. And, if we are looking at historical realities, we need to remind ourselves that the struggle of repressed experience for a space of utterance is always also a historical struggle against the semiotic appropriations of society which has a vested interest in installing rules of interpretation with a one-directional semiotic pointing out of art and in to society.

Equally the poets, musicians, and painters have a counter interest in exploding the sign, turning it back against itself.

Rimbaud: 'A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu: voyelles, Je dirai quelque jour vos naissances latentes: A, noir corset velu des mouches éclatantes Qui bombinent autour des puanteurs cruelles.....'

If we can we read here that the beginning of signs is a death for the body we also know to shut up, the body wanting Omega, with its 'Silences traversés des Mondes et des Anges' Poetry, the quintessential art of signs because made of words, disrupts the formal rules of language, struggles to turn signs to icons, to twist representation into evocation.

When musicologists speak about the exhaustion of the tonal system, what they really mean (without knowing it) is that the strain of suppressing much of the totality of sound in order to create the ground for a tonal system had become too great. Perhaps the growing absurdity of bourgeois ideology as it vaunted itself in the concert hall simply

started to collapse the actual musical experience. Certainly as we come into contemporary music, we meet a powerful impulse to give back to sound as much as possible of its suppressed totality. In composed music, Lachenmann, Dumitrescu, Barrett, among others are working at this in different ways. In improvised music we get the use of the fuzzier aspects of sound, noise, instability and indeterminate transition to maintain a high input of indeterminacy.

Exposure to the indeterminacy of collective interactions is deliberately chosen by musicians engaging in free collective improvisation. The absence of score doesn't just mean there is no predetermined form to be unfolded: it also means there is nothing to coordinate or to synchronise the intentions of the musicians as the music unfolds. In other words, I can make a sound that I intend to mark the end of a musical phrase, and there is nothing that stops you from hearing it as a sound initiating a new phrase, or simply continuing the current phrase. And what you play (or don't play) next will reflect your interpretation of my intentions and of the opportunities they have presented. Our different intentions in each moment are generated by our different constitutive listenings to what is happening in the previous moment. To speak of intention is to emphasise not a kind of consciousness, but a tendency or projection towards a particular result in the immediate future. In each moment what is played is 'as if' some particular outcome is going to follow from it. In free collective improvisation, this outcome will generally either not happen, or turn into something else. I believe that the unfulfilled implications of each musical act are a vital kind of information that forms an integral part of the overall impression. In other words the totality of what is happening is precisely the generation of a rich field of possibilities, containing not only what was actually played, but also what might have been played.

It wouldn't be too strong to say that this was the defining aspect of the aesthetic project of improvisation.

The circulation that is the source of art's energy can be thought of in improvisation not so much as the literal interaction between the musicians but as the circulation within this web of possibilities. Which is also an inductive machine in which the players and the listeners participate in the regeneration of modes of experience, in the subversion of rigidities at the primary interface which is that of experience itself.

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