Productive Misreading in Intermedia Art: Four Approaches from a Musician's Perspective

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Introduction

Being a classically trained musician requires an uncompromising immersion in multimodal stimuli to be "read" and acted upon in each instant, throughout a musical performance. Besides the terse verbal instructions (often in Italian), the sheet music gives instructions for bodily movement (often just the fingers, many times the respiratory system), but one must execute these in relation to the context, sensed by listening to the other musicians playing (e.g., for appropriate balance and nuances in tempo) and by interpreting their body language or meaningful instants of eye contact. Being an improviser usually removes the written symbols but greatly intensifies the other kinds of reading at work here, in order to gauge co-performers' intentions and to guess the future of the music and one's role within it. Being a computer musician forces certain kinds and levels of "language" into the thought processes of musical performance, as commands and signals are encoded using a variety of paradigms, as best fits the situation. It also allows me to work facilely with and across other media like imagery and text, since to the computer, they are all just numbers, sent through different kinds of inputs and outputs.

Similarly, I (Morris) approach working with images and text not as a visual artist or as an author, but still as a musician and programmer: it is all musical, it is all code. Further, it is *intermedial*, in that multiple modes of expression or experience are inextricably intertwined. My fortuitous exploratory, collaborative, and intermedial creative experiences have led me to engage with text and music notation—and to learn from them—in novel, unexpected ways. The following presents the evolution and lessons of four works of mine, to elucidate intermedial forms of reading at work in them and the productive, expressive potential of interfering with those processes.

Poetically Fragmented Ethnography, in Layers

In the Middle of the Room (Morris and Blair) came about as a live sampling improvisation with composer, vocalist, and poet Elisabeth Blair during a residency at the Atlantic Center for the Arts. In my live sampling improvisations, I partner with one or more acoustic musicians and I bring software I created, which cannot make sound on its own: it can only capture sounds from my partner in improvisation, live in the moment of performance, and transform them into something new, to reintroduce to the performance. This highlights the liveness of the listening experience, as the audience recognizes the mediated copy of sounds the human performer just made, at once noticing how the copy lacks *aura* (after Benjamin) and also adding value, retrospectively, to the original moment now past. Listeners can then hear the sampled sound gain a new aura of its own as it transforms and acts as an independent voice in the improvisation, influencing the performance and the human performer in turn.

Since vocalists often like to use words, syntax, subject matter, etc., to organize the sounds they make, Blair brought to our improvisation session some notes she had made about the recent experiences of a close elderly friend and conversations she had with this friend. She had no particular intention to tell that story in our improvisation; they merely sat before her eyes, available as prompts as we improvised so they would be ready as potential launching points if they fit the aesthetic or emotional needs of any given moment. This approach turned out to fit the tone of the subject matter quite well, and it set the creative mindset for the video layer of the work—both of which I realize only now. Blair's stream-of-consciousness navigation through and about the material reflected the scattered thoughts of a lonely, regretful, and aging mind that is aware of its own gradual failure—it is here that the creative work separates from a factual biography at times, or at least a linear telling of it, an assemblage inspired by fragments of a life's recollections and reflections, allowing dots to be connected in new ways by our imaginations and artistic intuition.

Our improvised performance concluded, we were both fascinated, haunted, by how it had developed, and the experience stuck in our minds. This was my first time improvising with someone using words, and I was struck by the new meanings that emerged poetically from the various text fragments juxtaposed in passing and by chance. To explore this fascinating concept and the beautiful piece, I re-entered the improvisation, this time as a performing video artist. I built a rudimentary video titler (so I could perform by typing on the screen) and fed its output to a video feedback engine I have used in previous works, which transforms any image into new abstract forms and the behavior of which is shaped by sound. I typed in real time, in response to the music, words, and the things in between.

With no plan other than this, I found myself switching among distinct modes of interpreting, reflecting, responding to, and misreading the words I heard. For example, I would echo Blair's long opening "oh" with my own ever-expanding "ooo. . ." to highlight its duration, its purity. As the fragmented solo account appeared to be in conversation with itself sometimes, I was moved to join that conversation or to continue the conversational pattern in the text even when it was not manifest in the sound. Thinking as a composer, I was guided by my appreciation for what composers call an *economy* of materials (as opposed to an inelegant "everything but the kitchen sink" approach) and for building a coherent form over time through strategic repetition and variation of materials that have appeared earlier. So, I used this conversational approach also to bring back past motives, letting partial, fleeting refrains emerge and further intertwining the most compelling motives in the work. This compounded pattern of chopping and rehashing also led new meanings to form as the sound and the text jumped fluidly from one statement to another, for example playing visual homophone play between "no" and "know" in response to "there's no one," cutting across a phrase like "there's a loveliness to life these Wednesdays" to yield "there's a life Wednesday," cutting across and sometimes antagonizing multiple phrases like "I can see the stars. . . In the middle of the room" to yield "can't see the middle," and forming neologisms like "probablyway," "nohow" (from "I don't know how"), and "leaven though" (from "can't leave, even though"). My rudimentary titler also turned out to give a charmingly simple and nostalgic typewriter feel by way of its chunky motion, fitting the tone of the piece nicely. All of this led to one more manifestation of the work, this time on the printed page, in a poetic transcription and annotation (Blair and Morris).

Productive Misreading Forced by Unreadability

The experience and lessons from *In the Middle of the Room* stayed with me, but my exploration ended there, until a similar spirit proved useful in enhancing another work of mine. *The Persistence of Elusion: Hard and Soft Dances* (Morris) also began as an audio work without video. It creates new music by recreating a classic 1980s style drum machine and wildly disrupting the one thing that is supposed to be stable in it: the clock that drives all the sound synthesis as it moves steadily forward. Banal and campy

drum beats become novel sounds, textures, and even melodies when the rug (of time) is pulled from under them. It was accepted for the Conference on Computation, Communication, Aesthetics & X (xCoAx), which also required a paper about the music. In it, I explained the above and its connections to Salvador Dalí via the title and Dalí theoretical explorations of the hardness and softness of things, including time. Reviewers seemed to love the explication and also like the music, but I sensed they felt something missing. Perhaps because this was not a conference for music only, where everyone is comfortable relying solely on their ears, I guessed that they probably wanted something to watch.

This (admittedly imagined) desideratum disappointed me somewhat and moved me to satisfy it in a way that also thwarts it. Being a fan of Dada and related movements, being mindful that reviewers seemed to like most that which was absent from the music (i.e., the essay), being that I describe my overall metapractice as *native composition* (Morris, "Metagaming"), in which I strive to let the most material and meaningfulness emerge by turning a given performance situation upon itself,[1] and with *In the Middle of the Room* in the back of my mind, I used the text of the essay and current trends for providing visuals for laptop performances to create the video content.

Since laptop performance is by default void of stage presence, and since we as audiences now realize how stage presence can impact a musical listening experience (only missing it once it's gone), it has become common for laptop performers to display their computer screens, projected large for the audience. This gives even nonspecialists some interest and comfort in seeing there is causality and intentionality behind the sounds as well as assurance that the performer is giving full attention to the performance, even though they may look the same as when they browse their social media feeds, hidden behind their screens and avoiding eye contact. My screen was boring (cheap drum machine-style on/off switches) and obtuse, since it was only meant for me to see, like the checkbox labeled "strive for normalcy." I added to this—and obscured it with—video of my face as I worked (as my built-in camera could see me in the dark venue) to add the stamp of my embodied presence, and I created a crude video effect that only showed the parts of me or my screen that were moving, letting the inactive areas fall out of focus in a glitchy fashion.

I used the same pattern of self-defeating straightforwardness with the text of the essay. I had my software display the text on screen, one word at a time and mostly linearly but with its direction changing as wildly as the clock in my hacked virtual drum machine, via a *drunk walk* randomized process. Instead of choosing a new random location in the text each time it is triggered (by events in the music), it advances randomly forward or backward from its previous point in the text, with a randomly-selected step size, so that it might skip a few words as it goes. As with *In the Middle of the Room*, the balance between linearity and disjunct recombination yielded a liminal kind of legibility that allows new meaningfulness to emerge in the audience's minds that is both relevant to the subject matter and unique to each person's perception, in addition to being gratuitously edgy and hip, as Mark Fenske's *video essay – as – music video* for "Right Now" (Van Halen) once was. While its speed and scrambled syntax make it unquotable, this seems to evoke a sense that an elusive meaning exists that is deeper than the points made in the printed essay.

Implied Meaningfulness from Nothing

This approach to let the text speak for itself somehow in the audience's minds and *despite* the author reached its height in *Camtasia Fantasy* (Morris). Created during a slow and dry workshop introducing a particular unnamed software tool, I aimed to discover what amusing or enlightening artifacts might emerge by maximizing the software's features and faults and turning it on itself. Most relevant to this

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[1] Site-specific works, data visualization and sonification, intermedial translation, feedback loops, and exploiting glitch aesthetics are all useful in this approach. Live sampling fits as well, in its play on the liveness of the performance and the specialness of the Now.

discussion, I used its automatic transcription feature to try to transcribe text from the voices and noises around me in the workshop. The number of simultaneous speakers and their distance from me ensured that the software would transcribe nothing correctly, but since it was a process that could only yield English words and perhaps segments of English syntax, it was forced to become a glitchy kind of found poetry generator. This process achieved "deeper" meaninglessness as I had the software process the sound in dramatic ways and attempt to transcribe it again, yielding two layers of captions, moving in and out of view thanks to the hopeless attempts of an automatic image stabilizing feature. Here, in a manner taking after John Cage in a way, any meaning that emerges, however poetic, absurdist, or abstract, can only come from within the reader's mind, because the source was nothing.

Both Preserving and Creating Anew: This Time It's Musical

Finally, this mindset and set of approaches are also useful in the domain of standard music notation and the 20th-century practice of *graphic notation*. Whereas the traditional dots and lines of standard music notation dictate which button a musician should press at what time in order to produce all the right notes, a graphic score leaves the details of execution up to the performer and instead focuses on dictating the overall shape or character of each musical passage. While most graphic scores exist as printed pages, *B4ch1007 ("Bach Loot")* is a silent video to be interpreted as a graphic score as it changes over time.

Composed for German cellist Ulrich Maiß and aiming to achieve the most natively cello-like music, I used and transformed the sheet music and a recording of J. S. Bach's famous Cello Suite (BWV 1007) to create an improvisatory work that was simultaneously new and native to its situation while also preserving some essence of Bach's music. I fed images of Bach's sheet music (both a blocky computer-notated version and a manuscript penned by Bach or a relative) into my video feedback engine that is shaped by sound, described above. To shape the video transformations of the source images, I played a recorded performance of Bach's Cello Suite. The Bach was to be heard only by the video-distorting software, not as part of any performance of this new work. Any Bach quotations emerging in the new performance come from fleeting glimpses of the written material, and the abstract temporal characteristics, the pacing of changes in bass and treble frequency ranges, are manifest in the behavior of the video.

Reading, Broken, as Poetry

Each of these pieces invites new meanings to emerge in the audience's mind while also remaining true to an underlying essence of the original text by misreading it, or in some cases, making it impossible to read straight. The straight reading can be made impossible by displaying words too quickly to read and process in the usual way, as in *The Persistence of Elusion* or by proceeding without any seminal text and acting as if one existed, as in *Camtasia Fantasy*. Each of these approaches evokes multimodal kinds of "reading" that leverage multiple senses and thought processes together to allow meaningfulness to appear in the audience's mind. For example, in *In the Middle of the Room*, the audience is simultaneously hearing one string of words and reading another string of words, echoing and arguing, converging and diverging like a convoluted Feynman diagram. Hearing "no one" and reading "know one" builds an instant, intermedial tangle of potential meanings. The aleatoric genesis of text in *Camtasia* Fantasy and the disjunct, fragmented linearities in the other works leave it to the audience's minds to connect the dots, and this level of interpretation happens instantly and before any logical cogitation, exploiting our ability to read: to see symbols, to instantly conjure the mental concepts associated with those words, and to fill in semantic gaps using intuitive habits. As poetry can achieve levels and types of meaning that prose cannot, by exploiting cultural and biological habits of thought and by breaking some rules of prose, this is an intermedial poetry of misreading.

Acknowledgments

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Author Bio

Jeff Morris creates musical experiences that engage audiences' minds with their surroundings. His performances, installations, lectures, and writings appear in international venues known for cutting-edge arts and deep questions in the arts. He has won awards for making art emerge from unusual situations: music tailored to architecture and cityscapes, performance art for the radio, and serious concert music for toy piano, robot, Sudoku puzzles, and paranormal electronic voice phenomena. His music is on Ravello Records. http://morrismusic.org

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