

Sonderdruck aus

Amerikastudien

American
Studies

A Quarterly

Edited for
the German Association
for American Studies by

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Volume 50 · 4 (2005)

Amst

Universitätsverlag
WINTER
Heidelberg
2005



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Hearing, Seeing, and Writing Thelonious Monk: Toward a Theory of Changing Iconotexts¹

DANIEL STEIN

ABSTRACT

This essay on the American jazz pianist Thelonious Monk situates the player and his music within a series of shifting written representations that inscribe music and performance with changing and conflicting cultural meanings. All forms of representing jazz are understood not merely as references to music in, or attempted translations into, another medium, but as acts that take part in 'sounding the music,' acts that allow Monk's music to emerge as a particular form of artistic expression. Any serious musical analysis must account for the visual, textual, and contextual processes of signification through which jazz communicates, and is made to communicate, beyond its sonic surface. Approaching Monk's jazz as an intermedial phenomenon that combines sound and sight ("hearing and seeing Thelonious Monk"), the essay investigates journalistic responses to this phenomenon ("writing Thelonious Monk") and argues that discursive shifts in jazz criticism coproduce musical meaning through changing iconotexts, defined as the realm of signification where musical sound, the visual element of performance, and textual interpretation meet and compete for cultural influence.

Hearing, Seeing, and Writing Jazz

Jazz is written most indelibly in sound, color, texture, and movement: in the crystalline tones and strutting swagger of Louis Armstrong's trumpet, in the blue shadings and elegant cosmopolitanism of Duke Ellington's *Mood Indigo*, in the bracing drone and polyrhythmic ecstasy of John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, [and] in the singular piano kinesthetics of Thelonious Monk.

Gennari 449

As the excerpt from John Gennari's article "Jazz Criticism: Its Development and Ideologies" emphasizes, jazz derives much of its appeal from an interpenetration of sound and stimuli associated with different senses: sound and sight ("crystalline tones," "blue shadings"), sound and motion ("strutting swagger," "piano kinesthetics"), as well as sound and feel ("polyrhythmic ecstasy"). Not surprisingly, then, writings about jazz have routinely celebrated individual musicians and musical performances by borrowing metaphors from the realm of non-musical

¹ An earlier version of this essay was delivered at the Austrian Association of American Studies' "U. S. Icons and Iconicity" conference in Graz (2003). I wish to thank Wolfgang Knauer at the Jazz-Institut Darmstadt for inviting me to use the archive's resources and for assisting me in the search for material on Thelonious Monk. I further wish to thank Thomas Michael Stein and Cornelia Petricevic for commentary and critical suggestions.

media, as Gennari's synaesthetic references indicate. In the case of black jazz pianist and composer Thelonious Monk (1917-1982), evocations of "angular" piano licks or "humorous" themes appear with regularity in the critical response to his music. Even among jazz musicians themselves, constructing analogies based on non-musical metaphors is common practice: Sonny Rollins once called Monk "the old master painter," and John Coltrane described him as a "musical architect of the highest order" (qtd. in Carr, "Monk" 206).²

These statements about the jazz performance and Monk's music urge us to re-think how we analyze and understand jazz. When Gennari suggests that "[j]azz is written most indelibly in sound, color, texture, and movement," he emphasizes jazz as a construct that gains cultural power from more than its aural qualities. On the one hand, he makes reference to musical expression and form: "Louis Armstrong's trumpet," "Duke Ellington's *Mood Indigo*," "John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*," and the "piano kinesthetics of Thelonious Monk." On the other hand, however, he employs a series of phrases that describe the musical performance with the help of non-musical terminology: "crystalline tones and strutting swagger," "blue shadings and elegant cosmopolitanism," "bracing drone and poly-rhythmic ecstasy," and "piano kinesthetics" (449; emphases mine). Only implicit in Gennari's observation, but crucial to making sense of jazz as an aesthetic form, is the following argument: Music is never 'pure' or 'absolute,' never simply sound, nor ever independent of its performance, divorced from sociopolitical and economic circumstances of musical production, or separate from acts of interpretation that assign meaning to certain musical acts. This is especially significant in the context of American jazz, a music that from its beginnings has been aligned with fundamental questions over the nature of American social life and politics.³

Recent efforts in black music studies have moved increasingly from investigating and documenting stylistic developments, as earlier forms of jazz criticism in their indebtedness to a positivist musicology had done, to an analysis of interfaces between the musical and non-musical performance of jazz and the shifting constructions of the music's multifaceted meanings. In his study of African-American music history, Ronald Radano observes:

It is not simply a matter of describing the performances that makes the task so difficult. We must also relate the experience [of listening] to the broader domain of history that inevitably casts sound as recognizable, discernible form. These contexts, these words, these ideas shape our musical perception continually; they give to black music an architecture

² Architecture provides a major non-musical metaphor in writings about Monk. See Richter, "The Beauty of Building, Dwelling, and Monk." Martin Williams describes Monk's 1956 release, *The Unique Monk*, as "among the most deeply (often sardonically) humorous jazz records ever made" (10); Kenny Mathieson speaks of Monk's "angular interjections" on the piano (155).

³ I side with Eric Porter, who argues that jazz "has been a vehicle for identity formation and actualization for members of disparate cultural communities; that its development has been structured by race relations, migration patterns, capitalist development, technological innovations, and the rise and decline of urban areas; and that the reception of jazz and its place in American society are fundamentally informed by beliefs about race, gender, class, sexuality, culture, commerce, and other issues" (xvii-xviii).

of meaning that directly informs the way we hear. The stories we tell do not simply surround the sound but are inextricably linked to it, as sound and text work hand in hand in casting music's spell. (xi)

If Radano is correct, as I think he is, in arguing "that we can never really separate our stories of the music from its seemingly pure sonic form" (xi), then all forms of representing jazz are to be understood not merely as representations of music in, or translations into, another medium of expression, but as acts that take an active part in 'sounding the music,' that is, as acts that are an integral part of the music's ability to emerge as an artistic form of human expression.

A few jazz studies scholars have begun to shoulder the task of accounting for jazz as a form of cultural expression which unites musical, visual, and textual elements. Krin Gabbard, for instance, has encouraged critics to look to what he calls the "other history of jazz," namely various forms of depicting and describing jazz—journalism, movies, novels, photographs—that cannot be separated from the music as such ("Introduction" 3). Gabbard's concern is echoed by Bernard Gendron's analysis of the controversy over revivalist jazz and swing (later bebop) in the 1930s and 40s, a time when an "aesthetic discourse" evolved out of the debates over the nature and characteristics of jazz. Comprehending "aesthetic discourse" as "a grouping of concepts, distinctions, oppositions, rhetorical ploys, and allowable inferences, which as a whole fixed the limits within which inquiries concerning the aesthetics of jazz could take place," Gendron emphasizes the constitutive power of writing about jazz, the sway that written representations of the music and artists hold over our understanding and hearing of certain musical styles and practices (34). Radano thus speaks of black music in general as a "soundtext," a "sonic palimpsest that accumulates tales on those already written" and necessitates "something more than hearing 'the sound itself'" (2-3).⁴ These tales often, though not always, take on the form of a visual encoding, where musician and music are represented by way of aural-visual analogies. It is this aesthetic discourse—encompassing sound, sight, and text—that provides the frame for the critical reception of Thelonious Monk's music and persona. If this discursive terrain is "laced with the idioms of commerce, politics, gender, and race," then "[t]hese idioms must be treated as integral to [each] newly emerging jazz aesthetic rather than as mere intrusions or add-ons," Gendron asserts. "Any attempt to extirpate them in order to reveal the 'pure' jazz aesthetic of [each] period would leave us only with a uselessly inchoate and abstract residue, shorn of any historical specificity" (34).

Among modern styles of music, jazz seems particularly suited to such a musico-visual texting. From a historical perspective, as Radano's investigations illustrate, the *difference* of black music is much less a natural given than it is a discursive construction of racial *difference* that began long before jazz emerged around the end of the nineteenth century. In eighteenth-century America, "the perception of musical *difference* had grown so thoroughly racialized," Radano notes, "that music

⁴ I will substitute Radano's 'soundtext' with Peter Wagner's concept of 'iconotext' because Wagner's iconic understanding emphasizes the interdependency of aural, visual, and textual dimensions in the making of the jazz performance.

came to epitomize racial differences generally [...]” (9). What is more, this racialization of music rested on “a sonically absent history” (Radano 5), a history of African-American music-making that we only encounter through written representations by Euro-American writers centuries before the first sound recordings of African Americans were made in the 1890s. The texts these Euro-Americans composed constitute “a fragmented body of cultural translations that mediate the course of ‘black music’ from sound to text within the discourses of those who [...] had typically antagonistic and tentative contact with African-Americans” (5). In this sense, by being made to signify ‘blackness’ and its manifold racist/racialist/romantic connotations, the music of black Americans from the very beginning transcended the status of self-contained sonority and served as a vehicle for fantasies of otherness, including sonic-visual components that rendered black performances “soulful, rhythmically affecting, based on collective engagements of call and response, and expressive of multiple levels of feeling and desire: pain, freedom, rebellion, sexual ecstasy, just to name a few” (5).

These discursive constructions of black music’s sonic and social meanings preceded and accompanied jazz’s entrance into the national consciousness in the late 1910s and early 1920s. As urbanization and the budding entertainment industry increased professional opportunities for African-American performers and heightened their visibility on theater stages and in night clubs around the nation—later on record covers, in magazines, on movie screens, on television—the African-American performer emerged as one of the most visible and most discussed ethnic figures in public life. For jazz musicians in pursuit of a career in the entertainment industry, this meant that they had to devise public personas and performance practices that could be fitted into a variety of cultural narratives, among them the story of African America’s racial uplift; the myth of black soulfulness, exuberance, and premodern authenticity; celebrations of industrial progress, technological ingenuity, and financial achievement; as well as—for those who rejected the new music on ‘moral’ grounds—the complaint about black degeneracy and *nigger music*’s corrupting influence on the mores of genteel America.⁵

Jazz trumpeter and vocalist Louis Armstrong is perhaps the most conspicuous musician in this regard. Since the multimedial nature of his performances made them a compelling object of analysis, they sparked a wide range of critical reactions and, in the process, brought attention to the jazz performance’s ability to function as an enabling agent in competing cultural narratives. Over the course of his career, and even more so in recent years, jazz historians and biographers have concentrated on Armstrong’s many talents as a performer in order to supplant an earlier image as an “Uncle Tom” figure ‘clowning’ for white mainstream audiences with a more complex image of a self-conscious artist/entertainer.⁶ Jazz critic Gary Giddins, for instance, establishes a connection between the trumpeter’s

⁵ Ogren’s *The Jazz Revolution* discusses many of these issues.

⁶ Laurence Bergreen, for example, speaks of young Armstrong’s performances as characterized by “laughing, singing, dancing, joking, and playing” and of Armstrong as a performer “unable to confine his exuberance and playfulness to any single activity” (77). Gary Giddins calls him “a musician, singer, bandleader, comic, dancer, actor” (89).

physical presence on stage and his singing on records when he writes that Armstrong’s ‘mugging’ on the bandstand (“half smiles, a trembling of the lips, a widening of the eyes, a scrunching of the nose”) “is so much a part of his vocal performances that it is impossible for anyone who has seen him to listen to his records without imagining his facial contortions” (89). Armstrong’s vocals evoke an undeniable physical presence; they consciously violate all rules of clean and precise (i.e., ‘white’) enunciation, attract attention to the black throat that utters these sounds, and add a visual dimension to the sonic world of recorded music.

The notion of a copresence of aural and visual impulses inscribed in Armstrong’s recordings has recently been explored by Brent Hayes Edwards, who reads Armstrong’s performances (concerts, recordings, interviews, autobiographies) as strings of signification that overwhelm critics and listeners with a multiplicity of simultaneous stimuli and encourage them to make the performance meaningful by developing stories to go along with the performance: the ‘mugging’ (visual), the creation of swing sensations among his listeners (haptic), the playing and singing (aural), and Armstrong’s insistence on speaking and writing himself into the public consciousness (verbal, textual) suggest meaning beyond what seems immediately accessible and therefore provide a great incentive for cultural interpretation.⁷ What is crucial to Edwards’s argument about Louis Armstrong’s multisensory performance, and what guides the following analysis of Thelonious Monk and the changes in iconicity that inform our perception of his music and career, is an acknowledgement of jazz as a multidimensional ‘text’ that draws heavily on a variety of available and interconnected discourses and media, “a rich, multi-layered culture that has created and communicated its meanings in a myriad of ways” and has, in the process, motivated a vast corpus of writing that seeks to subject the music to a series of “textings” (Gennari 449).

Jazz criticism’s emphasis on texting the music by means of employing non-musical metaphors can be regarded as a reaction to the music’s multimedial nature and multisensory appeal as much as it indicates a tendency among writers to ascribe iconic status to jazz players, emphasizing that the musician is something more than merely a sound-producing individual and that the jazz performance entails more than the creation of sound. Jazz writing thus frequently seeks to evoke, mimic, or even recover the elusiveness of the improvised jazz performance in written discourse.⁸ The jazz player, to apply and modify Charles Peirce’s semiotic model, is

⁷ See Edwards. On the interpenetration of music and text in Armstrong’s autobiographies, see also Brothers.

⁸ As Fritz Gysin reminds us, “[i]n contemporary African American fiction and its criticism, [a] dialogue among the Sister Arts [literature and music] has begun to foreground Jazz as an enabling metaphor of black cultural achievement,” and a “fascination with Jazz as a model or master code” for understanding African-American literature has taken hold. This fascination, however, has obscured to a large extent the notion that “some of the most fascinating and artistically challenging texts in Jazz fiction actually tend to address the *problematic* of voice (as a blending of narrative and musical voice)” (274, 275, 277). In the case of jazz criticism, the problematic exists on the level of representing music and musician in written discourse and the repercussions such representations have on our musical and cultural understanding of the jazz performance.

perceived less as a skin-and-bones, real-life person, but as an iconic persona, representing music aurally, visually, and textually all at once.⁹ In this sense, the multiple impulses generated in and by the jazz performance—sound, sight, narrative—become part of a larger, intermedial and iconotextual, realm of signification. While such connections between the musician's iconicity and non-musical realms of expression are sometimes acknowledged in popular literature on jazz, there remains a lack of theoretical reflection on the interaction among different media in the jazz act itself and in instances of iconic representations of this act. Instead of faulting this literature, however, it is vital to investigate "how the sound of black music has acquired meaning through discursive representation," as Radano advocates (xv).

Intermediality and Iconotext

German literary scholar and cultural critic Peter Wagner, discussing the influence of visual art on Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, defines intermediality simply as "the 'intertextual' use of a medium (painting) in another medium (prose fiction)" and goes on to argue "that [...] images, like texts, are rhetorical and must use signs to express meaning (signs, however, that are verbal, iconic, or both at the same time)" ("Introduction" 17). Werner Wolf's conception of intermediality as "the participation of more than one medium of expression in the signification of a human artefact" (*Musicalization* 1) proposes a similar understanding, as does Irina O. Rajewsky's notion of "Mediengrenzen überschreitende Phänomene, die mindestens zwei konventionell als distinkt wahrgenommene Medien involvieren" (13).

In the context of jazz, one could say that the sense of sound is intrinsically connected to a second medium, sight (witnessing a live performance, for example, or looking at photographs and album covers), both of which give shape to the jazz performance as an intermedial phenomenon where sound transcends the boundaries of sonority by interacting with the visual medium, and vice versa. But this intermedial interaction is linked to yet another medium: textual (i. e., written) representations of jazz, which not only describe the music but also participate in generating its cultural resonance, or effect, so that we may speak of jazz as an intermedial mix of three media conventionally viewed as distinct: sound, sight, and written text.¹⁰ This intricate and complex relationship can be illuminated with the help of Wagner's conception of iconotexts. In his work on the interpenetration of text and image in eighteenth-century engravings (mainly by William Hogarth), Wagner analyzes the intermedial relation between images and other texts which they evoke, texts representing distinct media such as poems, novels, or musical compositions. Focusing on the interplay of image—the visual depiction of thematic content—and text—as represented by an engraving or painting's title, a caption, or an intertextual reference

⁹ On extensions of Peircean sign theory, see Bouissac, Herzfeld, and Posner.

¹⁰ Robert O'Meally speaks of "[j]azz as metaphor, jazz as model, jazz as relentlessly powerful cultural influence, jazz as cross-disciplinary beat or *cadence*" and of "a jazz effect [...] [a]s a way of making cultural expression political or [...] making political expression palpable as culture" (xi).

within the work—Wagner seeks to reveal "the various ways in which iconotexts encode discourse and represent events" (*Reading* 12).

All art, he notes, is necessarily intermedial since allusions to other media are not only invoked by individual pieces (a painting, for example, might depict a scene that implies a story) but are brought to a specific artwork as soon as a viewer, listener, or reader begins to explore its potential meanings (a listener, for instance, might 'hear' a story behind a piece of music; a live event is always embedded in a specific social situation and the personal experience of those on stage and in the audience¹¹). Wagner thus urges us to move away from conceiving of painting, music, and writing as monomedial sign systems to an acknowledgement of their nature "as intermedial fabric[s] established by allusions." Only then can we possibly account for "traces of powerful lines of discourse and *mentalités*" that reside as a potential in works of art but take on added meaning in the greater realm of public discourse, "beyond [the artist's] control" (*Reading* 23, 101).

It is these traces of discourse and *mentalités*, taking on a life independent of the individual artist and seeking to control music and musician by attaching specific meanings to both, which interest me here primarily. Thus, this essay is not primarily concerned with decoding the intermediality of Monk's music by analyzing the visual impulses generated in the music and its performance (although the third and fifth sections of this essay begin this analysis). I am more interested in analyzing what happens once such an intermedial performance is translated into an iconotextual construction through which critics and writers attach their interpretations to the sound and sight of the performance. That is to say, it is imperative to examine what happens when the intermedial jazz performance intersects with a third medium, writing, that ultimately becomes part of the performance and completes the iconotext. This approach is compelling, I believe, because Monk's life and music were routinely presented to an audience of jazz fans by writers who had a specific investment in the politics of representation. As Scott DeVeaux, John Gennari, and Nicholas Gebhardt have demonstrated, jazz criticism and historiography are motivated by specific ideologies and interests. The "struggle for possession of the jazz act" (Gebhardt 3) is especially fierce in a segment of the entertainment industry in which critics and writers often double as record producers, managers, and critics (John Hammond, Nat Hentoff, and Leonard Feather are only three well-known examples).¹² What is more, from the beginning of its appearance, jazz (and black music more generally) has been embraced as a prism through which Americans have negotiated a sense of social, political, and economic, and cultural identity. Various forms of representation, including musical analyses, essayistic portrayals, record and concert reviews, television appearances and documentaries, as well as fictional or poetic celebrations, have competed, and continue to do so, in constructing Monk as an American icon with specific musical, social, and political meanings. These representations can effectively be labeled *Monk iconography*, or even *Monkography*, in analogy to Michael Jarrett's neologism *jazzography*, coined to denote "what people say jazz is" (2).

¹¹ On the narrative potential of music, see also Wolf, "Problem."

¹² Cf. also DeVeaux 528.

Jarrett argues that *jazzography* “relies on jazz for its existence, [since] jazz is shaped and sustained by texts that bring it into language” (2). But even though *jazzography* is a compelling term for representations of jazz in written discourse, the concept of iconotext expresses a more complex relationship between jazz and its discursive casting into multiple iconic forms. First, it foregrounds the process of iconocization underlying the exchange from one medium to another, reminding us that the representation is effective not only because of its likeness to a presumed original, but also because it functions as an interpretation and reinvention of this original. The depiction and evaluation of specific performances, musicians, or styles and their integration into an evolutionary scheme of a ‘jazz tradition,’ for instance, is always a narrative construction, that is to say, the result of a process of constructing shifting iconotexts that work according to the logic of *narration* as much as they emerge as part of a particular narrative and the specific sociopolitical, cultural, and idiosyncratic context. Thus, the narrative through which a ‘jazz tradition’ emerges is always contested, with particular iconotextual constructions of musical meaning struggling to gain prominence over others.

If we accept the label *text* as a broader category than the Greek lexeme *graphe*, then *iconotext*, the notion of a textual encoding, seems a more adequate term than *jazzography*: Jazz is represented (iconocized) not only in and through the written word, but also through images and their interpretation. According to Wagner’s reading of Roland Barthes, “the word *text* is derived from the Latin *textus*, meaning ‘tissue’ or ‘texture’ (that which is woven). One may therefore compare the implicit (unmarked) and explicit (marked) allusions in any given text to the knots in a textile fabric or mat: such knots ‘make a point’ by introducing new threads into the fabric being woven” (*Reading* 11; emphasis in the original). Furthermore, if Larry Reynolds is correct in asserting that iconography is to be understood as “the study of images as contested forms of mediation linked to ideology” (8), and if, as Michael Herzfeld has noted, the ideological motivations inherent in all iconic representations must be brought to the surface by unveiling iconicity’s tendency to “‘background’ [...] its own semiotic character” (401), then a productive reading of Monk’s music and career must venture beyond discussing his life, his music, and the critical reception of his work as disconnected phenomena. Instead, we must realize that, through the written commentary on, and depiction of, Monk’s image and music, we can trace the ideological positions of journalists, scholars, poets, and novelists as they become visible in the sounds and sights they associate with the musician and as they participate in the struggle over the ideological possession of the jazz act. Those who can fix the meaning of musician and music also exert control—however instable this control might be—over the social and political ideas music and musician represent and communicate. What is more, the ideological sway exerted through such an iconotextual fixing most often works implicitly, as it backgrounds its signifying power and disguises political interests as musical analysis.

Investigating changes in iconotextual constructions of Monk thus means analyzing discursive shifts in jazz criticism as well as looking at the specific historical contexts within which each act of writing emerged (that is, individual examples of jazz writing). The following analysis addresses both levels, the larger sociopolitical shifts and developments in jazz and jazz historiography as well as specific ex-

amples of jazz criticism: bebop’s allegiance with racial politics in the 1940s; the increasing respectability of jazz and the professionalization of jazz criticism, the reaction to jazz among different factions of its audience (the beat writers, black poets), and its role in advocating American Cold War liberalism in the 1950s; and finally the politicization of jazz in the 1960s in terms of free jazz and the civil rights movement/Black Power politics. We should note that such shifts in the iconotextual topography surrounding a musician do not completely erase earlier iconotexts; they often overlap with preceding versions and are frequently revived in later periods.

The Changing Iconicity of the Black Jazzman

In many jazz histories, Thelonious Monk is featured as an oddball, a deeply mysterious yet somehow profoundly significant artist whose music was first rejected as too weird only to be embraced later as the art of a musical visionary. Ken Burns and Geoffrey C. Ward’s documentary *Jazz*, for instance, evokes a Shakespearean grandness when they turn to Monk’s career: “No more mysterious man ever played jazz than Thelonious Sphere Monk,” the writers declare, only to reveal a few paragraphs into the text, that, by 1957, “[t]he jazz public was beginning to learn [...] [that] [t]here was method in his alleged madness, a powerful musical logic into which all the sudden stops and starts, the angular rhythms and dissonant passages and unanticipated intervals that had once so alarmed his audiences effortlessly fit” (382). This learning process, however, was neither an unmediated occurrence nor something that, as Burns and Ward, and indeed the entire neo-traditional movement spearheaded by trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and critic Stanley Crouch, would like to make us believe, has transcended the realm of historical debate and ideological conflict. Rather, the authors’ celebration of Monk’s persona and oeuvre is part of a larger project of securing a special place for jazz in the cultural landscape of twenty-first-century America, a project that entails subjecting the intermedial qualities of Monk’s performances to an ideological reading which puts a heavy emphasis on the celebration of individual black genius and on jazz as a symbol of American democracy.

Burns and Ward’s account reiterates the now-standard narrative of Monk’s musical career and personal life. The pianist’s many idiosyncrasies, among them his ‘unorthodox’ piano technique, his ‘eccentric’ style of soloing and composing, his ‘mysterious’ looks and ‘extravagant’ stage conduct, and his iconoclastic attitude toward interviewers, have inspired a body of critical and popular writings that goes far beyond musical analysis, biography, or historical contextualization. Sascha Feinstein, in an essay on the poems written about Monk during and after his life, characterizes the musician’s effect on fans and critics:

[I]n addition to his genius as a piano player, Monk’s personal eccentricities—dancing in performance, donning an array of traffic-stopping hats, and so on—magnetically attracted a range of followers, from adulating hipsters to humorously charmed intellectuals. This combination of genius and eccentricity has made Thelonious Monk one of the most attractive figures in the history of jazz-related poetry. (56)

The terminology is telling. The romantic category of “genius” is a compelling one for the poet, because it suggests meaning anchored and hidden deeply inside of the musician’s soul and psyche. It also lends itself well to the jazz critic’s task of creating a compelling narrative because it substantiates a key trope in jazz criticism, the assumption that “[j]azz defies circumscription [...] [a]nd [...] resists all inscription, foiling those who would encode it as words, as images on TV and movie screens, or as graphic notations on musical scores” (Jarrett 1). Thus, Feinstein positions Monk’s *habitus*, his clothes and his public behavior on an equal footing with Monk’s music. The elusiveness and immateriality of music, which has motivated poetry and other forms of writing to eternal evocations of jazz meant to substitute textual inscription for aural instability, is projected onto the player, who is identified as the physical and visual manifestation of a fleeting sonic original.

This tendency of treating persona and music as expressions of the artist’s genius, which the jazz critic seeks to control, is paradigmatic of the way in which Monk has been canonized.¹³ From the earliest writings about the pianist, beginning in the late forties and published in jazz magazines such as *The Record Changer*, *Down Beat*, and *Metronome*, to a recent collection of academic studies, Monk’s music and persona have consistently been interpreted as interrelated and mutually inclusive.¹⁴ These writings have routinely sought to exploit the intermedial mix of sound and sight emerging in Monk’s performances by developing different ideological lenses through which they read and promote the intermediality of these performances. In Monk’s case, the employment of visual analogies in reshaping musical experience through writing about it is particularly telling because the jazz critic’s iconocization of the musician is enticed by the high degree of intermediality contained in Monk’s music and performance practices. Monk’s exaggerated emphasis on encoding his playing visually provides the raw material, the stuff that critics then convert into written discourse and that ultimately reflects back on the music, ‘coloring’ and ‘sounding’ it in certain ways.

Before the analysis of changing Monkian iconotexts can begin, and in order to clarify the connection between intermediality and its iconotextual encoding, it is necessary to provide examples of Monk’s musico-visual self-presentation. To mind come his use of space in the construction of solos, where one almost inevitably pictures his fingers hovering over the piano as they are waiting for the right moment to hit a certain note. Monk’s solo on “Bags Groove,” recorded in 1954, underscores this process of visualization, especially as it is emphasized in the critical reception of Monk’s music. Evidently baffled by the sparseness and fragmentary quality of the performance, critics have repeatedly recounted an alleged alter-

¹³ Similar observations can be made in connection with other jazz musicians, such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Billie Holiday, and Charles Mingus, to name only a few. While the general theory outlined in this essay is especially valuable in reading iconotextual constructions of Thelonious Monk, many of its parameters are applicable to other musicians. That is, we can speak of an ‘Armstrongian iconotext,’ an ‘Ellingtonian iconotext,’ and so on.

¹⁴ For a selection of Monk criticism, see van der Bliek. The latest, and most substantial, collection of Monk scholarship can be found in a special issue of the *Black Music Research Journal* 19.2 (Fall 1999).

cation between Monk and Miles Davis, who was supposed to have asked Monk to ‘lay out’ during the trumpet solo because he could not play with Monk ‘comping’ behind him. The oft repeated story holds that Monk’s minimalist and somewhat dissonant solo signifies on Davis and expresses the pianist’s disdain for the trumpeter’s behavior.¹⁵ This reading of “Bag’s Groove,” compelling and insightful as it is, is heavily indebted to our understanding and image of Monk as an eccentric and unorthodox performer. It constitutes an example of musical meaning being co-produced by the writing about a musician, of surrounding the musical piece with a story easily visualized.

Additional aural impulses that suggest a visual dimension are the idiosyncratic sounds Monk creates by striking the keys with flattened fingers and occasionally his elbows, as well as his deep moaning audible in the background of his many recordings. Monk once explained that “I hit the piano with my elbow sometimes because of a certain sound I want to hear, certain chords. You can’t hit that many notes with your hands. Sometimes people laugh when I’m doing that. Yeah, let ‘em laugh! They need something to laugh at” (qtd. in Mathieson 167). As this example demonstrates, showmanship and musical sound cannot be separated. On a live recording of a 1958 performance at New York’s *Five Spot*, Monk’s moans and his vocal encouragements of his tenor saxophone player Johnny Griffin are especially audible; Monk’s vocalizations are part of the music, enticing the listener to acknowledge his involvement in the music and his movements across the stage. The medium of live recording preserves—or *appears* to preserve—the visual element of a Monk performance.¹⁶

Finally, Monk’s looks and stage performance, the beard, hats, and glasses; the dancing during his fellow players’ solos; the intensive tapping of his feet; and the rhythmic swaying over the piano have enabled audiences to ‘hear’ his music in certain ways. These visual elements immediately became a trademark, a shorthand that allowed easy identification of Monk’s ‘odd’ behavior and ‘weird’ music as well as his iconoclastic conduct. Most album covers thus reproduce photographs that signify exactly these elements: On *Monk’s Music* (1957), the pianist is pictured sitting in his son’s buggy wearing a corduroy hat and sunglasses, a striking visual encoding of musical eccentricity and originality that, if we believe Monk’s own account of the story, resulted from his rejection of his record company’s plans to have him “pose in a monk’s habit, on a pulpit, holding a glass of whiskey.” Monk does indicate, however, that the image on the cover *is* related to his music: “I told them I would pose in a wagon, because I have actually composed while sitting in my kid’s wagon on the front sidewalk” (qtd. in Brown 106). On the cover of *Criss Cross* (1963), two mirror images depict Monk on the piano with his mouth open, evoking the famous moaning; on the back cover of the same LP, we see his

¹⁵ Cf. Carr, *Miles Davis* 83-84; “Bag’s Groove” (24 Dec. 1954), *Thelonious Monk: The Complete Prestige Recordings* (Prestige/Fantasy 2000) 6:43-9:30.

¹⁶ Cf. Thelonious Monk Quartet, “Misterioso” (9 July 1958), *Misterioso* (Riverside/Fantasy 2002) 5:05, 6:34, 6:46. On the paradox of a jazz canon that exists in the form of historical recordings—the ‘freezing’ of an improvised music and the de-contextualizing of the social practice of collective music-making—, see Rasula.

silhouette, again sporting a hat, but this time with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. Here, Monk seems to be in total concentration, completely immersed in the sound of a solo that remains inaudible to the onlooker at first but is then supplied by the recorded music on the album.

As these observations on Monk's performance practices illustrate, it would be too easy to dismiss textual representations of the piano player's oeuvre in visual terms as unqualified and hyperbolic metaphoricity, employed more for their colorful nature than for their ability to shape our understanding of the music. It would also be too easy, however, to join the chorus of voices marveling about the multimodality of the Monk phenomenon without analyzing the complex interpenetration of multisensory and intermedial impulses and their refraction through changing iconotexts. After all, jazz criticism exists not as commentary separate from the politics of representation but co-determines how music sounds and musicians look. By interpreting jazz writing as part of the discursive field within which representations of Monk coexist, mingle, and compete, such diffuse concepts as 'genius' and 'icon' can be replaced with a more adequate theoretical framework (iconotext) that takes account of musical meaning as it emerges from the interpenetration of visual, aural, and textual signification.

Monkography

Monk's career, as it is represented in the jazz and mainstream presses, unfolded in roughly three stages (or iconotexts), each of which is related both to an intrageneric narrative of an evolving 'jazz tradition' and to larger developments in American cultural history. This means that the iconocization of Monk changed from its earliest variant as part of the bebop movement and the racial politics of the 1940s to the musician's attainment of 'jazz master' status in the 1950s, when jazz was appropriated by disaffected beat poets as a form of counterculture and institutionalized by jazz critics and postwar liberals as a symbol of American democracy during the early phases of the Cold War. In the 1960s, Monk finally became a contested icon in the era of the civil rights and Black Power movements.

A 1948 press release by Monk's record label at the time, Blue Note, promoted the piano player as "the high priest of bebop." The release claimed that Blue Note had

actually found the person who was responsible for this whole movement—and we have had the privilege of being the first to put his radical and unorthodox ideas on wax—it is an unusual and mysterious character with the more unusual name of Thelonious Monk. Among musicians, Thelonious' name is treated with respect and awe, for he is a strange person whose pianistics continue to baffle all who hear him. (qtd. in van der Bliek 27)¹⁷

This description has stuck until the present day, when Monk's 'enigmatic' and 'mysterious' behavior is still very much at the center of debate over his role in jazz

¹⁷ An earlier article on Monk in *Down Beat* had already assigned the "genius of bop" label to the pianist; see Gottlieb.

history. The vast majority of writing about Monk makes reference to the horn-rimmed glasses, the hat, the goatee, Monk's habit of dancing on stage, and the physical/visual nature of his playing. These elements shape the standard Monk narrative, and it seems that no writing, not even musicological analyses of individual pieces, can completely neglect these facets.

Significantly, this narrative frame goes beyond Thelonious Monk as an isolated figure; it relates directly to a struggle for control over the jazz act as it was fought between bebop musicians and jazz critics. Most bebop musicians in the 1940s placed a "high value [...] on the outsider searching for honest self-expression," as Lewis Erenberg writes (238), a focus that evolved not only from the music's avant-garde aspirations but also suggested a fierce pride in individual achievement and musical virtuosity. Their attire and conduct (jive talk, after-hours jam sessions, iconoclasm, drug use) worked exceptionally well within a music industry notoriously bent on highlighting *difference* as a way of marketing a product, but it also had an adverse effect. It provided fodder for journalists—members of the jazz press as well as of mainstream publications like *Time*, *Life*, or *Ebony*—to exaggerate the beboppers' prevalence for communicating *difference* visually. Thus, the mainstream magazines' focus on depoliticizing bebop by emphasizing visual connotations over musical analysis and political considerations helped pacify a potentially disruptive and revolutionary music in a postwar climate of racial antagonism and discontent.

Not all critics, however, were persuaded by bebop's visual statements, its "politics of style" (Lott 243) and its "cultural politics descended from swing's hipsters and jitterbugs" (Stowe 233). Leonard Feather's *Inside Bebop*, the best-known example of the first stage in Monk writing, is a case in point. Feather celebrated the achievements of Bud Powell, Charlie Parker, and Dizzy Gillespie but took a largely dismissive stance toward Thelonious Monk. Criticizing Monk's reputation as a flamboyant originator and innovator of bebop, Feather diagnosed flawed instrumental technique and poor musicianship while maintaining that Monk was essentially overrated "and grossly distorted [...] as a result of some high-powered publicity work. He has written a few attractive tunes," Feather went on, "but his lack of technique and continuity prevented him from accomplishing much as a pianist" (10). Feather is speaking from the perspective of a jazz promoter and enthusiast whose aim it is to prove jazz's musical and cultural validity to a wide audience. The inability to fit Monk easily into the narrative construction of bebop's rise as an avant-garde music over the commercial products of the swing era disqualified him as an exemplary figure, at least in Feather's eyes. From the late 1950s onwards, once jazz had been properly institutionalized and was gaining acceptance among cultural elites, Monk's "lack of technique and continuity" would be reinterpreted as the masterful musical vocabulary of a highly innovative genius.

Another influential article from the 1940s represents a third maneuver to control the Monkian iconotext, one that can be situated between Blue Note's advertising hyperbole and Feather's dismissal. Paul Bacon's "The High Priest of Bebop: The Inimitable Mr. Monk," which appeared in *The Record Changer* in 1949, regards the publicity work around Monk as part of a construction of a public perso-

na for which the pianist was only partially responsible and which served the needs of both his record company and the many jazz journalists who covered his career. Bacon identifies the stories surrounding Monk as part of jazz criticism's investment in creating jazz legends. "I have a choice here between writing about Monk as he is, or as he seems to be, and is generally thought to be," Bacon begins. "There isn't any great difficulty about it," he continues,

because both sides are fertile ground; the stories merely differ in plausibility. The trick to making a genuine legend out of an artist is quite simple—you need only to describe him in comparison with so-called "normal" people, if he is slightly eccentric, and, if he is not, describe his remarkable normality in comparison with the weird behavior of other artists. Thus, in Thelonious' case, staying up for 72 hours at a stretch and then sleeping for 48 may well be considered unusual, [...] unless you remember that [...] his personal life is that of a musician and not a bank clerk. (58)

But even Bacon's observations on the decisions that the jazz journalist faces, while styled as an 'enlightened' approach to jazz writing, seeks to shape musical meaning through written mythmaking. As his readers would have known all too well, bank clerks do not make for interesting reading, especially not *black* bank clerks, who, if they existed, did not comply with popular representations of black masculinity and African-American musicianship, which routinely celebrated the un conventionality of the jazz life Bacon is describing.

Similar to the debates over which iconic meanings could and should be attached to Monk in the 1940s, controversies over the nature and significance of black music and art dominated much of the public discourse on jazz in the 1950s. These controversies proceeded on two levels: a musical, or musicological one, and a broader, sociopolitical and cultural one, with a frequent overlap between the two. In terms of popular jazz musicology, the transition from the first stage of Monk criticism in the 1940s to the second stage in the 1950s resulted from changes in the ideological and institutional structures of the entertainment industry and the jazz press, when the "discourse shifted from criticism to analysis as it began to appropriate the methods of musicology for the study of jazz" (Jarrett 42-43). This shift required a changed iconotext in which the intermedial mix of Monk's work could be reshaped and made to fit the ideologies of a new generation of professional (and mostly white) jazz critics. While Monk's recordings in 1947 and 1948 had still been received within the larger journalistic debate between "modernists" (critics who championed bebop) and traditionalists (whom *Metronome* writer Barry Ulanov had named "moldy figs" in 1942 and who favored earlier jazz styles such as New Orleans and Chicago Jazz), the following decade saw a turn from the modernists' presentation of jazz as a revolution in style and politics to jazz as an American tradition and a valuable addition to America's democratic self-understanding in the wake of the Cold War.¹⁸ Jazz critics like Martin Williams, Gunther Schuller, and Marshall Stearns, in a development parallel to the New Critics' ap-

¹⁸ The best assessment of the "modernists" versus "moldy figs" debate is Gendron. Cf. Thelonious Monk, *Genius of Modern Music, Volume One* (1947) for Monk's early recordings. Van der Blik includes a selection of reviews of these recordings (26-35).

proach to modern literature, focused on jazz primarily as a musical phenomenon and sought to legitimate it as music worthy of inclusion in the canon of timeless American art (see Williams; Stearns).

This move toward canonization, however, was almost exclusively based on a formalist musicology that idealized and fetishized jazz as a form of 'absolute music.' These efforts routinely relegated the biography of musicians and sociopolitical and cultural contexts to the status of 'extramusical' factors and thus to a condition of relative irrelevance to the music's alleged brilliance and universality. "Historically, the concept of absolute music offered a way for jazz enthusiasts to prove to the unbelieving musical academy that jazz improvisation and composition warranted serious attention," Ingrid Monson writes (*Saying* 4). But in the process, the personal, sociopolitical, and economic circumstances of music-making were marginalized and depicted as the obstacles which ingenious jazz musicians had successfully overcome. According to Schuller, "[j]azz [...], evolving from humble beginnings that were sometimes hardly more than sociological manifestations of a particular American milieu, has developed as an art form that not only possesses a unique capacity for individual and collective expression, but in the process of maturing has gradually acquired certain intellectual properties" (qtd. in Gennari 452). Gennari summarizes the ideological underpinning of Schuller's argument as follows:

Such acceptance of jazz [...] seems predicated on the idea that jazz has transcended its origins in the black community and become universal; that jazz belongs in the academy or in any serious discussion of American art because it has aspired to and achieved a level of excellence comparable to that of the "great" works of the European and Anglo-American canon. If jazz has the complexity, intelligence, and timeless significance of true art, the argument goes, it is because it has overcome the aesthetic limitations of its conception in the boozy New Orleans red-light district and its development in the mindless mass-entertainment rituals of the urban dance hall. Only by suppressing base libidinal urges and emotional spontaneity in favor of rational reflection and self-control—only by migrating from the pelvis to the brain—did jazz begin to produce the refined, ennobling pleasures of true art. (452)

This perception had a decisive effect on how Thelonious Monk came to be embraced as a musical "genius" in the 1950s. Now many critics claimed that they had discovered the value of his compositions and recognized the uniqueness of his playing. His look and habits were reinterpreted as signs of true geniality and as outward expressions of the master composer's creativity. In combination with a series of strategic maneuvers, labeled the "mainstreaming of Monk" by Robin D. G. Kelley, these developments eventually led to a reconstitution of the Monkian iconotext (135; see also Tucker). With the help of a new record label (Riverside) and a new producer (Orrin Keepnews), Monk's career accelerated in 1955, when his debut recording for Riverside (*Thelonious Monk Plays Duke Ellington*) was released with the intention of acquainting a larger audience with his work. As Keepnews recalled a few years later, "we at Riverside feel very strongly that the whole emphasis on the exceedingly far-out and 'mysterious' nature of Monk's music has been seriously overdone in the past years" and that the Ellington album "was fully deliberate, a plot to seduce non-followers of Monk into giving him a

hearing" (qtd. in Tucker 231). The album received positive reviews from many jazz writers, and after the release of Monk's third album for Riverside (*Brilliant Corners*) and a successful stay at *The Five Spot* in New York in 1957 (with John Coltrane on saxophone), the response was overly positive. Monk was finally celebrated as a "jazz master."¹⁹

In terms of sociopolitical and cultural developments, one could argue that Monk's rise to mainstream recognition in the course of the 1950s was transported by, but that it also exerted an influence on, postwar racial politics and changes in the arts. As Robin Kelley and Jon Panish have pointed out, Monk's career benefited from the emergence of a scene of self-declared Bohemians in New York's Greenwich Village, a group of people including, among others, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Frank London Brown, Ted Joans, and Jayne Cortez. The work of these poets and writers, Kelley notes, "contributed profoundly to the modernist, multimedia qualities that [...] resonate powerfully with Monk's [...] performance practices. For some of his followers, for instance, the way Monk danced around the piano while his sidemen continued to play rendered Monk more than a jazz musician—he became a performance artist" (138).²⁰ Monk's "multimedia qualities" and his role as a "performance artist" also made him an ideal icon for the beats, whose romantic yearning for Negro authenticity, for the hipster's orgasmic lifestyle (most explicitly and notoriously formulated in Norman Mailer's "White Negro" essay from 1957), and for bebop's improvisational and "spontaneous" dynamics played into discourses of black masculinity and physical excess as compelling alternatives to 1950s conformism and suburban monotony. It is no surprise, then, that *Time Magazine* writer Barry Farrell called Monk "the ideal Dharma Bum to an audience of hipsters" (151).²¹ Monk's performances were taken as visualizations of a creative spark and subaltern sensibility that contradicted many white jazz critics' vying for jazz as a respectable form of artistic expression but affirmed the counterculture's romance with the black jazz musician as the embodiment of American postwar existentialism.

In the 1960s, Monk's iconotextual status underwent yet a third major change when he was reclaimed by a new generation of critics and activists in search of iconic figures to be instrumentalized for various political causes. As the 1960s saw a politicizing of jazz and an increasing emphasis on ethnicity and race as essential elements of the music (think, for instance, of Charles Mingus's "Original Faubus Fables" [1960] or Sonny Rollins's "Freedom Suite" [1958]), Monk's music appeared in a different light and offered new critical possibilities. Writers of the Black Arts movement, particularly Amiri Baraka, whose *Blues People* (1963) and *Black Music* (1968) are among the most significant texts of this period, increasingly looked to the avant-garde jazz of John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Archie Shepp, Cecil Taylor, and Thelonious Monk as inspirations for their poetry, fiction,

and non-fiction writing and as indicators of a new direction for black culture. Lorenzo Thomas aptly describes the emergence of the Black Arts movement and its role in reconstituting the Monkian iconotext as "a program of reclamation" and "a labor of reclaiming the lost souls of black folk" via an "attempt to control authorship of jazz criticism and, thereby, reclaim the music itself as a central cultural expression of the black community" (256-57).

Since Monk lived a reclusive, private life, not wholly disconnected from the political events in the country but not really involved in them either, his changing position in what Kelley describes as the "field of reception" in the 1960s "reflected the changing political landscape—one in which black nationalism, Third World solidarity, and even the more localized struggles against racism and exploitation in the music industry challenged [the] Cold War liberalism" that had pronounced Monk a humorous and lovable piano eccentric only a few years earlier. Monk's "musical home," located somewhere between different styles and sounds—his playing and composing were neither bebop nor the "new thing" (free jazz, avant-garde)—made him a perfect object for iconotextual reframing. Certain elements of his iconic radiance, such as his adherence to older musical styles like Harlem Stride, his prevalence for 'funny clothes,' and his taciturn nature when it came to political matters, could be emphasized by (mostly white) liberal writers as "a foil against the radicalization of black musicians." Other trademarks, such as his experimentation with form and the heightened ("black" and "male") physicality involved in his live performances, allowed for his "elevat[ion] to the status of cultural icon in some radical nationalist circles" and on the part of many free jazz musicians, as Kelley has noted (141, 143). Monk was no longer an outcast or an eccentric piano genius but appeared as a precursor to the fantastic costumes donned by such avant-garde troupes like Sun Ra's Arkestra and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Providing a fitting elaboration of the process of iconotextual construction, Kelley writes that

conservative and some liberal critics embraced Monk as a foil against the free jazz rebellion, while defenders of the avant-garde often sought to claim Monk as one of their own. Given Monk's complicated, often iconoclastic relationship to the history of modern jazz, it should not be surprising that all of these constituencies could legitimately lay claim to him. (136)

Monk provided interviewers with sound bites that allowed for the construction of a basically apolitical image (unlike Max Roach, Charles Mingus, Art Blakey, and Archie Shepp). Emphasizing that "[m]y music is not a social comment on discrimination or poverty or the like[;] I would have written the same way even if I had not been a Negro," Monk did his share to perpetuate the image of the withdrawn musician only interested in composing and playing his music (qtd. in Brown 107). In 1965, the year of Malcolm X's assassination and the publication of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, he told Valerie Wilmer:

I hardly know anything about it. I never was interested in those Muslims. If you want to know, you should ask Art Blakey. I didn't have to change my name—it's always been weird enough! I haven't done one of these "freedom" suites, and I don't intend to. I mean, I don't see the point. I am not thinking that race thing now; it's not on my mind.

¹⁹ See Hentoff's influential review for *Down Beat*. Joe Goldberg devotes a chapter to Monk in his study of 1950s jazz, characteristically titled *Jazz Masters of the Fifties*.

²⁰ Cf. also Panish 23-41.

²¹ Farrell is referring to Jack Kerouac's 1958 novel *The Dharma Bums* (151).

Everybody's trying to get me to think it, though, but it doesn't bother me. It only bugs the people who're trying to get me to think it. (qtd. in Wilmer 22)²²

This passage contains more than a superficial rejection of political engagement. As Ingrid Monson's research indicates, Monk took part in at least five benefit concerts in the 1960s, for causes ranging from fund-raising for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to a sit-in held for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) (cf. Monson, "Monk" 190). But like many artists before him (most notably Armstrong and Ellington), Monk seemed to have located his political responsibility within his musical achievements rather than in an outwardly political stance, thereby enabling various, even contradicting, iconotextual constructions of his persona and music. Accordingly, he is said to have told his manager Harry Colomby while watching the 1963 March on Washington on television: "I think I contributed as much [to the African-American struggle for equal rights] with my music. I don't have to be there marching" (qtd. in Gourse 221). Monk is disassociating himself here from the overly political statement made by the marchers on television, favoring a much less direct and seemingly 'pure' sonic form of expression instead. This allowed him to claim apolitical status—which must have pleased Williams, Schuller, and like-minded critics—while still claiming a political influence on current events—which would have pleased his more politically minded followers.

In contrast to Monk's rather hesitant involvement with the quest for civil rights, Amiri Baraka fiercely fought against what he saw as appropriations of Monk's image by a representative of the bourgeois establishment, *Time Magazine*. In the fall of 1964, Monk was selected as the fourth jazz musician to grace the cover of *Time* (after Armstrong in 1949, Dave Brubeck in 1954, and Ellington in 1956), a decision by the magazine's publishers that was no doubt motivated by the attractiveness of Monk's face as a representation of jazz's subcultural flair. Moreover, Barry Farrell's article elaborated on the image featured on the cover, analyzing in writing an argument already made by the drawing of Monk and thus adding a third, textual, dimension to Monk's music and image.

Farrell composed a sensationalized interpretation of Monk's life, stating among other things that "[e]very day is a brand-new pharmaceutical event for Monk: alcohol, Dexedrine, sleeping potions, whatever is at hand, charge through his bloodstream in baffling combinations. Predictably, Monk is highly unpredictable" (153). While Leonard Feather objected to Farrell's portrait because he feared jazz musicians would be further stigmatized in the eyes of American audiences (cf. "Feather's Nest" 161-63), Baraka made his bid for the preservation of Monk's mythical and emancipatory potential for black Americans. Without having read the Farrell piece (Baraka's 'response' was composed after word had gotten out that Monk would be on the cover and was published before the *Time* issue hit the newsstands), Baraka emphasized Monk's legitimacy as a black avant-garde artist ("He's paid more dues real and mythological than most musicians are ever faced with paying") and proclaimed that even though "Monk now is making his way

²² Monk is alluding to Art Blakey, who sometimes used the name Abdullah ibn Buhaina, and to Max Roach's *We Insist! Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite* (1960).

into bigtime [read: white and commercial] America, [...] he hasn't given his mind away on the way in. He's still 'out there,' and showing no signs of becoming anything other than what he's been for quite a long time now" (169).

As Baraka's attack on the mainstreaming tendencies in representations of Monk suggests, and as the other attempts at appropriating Monk as a figure for specific positions of interest demonstrate, the similarity between the icon and that which it denotes is based on conventions that are subject to change according to the perspective of the interpreter and to the cultural discourses within which they are produced. The similarity between Monk as an icon and Monk's assumed real-life personality was a different one for Baraka than it was for Farrell, and his music expressed different meanings for each writer. The examples of *Monk iconography* (or *Monkography*) therefore illustrate the importance of approaching acts of jazz criticism from a meta-critical perspective, as interventions in the jazz discourse that are tied to the particular contexts from which they emerge. In the case of Baraka and Farrell, we can discern what Jon Panish has described as the "jazz performance [as] a significant site of conflict between African and European American literary representations," here enacted within the different contexts of black cultural criticism and white mainstream journalism (79). Monk is as much the non-political introvert as he is a champion of a black arts impulse. Both stories are contained in, and sustained by the music, as long as they interact with the images and stories constructed by Monk himself and those who write about him. So instead of accepting how jazz writing frequently presents itself—as a mode of investigation independent of its subject of interest: the jazz musician and his/her music—we can more effectively identify it as a constitutive element of the iconotext, which, in modern mass media cultures, becomes an integral part of the musician's cultural work. This relocation accounts for the fact that the intermedial mixture that makes up the Monkian iconotext always contains aural (music), visual (dancing, movement, dress), verbal (interviews, announcements between songs), and written facets (reviews, portraits, biographies, musical analyses, poems, novels).

The Sight of Sound and the Sound of Sight

One night Monk danced for a whole set. A lady sitting in the front called out, "I paid good money to see you." Monk didn't wait. [...] He said, "Are you blind?"

Gourse 262

In this final section, I want to approach the issues of jazz's intermediality and the shifting iconotexts that are inextricably connected with it from the perspective of the musician. As I have already indicated, Monk's music cannot simply be understood in formalist terms, independent of its visual and textual dimensions. But neither can it be reduced to a mere echo of the discourses that seek to control the meaning of the musician and his work. The fascination with black music, Radano and others have argued, stems from its ability to "convey a range of meaning, its power deriving precisely from its accessibility and capaciousness, from its forceful

articulation of a broad base of social realms" (xiv). If the meaning of Monk's music was partly determined by those who wrote about it, then what effect did this have on his composing and performing? What happens when a composition or improvisation is 're-sounded' through discursive representation, and how can a musician anticipate and perhaps even counteract such representations and 're-soundings'? Radano observes a recent "'musical (re)turn' in the musicologies" that acknowledges the constraints enacted upon music by acts of discursive representation while, at the same time, insisting on the existence "of sound beyond discourse that is simultaneously saturated with vague, nebulous, yet multilayered meaning" (16). It is this sound beyond discourse, I believe, under which we have to group familiar labels like 'genius' and 'soul.' What is more, it is this sound beyond discourse that can be identified throughout Monk's musical work and that affords him, and other musicians like him, the power to re-inscribe the aural dimension into the iconotext and enact this dimension visually so that everyone may see what he or she might not be willing or able to hear.

A magazine article by Gerald Lascelles, titled "Portrait of 'The Hat'" (published in 1965), opens with the typical description of Monk's clothes and hats. But only a few lines into the piece, Lascelles touches upon a fundamental question. "I have tried in vain to relate the hats to his moods and thus to his music," he writes, "but so far without result. In fact they probably denote nothing more than an outward manifestation of his general approach to music and to life, a sort of personal detachment from the conventional" (10). Lascelles, however, overlooks a central element of Monk's performance practices: the redefinition of the black body and the significance of African-American male physicality as a rejection of the popular dance craze and big band swing. Steven Elworth, for instance, discerns a crucial shift in jazz from swing to bop: "If the dance music of the white bands was a commodified trace of [an African-American] celebration of the body, bop returned to the importance of the dance in [...] a symbolic sense by centering the bodies of the musicians" (61).

Within the cultural logic of the 1940s to 1960s, Monk's dancing inevitably drew attention to his black body, as can be witnessed in Farrell's depiction of Monk in concert:

Then he would rise from the piano to perform his Monkish dance. It is always the same. His feet stir in a soft shuffle, spinning him slowly in small circles. His head rolls back until hat brim meets collar, while with both hands he twists his goatee into a sharp black scabbard. His eyes are hooded with an abstract sleepiness, his lips are pursed in a meditative O. (152)²³

Raymond Horricks, a few years prior, had described a similarly animated scenario: "Fingers splayed stiffly, stabbing rather than touching the keys, legs thrashing wildly beneath the piano, searching for the pedal, missing it, banging the floor instead, body swaying, arms stretching and bending as he felt for unusual chords,

²³ Feather is correct in detecting a primitivist subtext in Farrell's piece; cf. "Feather Nest" 161-62.

grunting loudly as he found them," Horricks recalled and ended with a startling observation: "the fascination of it was visual rather than musical" (66).²⁴

Apart from attracting fans and providing writers with stuff that could easily be translated into lively reviews, Monk's performance practices accomplished something else. For one, they played into the romantic 'male gaze' of beat writers such as Jack Kerouac, for whom Monk's monumental size and dark skin color represented "black masculinity in its most attractive and threatening form [and] offered an alternative model of masculinity in the age of the gray flannel suit, suburbia, and other emasculating forces" (Kelley 138).²⁵ In the beat writer's reaction to Monk we can once again detect the workings of iconotextual construction. Conversely, however, by underscoring the intermedial relationship between sound and sight in his musical and physical performance, Monk himself generated impulses that reconnected jazz music with the black body as its site of origin in ways that do not necessarily correspond to the romanticizing gaze of the beats but communicate an aesthetic of black music as a syncretic phenomenon. As musicologist Richard Leppert has argued, "[w]hatever else music is 'about,' it is *inevitably* about the body; music's aural and visual presence constitutes both a relation to and representation of the body" (xx; emphasis in the original). In this sense, Monk's physical presence on stage and his enacting of music that the audience can hear but cannot see are more than mere accessories to the music: They are "bodily visualizations of his music," connecting it with its producers (Malone 292). As Monk's longtime drummer Ben Riley recalled, it was "like we were dancing with each other. [...] [W]hen [Monk's] music was happening, then he'd get up and do his little dance. [...] [I]t kind of raised me up some more to put more effort and more energy into the music" (Troupe and Riley 108).

Monk's physical presence and bodily movements, while communicating personal musical sensibilities to his audiences, also communicated—and coordinated—his fellow musicians' playing.²⁶ Physical presence thus aids listeners and viewers in making sense of the musical act; because of the significance of race in postwar American politics and culture, this is particularly rich in implications: "[T]he sight of the body's labors to produce sound [...] and [...] the irony that the 'product' of this activity—musical sonority—lacks all concreteness and disappears without a trace once the musician's 'physical labors' cease," to quote Leppert once more, are "crucial to both musicians [...] and audience alike for locating and communicating the place of music and musical sound within society and culture" (xx-xxi). Thus,

²⁴ For Monk performances captured on film, see *Thelonious Monk: Straight, No Chaser*, dir. Charlotte Zwerin (Warner Brothers 1988); *Thelonious Monk, American Composer*, dir. Mathew Seig (Tony Byron/Multiprises 1991). Gabbard's reading of Monk as a documentary subject effectively shows different iconotextual encodings in these two documentary films (cf. "Evidence").

²⁵ Monk's "tendency to dance around the bandstand to his own music," Kelley observes, "put his body on display in a unique way" (138). Kerouac's "Jazz of the Beat Generation," which became part of *On the Road* in 1957, outlines the writer's (fictional) perception of a live black jazz performance.

²⁶ "His famous dances around the piano," Mathieson observes, "were Monk's way of encouraging, and even conducting, the band" (161).

the physical performance of the black musician possesses tremendous importance as an original site of African-American cultural and artistic production and as the visual component of the iconotext. It not only accompanies the music, but it generates it as well before it is translated into written analyses by jazz critics and journalists speaking from different backgrounds and advancing different ideological objectives.

These observations are significant in the context of the racial and commercial politics underlying American jazz. Monk's formative years were the 1930s, when white swing bands dominated the popular scene and when the jazz press celebrated the achievements of white bandleaders and musicians such as Benny Goodman and Glen Miller. Additionally, African-American musicians were forced to reconcile their prominent position as urban professionals and artists with widespread racial discrimination and inequality. Monk's aural-visual performances are so significant because they reject jazz music as a monomedial practice separated from the black body, marketed over the radio and through jazz magazines, reproduced on records, and represented by a white "king of swing" like Goodman. Black skin "color suggests where a music comes from [and] who it 'belongs' to," Arthur Knight explains. But "in the ages of mechanical and electronic reproduction, music can seem to float free of its players; through imitation, notation, recording, broadcasting, and marketing, music can separate from 'colored' social bodies" (13-14).

Seen in this light, Monk's moans and "piano kinesthetics," evoking visible 'blackness' through sound, take on a political significance that marks the musician's non-verbal participation in the debates over his music. That is to say, Monk's insistence on the music's 'blackness' (by displaying his body as part of the music) limited the ways in which his critics could appropriate his music, and the pianist thereby took an active part in making certain iconotextual constructions plausible and others impossible, or at least implausible. Thus, when Leppert notes that "the slippage between the physical activity to produce musical sound and the abstract nature of what is produced creates a semiotic contradiction that is ultimately 'resolved' [...] via the agency of human sight" (xxi), he correctly assumes the ability of music's visual elements to aid in the construction of musical meaning, but he incorrectly excludes the power that discursive constructions afford music criticism a central role in 'sounding the music.'

Monk, it can be argued, instead of defending his music verbally or in written form, which would have meant entering contested discursive terrain on which the meaning of black performance had been debated for decades (if not centuries), took a musico-visual approach to inserting himself into the iconotextual construction of his music. In doing so, he positioned himself outside of his critics' reach, confining them to constructing extra-musical metaphors in attempts to account for his physical presence and its significance within the overall jazz aesthetic. He thus ensured and sustained a decade-long public interest in his work. He also enabled, indeed enticed, his critics to seek control of his music by attaching ideological significance to its sound and sight, while never allowing them to erase his own contributions to the Monkian iconotext.

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