

Five minutes with Steve Fuller: “The best teachers are like the best jazz artists – drawing on multiple texts simultaneously”

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Mark Carrigan interviews **Steve Fuller** about the act of improvisation and how it shapes creativity and learning. Through improvisation, the mind is gradually freed up from reproducing past social structures. Improvisation depends on having read sufficiently what others have written to be able to create something that is interestingly new. As such, Professor Fuller finds that improvisation is one of the few things equally valued by the Humboldtian university and the neo-liberal academy.



Why is improvisation important?

Improvisation is important mainly as a public demonstration of creativity. This was precisely the aspect of rhetoric that the ancients placed in such high esteem. It manifested the free exercise of reason, the hallmark of the self-realized human, someone worthy of recognition by others in the polity. The Greeks called it *heuresis* (the root of ‘heuristic’) and the Romans *inventio* (the root of ‘invention’). However, both ‘heuristic’ and ‘invention’ are nowadays terms mainly associated with something technological, even makeshift. To see the continuity to our own times, one needs to imagine that the ancients saw our own bodies as technology in just this sense.



But which technology would have led the ancients to see their own bodies so instrumentally?

Improvisation flourishes only against the backdrop of literacy. You can’t improvise if you’re the only source of the code. You have to focus your energies on transmitting the code, and any deviation is interpreted as error, not invention. In effect, you are not a fallible representative of your culture, but an authoritative instantiation of your culture. Thus, in non-literate cultures, speaking tends to be quite rigid and directive — at least from the standpoint of those coming from literate cultures. Without the external memory storage provided by writing, the exercise of memory is the main vehicle for reproducing what already exists (aka social structure). Thus, private remembering is a form of self-discipline (as in ‘rote memory’) and public remembering a relatively scarce and even sacred moment of cultural endowment to the audience (who would have no other way of acquiring the culture).



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All of this changes with the institutionalisation of writing. The mind is gradually freed up from reproducing the past, allowing it to showcase sustainable novelty, which has increasingly become the thing that distinguishes humans as a species. However, this process has been gradual, really only acquiring a full head of steam in the modern period.

Can you provide a sense of when improvisation became sociologically salient?

An interesting bellwether, at least from an academic perspective, is the institution of the 'lecture' at medieval universities. The lecture hall was originally a factory for mass producing the latest edition of authoritative texts. In this context, the students in the audience functioned as workers who manufactured the texts by copying lecturers' recitation of their own copies of those texts supplemented by their commentaries. This helps to explain the difficulty of establishing any copyright-friendly sense of 'authorship' in that period: New comments were often incorporated as part of the commented text. But more importantly, this practice explains why progress was slow, despite the fact that many modern ideas were incubated at those universities.

It is against this backdrop that we can appreciate the revolutionary difference that the printing press made. As Elizabeth Eisenstein showed forty years ago, printing freed up the mind's inventive capacity because one did not have to recall the past in detail – a simple citation (or 'link', as we now say) would suffice to conjure up the missing background that frames the communication. In that case, the question became how to spread this 'meta-capacity' across the entire population. This is trickier than it sounds. It is one thing, say, to make writing a requirement for citizenship, but it would be quite another to make reading a requirement. Most 'democrats' would balk at this. Yet, improvisation really depends on one's having read sufficiently what others have written to be able to create something that is interestingly new. Thus, the more writing to which you are exposed – whether or not you originally wrote it – the freer you become, as you have more texts to combine that you will have seen combined in more ways.

So improvisation depends as much on reading as writing?

Yes. Improvisation is most clearly understood as an interpretive performance of something written, be it a score, a poem, a script — or an academic text. Jazz is often seen an inherently improvisational genre because performances tend to be informed by multiple pieces of music that are artfully played off each other to produce a unique result. In this respect, the best teachers are very much like the best jazz artists: They are not simply rehearsing one well-read text but are rather drawing on multiple texts simultaneously. Students exposed to such a

performance can interpret the task before them as either to reproduce the performance, rendering it a fixed text (which probably means some stylisation on the part of the student) or to reverse engineer the performance to reveal the interplay of its constitutive elements, perhaps as a prelude to a new complex that may exchange some of the elements. I see these as, respectively, the ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ responses to academic improvisation. Both are legitimate and fruitful, but I prefer that students respond in the latter manner. However, in both cases, the academic performance – just like the musical one – depends not only on the capacity to write but also the disposition to read. People who dismiss improvisation as ‘bullshit’ should perhaps be understood as drawing attention to a kind of performance, which when you decompose it, does not reveal any interesting sources that can then be redeployed in new ways to new ends.

Does the labour market confronting newly graduated PhDs mitigate against improvisation? On the one hand, it doesn’t seem to be a climate conducive to risk taking. On the other hand, improvisation encourages people stand out vis-a-vis their cohort, though the risk here is that this might be reduced to a career strategy.

Let me start by saying that I don’t think there’s anything especially wrong with improvisation as a career strategy – if you can pull it off. Improvisation is one of the few things equally valued by the Humboldtian university and the neo-liberal academy. Indeed, only an unreconstructed authoritarian fails to see value in creativity. In effect, the improviser wants the audience to judge him or her sui generis, which is a high risk strategy as it invites the audience to project their own normative models of what the improviser is trying to do. Put crudely, a more learned audience may see art, where a less learned audience sees mess. But you’re certainly right to observe that nowadays academics are becoming more risk-averse. However, I see this as mainly a ‘crisis in judgement’ on the part of academic authorities, who don’t want to take personal responsibility for the standard by which they judge academic performance – which is exactly what improvisation forces you to do. Rather, they want to judge job candidates with their normative standards stamped on their foreheads (i.e. conformists), and of course in positions where the academic authorities hold most of the cards, they get exactly what they want.

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