

The irritating material of causality

1 It is quite rare, but some suffer from a peculiar condition. One hand suddenly acts on its own, like someone else's hand, turns into a being that turns its will against its owner. This disturbing behavior is called the “anarchic hand syndrome”[1] ; imagining all the complicated situations that arise from it, one can imagine that it makes everyday life really difficult for those who have it.

2 In a softer form, however, the dissociation of bodily actions from conscious control is much more common indeed. In fact, one such case is just in the everyday habituated movement, say of routinely doing the dishes or walking down the stairs. When such an action goes astray, this may be irritating. But it may also be entertaining, or to use a better word irritating, to realise that some part of ourselves has its own life [2]. For a purely instrumental action it usually counts as something like a convenient shortcut leading towards an otherwise intended goal.

3 This shortcut of body memory carries dance and instrumental music. But here, the subtle dissociation of body parts may suddenly enter center stage – a hand that is playing on its own, a foot that runs away with the basedrum, a voice that goes beyond the capabilities of voice. In improvised music, the origin of a sound can be intractable, for audience and musicians alike. A sound may be an inadvertent response, it may be an answer to a question nobody asked, an idea from nowhere. It also can be a lucky mistake, or a glitch of an instrument. Also in fully written out composed orchestral music, the intricate *moiré* of timbres is hard to trace. And in forms like algorithmic and aleatoric music, music may become an observatory for events, in which the musician is part of the audience.

4 Many 20th century conceptions, and maybe most prominently the *musique concrète* tradition, aims to emancipate sound from its source, and enable the listener for a self-evident and autonomous auditory experience. On the other end of the spectrum, there is also an ear curious for “knowing why”, an attention that is directed at following not only the effects, but also the causes. I think that the shady zones of contemporary music lend themselves to such a causal hearing.

5 There are two great reductions, however, which likely demotivate curiosity about the causal structure of music. The first is the idea of pure decision, embodied in the will of a composer for forming the musical material. If we know that everything that happens is an intended form, then there is, in the end, no cause other than an overall form that is to be carved out by the composition, and in the event of a performance, the individual events like the limbs of a marionette, all hang down from the threads of the composition. Even in aleatoric music, one can detect a negative form of this control, in the idea of events that just happen without a specific reason. In both cases, form is autonomous from its causation. A second reduction is in the importance of the idea of

communication, more common in improvised music. One can disassemble the causal relation in a way that each musician is fully autonomous and we hear an exchange, a musical panel discussion. Music speaks, the reason that something was said is to be found in what was said before. In all their richness, these forms encourage all kinds of listening, but they usually do not particularly encourage causal listening.

6 Let's suppose that among the artistic materials, like sound, paint, wood, and so on, there is the material of causality. Indeed, much of art does invent causal relations, makes things happen in a particular way, intervenes in the state of affairs, composes reasons for why something is. And also here, the material is not a passive matter merely to be formed, but resists, entangles, and demands participation. Causal art is not so much a narration of causes than caused by its very material. Perhaps algorithmic music is the best example? More than just an efficient specification of sound synthesis and musical score, a musician or composer is up to her neck in descriptions of procedures and constraints, in delegation and abstraction, in reasoning about what happens why and why what happens is not what was expected. The music gets out of hand. That's why one may want to listen less for an expression of an intent than for a diffraction of causes within what happens why.

7 Despite its inner causal abundance, much of computer music gives reason to believe that eventually, all the important stuff happens in a black box on stage. The fact that a performer controls it doesn't help that much, it remains a controlled black box. The League and The Hub made a difference by turning the black box inside out. Network music stages the diffraction of causes. In every piece, it presents a causal network as a specific situation, a specific distribution between persons, programs, protocols, things, and so on. This encourages to wonder how things happen. There is no first mover and no final cause. Anything may act or intervene, unplanned chains of action may unfold and merge to an event. Borrow it or steal it. Who did what, and who is to be blamed for it? Network music is anarchic in the proper sense of the word: it frees the curiosity for causes from the greed of liability.

8 In other words, what we have here is a great vehicle to navigate the landscape of being under, in and out of control. Surely, much of musical practice emancipates actions from the musicians' ability to fully take conscious possession of them, and vice versa. In network music, we encounter technology fallen in trance. Any member, human or not, may become possessed by any other member. The resulting irrtainment is more than just enjoyable. It suggests an adequate attitude for a movement beyond the law of the sociotechnical jungle.

Footnotes:

[1] Roessler, J. and Eilan, N. (2003). Agency and Self-Awareness: Issues in Philosophy and Psychology. Clarendon Press.

[2] The word irritainment is borrowed from Laura Kikauka and Gordon Monahan, who used it to describe their ambivalent background music

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