Jazz and Visual Abstraction: The Artworks of Mongezi Ncaphayi

by

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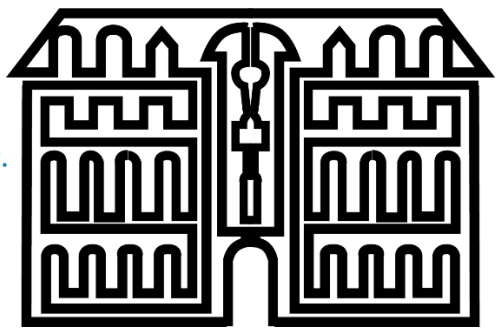

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Abstract

This study aims to theorize the intersections between jazz music and abstraction in the visual arts. Its focus is to analyse phenomenological aspects in the selected works of South African contemporary visual artist and jazz saxophonist Mongezi Ncaphayi (b.1983), as a means to understand the nature of the relationship between the 'visual' and 'sonic' in his work. This includes: locating visual art practice within a wider constellation of imagery production, which I refer to as jazz visual culture, encompassing album cover art, photography, and graphic scores, to outline a culturally informed and constructed view of jazz and visual art practices. By paying particular attention to Ncaphayi's iconography and the explications of his work, this study aims to clarify the resonances between the visual and the sonic, while demonstrating the significance of both in the realm of signification.

Although non-figurative abstraction lacks the conventional motifs found in figurative works, such as the depiction of instrumentation and portraiture, or even the symbolic stability of music notation, it continues to play a role in mediating the musical, aesthetic, and cultural meanings of jazz, despite its idiosyncrasy.

This study is conducted by examining existing literature on jazz visual histories, criticism, music theory, and interviews with Mongezi Ncaphayi as research tools. Additionally, specific artworks are analysed to support an investigation of the cross-modal encounters between visual and sonic elements. These are then interpreted through the lenses of phenomenology, formalism, iconography, and black studies.

Keywords: New jazz studies, jazz visual culture, jazz, photography, abstraction, phenomenology, formalism, graphic scores, iconography, black studies, ankhrasmation.

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BC Black Consciousness

LP Long Play

US United States

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background and Context of the Study

In a video excerpt from a studio recording session for a film score, jazz trumpeter Miles Davis stands before a projection of the French film *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* (Elevator to the Gallows), blowing his horn tenderly as he follows scenes from the movie with his band (Criterion, 2018). The film is a noir released in 1958. Davis, who was hired to score the film, was entering uncharted territory at the time. Instead of composing the score in the usual way, he took a riskier approach, but one that stayed true to his genius and identity as a musician. He improvised the entire score with his band (Carr, 1998:118-19). Unlike his typical practice in clubs, concert halls, and recording studios—where improvisation occurs within the framework of composed music—the entire performance was a musical response to the film, with the cinematic scenes serving as musical cues for the musicians. Music in films often functions to establish the mood of a scene. I found Davis's music in tandem with the film to be melancholic, lonely, contemplative, and sometimes whispery, while at other times it was aggressive, fast, and agitated.

This affair highlights various issues, primarily the musical aspects of the visual. I am interested in how visual material can be expressed and interpreted within a musical setting, focusing on visual art rather than film. By musical, I do not only mean sound but also music as a "discursive discourse" as suggested by art historian Shaw-Miller (2022:21). These questions are part of the wider jazz visual-sonic discourses that can be seen through the connections between jazz music, fashion, dance, musical notation, and gestures between performers and audiences.

This study is rooted in what has been called the New Jazz Studies, a growing interdisciplinary field that emerged in the 1990s and considers jazz as a cultural construct rather than merely a music genre (Pillai, 2017:2-3). It proposes new ways to analyse jazz within a disciplinary framework by expanding the scope of jazz studies beyond

musicology and ethnomusicology to include film, dance, poetry, visual art, and other disciplines, thereby uncovering the histories and influence of jazz in these areas (O'Meally, Edwards & Griffin, 2004:1-6). The literature in this field also tends to emphasise how broader political, social, and cultural contexts shape the music.

While it is widely accepted that music can be visually represented, mainly through notational systems, what complicates matters is when such representation lacks the traditional symbolic language of music notation. My attempts theorise that the imagery of jazz, to some extent, functions within such symbolic frameworks. This thesis is therefore a partial response to questions that I now believe will take a lifetime—and hopefully an afterlife—to try to answer.

The events that brought these investigations into focus for me were experiencing the exhibitions *A Black Aesthetic: A View of South African Artists*, 1970-1990, curated by Dr Same Mdluli, and *Leeto: A Sam Nhlengethwa Print Retrospective*, curated by Boitumelo Tlhoaele in 2019. Both shows highlighted a South African jazz culture that extends into poetry, theatre, and visual arts. This culture includes a pictorial tradition that I found to be largely under-theorised. Although publications on its figurative aspects are minimal, the literature on the non-figurative mode is far worse off. Consequently, abstraction as a mode of expression was the central subject of this study. The underpinning theoretical inquiry that explored the relationship between visual and sonic unfolded dually to answer the following questions:

1) How can sonic expressions be visually represented?

2) How can visual articulations be interpreted sonically?

These probes concentrated on non-figurative abstract art and jazz music within the wider scope of the jazz visual domain. This led to a cross-disciplinary approach, drawing from music theory and criticism to enhance art theory. This blurring of disciplinary boundaries is essential for this study, as it allows for a critical analysis of South African jazz cultures

by acknowledging their reluctance to be confined within a single discipline, due to their mutual inspirations (Dalamba, 2019:30).

The work of contemporary South African visual artist Mongezi Ncaphayi (b.1983) allows the concerns of the study to be addressed in light of their regional, formal, and theoretical considerations. Ncaphayi straddles both these fields as a contemporary South African visual artist and jazz saxophonist whose work explores themes including migration, displacement, mining, the transcendental and jazz (Besnard, 2019). More well-known for his visual art practice, his abstract paintings and prints are highly appreciated and feature both organic and geometric shapes, lines, patterns, and colours, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Mongezi Ncaphayi. *Adored Value*. 2024. Mixed media on canvas. 105 x 105 cm. (artsy.net).

Born in Benoni, Gauteng, and now based in the Western Cape, visual artist Mongezi Zanemvula Ncaphayi holds a National Diploma of Arts and Design from Ekurhuleni East College Arts School (2005), a Professional Printmaking Certificate from Artist Proof Studio (2008), and a Certificate in Advanced Studies from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, US (2012). He has also taken part in numerous solo and group exhibitions as a printmaker and painter.

Music, in general, and jazz, in particular, have been central to his life. Ncaphayi (2025) grew up in an artistic family with a music-conducting grandfather, a father who played the double bass, and an uncle who was a painter. His father was also a member of a poetry, art, and jazz appreciation and collectors club[1] in Benoni (Ncaphayi, 2025). Not limited to music, this society also engaged in the appreciation of visual art, poetry, and the performing arts. At home, the family's music collection was dominated by his father's jazz records (ibid.). Additionally, in his Benoni environment, he had access to a now-defunct multi-arts community recreation hall, where he participated in ballroom dancing, which he eventually left behind to pursue his interests in music and visual art (ibid.). At the tender age of three, he was already playing the accordion, and by 2006, he had switched to a saxophone after playing the recorder (ibid.). This background fostered an interdisciplinary orientation, which continues to influence him to this day. Although he was strongly considering a career as a working jazz musician, his father advised him against it due to a perceived lack of musical appreciation in South Africa. Visual art, another early childhood passion,[2] became a chosen career path around 2002, culminating in his enrolment in formal art education after he dropped out of an engineering course.

This musical relationship is central to this research, especially regarding Ncaphayi's visual work. As a visual artist, he has said that these abstract pieces are "musical compositions in a visual form" (Art Africa, 2015). His creative process sometimes involves repeatedly listening to jazz records and focusing on his emotional and spiritual

[1] The club went by the name JAPA, which stood for Jazz Art Poetry Association.
[2] Ncaphayi (2025) recalls drawing from as far back as he remembers.

reactions to the sounds (Nkomo, 2022). While listening, he occasionally visualises the music through shapes and colours, and sometimes records phrases and notes as patterns and forms, not necessarily to recreate the music technically but to allow the aesthetic experience to influence the creation of new visual works (Khosi, 2016). His work therefore represents an interpretation of the auditory experience in visual form or an expressive form of phonography.[3] By examining the sonic and visual elements, the study expands its theoretical framework and offers a critical analysis of the relationships between sound and vision. This research aims to situate Ncaphayi within a broader context that examines jazz visualisation from a historical perspective.

The relationship between jazz and visual art dates back to the early 20th century, and their creative interaction continues to this day. These historical connections between the two disciplines are extensive, often culminating in visual artists portraying musicians as subjects or creating visual representations of musical ideas. Although less common, jazz musicians have also, on several occasions, musically interpreted or reflected on visual art.

This includes the album *Chasing Paint: Jane Ira Bloom Meets Jackson Pollock*, featuring soprano saxophonist Jane Ira Bloom (2003) and her band. The album features original compositions inspired by Jackson Pollock's art (Lock & Murray, 2009:343-353). As part of the program for the exhibition *Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey*, Gallery MOMO in Johannesburg hosted a lecture by Robert G. O'Meally in 2015, who, upon conclusion of his presentation, projected artworks by Romare Bearden which were interpreted into an improvised jazz performance by the band *Eye to Ear Trio* (Tlhoaele, 2017:35). The *Eye to Ear Trio* consisted of South African jazz luminaries Feya Faku (trumpet), Herbie Tsoaeli (bass) and Ayanda Sikade (drums). These musicians proceeded to musically interpret the images, which were shared with them for the first time during O'Meally's lecture (Tlhoaele, 2017:35). In 2019, the Jazz at Lincoln Centre Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis recorded the album *Jazz and Art*, which featured ten original musical compositions

[3] Phonography is the practice of recording sound; it differs from writing about sound as its primary goal is to reflect the transient motion of sound.

inspired by modern art paintings from seven artists including Romare Bearden, Sam Gilliam, and Norman Lewis. In 2020, as part of his presentation on Ernest Mancoba, art historian and artist Thembinkosi Goniwe included an improvised reimagining of Mancoba's *Bantu Madonna* (1929), which was performed live by jazz bassist Herbie Tsoaeli, vocalist Sylvia Mdunyelwa, and contemporary dancer Amy-Kay Klaasen (Mabandu, 2022).

Although this relationship is dialogical, it is unbalanced in terms of how rare it is for musical works to engage with visual works or artists. The study aims, with some caution, to resurface this by highlighting instances where jazz musicians exalt visual forms, such as in the cases of Wadada Leo Smith and Ornette Coleman.

Despite extensive histories of collaboration, intersection, and cross-pollination between jazz and visual arts, they remain largely under-researched in South Africa. Jazz has played a significant role in the development of South African Black modernism, both musically and in the visual arts. The genre has been referenced in the works of visual artists such as Dikobe Martins[4] and David Koloane.[5] Additionally, it has been recognised as an essential element in the creation of visual works by practitioners like Dumile Feni (Ngakane 1970:13), Sam Nhlengethwa (The Artist's Press, n.d), and Mongezi Ncaphayi (2025).

Of greatest significance to my study was how the text positions imagery as part of a broader network of production rather than isolated phenomena. This was achieved through the conception of jazz as an 'art world', in which I applied Becker's (1982, cited in Voelz, 2017:4) definition of the term as a "network of people whose cooperative activity, organised via their shared knowledge of conventional means, produces the kind of artwork that the art world is known for". Voelz (2017) argues that this application to music needs to be expanded to include instrument manufacturers, audio engineers, and

[4] His artwork, *A Song for Dollar Brand* (Martins, 1981:30), depicts jazz pianist Abdullah Ibrahim.
[5] Jazz is a recurring theme in his work. in the year 2000, he produced a series of portraits featuring jazz performers such as Mackay Davashe (Koloane, 2000b), Hugh Masekela (Koloane, 2000a), and Sophie Mgcina (2000), among others.

producers, among others, with clear distinctions between those who constitute artists and those who are support personnel. He examined how multiple actors—including musicians, independent record labels, photographers, and illustrators—collaborated to influence both cultural and commercial perceptions and receptions of jazz within the US public. This is a collaborative view of artistic creation rather than an individualistic or solitary one. I explore this cooperative framework of production in my study, particularly the extent to which a visual language is deciphered across various media. By framing my analysis of Ncaphayi's work within the context of a network of other visual creators who share a common interest in visualising jazz, my study loosely adopts this concept of artistic creation, though I specifically limit its focus to jazz-related imagery.

Through my investigation, I noticed that studies exploring the relationships between jazz and visual arts often tend to examine the jazz visual domain, which includes photography and album cover art as isolated, independent phenomena from fine art, with little or no connection to each other. My study aimed to highlight the dialogical relationships between these practices and demonstrated how this can enhance our understanding of their interactions. The purpose of this research was, therefore, to expand the view of the wider jazz visual cultural domain and to position the work of Mongezi Ncaphayi within it. I also observe a gap in knowledge regarding the broader South African jazz visual cultural domain and its relationship with visual art in general, especially in the context of non-figurative work and the study of jazz iconography. Consequently, this text seeks to address the lack of knowledge in these areas. By focusing on this specific theoretical inquiry, I aim to generate new insights within this field of research. I hope that this study will underscore the need for further exploration of South African jazz visual culture, particularly in its interactions with visual arts.

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this theoretical framework is to delineate the parameters of the research and clearly define the perspectives from which I analysed and interpreted the data of my

study. It also provides the theoretical tools I used to develop the hypothesis and foundations of this study. My study primarily examined how sonic expressions are conveyed through visual means. I deliberately chose to examine my research subject within the context of the visual culture of jazz, which Mongezi Ncaphayi engages with in his work, to suggest a different approach to interpreting the visual-sonic encounter. Consequently, I explored various modes of representation within the visual culture to contextualise my investigation. However, due to the geographical context of the genre and its socio-historical developments, along with the choice of the artist, I also address issues of identity. The selection of my theoretical ensemble was based on its relevance to the study, explanatory effectiveness, and ease of application.

Phenomenology is the critical study of first-person experience, aiming to clarify the factors that shape it. According to David Woodruff Smith (2007:1), phenomenology is "the study of the essence of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view." Therefore, it is the philosophy of experience, primarily focused on describing the unfolding of experience from a first-person perspective to uncover the essential structures that inform it (Smith, 2013).

Since my research focused on experiencing visual material, I drew on the ideas of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty regarding perception and phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty (2005:81) states that "I regard my body, which is my point of view upon the world, as one of the objects of that world". This suggests that the body is the main agent of our experience and understanding of the world, in which it is embedded. Because perception is predicated on functional sense organs, the phenomenology of perception is consequently a phenomenology of the body (Hacklin, 2012:27). In his theoretical work on perception, art is linked with perception; art is not just a subject of study but a method through which the nature of perception can be explored.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (in Brough, 2012:293) argues that visual art exemplifies perception by revealing how perception develops within our consciousness. However, what makes phenomenology difficult is that our familiarity with experiences can obscure

and distort our awareness of them; this is because our familiarities include unquestioned and "overlooked beliefs and actions that we daily live through but do not critically examine" (Idhe, 2007:17). The first task of phenomenology, then, is to deliberately suspend our preconceived notions and beliefs that we impose on our experiences and instead critically examine how we experience them (Wrathall, 2010:20). Ultimately, it must also be recognised that experience takes place within a cultural and historical context. According to British philosopher Paul Crowther (2010:9&18), a phenomenological study of the visual arts requires detailed identification of the factors and implications involved in both its creation and reception, which underscores its distinction from merely describing the work's historical use and social meaning. This includes the artist's unique visual handling of their medium and compositional elements.

My concerns with phenomenology revolve around examining the relationships between artwork and artist, image and spectator, visual and sonic in the work discussed (photography, album cover art, graphic scores and visual arts), based on my own first-person experiences. Concerning the artist, who is the subject of the study, it aims to describe and interpret Mongezi Ncaphayi's lived experiences as they relate to the artist's processes of translating sonic into visual, in which his auditory experience of jazz recordings plays a significant role. This focus on phenomenology is then deliberately complemented by the notion of semiotics.

A central focus of the study is examining how images communicate meaning, specifically asking, 'how can we locate jazz through images?'. This is fundamentally a question of how meaning is mediated through visual representation. This leads to the study of signs, which are anything interpretation can be attributed to, or, put differently, an entity that can mean something beyond itself. The aim of semiotics is to study signs. Semiotics seeks to "study how meanings are made and how reality is represented (and indeed constructed) through signs and sign systems" (Chandler, 2017:2). Semiotics has been used to gain a better understanding of how jazz imagery is interpreted, exploring sources of meaning, modes of meaning (literal, allegorical, or metaphoric), structures of meaning

(the framing of the message), and the context of meaning (situating the message) within the visual realm of jazz.

Since the study aimed to situate Ncaphayi within a jazz visual domain with a focus on South Africa, analysing not only its signs but also its iconographies becomes essential for developing a critical perspective on his work from this angle. While semiotics primarily centres on the image and aims to understand how signs acquire meaning and how people interpret them, it takes for granted how cultural meaning is negotiated through the context of production and circulation of images (Van Leeuwen, 2004:2). The explanation of the historical development of cultural meaning and pictorial expressions is also not given sufficient attention (ibid.). Iconography is a methodology that seeks to understand visual motifs and symbols within their specific cultural contexts (Kilroy-Ewbank, 2021). As a methodology, it involves the "interpretation, description, and identification of the visual and symbolic content of images" (Cline & Elkins, 2022:1). In this study, iconography is utilised as a tool to gain insight into particular pictorial conventions resulting from cultural epochs, landscapes, and frameworks rooted in jazz cultures. Consequently, in this context, semiotic and iconographic analyses may reveal aspects of Ncaphayi's work, especially when applied in relation to music theory.

Music theory is the systematic study of the elements and principles of music. It often involves a "description of materials and conventions of construction" (Butler, 1982). Because the study concerns Mongezi Ncaphayi, an artist deeply engaged in music as part of his practice, I would argue that any critical reading of his work requires discussion of music theory. However, since the study will specifically focus on jazz, I must then examine the subset of music theory known as jazz theory, which analyses the formal musical qualities of the genre. Its purpose will be to evaluate the cross-modal translations and connections between visual and sonic in the study. This will be applied more specifically in the analysis of artworks. Although the study touches on aspects of music creation and its aesthetics, it does not directly fall within the field of ethnomusicology. I explored basic theoretical concepts of music, but without intending to pursue an

ethnomusicological research project. Music theory is used here to critically examine how artists incorporate musical concepts into their visual work. Additionally, the ultimate aim of the research is not to provide a musicological interpretation of Ncaphayi's work, but rather to employ music theory as part of a theoretical ensemble that serves to analyse the specificities of jazz practice and composition in relation to the artist's visual work.

Disregarding narration or ideation, formalism advocates for judging art mainly on its visual aspects such as line, shape, colour, texture, scale, etc. (Tekiner, 2006:32). As Clive Bell (1914:27) argued: "To appreciate a work of art, we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions". Therefore, under formalism, art is to be valued not for its representation or expression but rather for its physical and compositional elements. Formalism interests me as it attempted to address the shift in visual arts when artists began to move away from figurative accuracy towards abstraction. My interest in this school of criticism mainly lies in its focus on the' compositional aspects of the arts, by examining how artists handle their medium. However, I am not interested in parts of the theory that argue for the autonomy of art as separate from social, cultural, or historical contexts, as this contradicts the focus of my study. I will thus acknowledge its limitations and, when necessary, go beyond its analysis scope, especially when examining works rich in social, cultural, and historical meaning.

Africana (or Black studies) is broadly described as the multidisciplinary study of the experiences of African peoples and those of African descent worldwide. Originating in the 1960s Black power movement in the US, Black studies emerged from Black radical activism and liberation praxis (Okoth, 2023:20-24). As scholar Greg Carr (2011:178) has noted, it was to be the "intellectual arm" of the Black liberation movement and the academic extension of the Black radical tradition as conceptualised by Cedric Robinson. (2021). More than just a study of Black issues, its grassroots activist mission aimed to address the liberatory concerns of Black people through the evaluation and application of Black intellectual heritage.

Another central tenet of this definition of Black studies is that "Black people themselves are the main agents, or protagonists, of the study and learning" (Alkalimat, 2021:1). This study was inspired by the original mission of Black studies regarding aesthetic concerns related to Black artistic expression, mainly in jazz and visual art. The socio-musical study of jazz, both in the African diaspora and on the continent, is intrinsically linked to issues of race, class, and gender. These concerns have been addressed in the writings of Gwen Ansell (2005), Christopher Ballentine (2012), and Boitumelo Tlhoaele (2017), among others, all of whom have noted the significance of race in the study of jazz in South Africa because of its social, cultural, and class-based historical trajectories. My study aims to build on this scholarship. Additionally, several theorists I draw from, such as Fred Moten (2003), Fumi Okiji (2018), and Stuart Hall (2018), are engaged in this field of study.

Methodology

My main aim is to explore the under-researched topic of jazz music and visual arts to generate new insights and gain a deeper understanding of jazz visuality, particularly regarding its dialogical visual and sonic expressions. Therefore, this will be a qualitative research project. Qualitative research involves the systematic study of experiences and/or theories. More specifically, Patricia Leavy (2020:2) describes its common function as being used to:

> explore, describe, or explain social phenomena; unpack the meanings people ascribe to activities, situations, events, or artifacts; build a depth of understanding about some aspect of social life…explore new or underresearched areas; or make micro–macro links (illuminate connections between individuals/groups and institutional and/or cultural contexts).

This describes my main aim to explore the connections between jazz and abstract art. To achieve this, I have conducted a critical review of relevant literature, synthesising key readings in the field and evaluating both primary and secondary textual sources by engaging with scholars' work, artists' writings, and interviews for their insights and limitations. These readings offer both historical and theoretical context, enabling a nuanced engagement with Ncaphayi's practice.

Visual analysis facilitated the examination of cultural meanings, artistic techniques, and compositional elements. Throughout the study, various images were scrutinised, primarily focusing on South Africa and the United States, owing to their shared histories of slavery, colonialism, apartheid, segregation, and the civil rights and anti-apartheid movements- all of which intersect with the evolution of jazz music. The period of selected works spans from the early 19th century to 2024 and encompasses a diverse range of media, including photography, graphic scores, album cover art, and fine art. The criteria for selecting artworks are based on their relevance to the discourse, taking into account style, historical significance, and theoretical importance. In the case of photography, emphasis was placed on stylistic developments and their engagement with visual languages of other media, including fine art and album covers. When considering album cover art, the selection was limited to stylistic conventions that are prominent in both photography and fine art. For fine artworks, the scope was restricted to those created by artists who have explicitly referenced jazz, either through the title, subject matter, or published texts. The artist selection prioritises South African creators, reflecting the geographical context of Ncaphayi's practice. Given that the use of abstraction in jazz visual representation is a novel concept with limited documentation within the South African context, I have bridged some historical gaps by considering predominantly African American artists. This aligns with the principles of Black Studies, which centre Black individuals as subjects; these choices were made deliberately. The aim was to carefully select artists who have made critical artistic and theoretical contributions that can enrich the discourse but have, for various reasons, not yet received significant scholarly attention.

Formalism and iconography were the primary analytical tools employed in these studies. Formalism, which concentrates on the physical qualities of art, allowed for a detailed look at each artist's unique handling of materials. However, since this narrow focus on visual features is insufficient for exploring how pictorial meaning is culturally constructed, iconography helped contextualise the cultural performativity of the images examined.

Because of a gap in art historical knowledge about Mongezi Ncaphayi, semi-structured interviews were conducted on 6 February 2025 after an extensive private conversation on 20 August 2024. The interview sought to understand Ncaphayi's perspective on broader concepts surrounding jazz, abstract composition, and art, rather than following a strict interview schedule. My focus was on exploring how he perceives the intersection of music and visual art in both procedural and theoretical terms, as well as understanding his wider social, cultural, and creative expressions and their meanings.

Literature Review

Although the existing literature on music and visual art is broad in scope and depth, this body of work generally concentrates on Western painters and musical traditions. The volume of literature on jazz and visual art is much smaller even within the Western centre, and this can be attributed to a "racial blind spot and/or listening bias" (Lock & Murray, 2009:1). To address these issues, I examined both broader texts on music and visual art and those specifically on jazz to better understand where my research aligns and diverges from the existing theoretical frameworks.

Theories about the connections between sonic and visual modes have been proposed since antiquity, as noted by Aristotle who proposed that colour harmonies and musical proportions are linked, "speculating that the effect of colour combinations to the eye might depend upon the same numerical proportions as the musical sounds" (Spence & Di Stefano, 2022:2).

Later, in the late 19th century, artist James Whistler (1885, quoted in Floryan, 2021) compared visual art to music when he proposed the following:

> Nature contains the elements, in colour and form, of all pictures, as the keyboard contains the notes of all music. But the artist is born to pick and choose… that the result may be beautiful, as the musician gathers his notes, and forms his chords until he brings forth from chaos glorious harmony.

These comments suggest that Whistler, at the very least, saw the art of composition across music and visual art as not just desirable but compatible. In this thesis, I critically examine and highlight the nature of this compatibility.

Instead of developing a line of reasoning that supports a musicological basis for their analogy to music, the aesthetic theories instead employ an abstraction of the very idea of music (Zilczer, 1987:101). The argument relies on the notion of music as a "non-narrative, non-discursive mode of expression" (Zilczer, 1987:101). These views are echoed by Walton (1988:351-352), who argued that music is often seen as an inherently non-mimetic art form, since musical sounds are generally not meant to imitate natural or industrial sounds. This prompts a pause to recognise that these comments reflect a single musical tradition, that of Western concert music, whose aesthetic concerns do not apply to other traditions, including jazz. As a result, these ideas do not sit comfortably within jazz, as I will demonstrate later.

Returning to Whistler, I interpret his comments as highlighting the perceived shared emotional effects of music and visual art rather than suggesting a formal equivalence. In other words, what is being created is not a notational transcription of rhythm, notes, pitch, etc., into equivalent or proportional pictorial cues. The aim is to utilise music as raw material to inspire a new work with comparable emotional prowess, but how to measure the success or failure of this endeavour remains unaddressed.

Whistler also adopted the practice of alluding to musical concepts such as nocturne, symphony, and harmony in his titles (Floryan, 2021). This pattern recurred during the 20th century in several artists, including František Kupka, and notably Wassily Kandinsky, particularly in his improvisation series (1909-1917). I interpret this as the artist's effort to assert their intentions clearly to the audience, similar to how musicians strategically use song titles to highlight thematic and topical concerns. The use of titles, especially in non-mimetic works or instrumental compositions, can serve as a valuable communication tool that helps establish and reinforce interpretations (Ake, 2010:77). I also view these attempts as a reaffirmation of the author's authority.

In the case of titling visual works with musical concepts, this intervention can also be seen as a deliberate act of asserting music as a dominant subject or thematic concern. However, I believe that titles do not necessarily define the interpretation through a single perspective; rather, they provide one entry point to consider within objects filled with multiple discursive points. Additionally, naming paintings after musical concepts is a theoretical intervention that aims to blend the auditory and visual, leading to the idea of synaesthesia. Synaesthesia is a subjective neurological experience where an individual perceives an interaction between the senses, such that, in this case, the visual can be heard or the sonic can be seen (Kennedy, 2007:2).

Synaesthesia, according to Zilczer (1987:101), developed along two distinct philosophical schools of thought: the romanticist inclined and the scientific leaning. For the romanticists, the sensorial interactions were assumed to be "evidence of mystical correspondence to a higher reality" (Zilczer, 1987:101). Those leaning into scientific research understand synaesthesia as a "phenomenon of human perception" (Zilczer, 1987:101). Here, it is either argued that there is a direct correspondence between light and sound or that there is psychological reasoning related to human perception in support of the association (Zilczer, 1987:118).

The concept of synaesthesia was further explored by artist Arthur Dove, who optimized the invention of the gramophone by utilizing recorded music in his creative process. This produced a series of works, most notable being the collage *George Gershwin--"Rhapsody in Blue," Part I* completed in 1927, in which listening to the music of George Gershwin was incorporated into the creative process whilst painting (Zilczer, 1987:111). Through a creative combination of line, colour, texture, and forms, Dove believed he could harness the emotional potency of the music. Aubrey Williams is another artist to create from recorded music, most notably in his 30 canvas Shostakovich series, painted as the result of durational listening to the music of Dmitri Shostakovich (Liu, 2022:155-6). Although synaesthesia is not of significant concern to the study, it is worthy of attention to

contextualise the broader community of ideas in which the music-visual discourse unfolds as it forms an integral aspect of the existing scholarship.

In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, first published in 1912, Wassily Kandinsky (2008:61-62) theorised that colour is "the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul". He went a step further by assigning specific colours to corresponding musical instruments and, consequently, to the sounds they produce. Light blue is likened to a flute, darker blue to a cello, and the darkest blue to an organ (Kandinsky, 2008:83). Essentially, Kandinsky speaks to the affective capacities of colour on a spiritual level through the metaphor of music. Other artists who have used music as a metaphor in their pictorial experiments include František Kupka and Piet Mondrian, who claimed that music and painting correlated based on colour eliciting and affecting human feelings in a manner parallel to musical tone (Railing, 2005). Railing (2005) concludes that feelings are "the 'instrument' on which colours and tones play their tunes," as although both operate through different media and sensory receptor modes of sight and sound, they share this specific overlapping trait.

The foundational collection of texts for the study was *The Hearing Eye: Jazz & Blues Influences in African American Visual Art* (Lock & Murray, 2009), which, according to the editors, is the first published critical anthology to focus specifically on jazz and the visual arts. The collection offers a wealth of critical inquiries on the subject, covering early blues advertising art, jazz photography, the visual arts, and the production of jazz as it relates to the visual arts' influence on its musical creation. Through critical essays and interviews, the texts examine various modes of representation, artists, media, and styles, as well as clarify artistic intent, processes, and cross-modal connections. A key debate in the texts concerns the efficacy and legitimacy of identifying formal translations between jazz and visual art as an analytical tool for theorising visual work.

The dominant approach in scholarship, exemplified by researchers such as Robert G. O'Meally in *"We Used to Say 'Stashed'": Romare Bearden Paints the Blues* (2009:173-193) and

Sara Wood in "*Pure Eye Music": Norman Lewis, Abstract Expressionism, and Bebop* (2009:95-119), is to primarily focus on drawing attention to formal parallels between music and visual art as a way of analysing the relationship between both disciplines. In her analysis of abstract painter Norman Lewis and his connection with jazz, Wood also incorporated the socio-musical aspects of bebop to provide an interpretation of Lewis's work. She associates bebop's refusal to conform to popular tastes and its challenge to audiences' sensibilities with the introduction and reception of abstract expressionism in US society. Building on socio-musical contexts, Wood (2009:112) further links the artists' inventive adaptations of various movements such as cubism, expressionism, and elements of surrealism in his work with the musical methodology of bebop musicians like Dizzy Gillespie, who stated that their practice involved radically reworking musical standards to create entirely new compositions.

Although I find these approaches useful for understanding artistic intent within the context of the musical culture discussed, I consider them insufficient for critically explaining the actual translation from one medium to another. Scholars such as Johannes Völz in "*Blues and the Abstract Truth": Or, Did Romare Bearden Really Paint Jazz?* (2009:194-215) and Richard H. King in *The Enigma of Bob Thompson* (2009:134-149), have argued that any study of the relationship between music and visual arts must acknowledge the differences between these two forms rather than imply that the gap between them has been or can be bridged. Both texts seem to support the critical position introduced by Diedra Harris-Kelley (2004:249), which states that, regardless of the artist's stated intentions, the processes of pictorial construction differ from those in the musical realm. These differences must be recognised in any critical analysis of the relationship between the two modes of expression to avoid obscuring rather than enlightening their connection (Harris-Kelley, 2004:249). This disconnection arises neither from a lack of intent nor skill on the part of the artist but results from the fundamental divergences in the principles governing both the creation and reception of visual and auditory modes.

I drew on both arguments for my research. I relied on the confluence of formal and socio-musical correlations to theorize artistic intent and then to explain the uniqueness of both practices in detail, without conflating one with the other. I applied basic concepts of music theory to discuss the translations themselves critically. The texts also lack a study of iconography being explored in the imagery or an attempt to inquire how these different representational configurations either inform or are in dialogue with each other. Additionally, a study of the jazz graphic score is not covered in the text; this is also omitted in overviews that broadly cover the relationships between music and visual arts, such as by Shaw-Miller (2002) and Leach (2015), who both engage the western concert music graphic score.

A significant attempt to display possible overlapping relationships between the practices of visual arts, jazz photography, and graphic scores was the exhibition *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now* (Beckwith & Roelstraete, 2015). I, however, found these connections to be more implied through display juxtaposition and proximity than academically theorized, as the catalogue lacks an essay focused on these overlaps. In the catalogue the historical intersections between Chicago-based cultural organizations the African Commune for Bad Relevant Artists[6] (visual arts) and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians[7] (music), Black Nationalist ideologies from the 1960s, and the continued visual and musical dialogue between jazz, black subjectivity, and contemporary visual arts are highlighted (Beckwith & Roelstraete, 2015). These texts collectively informed the broader inquiries that influenced the specificity of my South African investigations.

Boitumelo Tlhoaele (2017) examined curatorial methodologies in Sam Nhlengethwa's 1994 and 2010 solo exhibitions through the lenses of synaesthesia and exhibitionary affect,

[6]African Commune for Bad Relevant Artists is a Chicago based art collective founded in 1968 by African American visual artists.

[7] Founded in 1965, the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians is an educational and promotional community-based organisation for what is termed 'Great Black Music', which jazz forms part of, along with other black musical traditions.

providing a significant study within the South African context of the intersections between jazz and the visual arts. Tlhoaele explored the relationship between jazz imagery, its sonic experience, and the effectiveness of curatorial practices. She also investigated the potentialities of how jazz exhibitions can be curatorially framed using concepts of synaesthesia and exhibitionary affect as means of exploring the relationship between sonic and visual. In this context, exhibitionary affect refers to how audiences experience the jazz theme during the exhibitions. The study focused on profiling two of Nhlengethwa's exhibitions: *Sam Nhlengethwa: Standard Bank Young Artist Award* (1994) and *Kind of Blue* (2010). It examined how art and the spatial arrangement of exhibitions can evoke moods, sounds, and other sensory experiences related to jazz. Although the study shares common interests with mine, particularly the intersection of jazz and visual arts, its primary aim was to investigate effective curatorial methodologies that facilitate conveying the artists' images and the jazz genre to audiences. Therefore, despite making detailed references to Nhlengethwa's process of translating sonic elements into visual ones—such as listening to jazz records and using colour selectively—the scope of the work did not include an investigation of the iconography employed by the artist or its traditional significance.

Tlhoaele (2017) also highlights an important aspect of my inquiry, specifically the sociological intersections between visual art and jazz in South Africa, by contextualising both practices in relation to Black subjectivity. Tlhoaele (2017:59-61) argues that jazz is part of a South African Black aesthetic, which results from Black experiences and should be understood within its politics of race, gender, and cultural practices. Additionally, the connections between African-American and South African jazz are emphasised, without one being obscured by the other, a point I also considered in my research. The study does not provide definitive conclusions; rather, it offers an entry point for rethinking the curation of jazz exhibitions. From a South African perspective, Percy Mabandu (2022) offers a significant overview of the extensive collaborative histories of jazz and visual arts. He details various collaborations, including improvised music and dance performances featuring Ernest Mancoba's Bantu *Madonna*, album covers, and works by

visual artists. It seems to me that part of the article's aim is to draw attention to this largely under-researched heritage, which projects like mine can use as a foundation for more targeted studies.

Writings on Mongezi Ncaphayi mainly consist of online magazine articles, interviews, exhibition texts, and reviews. In the exhibition text for *Which Way is East*, Mabandu (2017) highlights an aspect of what he considers the sublime in the artist's work. He situates this within the practice of cartography, which he links to Ncaphayi's work. He suggests that if cartography is the act of scientifically or aesthetically communicating spatial information about physical reality or its imagined counterpart, then Ncaphayi's role is that of a navigator, demonstrating the nature of its affective force (Mabandu, 2017). Mabandu juxtaposes the sublime in the work of J.M.W Turner and Ncaphayi. He contrasts Turner's pursuit of the sublime through physical and external reality with Ncaphayi's internal, psychological, and emotional experience. Accordingly, the sublime in Ncaphayi's work is not found in the grand violent energy of nature but rather in navigating what Mabandu (2017) refers to as "man's awesome interiority."

Athi Joja's (2019) exhibition text for *Of the seeking or the finding* contextualises Ncaphayi's practice within what he views as an imposed expectation of cultural or racial representation placed on artists from marginalised backgrounds within the globalised contemporary art arena. He thus sees abstraction as offering different forms of representation that circumvent these expectations, rather than as being devoid of representation. Abstraction, for Joja (2019), has historically served as a vehicle for artists to evade co-optation into identity politics. Both Joja (2019) and Mabandu (2017) reflect on the artists' pursuit of internal exploration; a kind of interrogation of the conscious and subconscious. Ncaphayi also referenced this point (Besnard, 2019). Due to limitations of length and format, both texts provide an overview of Ncaphayi's work, while I examined individual works in more detail and discussed jazz composition and its translation into visual form at greater length. My study also explicitly situated the artists' work within a

broader framework of jazz visual culture and its iconographies, which was not the intention of Joja (2019) and Mabandu (2017).

Interviews such as those conducted by Vusumzi Nkomo (2022) and Nadège Besnard (2019) are highly informative in revealing the artists' influences, techniques, and thematic interests, which I intend to explore further critically. Most interviews, such as the one conducted by Daniel Hewson (Art Africa, 2015), tend to emphasise more biographical aspects of the artist, whereas my enquiries are more focused on critically examining compositional and theoretical elements, which, although discussed, do not seem to be the main focus of these interviews. Furthermore, I find the visual and sonic expressions of jazz to be under-theorised in both the interviews and exhibition texts, and I have attempted to address this through my engagement with music theory, iconography, black studies, formalism, and phenomenology.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 introduces the study, its aims and objectives, and provides a theoretical context for the study.

Chapter 2 offers a historical overview of jazz imagery, presenting a broad view of traditional jazz pictorial symbols. Through a fragmented and cross-regional examination of mediums such as photography, album cover art, and visual art, the chapter illustrates how the cultural meanings of jazz are negotiated through visual representations. Across these media, I identify a dominant visual language characterised by figures and often featuring musicians or musical performances. I see the primary influence of this visual vocabulary in jazz photography, which I regard as the main visualiser of jazz. The shifts in jazz visuality around the 1940s mirror changes in musical sensibilities, as the earlier dance hall orchestra bands with their group portraits gave way to an emphasis on individual performers, initiated by bebop's focus on virtuosity (Spring, 2006:5). Visual artists then followed suit in their portrayals, some of which are derived from photographs

(Nhlengethwa, 2021), exploring a language that mainly concentrates on performers and performances. Regarding album covers, I argue that they represent an audio-visual medium that primarily functions as the canvas of jazz visuality.

The album cover, particularly with its inclusion of modern art during the 20th century, helped to reform the perception and reception of jazz from 'low' to 'high' culture. The interaction between jazz and modern art has been described as mutually assured (Milnes, 2015:206-208) and reciprocal (van Kan, 2022:182-183), with the jazz album promoting modernist aesthetics while early modern artists aligned their visual experiments with jazz. Aside from an emphasis on performers, the selected imagery also focuses on instrumentation, particularly the saxophone, which I classify as part of the horn instruments. This focus is significant because it demonstrates that the sounds of jazz can be evoked through the inclusion of instruments associated with the genre (Pinson, 2010:81), thereby making the instruments both aural and visual icons of jazz. I partly attribute the prominence of the saxophone in jazz imagery to the high profile of musicians who play it (Cotrell, 2012:227). The chapter then moves away from this focus on performers, instruments, and performances by highlighting a Black Consciousness visual language that introduces the socio-political and cultural context of the music, thereby destabilising the dominant visual language of jazz. It concludes with an introduction to abstraction and its disconnection from the prevalent figurative language. Ultimately, this raises questions about how abstraction represents jazz and how it could be interpreted; chapter 3 addresses these concerns.

Chapter 3 focuses on abstraction and explores the theoretical links between abstraction and jazz, beginning with their shared relationship to spontaneity and improvisation (Whitten, 2020:411), before examining other compositional elements such as timbre, rhythm, and gesture (Shaw-Miller, 2022:4–5). For these reasons, basic music theory concepts are introduced to provide a foundation for critical insights into the jazz visual and aural encounters expressed through the mode of abstraction. This prompts questions about how to understand the representation and interpretation of abstraction and jazz. I

introduce the concepts of *jazz as an aesthetic model* and *jazz as a paradigm* as interpretive lenses that form the theoretical basis for understanding jazz.

Where *jazz as an aesthetic model* is concerned with unravelling formal equivalences and approximations, *jazz as a paradigm* focuses on the theoretical and ideological exchanges between jazz and abstraction from the perspective that jazz is above all a musical discourse (Shaw-Miller, 2022:21). Through visual analysis, these interpretive lenses are explored across several artworks by a select group of artists. From this visual analysis, theoretical concerns emerge regarding improvisation in the visual mode and how it relates to jazz music. To critically understand improvisation within its visual and aural contexts, I discuss the form and ideology of jazz improvisation to clarify its specific nature. For this, I draw on George E. Lewis's (1996:94) theoretical framework of *Afrological* and *Eurological* improvisation tendencies to situate the ideology of jazz improvisation and define its character in theoretical terms. The chapter concludes with the language scores of Wadada Leo Smith, which provided an opportunity to consider musical language in abstract visual form. This raised questions about abstraction and representation, navigated through iconography. This chapter serves as the foundation for the nuanced theoretical discussions in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 focuses on Mongezi Ncaphayi, analysing his visual work to highlight his theoretical concerns and visual language. The chapter deliberately diverts from formalism and emphasises socio-political registers in the artist's work in response to Ncaphayi's insistence on looking beyond formal aspects. I structure the discussion around Fred Ho's (2012) argument that artistic production cannot be separated from history, ideology, and societal constructions. The chapter concentrates on analysing three individual artworks by Ncaphayi created between 2012 and 2021. These pieces explore themes of migration, transcendence, and jazz. His ideas about what constitutes jazz reveal a longstanding artistic orientation that is multimodal, with music and visual arts not divided by disciplinary boundaries but emerging from the same creative impulse. Contrary to narrow views that see abstraction as inherently negating political

commitment, Ncaphayi's work is highly politicised and charged. His choice of abstraction as a representational style is partly driven by a desire to create formal beauty that is imbued with a history of violence. I interpret this as an expression of Edouard Glissant's (1997:189) right to opacity- the right of oppressed groups to evade Western knowability and understanding. This politics of refusal to perform their identity stems from black survival tactics, which were also embraced by the jazz vanguard of the 1940s and 1960s.

The **conclusion** Summed up my findings on the dialogical relationship between music and visual art in general, and jazz and abstract art in particular. I argue that although lacking a serialised visual language reducible to a few tropes, abstraction remains a vital mode of jazz expression and representation in expanding the horizon of possibilities. After all, for a genre so intrinsically linked with experimentation, its visual language sometimes seems stuck in the mid-20th century, with its over-saturation of portraiture as its default mode of presentation. Ncaphayi reminds us that improvisation is about being present-minded.

Chapter 2: Jazz Visuality: A Historical Context

> Jazz was never just a music. From its beginnings, live performance promised spectacle: musicians wielding instruments, physical interactions between performers and audiences, systems of looks and gestures that communicated complex meaning. Posters advertised these gigs, with conventions of design and typeface developing according to environment and culture. The LP sleeve provided a canvas upon which this iconography was advanced. Jazz musicians were photographed, filmed, even immortalised in comic strip form. A product of the mass media age, jazz was always insistently visual. - Nicolas Pillai (2017:1)

Introduction

Since the central focus of this study is on theorising jazz and abstract art by positioning Mongezi Ncaphayi's practice within a broader field of visual culture marked by jazz visual influences, my analysis of his work requires a historical perspective on jazz and visuality. This chapter thus aims to outline a visual heritage and history of jazz visuality.

This study essentially engaged in a fragmented[8] historicization that was transregional and unfolded as I examined different geographies, mainly South Africa and the US. This focus on the African diaspora stems from the fact that the political and cultural histories have been largely similar in terms of how jazz music gained prominence in the context of colonialism, apartheid, civil rights, segregation, and the dominance of Western cultural modalities, all of which are comparable developments.

Jazz as a distinct art form began to emerge around the late 1890s to early 1900s in the US as a crystallisation and culmination of multi-generational hybridisations between performance and musical traditions, including vaudeville, minstrelsy, march bands, ragtime, spirituals, folk music, gospel, and blues. This period proved crucial to its development and dissemination, as it coincided with technological innovations in both image and sound production and distribution; jazz benefited greatly from both. The

[8] The study explores the idea of non-linearity in history and interpretive perspectives. Irregular historicization is commonly understood as undermining Western-hegemonic historical readings by moving between different regions, timelines, and perspectives.

genre in South Africa also results from the confluence of local and imported historical music, which continues to shape its unique sound and 'flavour' today. Jazz culture in South Africa did not emerge fully formed as a foreign import appropriated by locals, but is the product of its own historical processes (Coplan, 2007:81). Before the 20th century, the region was already home to diverse music and performance traditions, including instrumental ensembles, mining compound dance groups, choral traditions, and other local styles (Coplan, 2007:81). These traditions produced musical cross-pollinations between American jazz and local genres such as *marabi*, *goema*, *isicathamiya*, *township bop*, *malombo*, *maskandi*, and *kwela*. These foundational influences continue to give South African jazz its distinct sound and styles today. An early example of this syncretism was mbaqanga[9], a popular type of music from the 1950s that featured characteristic jazz elements, such as instrumental soloing (Ansell, 2005:328). These histories align with the rise of black urbanisation in the country, which contributed to the evolving musical sensibilities of the urban black population, who fostered South African jazz alongside various urban musical styles. A comprehensive account of these South African jazz histories has been published by author Gwen Ansell (2005), musicologist Christopher Ballantine (2012), and anthropologist David Coplan (2007).

Having its roots in the late 19th century and first recorded in the early 20th century, jazz as a genre of music rose to popularity during a period of technological advances in image and sound production, recording, and dissemination. Initially emerging as a folk art that existed solely through live performances, musicians used gestures that were auxiliary to the production of the sonic output, such as closing their eyes, stomping their feet, and communicating with the audience through bodily and vocal gestures. When jazz developed into commercial popular music in the early 20th century, it became embedded within mass media productions, appearing in advertisements, newspapers, magazines, films, photography, and later on album covers. Peter Townsend (2000:92) rightly argued

[9] The term was adopted in the 1960s to describe a style of music which combined marabi with urban neo-traditional music. Its instrumental make-up consisted of electric guitars, saxophones, violins, accordions, and drums (Coplan, 2007:441).

that when jazz is represented through another medium, it becomes subject to the domination of that medium's traditions, forms of expression, and vocabulary. Its interactions with film, commercial print media, and visual art have thus shaped public perception of jazz. Furthermore, as O'Meally (1998:176) observes, jazz composition titles often allude to visual concepts; in South Africa, examples include *Barney's Shoes* by Roots (2020), *Mayihlome* by Sibongile Khumalo (2000), and *Umzi Watsha* by Zim Ngqawana (1999), among others. Several jazz compositions also make references to visual artists, such as *JAMO Meets SAMO* by Jason Moran (1999), Archie Shepp's *A Portrait of Robert Thompson (As a Young Man)* (1967), Lakecia Benjamin's *Basquiat* (2023), and *Picasso* by Coleman Hawkins (1949). The interplay between visual-sonic discourse is therefore integral to jazz musicality.

Jazz music has always featured visual components dating back to its origins. I refer to these as jazz visual culture. Visual culture, sometimes called visual studies, is a field of research that emerged in the late 1980s, stemming from the interactions between poststructuralist theory and cultural studies across disciplines such as art history, film studies, comparative literature, anthropology, and others (Dikovitskaya, 2017:68). As an inherently interdisciplinary field, it places visual images at the core of cultural meaning (ibid.). Therefore, by jazz visual culture, I mean the visible material expressions related to the sonic, commercial, aesthetic production, and distribution of jazz as a genre of music. Visual culture aims to situate imagery produced in a jazz context within a broader visual cultural framework, rather than in isolation by medium or discipline. In this context, we will examine networks of visual representations and visual-sonic resonance across various media. This allows for a detailed analysis of how meaning is constructed through distinct visual configurations and the cultural performance of this imagery.

In this study, I argue that the visual arts should be understood as part of this visual culture and, as such, that visual artworks ought to be interpreted within this broader context of imagery production. I therefore highlight several visual rhetorical devices used within the jazz visual domain to reveal a tradition of jazz visual representation and to

decipher its visual vocabulary. Consequently, this chapter aims to clarify the historical context of jazz visual articulations in three main aspects: visual arts, photography, and album cover art. I provide a visual analysis of various examples to establish a historical contextual foundation for my theoretical explorations regarding abstraction in the practice of Mongezi Ncaphayi.

Visual Mediums

Before the writing shifts into contextual and visual analyses, I will provide a brief profile of each medium, namely photography, album cover art, and visual art, to historically contextualise their subsequent discussions and their relevance to the study.

Photography

According to Gabbard (2004:337), "the best place to find compelling images of jazz is photography". Photography and jazz share a very intimate history, so much so that a photographic tradition exists within jazz. This tradition has played a highly formative role in shaping how the genre is perceived through its visual identities and, consequently, understood through visual mediation. Among all visual media that have contributed to jazz's various visual identities, photography has been the most influential. Images of jazz musicians and audiences alike have been disseminated worldwide, primarily through photographs featured in newspapers, commercial magazines, album cover art, and print media. It is therefore the quintessential visualiser of jazz.

In this chapter, photography primarily serves a dual purpose: firstly, as a historical document, functioning as a medium that visually and mechanically captures the likeness of figures, moments, and events. Secondly, photography acts as an artistic form that has developed conventional styles of expression and a tradition. The chapter aims to provide a broad, selective overview of the developments in the visual languages of jazz within the medium, leading to what I consider to be a standard that has influenced how visual artists construct their jazz visual configurations.

I categorise jazz photography into two periods: before the 1940s and after the 1940s. The reason for this is that I observed a shift in the popularisation of certain aesthetic

sensibilities during this time division. I do not intend to recount the entire history of jazz photography, as the focus here is on selectively highlighting popular visual strategies and their cultural significance. This approach enabled me to make cross-media connections with other aspects of jazz visual culture identified in this study, helping to decode a visual language and vocabulary of jazz.

Among the various media through which photography is shared, I contend that the album cover is the most significant medium for distributing jazz photography, to the point that photography is the dominant medium in album cover art. When this is coupled with the fact that recorded music remains the primary means of musical dissemination, the importance of the album as a platform for exploring musical, visual, and cultural meanings cannot be underestimated.

Album Cover Art

Jazz music developed alongside technological innovations in sound recording and benefited greatly from its growth, distribution, and subsequent popularisation as a modern art form. Recordings have also played a significant role in the education of many South African musicians, offering musical records for study and imitation as part of their instrumental and stylistic development (Devroop & Walton, 2007). Accompanying recorded music is its packaging sleeve, often featuring illustrations, photographs, and sometimes artworks from the fine art world.

Before the invention of the Long Play (33 rpm or LP) in 1948, the standard recording format was 78 rpm. These only allowed about 5 minutes of sound recording on each side and were often packaged in plain, generic sleeves with a hole to reveal the record title, and only sometimes featured illustrations and low-quality photographs. Photography did not become an industry standard until the mid-1950s (Dougherty, 2007:48-49). The invention of album cover art is credited to Alex Steinweiss, who joined Columbia Records as an art director and graphic designer in 1939 (Jackson, 2021). The LP allowed for 22 minutes of sound recording on each of its two sides, representing a significant improvement over the previous standard. It is, therefore, the invention of the LP that for

the first time enabled recordings of extended soloing, thus disseminating individual improvisational styles that function as sonic identities with much greater precision than before (Voelz, 2017:10). The LP thus transformed the aesthetic experience of recorded music, not only sonically through extended musical length but also visually through recording companies' adoption of professional illustrators, designers, photographers, and visual artists (Voelz, 2017:11). These changes were partially driven by a shift in distribution methods, as previously, records were obtained from store clerks behind a counter, leaving little scope for commercial initiative in creating distinctive covers. When distribution shifted to a self-service model where customers had to identify records themselves, visual distinction became a crucial factor in marketing and distribution (Dougherty, 2007:48-49).

The music album as an audio-visual medium provides a relevant opportunity to explore the fluid and dialogical relationships between the inference of information, which is articulated through the sensory receptor fields of sight and sound. In my own album listening experiences, because the cover is the first encounter with the artefact—before a single note is heard or a lyric recited—it becomes a site where discourses around the interpretation and meaning of the music are initiated and mediated. I argue that these discourses operate on multiple levels, primarily as the meaning of a specific recording is created, secondly as the way in which a musician's musical and visual identity is constructed, and finally as the broader process through which the identity, perception, and cultural significance of the genre are contested.[10] While all these discursive levels are worthy of study, for this particular research, I focus on the first and last points of discussion.

Considering the relationship between the cover and recorded music, Drewett (2008:117) argues that the meaning of the visual can serve as an extension of the meanings expressed in the music. At the same time, it can also offer additional meaning that is either not

[10] There are other discursive levels worthy of consideration and future research such as the construction of distinctive visual identities by jazz record labels, some of the most successful which come to mind are *Blue Note Records, Black Jazz Records,* and *ECM Records* to name a few.

present or, in cases of censorship, cannot be captured by the music (ibid.). Ansell (2016) further suggests that the cover can also reveal insights into the social context of the musical creation. When it comes to interpreting the album cover, I find that meaning is temporal and malleable, never definitive but subject to the current mood and intellectual preoccupations.

Jazz and visual art collaborations through album covers have also reflected the latest and popular developments in graphic design and visual art movements of the time when the recordings were made; these have included pop art, abstract expressionism, and cubism, especially during the 1950s-1960s (Dougherty, 2007:49). In American and European cultures, these trends to align jazz with modern art were deliberate attempts to reposition public perception of jazz from its pre-bebop[11] commercial dance music into a "high" cultural art form akin to modern art. According to Milnes (2015:206-208), this was a mutually beneficial exchange, as early abstractionists like Mondrian and Arthur Dove used jazz, which was mainstream commercial music at the time (1920s and 1930s), to contextualise and legitimise their visual experiments. Later, with the development of bebop in the 1940s, which specifically aimed to establish jazz as art music and distance it from entertainment, jazz benefited from the analogy with modern art, especially painting, which at the time enjoyed cultural status as 'high' and refined art (Milnes, 2015:209). Commenting on the link between jazz and modern art on album covers, van Kan (2022:182-183) argues that the relationship was reciprocal; although jazz gained from being embedded within the context of modern art, the jazz record album and its cover, in turn, promoted modernist art aesthetics.

I did not consider the visual design aspects of the album cover, such as typography and colour scheme, from a graphic design perspective. Although the subject is rich with elements like lettering, typeface, colour, and overall design, I was interested in the piece

[11] Bebop is a style of jazz music that emerged in the early 1940s in which musicians placed emphasis on individual instrumental virtuosity and improvisation. The music is characterized by fast-paced complex harmonies and chord changes.

itself as an aesthetic object that reflects these elements through its cultural performativity. The aim of the study is to identify patterns and overlaps that emerge through visual analysis, examining visual phenomena on the album cover in relation to various visual mediums such as photography and the visual arts.

Visual Art

Photography is not meant to be seen as being peripheral to visual art; instead, it is distinguished to highlight its unique historical path and dominant influence on visual concepts, as well as the construction of signs and iconography in media like drawing and painting. The connections between jazz and visual art stretch back to the early 20th century, with their creative exchanges continuing to this day. The historical links between these disciplines are extensive, often culminating when visual artists attempt to transmute musical ideas into visual forms and engage in musical improvisations that are, at times, in direct or indirect dialogue with visual works. Despite a long history of collaboration, intersection, and cross-pollination between jazz and visual arts, these topics remain largely underexplored in South Africa. This lack of knowledge was a key motivation for this chapter and the broader trajectory of this research.

There are numerous recent and historical publications on jazz album cover design, photography, exhibition catalogues, and visual art; however, few works provide an overview of how jazz has been visualised across different idioms, such as O'Meally (1998), Lock & Murray (2009), and Shipton (2020). Shipton's (2020) *The Art of Jazz* is a comprehensive and kaleidoscopic study that assesses jazz as a visual history, drawing on various media such as posters, photographs, illustrations, fine art, and album cover art from 1913 to 2018. However, this publication does not focus on the overlaps and the use of a distinctive visual grammar that runs through multiple mediums. While medium-specific studies are valuable in deepening understanding of each medium's historical and aesthetic development, their approach is not fully suited for the aims of this study. The current focus is to highlight patterns that emerge across media and demonstrate how a

unique visual vocabulary is not confined to a single medium but is rather interconnected among various forms. Therefore, a cross-medium approach facilitates a more cohesive integration of the study's ideas and goals. Consequently, I chose to structure the writing thematically rather than by medium.

Jazz Through the Photographic Lense: Establishing a Pictorial Tradition

As early as the 20th century, a recognisable photographic aesthetic began to emerge that solidified by the late 1940s as the dominant image of the genre: the depiction of the jazz musician with their instrument (Pinson, 2010:28–35). Before the 1940s, much of the imagery appears to have been serial documentation of performers, mostly in group poses holding their respective instruments and directing their gaze towards the cameras, as shown in Figure 2, which depicts the earliest historicised and mythologised figure in the development of jazz. The photograph in Figure 2 is the only surviving mechanical record of Buddy Bolden (1877–1931), as his sole musical recording has been lost.

Figure 2: *Charles "Buddy" Bolden is pictured standing second from left with his band*. Circa 1905. (prnco.org)

Figure 3: The Jazz Maniacs. Photograph. Estimated to have been taken between 1934 and 1939. (Ballantine, 2012: Figure 8).

A key characteristic of this early jazz imagery is the frontal pose, where musicians form a horizontal line with each instrumentalist holding their instrument and gazing directly at the camera in full-body group portraits. The musicians are essentially engaging in a performance for the camera and photographer, typically in a studio or stage setting, but not usually in the process of making music. I see this as a performance in the creation of perception and meaning-making as I interpret the act of 'posing' as a broad form of performance—an act of engaging with the camera and photographer through staging a moment. I argue that the subjects are also performing an identity, projecting a constructed perception and gaze. I believe these photographs primarily serve as historical records, capturing band members and their physical likenesses during specific periods.

Another noticeable feature is control: control of the lighting environment that allows the photo to be captured, and control of bodily movement and gestures. This is why the photographer's studio or empty performance halls feature prominently. I find that at this early stage, through such imagery, the identity of the musician as an extension of their instrument was already being constructed. The stationary group portrait configuration

remains in use to this day, although its use in mass media or as a reference in the visual arts remains fairly minimal compared to the other visual configurations I discuss.

Based on the historical use of this compositional pose, I find that it evokes ideas about tradition, and when paired with contemporary music, suggests a form of artistic continuity or revival. Regarding the African Jazz Pioneers[12], the cover in Figure 4 (left) presents the music and musicians as firmly grounded in the geographically specific traditions of the genre through visual arrangement, including the band's name. In the case of *Yes Please*, the cover in Figure 4 (right) features a combination of characteristic static posing alongside some instrumental playing or the illusion of it. The image also employs vibrant colours overlaid on the photograph, adding a playful quality to the depicted subject, which, due to the static poses, can sometimes seem to lack charisma or individuality. Considering the music on the album and Chris McGregor's Brotherhood of Breath[13] discography, the cover showcases the studio artefact and its performers as avant-garde extensions of tradition.

This inclusion of musical performance is also present in the artwork *Satchmo* and his band by Sam Nhlengethwa (2021), shown in Figure 5. The artwork, like many of the artist's pieces, draws inspiration from an existing photograph that has been recast and recomposed into a new arrangement. In the original image, Louis Armstrong is not depicted as a bandleader, as he would become later, but as a sideman in *The King Oliver Creole Jazz Band* led by King Oliver, documented in 1922 (see Bettman, 1922). The source photograph contains no performance and features the standard formation: a neatly arranged row of musicians, each holding or seated next to their instrument, all facing the camera. In the artwork (Figure 5), Armstrong appears twice—as a youth (the fourth individual from the left) and as an older veteran (the trumpet-playing figure in the

[12] Founded and led by Ntemi Piliso (1925 - 2001) in 1982, the band played musical stylings and compositions from 1950's South African jazz.

[13] The band comprised South African exiles in collaboration with British and European musicians. Formed and led by South African Chris McGregor (1936 -1990) in 1969, the band's music was a big band synthesis of *mbaqanga* and *free jazz*.

foreground). This focus on the act of creating music contributes to the primary visual characteristic of the genre, alongside an emphasis on individual performers rather than ensembles.

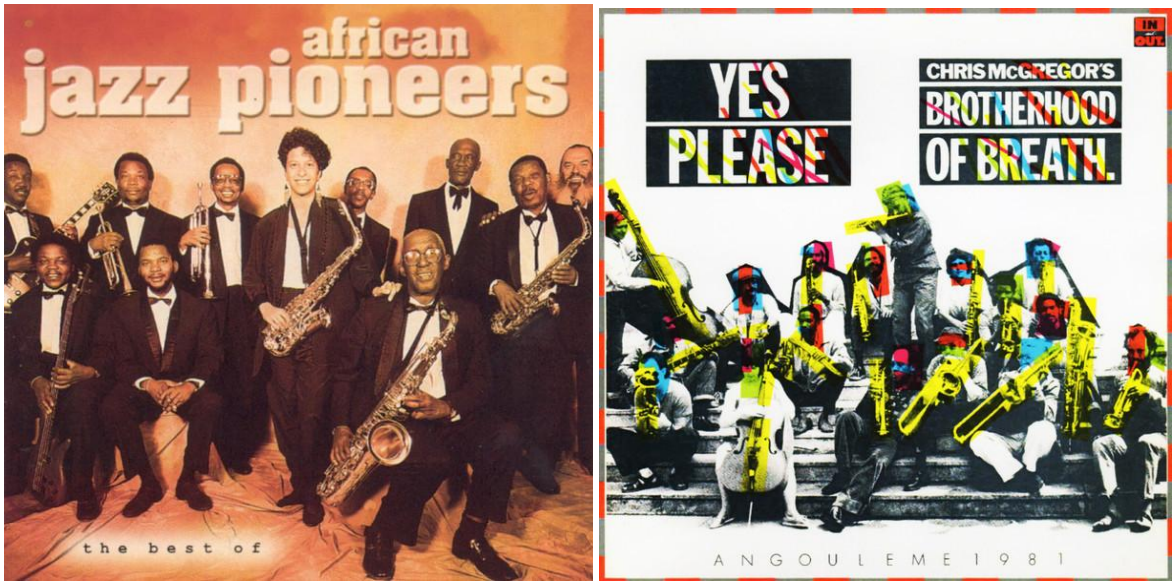

Figure 4*:* (left) African Jazz Pioneers. *The Best of*. 2002. Album cover. (discogs).
(right) Chris McGregor's Brotherhood of Breath. *Yes Please*. 1981. Album cover. (discogs).

Figure 5: Sam Nhlengethwa. *Satchmo and his band*. 2021. Mixed media on canvas. 120 × 109 cm. (galleriesnow.com).

During this early period, jazz scenes in both South Africa and the US were dominated by big bands and orchestras performing in ballrooms and dancehalls. The swing era marked the genre's peak commercial phase, as bands emerged in large numbers to satisfy the public's appetite for what was then the popular dance and musical culture of the time (Lawn, 2013:189). As World War II led to an economic downturn in the US after the war, supporting big bands from the swing era became financially challenging. Black musicians also led a cultural and aesthetic rebellion against the commercialisation characterising the pre-World War II period, a time when relatively few Black musicians—who were the main innovators in the music—reaped the monetary rewards enjoyed by white artists (Lawn, 2013:192).

Through experimentation in jam sessions at jazz clubs, notably in Harlem, younger musicians developed new ways of evaluating the aesthetics of jazz music (Voelz, 2017:6). These new ideas highlighted a focus on instrumental virtuosity and technical skill. The music that emerged later became known as bebop or modern jazz. Bebop is a style of jazz that arose in the early 1940s, characterised by a focus on individual instrumental virtuosity and improvisation. It is distinguished by fast-paced, complex harmonies and chord changes (Voelz, 2017:6). In this new musical form, musicians set their own expectations and standards for engagement with the audience, demanding they be met rather than pandering to the audience with danceable music (DeVeaux, 1997:8). The bebop revolution thus shifted the perception of musicians from commodities and talented entertainers to artistic, intellectual contributors. Due to the high level of technical and theoretical skill needed for composition and performance, bebop played a key role in shaping public perceptions of jazz as an intellectual art form.

In South Africa, the jazz performance that defined the marabi-swing[14] period was being economically strangled by pass laws that restricted movement and increasingly

[14] For an exhaustive account of this period, see Ballantine (2012).

segregated venues[15], which denied access to economically vital spaces. This was compounded by the destruction of communities that culturally nourished the music and provided financially feasible performance venues, such as Sophiatown and District Six[16]. These factors, along with growing aesthetic inclinations influenced by convergences between the local *marabi* idiom and modern jazz from the US, changed the makeup of bands in South Africa, shifting the focus from big band orchestras to musical acts led by an improviser, with accompanying musicians (Ballantine, 2012:9). Whereas during the swing era, the arranger was seen as the leading figure among musicians, the bebop revolution shifted this status to the soloist. Bands became smaller, often consisting of trios, quartets, or quintets. Record labels promoted individual band leaders such as Eric Nomvete, Gideon Nxumalo, and Zacks Nkosi, each recording under their own names. These developments influenced the visual presentation of jazz, with increased emphasis on individual soloists. As a result, in the years following this period, a new visual language emerged as the dominant format, so much so that it could be regarded as a 'standard' for the genre.

Candid Environmental Portraiture

As music evolved in the 1940s from commercial dance music into a space between high art and commercial music, photographers' profiles increasingly tended to be those who were first somewhat immersed in the scene and its performance culture[17], and second,

[15] The Group Areas Act of 1950 legislated spatial segregation along racial and 'tribal' lines, thus forcefully moving members deemed to be residing outside the designated areas. This negatively impacted the already scarce access to economic and social resources, including economically viable performance venues, for black urban communities.

[16] A culturally mixed area in Cape Town which was demolished by the apartheid government after it became classified as a whites-only area in 1966, under The Group Areas Act of 1950.

[17] This is a phenomenon repeated by other known photographers such as Lerato Pakade (Sekelwa, n.d), Ian Bruce Huntley (Albertyn, 2013). Basil Breaky is an exemplar of this case as it is noted that he made friendship with a circle of jazz musicians whom he repeatedly photographed over a period of time (Zimmer, 2012:77).

those who went further to find creative inspiration in the musical art form[18] (Spring, 2006:3). The shift from large bands that characterised the marabi-swing period to smaller ensembles of modern jazz (bebop) leads to an observable change in the photographic tradition, with more emphasis on individual musicians (Spring, 2006:5).

This second iteration of jazz imagery primarily relied on ambient lighting, sometimes using no additional illumination beyond what was available in the environment, often resulting in subjects being photographed against dark backgrounds. This approach can be described as environmental portraiture, where the subject is documented within their professional, domestic or constructed physical surroundings, typically in performance spaces and music recording studios (Paulo, 2022:183). Additionally, it is not only the space that becomes an essential part of the composition but also the style of photography itself: here, photographers candidly capture musicians mid-performance or during moments in between. The act of posing and performing for the camera is largely replaced by live musical performances, which are now how the identity of the performer is negotiated.

As seen in the *Three Jazzolomos* photograph in Figure 6 (left), there is much more emphasis on individual expression across multiple levels in these images. Firstly, although this is a group composition, each member of the group exhibits distinct body gestures and facial expressions. Secondly, the images tend to focus closely on one or more performers rather than giving equal attention to all band members. Nhlengethwa (2021) in Figure 6 (right) shows an isolated Miriam Makeba against a dark background; this visual trope was consistent with the lighting conditions of performance spaces. It is not that this type of imagery did not exist before this second phase, but rather that the visual strategies used here became significantly more widespread during this period.

[18] Roy DeCavara is an internationally celebrated photographer who has professed conceptual affinities between his practice and jazz (Ings, 2009:321).

What this version of jazz photography does is present the musicians as serious, cool, stylish, and contemplative artists. The images portray musicians during the act of musical creation or in between these moments, in preparation or reflecting on their art.

Figure 6: (left) Jurgen Schadeberg. *The Three Jazzolomos, Johannesburg 1953*. 1953. Photograph. (belgraviagaellery.com)
(right) Sam Nhlengethwa. *Miriam Makeba*. 2021. Mixed media on canvas. 70,5 x 100,5 cm. (galleriesnow.com).

Today, the popularity of this aesthetic sensibility endures despite advances in colour photography. This is partly because, by the time colour film reached a quality comparable to black and white film, the latter had already become the industry standard (Spring, 2006:7). The current aesthetic thus connects to historical ideas—a form of neoclassicism that harkens back to a significant period in jazz music development (1945–1959), creating a continuum of meaning by framing the present as classical. Linking jazz to a specific era and aesthetic leads to what I argue is the classicisation of the contemporary. This is interesting since the music has continued to evolve, whereas the photographic language has largely remained rooted in established traditions.

These visual configurations are evident in the work of various visual artists. Alongside cityscapes of Johannesburg, township scenes, and club patrons, depictions of jazz musicians also receive attention in David Koloane's (1938-2022) oeuvre. Koloane was an illustrator of the Johannesburg black urban experience. He was known to have been an avid music enthusiast who frequented jazz clubs. In the work titled *Saxophone no.1*, shown in Figure 7 (left), Koloane (2016) presents a monochromatic depiction of a performance scene featuring a bassist on the left, a drummer in the centre—considering the halo-like high-hat above their head—and a saxophonist on the right. The image is also bathed in clouds of cigarette smoke, similar to both images of *The Three Jazzolomos* in Figure 6 (left) and *Dexter Gordon* (Leonard, 1948) in Figure 7 (right). The inclusion of cigarette smoke adds a mystic element to the image, presenting the figures as exuding a sense of cool and perhaps divinity. This is another prominent motif in this imagery.

Whereas the Jurgen Schadeberg (1953) (Figure 6, left) image clearly captures the physical likeness of the musicians and is even captioned to identify them, *Saxophone no1* (Koloane, 2016) (Figure 7, left) in contrast, lacks clarified facial features mainly because of the gestural mark making of the artist. This decision to focus on unnamed and unidentified performers leads me to conclude that Koloane wants to draw attention to the broader art form of jazz performance rather than a specific performance or group of musicians. These preoccupations with performance reveal themselves in the work of several visual artists along transnational and multigenerational lines. This can be observed in the works of Sam Nhlengethwa, Romare Bearden (1974)[19], Gerard Sekoto (1961)[20], Ephraim Ngatane

[19] See, Romare Bearden (1912-1988). *Empress of the Blues*. 1974. Acrylic and pencil on paper and printed paper. 91.44 x 121.92 cm.
[20] See, Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993). *The jazz band*. 1961. Oil on canvas board. 45 x 60 cm

(1969)[21], Wadsworth Jarrell (1970)[22], Jean Dubuffet (1944),[23] and Jean-Michel Basquiat (1983)[24]. This appears to be a rather ubiquitous concern amongst visual artists.

Figure 7: (left) David Koloane. *Saxophone no. 1.* 2016. Mixed media on canvas. 130 x 140 cm. (arsty.net). (right) Herman Leonard. *Dexter Gordon, Royal Roost*, New York. 1948. Photograph. 60.3 x 50.1 cm. (christies.com).

The selected imagery thus far reveals a commonality of particular musical instruments, namely the horn instruments. I understand instruments to be a crucial facet of jazz identity, both sonically and visually, as they are the tools whose sound we hear and the visual codes outside of the body producing the sound, so as visual material, they are also significant. In the next section, I explain why certain instruments are ingrained in the identities of the genre as a means to deepen understanding of the visual language.

[21] See, Ephraim Ngatane (1938-1971). Jazz Band. 1969 Oil on board 61 x 91 cm
[22] See, Wadsworth Jarrell (b. 1929). *Coolade Lester.* 1970. Acrylic on canvas. 127 × 61 cm.
[23] See, Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985). *Grand Jazz Band (New Orleans)*. 1944. Oil and tempera on canvas. 114.6 x 146.7 cm.
[24] See, Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988). *Untitled (Stardust)*. 1983. Acrylic and oil stick on canvas. 213.5 x 132 cm.

There's Something About the Horn: Instruments as Jazz Icons

A central focus of the study was exploring how images convey meaning. The question of 'where is jazz' in a visual work examined the cultural significance of specific imagery. Since the study aimed to position Ncaphayi within South African jazz visual culture, analysing its iconographies and symbols was vital for developing an understanding of his work from this perspective, as it enabled me to assess how his visual language either aligns with or challenges this tradition and guides its interpretation.

Pinson (2010:67) argues that images have the ability to convey information that can manifest as sound, sign, word, or photograph, and to establish a relationship with the receiver of the image or sign. A sign is generally understood as any phenomenon, including words and images, that represents something else; essentially, anything can be interpreted as a sign. The sounds of jazz, for instance, can be implied through an image by depicting instruments commonly associated with the genre, such as the saxophone, trumpet, piano, bass, and drums, alongside jazz musicians (Pinson, 2010:81). The argument here is not only that images can represent something else but also that we can locate the meaning of these phenomena within a specific cultural expression. It is not merely that the depicted instruments produce sounds, but that the sound approximates a particular musical form. However, it should be noted that the perception of signs depends on the viewer's previous experiences and knowledge; that is, interpretation relies on having a historical relationship and understanding to recognise the phenomena as fitting within one of many possible interpretations.

In my experience, I find that images featuring vocalists, pianists, drummers, and other non-horn[25] instrumentalists in isolation do not initially register sonically as jazz for me unless I can identify the depicted musician or if the images are displayed alongside those of horn players. However, I notice that when it comes to horn instruments (especially the

[25] In jazz 'horns' refers to wind instruments (both woodwind and brass). These are instruments that contain a mouthpiece located at the rear of a flared opening into which the musician blows air to produce sound through vibration. Horns include the trombone, trumpet, clarinet, saxophone, trombone cornet, flugelhorn, and tuba.

saxophone and trumpet), even if the player's identity is concealed, the image still registers as jazz sonically, although with lower fidelity compared to when I can identify the musician. A good example of this is the lithograph titled *Feya Faku* by Nhlengethwa (2018), shown in Figure 8 (right). The image depicts a profile silhouette figure in a suit, firmly gripping a flugelhorn close to their body. The instrument itself frequently appears in brass bands, occasionally in Western classical music, and most notably in jazz ensembles. Since it plays no prominent role in brass bands or Western classical music, I associate it with jazz, as it is the tradition where I am most likely to recognise an individual flugelhornist based on the likelihood of aural and musical distinctions that the instrument may produce during a performance. The attire and likely racial background of the individual only reinforce my suspicions, even before I can recognise that Feya Faku is a jazz musician, as confirmed by the title. These thoughts are echoed in Siphiwe Mhlambi's (2019) photograph of trombonist Siya Makuzeni (Figure 8, left), with the main differences being the performance, attire, and gender.

Figure 8: (left) Siphiwe Mhlambi. *Siya Makuzeni*. n.d. Photograph. (facebook.com).
(right) Sam Nhlengethwa. *Feya Faku*. 2018. Lithograph on chine-colle paper. 41.5 × 39.5. (artsy.net).

I believe that my reasoning highlights the reality that the vast majority of jazz albums I have enjoyed as a listener prominently feature these specific instruments in both their rhythmic and improvisational roles. This suggests to me that the instruments themselves can serve as signifiers. The best way to demonstrate this is through a selective comparative analysis of an image that fits the description.

The *Castle Lager Jazz Festival* was a significant cultural event that offered vital exposure and important musical recordings for several of the country's leading musicians during the 1960s. The 1964 edition produced a highly acclaimed recording in South African jazz history, featuring two groups. The album is divided into Two Sides, showcasing the *Malombo Jazz Men* on Side A and the *Early Mabuza Quartet* on Side B.[26] On the cover, shown in Figure 9, the contrast is visualised through a band member from each group occupying opposite sides of the image. On the right, Early Mabuza sits at his drum set, holding a double bass with his left hand, and his right hand grips two drumsticks resting on his shoulder. According to Gamedze (2019:30), "this side of the cover, the right, is assumedly representing, in a more normative sense, modern jazz", or in other words, the instrumentation aligns with prevailing ideas about the typical configuration of jazz expected by an audience, and the featured music affirms this.

I argue that the instruments only allude to jazz in combination with each other and Mabuza. In isolation, neither instrument would register at the same level of clarity with jazz in the typography or Mabuza, as long as one can identify and locate him in his profession. Based on the grouping of instruments in many jazz recordings and performing bands, it can be seen that the bass and drum set are more prominent than any other instruments, as they are the preferred and standard rhythm section in jazz.

[26] I find this cover to be reminiscent of African American Kenny Dorham's (1957) album Jazz *Contrasts* that features this instrumentational division configuration. In the Dorham cover on the left side, he sits holding his trumpet and, on the right, he's standing next to the harp. The albums Side A and Side B refer to this division as the harp is only featured on Side A.

However, taken individually, these instruments are used across many genres of music, making them insufficient to represent a single genre.[27]

Figure 9: The Malombo Jazz Men & Early Mabuza Quartet. *Castle Lager Jazz Festival 1964*. 1964. Album cover. (flatinternational.org).

On the left side of the cover (Figure 9), Julian Bahula of the Malombo Jazz Men holds an electric guitar while resting his left hand on one of four malombo drums; also included is a flute positioned across the two drums on the right. The band derives its name from the upright, drum-based indigenous southern African spiritual music played by communities in Zimbabwe and Venda (Gamedze, 2019:27). This music also serves as a source of inspiration for the group. These instruments signal a sound palette not

[27] One thinks of how several contemporary poplar genres such as Afrobeat, Soul, Hip-Hop, Amapiano and various types of dance music all rely on the bass and drum combo as their rhythmic foundations be it acoustic, electric or synthesised. There is however an argument to be made regarding the double-bass as being largely limited to jazz and classical music given the adoption of the smaller bass-guitar in popular music since the mid-1950s.

commonly found within jazz music, and the drums are not synonymous with those typically seen in jazz ensembles. The flute has an interesting history in jazz. In its early days, it was largely a novel instrument, partly because it was sonically overshadowed by brass instruments in terms of amplification (Rodriguez, 2018:1). It was not until the 1950s, with the contributions of figures such as Herbie Mann and Frank Wess, that its stature in jazz significantly improved (Rodriguez, 2018:1). From the late 1950s onwards, this progress was furthered by multi-instrumentalists such as Sahib Shihab, Rashan Roland Kirk, Eric Dolphy, and Yusef Lateef, who included the flute in their repertoire and boosted its popularity as a solo instrument. In South Africa, Abbey Cindi of Malombo can be largely credited with popularising it, but it has never quite established itself as a de facto instrument of choice, comparable to the trumpet or saxophone.

Given this context, I find that the cover functions as a form of sonic aesthetic debate between jazz, which is more readily associated with its American origins, and that which points to a different direction closer to a southern African centre through instrumentation and musical style. I want to focus more on why the horn instruments have such a significant register compared to other instruments.

I believe that horn instruments continue to be a vital part of jazz's visual and aural identity, not necessarily because they are the most frequently used instruments, but because other instruments in jazz ensembles are too prominent and common in many other genres. For instance, the piano appears in a variety of genres, including classical music. Among horn instruments, the saxophone family is arguably the most distinctive in shaping both the sound and image of jazz. The instrument was invented in 1841 by Belgian inventor and musician Adolphe Sax and reached the US, the birthplace of jazz, in 1888. Although the bass, piano, trumpet, and trombone were already established within the Western classical music tradition before entering jazz, the saxophone, with its unusual design and unique musical timbre, initially struggled for acceptance in Western

classical music[28], but was widely used in circus and military bands before becoming a staple in jazz (Cottrell, 2012:335). It was through jazz that the saxophone came to symbolise modernity and sophisticated creativity.

According to jazz critic and historian Gioia (2017:30), the saxophone only began making notable appearances in jazz ensembles around the 1920s. However, it was not until the late 1930s, with the rise of smaller ensembles and the decline of the big band era of the 1910s-1940s, that its status started to gradually increase over time, leading into the 1950s with the emergence of modern jazz, when it had established itself as the iconic jazz sonic and visual symbol. It has been suggested that a primary reason for its adoption within jazz could relate to its abilities as an essentially 'vocal' instrument, in that it can easily manipulate the pitch of a given note, much like the human voice, with a level of flexibility not common to most instruments (Cottrell, 2012:186). Although string instruments and trombones can navigate pitches more easily, the warm and mellow textures produced by the saxophone make it uniquely vocal, especially in its ability to imitate blues music vocal lines and create the 'moans' and 'wails' that are fundamental to the blues tradition (Cottrell, 2012:186). While many other instrumentalists, such as pianists, trumpeters, drummers, and bassists, have developed the musical and technical aspects of jazz, no other instrument has contributed as many of the genre's major influential innovators or imitators as the saxophone (Cottrell, 2012:227).

In South African history, the horn instruments were introduced through European missionary brass bands, specifically British and German missions (Ballantine, 2012:38). By 1885, mission stations in every province had brass bands (Coplan, 2007:103). However, the exact date of the introduction of the saxophone to the country remains unknown.

A close second to the saxophone in the hierarchy of jazz instrumental icons is the trumpet. Unlike the saxophone, which is a relatively recent instrument, the history of the trumpet

[28] In the 1920s, the American Symphony Orchestra League issued an official ban on the saxophone in symphonic orchestral music (Gioia, 2017:159)

dates back to ancient times. Primitive and ancient designs used animal horns[29] or metal, utilising their loud sounds as functional signal instruments for war or ceremonial processions across cultures as diverse as ancient Egyptian, Greek, Mayan, and Chinese (Wallace & McGrattan, 2012:8-26). After evolving through multiple designs worldwide, the valve trumpet was invented in the early 19th century, and since then, minor modifications have been made to its design to create the modern trumpet (Wallace & McGrattan, 2012:1). Until the 1920s, the cornet dominated most of the early jazz music emerging from New Orleans (Wallace & McGrattan, 2012:266). Over time, it became common for players to switch between trumpet and cornet, leading to a synthesis of musical vocabulary and techniques between the two distinct instruments (Wallace & McGrattan, 2012:267). When Louis Armstrong shifted from the cornet to the trumpet in the late 1920s, the course of music history and the perception of the trumpet were forever changed. The cornet faded into obscurity, and the trumpet assumed its place as a jazz icon.

Armstrong is undoubtedly one of the most influential jazz musicians throughout the entire history of the genre, and he is often regarded as the first great soloist.[30] On his abilities and influence, Tanner and Megill (2013:92–93) write that his "tone, stamina, range, creativeness, and technique were envied by all jazz performers. At that early age, he became the ideal, the model of how to play jazz improvisation". Armstrong freed the trumpet from its presumed limitations, and "as a consequence realised the latent capabilities of the trumpet, rendering it for the first time a complete instrument with the full panoply of expressive and technical possibilities" (Tanner & Megill, 2012:268). As with the saxophone, through a combination of innovation and creativity, jazz musicians redefined existing perceptions of the trumpet.

[29] In southern Africa, the adoption of brass instruments like the trumpet, specifically by the Bapedi and Batswana, can be understood as representing a form of cultural syncretism in the sense of the antelope horn known as the *phalaphala* that was used as a signal horn giving way to the trumpet (Coplan, 2007:103-4).

[30] In the 1920s, his closest rival to this title was soprano saxophonist Sidney Bechet (Tanner & Megill, 2013:88).

The prominence of horn instruments in jazz imagery is closely linked to the figures who led musical innovation, influenced their peers, and achieved some form of commercial success or cultural recognition, thus becoming iconic. Although every instrument has produced innovators and key figures in jazz development, it is safe to say that no other instruments have a comparable list of major innovators, including figures such as Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Sonny Rollins, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, and Ornette Coleman. Pianists are arguably the closest in terms of influence and popularity. While innovators exist across all instruments within jazz, their collective legacy and mythology are often overshadowed by those of horn players. These musicians not only expanded their instruments' vocabularies and inspired future generations to play the saxophone or trumpet, but, in some cases, like Charlie Parker, influenced how players of entirely different instruments approach their craft. The influence of these instruments is both musical and visual, shaping the cultural perception of jazz. They have become essential to jazz's image and visual language.

So far, the visual lexicon of jazz can be surmised as portraits of jazz musicians, images of performers engaged in making music, or depictions of instruments closely associated with the genre, such as the saxophone, trumpet, or double bass, or any combination of these. I argue that these images highlight musical creation by drawing attention to performers and their instruments. Among these visual strategies, it is the images of musicians either playing or holding their instruments—particularly horn instruments like the saxophone and trumpet—that, due to their prominence, I see as having become a standard visual idiom of the genre. I suggest that the widespread use of this visual language reflects culturally constructed frameworks of shared understanding that help these images resonate and communicate a connection with the genre to a broad audience. Therefore, this study aims to clarify their impact and cultural significance. I also believe that these representations rely on iconographies and meanings embedded within the larger jazz visual culture, not limited to any specific medium.

I aim to complicate the relatively stable historicization of jazz visual identities by incorporating a significant visual idiom unique to South African jazz cultures, namely Black consciousness (BC). This development forms the foundation for considering jazz visualisation within the framework of de-emphasised descriptive visual tropes.

A Black Consciousness Language in Jazz.

In the BC philosophical tradition, blackness as an identity necessitates self-affirmation as Black by those belonging to the historically discriminated groups in South Africa.[31] Consequently, they are obliged to commit themselves to defiance against their oppression as a group (Biko, 2017:52). The rehabilitation of Black humanity, after being materially and socially relegated to a status of abjection in the world, is a central goal of BC. Part of this project involves rectifying the self-perception within Black people, which BC describes as being overtaken by a colonial false consciousness that seeks to manufacture a self-image accommodating anti-Black subjugation. Essentially, it is a philosophical and political ideology that aims to understand and transform the condition of Black existence in a world characterised by anti-Blackness. As philosopher Mabogo Percy More (2017:46) asserts, BC aims "at reversing the white definition of Black people and, through that very act, change the limits set to Black possibilities for existence". Accordingly, the critical role of the arts is to be functional and receptive to the ideals of BC, which include, but are not limited to, countering negative racial stereotypes to facilitate the reclamation of Black intellectual and creative sovereignty.

As an ideology, BC has historically shaped and continues to influence the political, intellectual, and cultural landscape of South Africa. This led to a 'Black Renaissance' during the late 1960s and 1970s as cultural literacy merged with political activism, resulting in a surge of BC-infused literature, theatre, visual art, and music (Sambo, 2011:49). In jazz history, these developments are recalled by multi-instrumentalist Pops

[31] From the BC tradition these include African (Natives), Coloureds and Indians.

Mohammed (quoted in wa Bofelo, 2021), who reflected on how "the impact of Black Consciousness in the early and mid-70s saw groups such as *Dashiki Poets*, *Malombo* and *Batsumi* articulate a strong Black and proudly African identity". Mphutlane wa Bofelo (2021) argues that both BC and jazz emerge "out of efforts of Black people to find their own voice in an anti-Black world".[32] As it pertains to both the US and South Africa, jazz was born and developed in response to cultural, social, and economic oppression (Ballantine, 2012:11).

A more subtle political awareness was associated with participating in South African jazz culture during apartheid. Firstly, the music fosters transnational and intercultural exchanges and a sense of urban Black modernity, all of which challenge the essentialised primitive native mythologies that supported South Africa's colonialism and apartheid policies. Consequently, this fostered a new sense of self-awareness and identity that transcended 'tribal' divisions, promoting an internationalist perspective and non-racialism.

In terms of cultural production, this sometimes manifested in seeking inspiration within the African continent and across the black transatlantic[33] for anti-colonial and non-Western knowledge systems and cultural expressions. However, the concerns of BC went beyond merely referencing indigenous art tradition and instead set its sights on the content of the work. It mattered more what the composition communicated to its Black audience about its current state than in fantasising over the past; the work had to conscientize its audience.

Aesthetically, the aim was to rehabilitate the imagery of Blackness along a BC line of thought, including a celebratory portrayal of historical resistance, African history, culture, and mythologies. I view this valorisation of African cultures and epistemes in BC

[32] In the US, the civil rights movement and black liberation struggles fostered racial and political consciousness amongst numerous black jazz musicians and organisations, resulting in an influx of musical recordings, especially during the 1960s & 1970s, where African culture and a politics of resistance informed much of the music. The results of these in terms of their overlaps and divergences with those of South Africa are outside the scope of the thesis but warrant future investigation.
[33] Or Black Atlantic as termed by Paul Gilroy (2022)

alongside other Black transnational ideologies such as Pan-Africanism and Black Nationalism, which coalesced into cultural movements including Negritude, Natural Synthesis, and the Black Arts Movement. I do not intend to erase the distinct historical and ideological contexts of each movement and ideology; rather, I highlight their collective engagement with African culture as a force in shaping identity, unity, and driving cultural and political resistance in an anti-Black world.

Whilst much has been written regarding the influences of BC on the aesthetic productions in South African visual art (Manaka, 1987:16-17; Sambo, 2011:38-59; Hill, 2015), what has yet to be done is a critical reflection on the implication of its visual language within the context of album cover art, and how these resonate in a musical context. What unfolds is a consideration of the locally specific visual language that BC contributed to the wider jazz visual culture.

In her examination of South African album cover histories, Ansell (2016) observes that "a common visual language around jazz coalesced among the community of black artists in 1970s Johannesburg" (2016), referencing the artworks of Zulu Bidi (Figure 10, left) and Hargreaves Ntukwana (Figure 10, right). I see this visual lexicon emerging from the BC visual idioms that were developing simultaneously among a group of artists in the Pretoria-Johannesburg nexus. These works tend to suggest African cosmic currents that were honed by visual artists from South Africa's BC cultural arm, such as Lefifi Tladi, Thami Mnyele, Harry Moyaga, Fikile Magadlela, and Motlhabane Mashiangwako, during the 1970s. The imagery from these artists highlights Black figuration and a tendency to depict them in natural settings, often appearing to float. The facial features are emphasised to the point that racial identity becomes unmistakable. These depictions embody the BC belief of interpreting the world from our own historical, cultural, intellectual, and bodily perspectives as Black people, rather than trying to imitate whiteness or escape the Black body. I interpret Hargreaves Ntukwana's visual language as operating within these contexts.

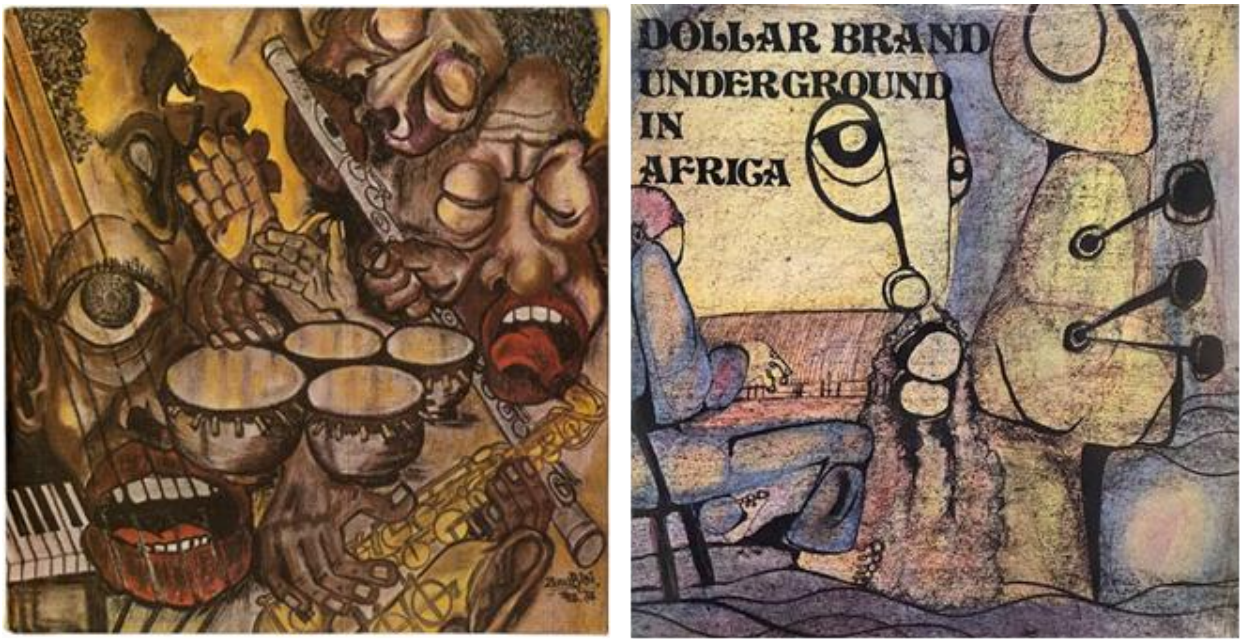

Figure 10: (left) Batsumi. *Batsumi*. 1974. Album cover. (discogs.com).
(right) Dollar Brand. *Underground in Africa*. 1974. Album cover. (discogs.com).

Abdullah Ibrahim's (formerly known as Dollar Brand) musical output from the late 1960s onwards has largely focused on blending indigenous Southern African music with jazz. Commenting on Abdullah Ibrahim's 1969 release *African Sketchbook* (1969), Muller (2013:77) writes that "much like a visual artist, Brand creates a series of sketches of the pieces of South African music and culture that he remembers or wishes to bring to the attention of his listeners". That album initiated a series of works that demonstrate an insistence on exploring a range of South African music as source material in jazz composition. This dialogue often announces itself in some of the titles of his musical works from 1970 to 1980, which include *African Piano* (1973), *Ancient Africa* (1973), *Good News from Africa* (1973), *African Space Programme* (1974), *African Herbs* (1975), and *African Market Place* (1980). In my view, *Underground in Africa* (1974) is part of this extended musical series. The cover, shown in Figure 10 (right), by Ntukwana depicts a scene where landscape, musical instruments, humans, and what I interpret as an ancestral presence (the colossal African head) coexist as a collective entity. With its bold lines, organic and stylised facial features, the colossal head resembles African sculpture. The disproportion between the seated figure, who is markedly smaller than the floating colossal head and

what appears to be the top of a double bass or bass guitar, gives the composition a surreal, almost fantasy-like quality. Despite these unnatural juxtapositions, I do not find the combination of these seemingly disparate elements intrusive, as everything conveys a sense of belonging. The illustration frames the music as expressive of the ethereal, ancestral realm and African culture.

Some of the work in the BC idiom is characterised by figures who often inhabit an environment that suggests otherworldliness through defying gravity, cross-pollination between the physical and spiritual realms, and a distortion or disruption of time and space that defies observable logical reasoning, as shown in Figure 11 (left and right). The images evoke the Black Consciousness credos of "unity, ancestry, and action" (Hill, 2015:12). The figures are consistently in harmony with their environment and engage in actions within the respective compositions.

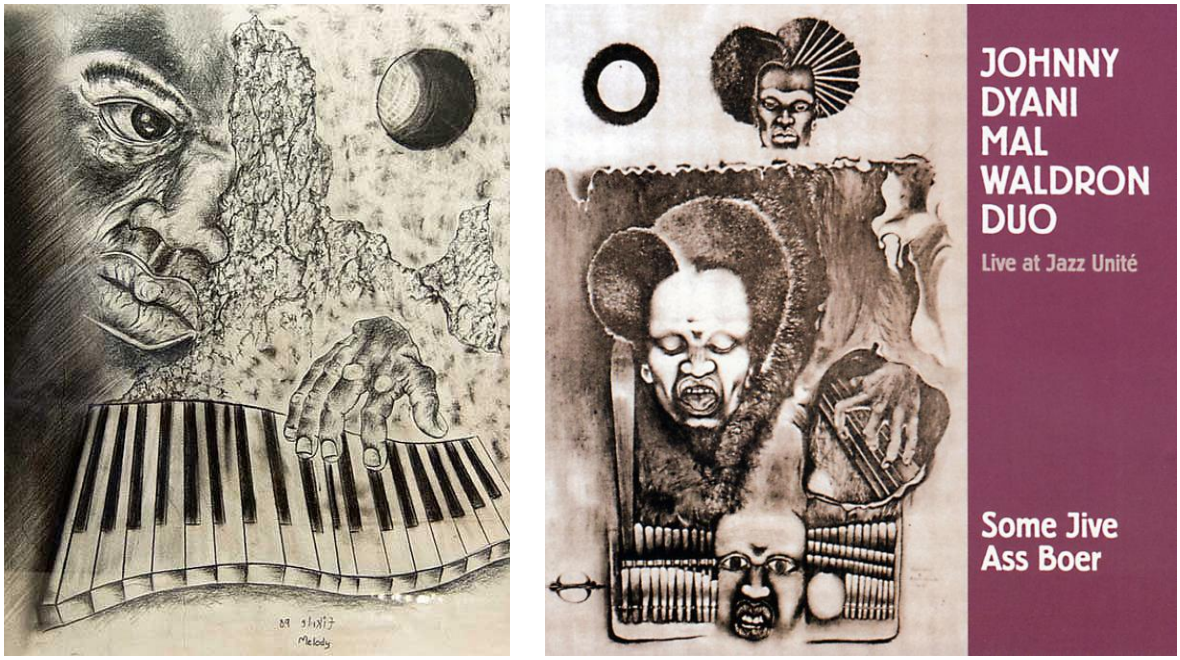

Figure 11: (left) Fikile Magadlela. *Melody*. 1989. Charcoal on paper. 89, 63 x 48 cm. (invaluable.com).
(right) Johnny Dyani & Mal Waldron Duo. *Some Jive Ass Boer ''Live at Jazz Unité''*. 2019. Album cover. (bandcamp.com).

Whilst some authors have associated such visual stylings with surrealism (Manaka, 1987:16; Hattingh, 1998:22), Shannen L. Hill (2015:166) proposes that this framework is

ill-equipped to explain the phenomena, due to its over-emphasis on the dreamscapes formed by the rational and irrational encounters in surrealism, which emanate from harnessing the subconscious. For Hill (2018:196), this viewpoint arises from a failure to seriously consider the thoughts of the artists involved, who individually and collectively pursued the intent of a "concretely visualized…politics of black being". What is being created here is not the product of the subconscious or irrational, but rather a conscious attempt to extend the tentacles of BC through visual art. The illustrations can thus be interpreted as articulations of African cosmologies and epistemologies in visual form, rather than depicting vague Afro-mysticism or surrealism. I argue that the illustrations express a BC orientation towards the central role of African cosmologies in resisting Eurocentric epistemological dominance.

For me, the dominance of figurative elements in this imagery can be aligned with the fact that BC, as a human-centred philosophy, emphasised humans in relation to their history, contemporary reality, and environment, within the context of their connection to the wider world. BC also recognised that social and intellectual faculties form the foundation upon which political traditions are built (Halisi, 1991:100). I trace the origins of these developments in jazz album cover art to an earlier date with the release of Gideon Nxumalo in 1968. It should be noted that BC is a particular ideology reflecting specific material conditions of oppressed Black people. While individual persons can adopt the ideology, its principles can also be embraced more broadly without requiring individuals to identify with or adhere to the entire original ideology fully. Essentially, I am identifying a visual language and placing it within a historical and regionally specific context. I am not aiming to provide an authoritative historical account of these works but rather to offer alternative interpretations.

Gideon Nxumalo (1929–1970) was a jazz pianist, composer, and radio presenter acclaimed for being well-versed in the bop idiom. Nxumalo is one of the earliest recorded musicians to successfully transcend American imitation and forge out a distinctly localised style and sound by incorporating African musical traditions and

instrumentation within an album format that featured solely original compositions. His release, titled Gideon Plays (1968), is a testament to this. Although I find most of the songs upbeat and jolly, there's also an overriding eerie undertone, especially in the first two compositions (*Welele* and *Dimple*). I associate this with the sound of the organ, an instrument I tend to think of as musicalizing the presence of unnatural forces. I attribute this to my experiences with the organ within a predominantly gospel context. The cyclical structure of the music is another factor that induces uncontrolled head-bopping, a sort of shamanic hypnosis. The cover artwork, shown in Figure 12, is attributed to the modernist South African artist Dumile Feni, whose work has also adorned the sleeves of other albums by artists such as Hugh Masekela and Jabula. In a composition dominated by a red background, featured on the front cover of *Gideon Plays* is a rather strange scene that illustrates an adult female figure caressing an infant whose face gives the impression of being older than their body. There are also too many hands in this picture, as a pair of hands from an undepicted body appears right between the child's feet. However, what I find truly unsettling is the object between the infants' legs and lower abdomen, which appears mutilated and exposed. This raises questions about whether the infant is among the living or the dead, or perhaps the supernatural. The cover is thus generative for me and evokes ideas about the mood and themes I associate with the music. On an extra-musical level, I view the album as a meeting point between two Afro-modern theorists, one in the visual and the other in the sonic. It matters not if this was intentional or not, as the album actualises this historic and creative arts encounter.

Figure 12: Gideon Nxumalo. *Gideon Plays*. 1968. Album cover. (discogs.com).

Recently, the BC visual style has reappeared on album covers over the past decade, mainly through the works of contemporary visual artist Mzwandile Bhuthelezi, whose art has appeared on covers for artists such as Shabaka and the Ancestors, Amandla Freedom Ensemble, Benjamin Jephta, and Thandi Ntuli. His illustrations often depict mystical figures, using a limited palette and tonal range of three or fewer colours, excluding the background colour. While artists like Moyaga, Magadlela, and Mashiangwako depict their figures with a fair degree of realism in proportions, skin tones, and bodily details, Tladi, like Bhuthelezi, employs a line-heavy style with bodily distortion, exaggeration, and stylisation reminiscent of classic African sculpture and masks. In the works of these artists, the Black figure is typically illustrated in pencil or charcoal, generally within a monochromatic colour scheme. Bhuthelezi has highlighted Hargreaves Ntukwana as an influence, alongside Feni, Ezrom Legae, and Magadlela (Monaheng, 2015).

In Buthelezi's (2015 & 2014) illustrations for *Homecoming* (Figure 13, right) and *The Offering* (Figure 14, left), as well as *Wisdom of the Elders* (Figure 13, left), the compositions

are characterised by multi-figured arrangements. In both *Homecoming* and *Wisdom of the Elders*, colossal figures hover over smaller ones, perhaps representing ancestral protectors or celestial nurturers, similar to Ntukwana's (Figure 10, right) cover art for *Underground in Africa*. These artworks depict African cosmologies of ancestry and relationality to the earth. In both images, the ancestral figures emerge from the earth, either through the mountain or the ground, possibly suggesting their overarching presence and interconnectedness with the natural world. These themes also appear in *The Offering* (Figure 14, left) which shows two figures kneeling, with one either giving or receiving energy from a sentient tree, thus emphasising the interconnectedness of African spirituality and nature.

Figure 13: (left) Shabaka and the Ancestors. *Wisdom of the Elders*. 2016. Album cover. (bandcamp.com) (right) Benjamin Jephta. *Homecoming*. 2015. Album cover. (bandcamp.com)

In *Oratorio of A Forgotten Youth*, shown in Figure 14 (right), Tawanda Mu Afrika (2023) constructs a scene in which the earthy and cosmic synchronously co-exist: planetary organisms emerge from the soil, and the trees are living entities that replicate female anatomical features, with two towering female heads in profile dominating the composition. Based on their physiognomy, they seem to be twins, the main difference being the circular headbands on their foreheads. These groupings of imagery illustrate a shared concern with figuration, African cosmology, and epistemologies.

Figure 14: (left) Thandi Ntuli. *The Offering*. 2014. Album cover. (bandcamp.com)
(right) Amandla Freedom Ensemble. *Oratorio of A Forgotten Youth*. 2023. Album cover. (spotify.com)

These BC inflections in jazz do not always appear on the album cover, for example, in neither *Zimphonic Suites* (Figure 14, top left) by Zim Ngqawana (2001), Asher Gamedze's (2020) *Dialectic Soul* (Figure 14, top right), nor Tumi Mogorosi's (2014) *Project ELO* (Figure 14, lower middle). Each of these projects is unique musically, visually, and intellectually, with cultural, ideological, and epistemic connections to BC uniting them. The BC artistic community was not homogenous in thought or style, as technical experimentation was considered "fundamentally African in origin" (Hill, 2015:12).

Figure 15: (top left) Zim Ngqawana. *Zimphonic Suites*. 2001. Album cover. (spotify.com).
(top right) Asher Gamedze. *Dialectic Soul*. 2020. Album Cover. (bandcamp.com).
(lower middle): Tumi Mogorosi. *Project ELO*. 2014. Album Cover. (bandcamp.com).

When such images appear on album covers, they influence the perception of the music in several ways. The BC visual idiom shifts the album's visual focus towards a state of consciousness that positions Blackness as a central reference. In other words, it emphasises the politics of race, culture, and history within the context from which the music emerges, becoming an implicit, and at times explicit, form of expression.

Consequently, it weaponizes itself against the dominant anti-Black ideologies, aiming to challenge them. This broadens the discourse beyond individual performers to include the wider racial group, making the representation social rather than personal. However, as previously noted, the music also shapes the perception of the images by framing the visuals in dialogue with the auditory experience, asserting its own discourses through the musical mode. The featured artists in these albums are diverse in style and scope, but it could be argued that they share an Afrocentric orientation of modern jazz. Therefore, what Black Consciousness enables is an unsettling expansion of the dominant jazz visual language, particularly within the South African context, by highlighting other discourses beyond its limited scope. What I intend to explore in the remainder of the study is a further rupture of the lexicon, beginning with an assessment of how abstraction functions as a visual mode within jazz.

A Language of Abstraction

The work examined so far has been solely figurative, with varying degrees of mimesis. Still, each representation features recognisable elements related to a figure, object, or organism, reflecting the prominence of figuration in jazz imagery. In this section, I shift the focus of the study towards abstraction, which was the primary aim. Considering a potential visual language of jazz, abstraction appears to undermine any illusion of coherence by removing recognisable visual motifs that members of a relevant social group can culturally connect. Abstraction presents what appears as idiosyncratic visual configurations, essentially breaking down the visual language and making it hard to identify a common visual grammar. These were my ideas about abstraction, so I wanted to critically explore its possibilities and limitations as a means of representing jazz and highlighting its cultural contexts within the genre.

I wanted to explore what a possible vocabulary might look like in the abstract language. Considering the saturation with objects and figures in the previous section, it is important to consider what their absence could imply for constructing a grammar. This highlights

two main concerns I address, which relate to the limits of abstraction in terms of interpretation and representation. These issues are further elaborated on in subsequent chapters. As this shift in focus represents the main concern of the study, the initial steps are to define abstraction and to situate it within South African jazz visual culture through the study of selected representations.

Mimetic pictorial art is characterised by a relationality between the artwork and what it represents in terms of resemblance. Abstraction, on the other hand, involves either the reconfiguration or distortion of mimetic conventions or an original arrangement of lines, colours, shapes, forms, and textures for their own sake. Abstraction, similar to figuration, has its degrees of variation and articulation.

John H. Brown (cited in Mion, 2021:78) argued that abstract art can be understood through two main subcategories: schematising abstraction, which involves using schematisation to depict a variety of figurative representations, and non-objective abstraction, also known as non-figurative or pure abstraction. Two different methods of pictorial abstraction emphasise this distinction: the first begins with a natural depiction that is gradually reconstructed, while the second involves creating the image purely through the combination of lines, colours, values, textures, shapes, and forms. Typically, the spectrum of abstraction extends from figurative on one end to non-figurative on the other. Some work by David Koloane, for example, could be classified as figurative abstraction due to its rendering of figures with expressive gestural brushstrokes, to the point where the figures begin to blur, often beyond recognition. As previously demonstrated, most research focusing on the visual aspects of jazz tends to emphasise figural forms, resulting in gaps in the historical record and insufficient theorisation of non-figurative abstraction as a mode of representation.

In examining the South African visual domain, abstraction as a jazz representation style seems to reveal gaps in documentation. I attribute these gaps to a lack of scholarship on abstraction outside white circles during the apartheid era. While I acknowledge the possibility that this form of representation was never widely embraced in the country, I

also believe there is a likelihood that it suffers from a lack of documentation and industry support rather than its absence, particularly considering how politicised Black representation was in the visual arts during the apartheid years. In 1990, art historian and then director of the South African National Gallery, Marilyn Martin (1991:25-39), questioned whether the mainstream South African visual arts industry would be more receptive to Black artists exploring abstraction under the then-upcoming new political dispensation, as opposed to the marginalisation common during apartheid. It is within this context that my study of historical precedents for this particular mode of jazz representation is geographically more Western-focused than previous sections of this writing.

My analysis begins with two works: one by Philiswa Lila (b. 1988) and the other by Kagiso Patrick Mautloa (b. 1952).[34] It is clear that although both *Jazz* (Lila, 2014) (Figure 16) and *Jazz Vibes* (Mautloa, 2021) (Figure 17) expressively make use of line, colour, and shapes, they both utilise variations of the dominant visual language of jazz, which is the depiction of instruments. In *Jazz* (Figure 16), Lila depicts an outline of a saxophone and a fully rendered trumpet, the two leading jazz instrumental icons in her composition, blending figuration and abstraction. In *Jazz Vibes* (Figure 17), Mautloa depicts a visually complex surface featuring line, colour, geometric shapes, figures, piano keys, and Western musical notation, all executed in a roughly textured finish. Throughout the composition, I am most fascinated by the inclusion of two f-hole symbols (one yellow and one blue) painted on the middle left of the canvas because these often appear on double basses, guitars, and violins. They are carved onto both left and right sides of the instrument's body and serve to emit the internal vibrations of the instrument to the outside, thereby affecting its tone. I found this effective in highlighting ideas about physical musical qualities, possibly

[34] Jazz does not feature as a sustained influence in the work of visual artist, scholar, and curator Philiswa Lila. The selected artwork represents only a fraction of a practice that broadly explores ideas of memory, identities, and history. Although Mautloa's oeuvre reflects a broader interest in jazz than Lila's, he more frequently investigates the city of Johannesburg. The artists examined in the next chapter will be those who jazz forms a central part of their creative process or aesthetic inquiries.

reverberating both from the artwork's entire surface on a material level—through the artist's interaction with the material—and visually through the composition.

Figure 16: Philiswa Lila. *Jazz*. 2014. Oil on varnished canvas. 55 x 132 cm. (mmutleak.com).

Figure 17: Kagiso Patrick Mautloa. *Jazz vibes*. 2022. Acrylic and collage on canvas. 120 x 170 cm. (bagfactory.org)

These artworks, despite their expressive use of colour and shapes, do not significantly deviate from the prevailing visual language, as both incorporate the motif of

instrumentation. Both pieces comment on the performance aspects of the art form by emphasising instrumentation, and in the case of *Jazz Vibes*, musical notation symbols are also included. However, the expressive use of colour may reflect the perceived playfulness of the music, particularly in terms of its risk-taking and improvisational nature. This lends jazz a degree of musical informality, contrasting with the rigidity of the score. We must, however, be careful not to overextend this informality into ideas of unrestrained spontaneity and childlike playfulness, which relate more to the myth of primitivism than to actual jazz practice. This point of contention will be elaborated in the subsequent chapter. I believe that the inclusion of abstraction in these works might loosely allude to the formal qualities of the music, though not in a literal sense. To further explore the language of abstraction, I turn to the album cover.

It goes without saying that most album covers in South Africa are in a figurative style, with pure abstraction being a notable exception in terms of representation. I would suggest that a key factor for this trend could be linked to the role of music in the marketplace. To maximise profits, the music industry relies on exploiting the audience's familiarity with the physical world, while also using distinction to separate musical products. This is particularly true when purchasing a physical album at a music store, as the customer needs to identify the album visually, given the size of the record. In such cases, the portrait, which is the dominant form, acts as a cultural identification document. This becomes less relevant in the streaming era, where searches are more streamlined to names and titles, thus making the album cover largely secondary for product identification. Non-figurative abstraction requires the audience to either be familiar with the album cover or to use the titles for confirmation.

An example of abstraction is the 1999 album release titled *Ingoma* by jazz multi-instrumentalist, composer, and arranger Zim Ngqawana, which features an artwork dated to 1994 titled *Okare* by poet, visual artist, and activist Lefifi Tladi[35] (Hattingh, 1998). The visual composition, shown in Figure 18, depicts an unidentifiable form with a top

[35] Tladi also features as a performer on the album.

section dominated by a black organic shape that suggests an oval or egg-like shape in its centre. The bottom section contains another organic black shape that stands out due to its proportion and contrast against the watery blue and light green curved lines, two of which intersect the black shape, while two are placed within its interior. I believe that, by removing the dominant figurative language, the cover encourages, and even compels, a meditative contemplation of the music. After all, signs and icons significantly engage the audience through the directness of their messaging.

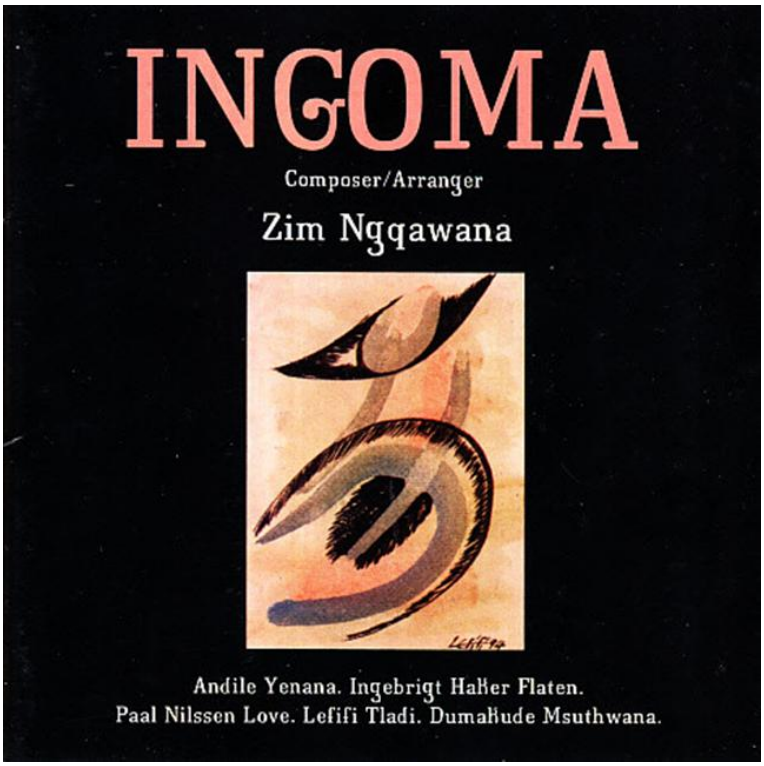

Figure 18: Zim Ngqawana. *Ingoma*. 1999. Album cover. (discogs.com).

Although I recognise that all material can be personally interpreted, I would argue that by removing a clear relatability between the physical world and visual representation, non-figurative abstraction invites personal interpretation and visual meditation that unfolds distinctly. It is not that representation is negated but rather that it is realised through different means than how everyday life is experienced through sight and signs, thus slowing down the act of looking.

In a more recent example of this record cover display strategy, an artwork by Mzwandile Buthelezi adorns Herbie Tsoaeli's EP (Extended Play) titled *Ndiyakudinga* (2023). The work shown in Figure 19 features swirling, thick black lines on the left, executed in charcoal. The darker areas indicate variations in pressure applied to the surface. It is unclear where these lines begin and end, so although they suggest motion and dynamism, their direction remains ambiguous. These lines are complemented by shorter horizontal strokes in burnt sienna that appear to form a procession moving either from left to right or in the opposite direction. It is precisely this elusive and ambiguous state that I argue invites a slowed-down, meditative viewing experience. Perhaps this speaks to the expectation that artworks are always 'about something'. Even though mimesis is abandoned, the image is still viewed within the context of visual culture, if not art history, and more explicitly in dialogue with the musical recording. The titles of the album and songs extend this zone of interpretation, which directly influences the viewing experience. The music album's unique multimodal status as an object, rich with textual, pictorial, and sonic information, further reinforces the expectation that the image is 'about something'. Due to this multimodal status, the interpretation is not always static but rather in a perpetual process of unfolding and becoming, as it is influenced by enculturation, mood, personal taste, and experience, all of which also inform the musical experience. However, I also want to make it clear that the cover need not serve the role of illustrating the contents of the music; it can equally provide a supplementary experience instead, by speaking to other ideological or cultural facets not directly referenced in the music thus by way of juxtaposition and oftentimes unintentionally allude to connections not previously made.

Figure 19: Herbie Tsoaeli. *Ndiyakudinga*. 2023. Album cover. (bandcamp.com).

In the US, the importance of abstraction is much more significant compared to South Africa, as seen in key works such as *Mingus Ah Um* (Figure 21, right) by Charles Mingus (1959) and perhaps most notably on *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* (Figure 20, right) by Ornette Coleman (1960). Despite this, the overabundance of portraiture, mainly through photography, keeps abstraction at best as a secondary form of representation. While there is a tendency to use abstraction in more experimental and avant-garde leaning music, such as *Ancestors* (Figure 20, left) by Wadada Leo Smith and Tebogo Louis Moholo-Moholo (2012), albums like *Latin Shadows* (Figure 21, right) by the organ virtuoso Shirley Scott (1966) show that there is no consistent use of imagery, as the music on this record features danceable, accessible Latin jazz, which is much easier on the ear than the recordings mentioned earlier. The Ornette Coleman release features the painting *White Light* by Jackson Pollock, which can be fully viewed when the LP gatefold is opened. This Coleman-Pollock[36] encounter stands out due to the high-profile statures of both artists

[36] I am referring to the sonic-visual marriage between Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* and Pollock's painting *White Light*.

and the avant-garde discourses linked with their works during particular historical junctures in their respective fields.

Sparti (2010:120) proposes that the convergence between the abstraction of Pollock and jazz might lie in Pollock's working process, which he links to surrealist automatism[37]. The argument proposes that the conscious/unconscious relationality can be discerned in both automatism and improvisation (Sparti, 2010:118–120). Improvisation from this viewpoint does not call for a surrendering of musical knowledge but instead relies on the relaxation of "cognitive control over the musical direction" (Sparti, 2010:118–120). This is the result of the conscious and unconscious duality being "transitory and reversible" (Sparti, 2010:118–120). This application runs counter to the traditionalist interpretation of automatism, which calls for the expulsion of reason by tapping into an uncontrollable outpouring of the unconscious (Cramer & Grant, 2020).

Figure 20: (left) Wadada Leo Smith & Tebogo Louis Moholo-Moholo. *Ancestors*. 2012. Album cover. (spotify.com).
(right) Ornette Coleman Double Quartet. *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation*. 1961. Album cover. (discogs.com).

[37] A set of surrealist movement artmaking techniques that seek to suppress conscious thought and instead facilitate an outpouring of the unconscious in the creative process.

Figure 21: (left) Shirley Scott. *Latin Shadows*. 1966. Album cover. (discogs.com).
(right) Charles Mingus. *Mingus Ah Um*. 1959. Album cover. (spotify.com).

The abstraction-improvisation thread is a recurring claim that I critically examine in the next chapter by invoking King (2009:140) in their argument that any study linking music and the visual arts must recognise the differences between the two forms, rather than suggesting that the space between them has been or can be bridged.

This critical position is influenced by Harris-Kelley's (2004:249) caution against making the "easy analogy" between playing jazz and constructing pictorial images. This mistake can happen when structural and formal techniques are equated across both practices, often done uncritically on the assumption that there is a self-evident interchangeability between music and visual art, looking and listening, playing jazz and painting. Such an approach could lead to a distorted view of the processes involved in creating both art forms. Harris-Kelley (2004:249) maintains that without a careful study of the technical differences in each medium, this approach risks hiding more than it reveals. My aim was not only to explore the supposed parallels between music and visual art but also to acknowledge their differences and the potential loss of meaning in translation. To support this, I incorporated basic principles of music theory in Chapter 3 as part of my

analytical toolkit. This allowed me to critically examine how music is represented and interpreted visually, especially through abstract pictorial arrangements.

Conclusion

Jazz, as I have demonstrated, has a visual tradition as old as its musical heritage. The effects of this tradition are complex and extend in multiple directions. Firstly, since imagery representing the genre is mainly figurative across various media, the visual language achieves unity through these forms of representation. The primary motifs include illustrations of musicians, often alongside their instruments, captured in static poses or spontaneous performance shots. I argue that such images emphasise the performance aspects of the genre. The album cover serves as a medium of expression, allowing for a closer examination of the dialogue between visual and auditory elements, with visuals providing interpretive clues for the sound. In South African jazz visual culture, BC challenged traditional jazz visual language by openly addressing ideological issues, thus disrupting the existing lexicon by expanding its expressive range beyond performance-related themes to include the music's political, social, and cultural contexts. Outside these expanded boundaries, abstraction was introduced as a mode of expression, unsettling established norms and providing an alternative approach. In the following chapters, I examine historical debates about the interaction and analyse the theoretical and procedural relationship between jazz and abstraction.

Chapter 3: Jazz and Abstraction, Between Theory, Ideology and Interpretation

Introduction

The second chapter aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of a selective visual history of jazz. Focusing on jazz visual culture, I described the various ways in which the genre has been expressed through album cover art, visual art, and photography. Through contextual and visual analysis, we outlined a visual vocabulary based on a figurative lexicon often depicted through representations of jazz musicians and/or instruments associated with the genre. Concerning the language of abstraction, which is the focus of this study, I introduced several examples from jazz visual culture and began to explore the implications and challenges of interpretation and representation arising from non-figurative abstraction. While most artworks discussed were album covers, viewed within the context of their accompanying music, I now wish to shift the focus toward standalone works to demonstrate how they complicate the sonic-visual relationship, which I find valuable for critically analysing their interrelation.

In this chapter, I examine various interpretative frameworks that have been employed to explore the relationship between jazz and abstraction, with particular emphasis on representation and interpretation. I draw upon multiple disciplines, including jazz criticism, music theory, image theories, and iconology, to elucidate the dialogical registers inherent in this relationship. Accordingly, this chapter establishes a theoretical framework for understanding this connection and serves as a foundational basis for the critical analysis of Mongezi Ncapayi's work, which will be addressed in the subsequent and final chapter of this study. Furthermore, I analyse the graphic language scores of Wadada Leo Smith (b. 1941), as they present a valuable opportunity to consider abstraction as a form of musical language. Wadada (his preferred moniker) originates from the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, where he developed his musical and compositional skills. In 1967, as part of his musical development, he

devised an idiosyncratic musical notation system, which he named *Ankhrasmation*. This visual language score is characterised by the use of colour, shapes, linework, and symbols. Since this graphic work is primarily intended for musical interpretation, rather than being solely influenced by or reflective of music as a subject, it provides a case study for expressing and interpreting sonic ideas through abstraction. Finally, the chapter contends that non-figurative works should be regarded as representational within the domain of iconography. To contextualise these discussions, I examine the work of Jennie C. Jones, whose creative output effectively underscores the overarching concerns addressed in this chapter.

Surveying the Modernist Avant-gardes in Music and Visual Art: The Case of Jennie C. Jones

Jeannie C. Jones (b.1968) is an African American conceptual contemporary artist whose work expresses itself through painting, sculpture, drawing, sound collages, and installations. Conceptually, her work focuses on highlighting the unaccounted for, peripheralized, and attempted erasure of Black thought in modernist discourse, particularly in visual art and music, with an emphasis on jazz and abstract painting. Her creative breakthrough occurred when she noticed the large amount of time spent curating music to accompany her art-making process (Oliver, 2015:12). This led to the realisation that music was an essential aspect of her practice; since then, she has pursued direct inquiries to explore listening as a conceptual practice (Dafoe, 2022).

Jones's oeuvre tends to focus on objects related to sound treatment, transmission, recording, and distribution, including materials such as acoustic panels, wires, earbuds, and plastic CD racks. She might be broadly viewed as a sound historian who examines what she calls the "physical residue of music" (Vitiello, 2012) or the materiality of music. The minimalist paintings featuring acoustic panels are among her most recognised works. In these pieces, she explores the largely underexamined connections between African American composers, musicians, and modern art by highlighting the

simultaneous innovations within the avant-garde movements of the 1940s to 1970s, particularly in jazz music and abstract painting (Oliver, 2015:12). While several of her early drawings depict literal and figurative sound devices such as speakers, I want to emphasise her abstract work that engages with sound both visually and aurally.

In *Red Recording Gray (for Elvin Jones)* (Figure 22), Jones (2016) creates a square composition featuring varying shades of red and grey. While most of the artist's current paintings could be classified as hard-edge[38], such as *Red Break* (Jones, 2024b) and *Neutral, Soft, Sharps* (Jones, 2024a), this canvas belongs to a group that, in my view, blends both gestural[39] and hard-edge abstraction. The use of red is lively as it appears on the far left, disappears towards the centre, and reappears on the far right. It is interrupted by the dark grey hue, which, upon closer inspection, seems to give the red dynamism by defining its contours. On the left, the grey appears to lighten as it overlays the red, which quietly simmers beneath the grey. This overlay creates a vertical separation between the tonal shift from the grey on the far left to the adjacent grey. The title of the work reveals it as an ode to one of the most influential and stylistically innovative modernist jazz drummers, Elvin Jones.

[38] A style of abstract painting that found prominence in the 1960s and is characterised by defined edges between colour areas and the use of flat colours. Artists whose work is descriptive of the style include Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelley, and Lorser Feitelso.

[39] Alternatively referred to as Action Painting, it is a style of abstract painting whereby the artist employs techniques that leave visible traces of their gestural pigment application on their surface. Artists associated with the term include Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Willem de Kooning.

Figure 22: Jennie C. Jones. *Red Recording Gray (for Elvin Jones)*. 2016. Painting. 121.9 x 121.9 cm. (artbasel.com).

Elvin Jones is renowned for his distinctive use of polyrhythms[40] in his playing, which featured on canonical jazz albums such as John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* (1964) and Wayne Shorter's *Speak No Evil* (1966), to name but two examples. *Suppose Red Recording Gray (for Elvin Jones)* is viewed from the perspective of highlighting simultaneous innovations, particularly in jazz and visual art. In that case, the artwork might be interpreted as an intellectual challenge to re-engage with the innovations in abstraction and Elvin Jones's own rhythmic stylings, not as separate occurrences as they are often understood, but as interconnected. This proposition raises two follow-up questions that I will first outline broadly here, before attempting a more detailed and contextualised theorisation later in the chapter. Primarily, I need to clarify the nature of the relationship between jazz and abstract art. It must be established whether the interaction occurs

[40] Polyrhythm in music is the simultaneous use of more than one rhythm in a given composition.

primarily at a formal level, in terms of similar techniques and processes. Secondly, it is necessary to determine whether the engagement is at an ideological or conceptual level—that is, whether both visual artists and jazz musicians share underlying conceptual concerns.

Considering the conceptually rich materiality of acoustic absorbers, these mainly emphasise sound's physical and visible qualities to the audience. Acoustic absorbers serve to reduce echoes and reverberation by defusing and absorbing sound waves, making them ideal for soundproofing spaces.

At a material level, there is a peculiar relationship between the canvas and the acoustic absorbers that could be perceived as two distinct sound frequencies, reflecting how both individually and collectively alter the presence of sound in the room. Formally, if we consider the stylistic registers in the composition, it could be interpreted that the painting showcases an interplay between structure (hard edge) and loose play (gesture. Consequently, both could be loosely seen as the reconciliation of more than one register within a composition. However, these interpretations do not necessarily lead to polyrhythms. In visual formal analysis, rhythm is described as the effect of creating a sense of movement by manipulating elements such as line, form, colour, and shape to evoke the impression of motion. Since polyrhythms essentially involve the merging of multiple rhythmic structures within a composition, it could be argued that the dynamism of the hard edge and gestural abstraction may be viewed as separate directional structures. Nevertheless, this raises questions of historical and contextual analysis, as it would then be necessary to demonstrate how this specifically relates to jazz, rather than other musical polyrhythmic registers.

Focusing on ideological concerns as the subject of study, I begin with an examination of the tendencies that influenced minimalism and gestural abstraction, and explore their theoretical foundations. There is a common perception of minimalism in visual art as the tendency to simplify representation to its most essential compositional elements by eliminating detail. This often results in a preference for sparse, geometric arrangements.

A close precursor to this tendency in jazz could be modal jazz, especially when considered within its historical context as a post-bebop development.

Whereas bebop was characterised by fast-paced, complex chord changes and lively harmony, modal improvisation instead used fewer chords and more sparse harmonies. In this historical context, emerging as a reaction to bebop, modal jazz can be seen as part of a minimalist trend in jazz; however, this does not necessarily mean it was a minimalist style of music. Stylistic minimalism in jazz might be more accurately attributed to the work of trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith, where the music embraced a spacious and minimalist palette while still maintaining the musicians' unique qualities and voices. This suggests that, at least from a formal perspective, minimalism has at best a loose association with jazz music – a connection that does not amount to direct correlation – as both modal jazz and the work of Wadada is still defined by improvisation, individuality, and symbolic storytelling, all qualities that minimalism in modern art tends to avoid. Minimalism also encourages the use of basic, predetermined structures, often geometric, whereas the musical structures of Wadada are both highly complex and resist stylistic serialisation. Therefore, on a broad level, this appears not to be a relationship of complete congruency, at least across different modes.

In summary, Jennie C. Jones's work highlights a range of issues discussed in this chapter. The first concerns the historical asymmetric relationship between Black contributions to modernist discourses in jazz and the visual arts and their lack of recognition. I will explore this by focusing on theorists and artists whose contributions I believe warrant attention due to the criticality of their contributions to the jazz abstract art discourse. Secondly, there is a deliberate effort to showcase the physical and perceptible qualities of music in some practitioners' works; this development will be further emphasised through a focus on materiality and process. Both conceptually and formally, the work necessitates an analysis of the nature of the relationship, with a critical examination of the underlying theoretical and formal connections between the forms. That is, we should consider whether it is possible to interrogate the relationship by primarily analysing the visual

work, then interpreting it through theoretical dimensions, while remaining critical of the implications of these findings. These issues encapsulate the main concerns of the study, which relate to the boundaries of both representation and interpretation in the context of abstraction as a visual form of musical expression. To this end, Wadada Leo Smith's work serves as an ideal site of inquiry for my discussions since his practice explores the language of visual abstraction as a mode of musical interpretation.

Review of the Theoretical Tendencies in the Jazz and Abstraction Interrelation

In this overview of the theoretical foundations linking jazz and abstract art, I outline various theorizations on the jazz-abstraction relationship as a way to better clarify where my interventions differ or align with the existing body of knowledge. I begin by establishing preliminaries between music and abstract art, then jazz and abstract art, before shifting the discussion to theoretical tools of interpretation and establishing working definitions.

I trace the origins of the thesis of abstraction in jazz to 19th-century art discourses that coincided with the developments that would lead to 20th-century abstraction in the visual arts. One of the leading figures in this discourse was English essayist Walter Pater,[41] who is credited with the maxim "all art constantly aspires to the condition of music" (Herzog, 1996:122). This condition, associated with music, is that of purity of form. While the arts of poetry, drama, literature, and visual arts are argued to rely on narrative and representation, music exists through the purity of sound. It requires no literal narration, moral appeals, or mimetic depictions of worldly references as the other arts do. Music is therefore regarded as the most abstract of art forms, capable of speaking directly to the senses, whereas the other arts aim to make their mediums transparent. It is essential to recognise that these comments were made with specific reference to Western classical music and the arts at that stage of their development. It was argued that

[41] Pater was a notable member of the 19th century Aestheticism movement that is credited with promoting the "art for art's sake" slogan.

this condition of music embodies the ideal state of artistic expression toward which all arts should aspire. The argument is not that music cannot be mimetic in its representation, but instead that it is not expected to be, whereas the pictorial arts in most cultures operated under the expectation of mimesis.

Formalist Clement Greenberg (1965:6) later echoed these findings in his seminal essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* where he characterises music as the art that contains the fewest references to anything outside of itself. Roger Fry (1998:12) also commented that in music and architecture, the imitation of actual objects is largely a negligible quality. This proposition would go on to inform developments such as high formalism in the 20th century. These conclusions are prefigured by abstraction as an aesthetic purism, which entails a compositional construction process that eschews adherence to mimetic principles of representation.

Jazz is often compared to abstract art in various ways that I explore. Firstly, there are similarities between both practices in that they emphasise the creative process rather than rigidly adhering to a pre-established structure (Liu & Adams, 2017:57). African-American abstract artist Jack Whitten (2020:411) writes the following:

> Abstract artists are attracted to jazz because of its expandable qualities. Jazz imposes no limit on feeling and its basic elements of spontaneity/improvisation preserves the freshness of spirit. Spirit does not like stale air! Spontaneity/improvisation are necessary ingredients of art.

This explanation equates spontaneity found in visual art with jazz improvisation, firstly on formal and procedural terms and secondly, through the realm of theory.

Apart from improvisation, jazz and abstraction are also understood to share an emphasis on formal sensibilities, including rhythm, timbre, and gesture (Shaw-Miller, 2022:4-5). Rhythm is a primary feature in jazz, and commonly denotes its distinctive sense of 'swing'.[42] Generally, rhythm refers to the steady pattern created by a sequence of notes played with varying stress and duration, emphasised by a steady beat typically provided

[42] A musical sense of forward momentum and propulsion.

by the drummer or, less conventionally, the bassist. In visual art formalist language, rhythm refers to literal or implied movement within a composition, achieved by arranging elements such as colour, line, form, or patterns in a way that suggests a sense of movement.

Timbre refers to the tonal quality of sounds or instruments, often described as the unique colour of a particular sound or instrument. In abstract painting, colour is of primary importance and is often seen as carrying its own signification while shaping an essential compositional and interpretative element. Tonal quality in music works alongside "technique and style of performance (mode of attack, breath control, physical deportment, etc.)", and contributes to a musician's distinctive sound or 'voice' (Shaw-Miller, 2022:5).

Gesture is another element that gains emphasis in jazz music, especially in improvisation. This refers to both physical gestures and the description of phrasing: how a musician articulates a specific note within a sequence of notes. Other descriptions include accent and punctuation. In the visual realm, particularly in abstract art styles such as abstract expressionism, gesture is a key aspect that defines both the content and style of painting, where the artwork is a record of the artist's physical interaction with their materials (between pigments, brushes, and canvas); it is an event. In both media, gesture implicates the body.

Diverting from a primarily formal to a theoretical focus, I further extrapolate from the thesis of abstraction as a process into the developments of jazz for its basis as an abstract idiom. According to Stewart (2011:336), "music can be said to be representational in the sense that musicians generally draw upon certain stylistic conventions that invoke and, in effect, represent a particular musical style or tradition". From this application, any musical style, when viewed in terms of its evolutionary developments, can be subject to an abstractionist process of its traditional forms. Representation in this sense is not related to mimesis of the natural or industrial world of sounds, but rather adherence to established musical forms. In the broadest terms, it can be argued that jazz, born in a

predominantly Western culture and society, represented radical diversions from the harmonic and rhythmic conventions found mainly in Western concert music.

Extending this perspective further, bebop, in relation to both prior jazz tradition and Western popular music form up to that period, was engaged in a process of abstraction comparable to the broader interests in modernist abstraction (Stewart, 2011:336). However, it must be noted that whilst modernist abstraction promoted the ideal of a self-contained and autonomous art, bebop was intrinsically rooted in signification (Ramsey Jr, 2003:108).

Whilst the bebop revolution might be credited with contributing to jazz as a form of art music, free jazz[43] challenged the very idea of jazz as a containable and codified whole to the point of rupturing the borders of the genre in some people's view. The music challenged "jazz's traditional relationship to popular song form, controlled improvisation, blues tonality, and rhythmic regularity" (Ramsey Jr., 2011:353). Thus, free jazz can also be interpreted as an abstractionist tendency of jazz traditional forms.

Having outlined some key theoretical foundations, I now want to explore issues of abstraction and jazz as they pertain to visual representation and interpretation by focusing on two related but distinct interpretive models: *jazz as an aesthetic model* and *jazz as a paradigm*.

Jazz as an Aesthetic Model

The first interpretive framework I will refer to is *jazz as an aesthetic model*. Here, the assumption is that the artist aims to replicate specific musical aspects of jazz within the languages of visual art, and therefore the interpretations rely heavily on identifying formal similarities. As an explanatory model, it requires understanding the fundamental

[43] A set of diverse styles of jazz music that emerged in the late 1950s, defined by a breaking away of common principles of tonality, and regular rhythmic and melodic patterns. The music was also commonly associated with black radical politics of the civil rights and black power movements that fermented during the same era.

characteristics of the genre as a prerequisite to assessing its presence and influence in a visual artwork. I suggest that the validity of these should be weighed against image production, procedural, and compositional factors.

In applying *jazz as an aesthetic model* framework, the composition by modernist Piet Mondrian (1944), *Victory Boogie Woogie*, shown in Figure 23, can be viewed as a form of visual dynamic rhythm. Recognised as Piet Mondrian's final work, *Victory Boogie Woogie* was incomplete at the time of his death in 1944. The title references boogie-woogie music, a piano-based blues style that became a popular jazz idiom during the 1920s. This was a style of music that emphasised rhythm over melody (Leach, 2015:42-3). Further referenced in the title of the artwork is an earlier painting, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1943). Like its predecessor, *Victory Boogie Woogie* features a grid arrangement of squares and rectangles on a square canvas, with colours limited to yellows, greys, blues, blacks, and reds. However, unlike *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, *Victory Boogie Woogie* is displayed with the canvas positioned diagonally in a diamond formation, and the artwork is unfinished. The shapes lack geometric consistency; its lines are far less symmetrically refined, and so are its shapes, which feature overflowing outlines. These features are uncharacteristic of Mondrian's late period.

Although the title of the artwork makes the comparisons with boogie-woogie inevitable, the artist also expressed an affinity in 1943 when they commented that "I view boogie-woogie as homogenous with my intention in painting…dynamic rhythms" (cited in Leach, 2015:42). A prime example of dynamic rhythm in jazz is syncopation, which typically refers to "distributing rhythmic figures and accents on unexpected locations within the measure" (Terefenko, 2014:20), essentially a way of increasing musical excitement by deviating from the established beat or playing 'offbeat'. The closest visual approximation to syncopation could be the repetition of both shapes and colours that are organised both vertically and horizontally in a non-uniform sequence. Another characteristic of boogie-woogie music is the repetitive and persistent bass line, which James Johnson Sweeney (Kline, 2018), in their assessment of *Broadway Boogie-*

Woogie (1943), compared to the consistency and recurrence of the right angle in the canvas, *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1944), and even in its unfinished state, this work displays a similar motif of right-angle repetition throughout the canvas.

Another aspect of the work that can be considered in terms of jazz practice is its unfinished state. Mondrian declared the work completed on two separate occasions only to rework it each time (Kline, 2018). Although governed by separate principles of composition and presentation, jazz compositions 'completed' as studio recordings or sheet music are continually reworked each time they are performed.

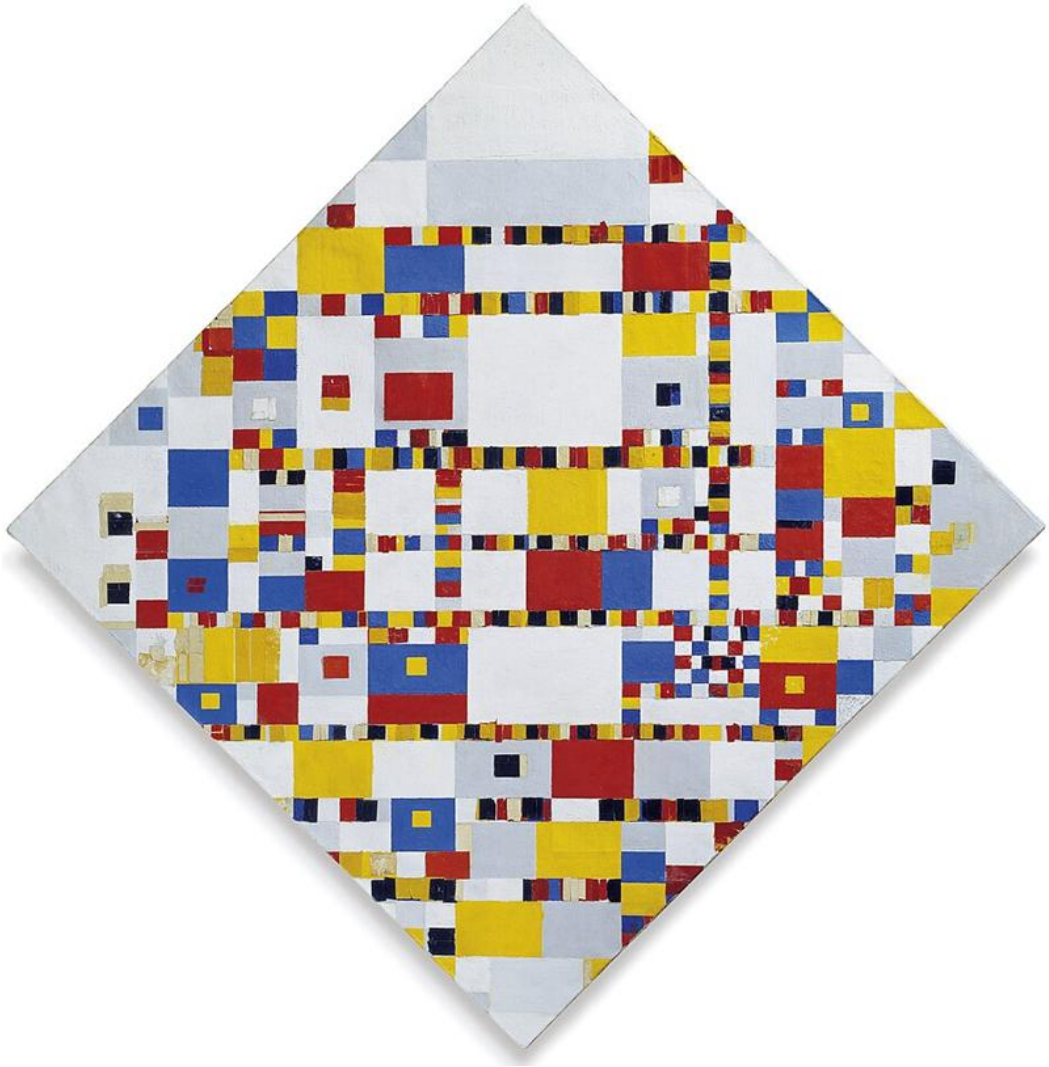

Figure 23: Piet Mondrian. *Victory Boogie Woogie*. 1944. Oil on canvas. 127 cm × 127 cm. (Wikipedia.org).

Worke Kosrof (b. 1950) is an Ethiopian-born contemporary painter. His visual language recontextualises and reconfigures Amharic script [44] into abstract forms. Amharic calligraphy interplays with gestural marking and often vibrant colours as seen in *Coltrane's Notebook* (Kosrof, 2012) (Figure 24). Kosrof explains that his intention with the inclusion of the text into his visual language is seldom to illustrate literal words but rather to "disassemble, elongate, deconstruct/re-form the script to create a 'visual vocabulary' that can speak and be 'read' by all viewers" (Art Africa, 2018). This reveals that the essence of his inclusion of text is not lexical but rather expressive, and the language forms a basis for thinking about mark-making, which is animated through abstraction.

Jazz is another major influence on his work. Kosrof understands the confluence between jazz and his use of Amharic script as follows:

> Like jazz music, the script provides a repertoire of dense, yet supple, elements that lend themselves well to visual improvisation. Jazz also influences my sense of composition: like improvisational music, the language symbols can be juxtaposed on canvas in nonverbal 'word-plays' to create a visual language of form and color, rhythm and movement. (DiRubbo, n.d.)

From this statement, Kosrof emphasises jazz improvisation as his preferred aesthetic model, aiming to achieve visual resolution through his procedural mark-making. Improvisation can be broadly understood as the process of composing through musical performance; therefore, such a process cannot be notated onto a score before it is performed, but instead relies on spontaneity and in-the-moment musical decisions. When a jazz performer improvises, it is often referred to as taking a "solo"; this involves the individual deviating from the established rhythmic and melodic collective framework. Improvisation as a practice involves the real-time management of rhythm, timbre, and gesture. In Kosrof's approach, improvisation signifies a process of both extracting and altering existing material, that of the Amharic script. As I will subsequently demonstrate, this is a common practice within jazz.

[44] The Amharic script is the Ethiopian text form of the Amharic language, the country's national language.

Figure 24: Wosene Kosrof, *Coltrane's Notebook*. 2012. Acrylic on canvas. 81.28 cm x 81.28 cm. (wosene.com).

Jazz as a Paradigm

The second conceptual framework of interpretation I want to highlight is what I refer to as *jazz as a paradigm*. I understand the term paradigm to denote a model or framework upon which worldviews are constructed. Here, besides including formal influences, the artist engages jazz at a conceptual or philosophical level by focusing on the underlying ideas and logic of the genre. Shaw-Miller (2022:21) writes the following:

> Jazz is not, then, a term that signifies a *style* of music but is rather a term that delineates a *musical discourse*: a point or a prism through which several codes, influences, and ideologies creatively collide and mingle. 'Musical' is not used

> simply to signify sound, for jazz is not just a sound, any more than any other music, it is a practice, a discursive practice.

Jazz as a cultural product is clearly saturated with ideologies concerning class, gender, race, and nationality. In the visual arts, these concerns are expressed through aesthetic considerations, where the artist seeks resolution within the languages and traditions of their respective medium, in expressive terms that reference jazz on a conceptual level rather than merely a formal one.

In art historical terms, the New York School[45] probably has the most well-documented affinity and proximity to jazz. Shapiro and Shapiro (1992:5) assert that it is unquestionable that abstract expressionism embodied an improvisational quality characteristic of jazz. Two distinct stylistic strands emerged within abstract expressionism: chromatic (colour field abstraction) and gestural abstraction, also known as action painting. Of these two groups, the gestural abstractionists are often associated with jazz, artists such as Willem de Kooning (Stevens & Swan, 2005:562), Jackson Pollock (Sparti, 2010:118–120), and Joan Mitchell (Sigler, 2019) have either been quoted or written about as being influenced by jazz. I will not dwell on these artists, as their work is already well documented in academic circles. Instead, I wish to highlight an artist who was a member of the New York School but has, unfortunately, experienced a fate all too common for Black artists—art historical marginalisation.

As a member of the New York School, before experimenting with abstract expressionism, Norman Lewis (1909-1979) came from a social realism background. Lewis's work resists being neatly categorised within the dominant abstract expressionism subcategories of colour field versus action painting. Additionally, while abstract expressionism generally aimed to detach itself from social references in terms of imagery and subject matter, Wood (2009:103–104) argues that Lewis sought to bypass these limitations by using *jazz as a paradigm*. Bebop, which was his musical reference, thus offered Lewis a paradigm

[45] An interdisciplinary avant-garde arts collective of visual artists, musicians, dancers, and poets active during the 1950s and 1960s in the city of New York. For an account of the visual and musical aspects of this collective, see Johnson (2002).

inclusive of "all of the experimentation, audience confrontation, and emphasis on individual artistic freedom that modernism promoted, but without its disengagement from social relation" (Wood, 2009:112). As noted in the previous chapter, bebop not only caused a stylistic shift in jazz but also instigated an ideological shift from passive entertainment to a form of art music that demands active listening and deconstruction.

As an example of Norman Lewis and his artistic engagement with jazz, I want to examine the work *Twilight Sounds* (Lewis, 1947) (Figure 25). The composition features a sky-blue background overlaid with a web of fluid red, blue, and black linework that creates rows of organic shapes highlighted with flat colours. I believe the background and title might refer to late-night jam sessions among musicians, where musical exchange, peer review, and experimentation are refined after formal gigs in the early hours. If one word could describe the work, it would be dense: it appears as if the linework and shapes form a mass-like presence, perhaps reflecting their state of entanglement, suggesting a blending or density of different sounds. Interestingly, these lines create their own frame within the canvas, forming a border between their chaotic exchanges and the emptiness near the edge of the canvas. When trying to follow the direction of the lines, they initially seem to meander aimlessly, but closer inspection shows they venture off, creating patterns and shapes that are only briefly sustained before being replaced by others in a different direction. The linework is elusive and unpredictable, mirroring the spontaneous nature of the lines. Tan (2015:23-24) suggests that the continuous linework could "replicate and reimagine the exhilarating experience of a jazz performance", although adding that "Lewis is not necessarily painting jazz music; he is more a jazz composer, improvising and riffing off of what he has already put on the canvas in the same way musicians play off of what each other is doing". Improvisation in jazz, especially in a group setting, is not self-contained but rather conversational in its musical interaction, where the accompanying ensemble shapes the soloist's musical direction. I want to compare this piece with another work to highlight the artist's aesthetic tendencies in conveying musical ideas at this stage of their practice.

Figure 25: Norman Lewis. *Twilight Sounds*. 1947. Oil on canvas. 59.7 x 71.1 cm. (slam.org).

In *Jazz Band* (Lewis, 1948), shown in Figure 26, from a year later, there is a monochromatic artwork composed entirely of linework on a black surface. The vertical structure of the composition that features in *Twilight Sound* (Lewis, 1947) is also maintained in *Jazz Band*. Here, it is almost as if the band members and their associated instruments have dissolved into their instruments and each other; the individual has melded into the group almost to the point of unrecognition. However, due to relatively more defined and figurative line work, I can still identify what appears to me as a microphone stand, the neck and body of an upright bass, and suggestions of hands, feet, and horn instruments. This form of stylisation appears to allude to musicianship and performance, the creative act of music. An important characteristic of Bebop not previously discussed is the relationship between existing popular songs and Bebop improvisational practice, which results in an aesthetic of defamiliarization. Bebop virtuoso Dizzy Gillespie outlines this process as

taking "chord structures of various standard and pop tunes and creating new chords, melodies, and songs from them" (Wood, 2009:112), essentially a radical reorganising of familiar and recognisable musical material into an unrecognisable and new composition. This is an important aspect of bebop and is partly responsible for it as a distinctive musical form. In both *Twilight Sounds* and *Jazz Band*, Lewis is experimenting with abstract expressionism but through the prism of bebop's 'aesthetic of defamiliarization' as termed by Sara Wood (2009:112).

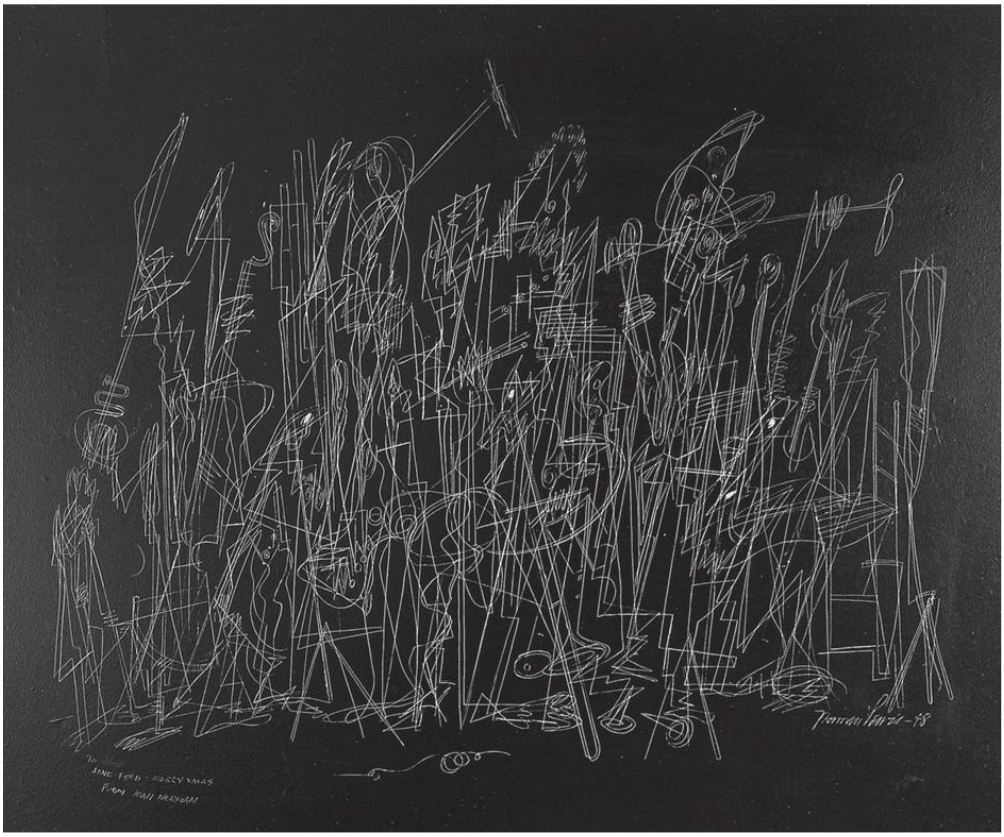

Figure 26: Norman Lewis. *Jazz Band*. 1948. Incised on black coated masonite board. 58,4 x 50.8 cm. (arthive.com).

Another artist I wish to consider within this framework is Jack Whitten[46] (1939 - 2018), whose art career spanned over 50 years, during which he mostly experimented with

[46] An African American visual artist who, throughout their career, was primarily an abstract painter who sometimes also produced sculptural works. A consistent drive to experiment in materiality defined his practice.

process and form in painting. In his published career-spanning studio notes, it is revealed that although he eventually abandoned his dreams of being a musician, he continued to frequent jazz clubs and built personal relationships with musicians, all while remaining fully committed to visual art, as the genre continued to influence his visual practice (Whitten, 2020:14).

Whitten (2020:410-412) has also written what I consider to be one of the most insightful and enlightening theoretical contributions on jazz and abstraction in the essay titled *Five Lines Four Spaces*, originally published in 2012. In the essay, he claims that "[t]he expansion of freedom is the philosophical underpinning of jazz. My art shares the same philosophy as jazz and therefore is the physical equivalent to jazz" (Whitten, 2020:411). I find this statement rich in theoretical potential, holding significant conceptual weight.

I see two main diverging interpretations of this statement, both of which I present based on their roots in the idea of jazz representing aesthetic freedom. This is largely supported by its focus on continuous experimentation and the expectation that each musician develops a unique musical voice and approach to their instrument, combined with the practice of improvisation, which fosters individual self-expression within a group setting. The point of contention then becomes how to locate this aesthetic radicality politically.

To the liberal imagination, jazz embodies Western liberal democratic ideals of individual freedom supported by collective liberty. In the dominant pro-US and integrationist view, jazz is seen as representing the multicultural utopian ideals of US democracy (Ho, 2009:127). It is thus argued that jazz could only emerge from the American 'melting pot' experience due to its particular social formation, which includes the twin principles of capitalism and liberal democracy. Because of US propaganda, these principles have become equated with 'freedom'. From this perspective, jazz is regarded as the musical expression of American freedom. In the international arena, the spread of jazz into wider Europe was facilitated by records and the US military, particularly through enlisted servicemen who were musicians. Due to the US's role in World War I as liberators, the

music became linked to Europe's perception of the US as a free, democratic, and modern nation (Groos, 2015:26).

Saxophonist and playwright Archie Shepp presents an opposing thesis, which argues that jazz was born not because of, but rather despite, the US. This is perhaps best expressed through Shepp's metaphor that suggests that "jazz is the lily in spite of the swamp" (Boynik, 2024:152). Shepp adopts a more radical interpretation that sees the ethos of jazz as anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, and "for the liberation of all people" (Carles & Comolli, 2015:11). This second interpretation states that jazz is the modernist musical embodiment of Black social and political aspirations for freedom that are viewed as directly conflicting with the ethos of white settler US society. It acknowledges the abject circumstances in which jazz was created by its Black innovators and recognises that the music is a child of the blues, which descends from negro spirituals and developed as a result of the cultural adaptation of the African work song to the context of chattel slavery.

I suggest that these perspectives on jazz and freedom be considered alongside Whitten's (2020:411) comments in the same essay regarding improvisation/spontaneity, where he argues that it is not the absence of conceptual thought, as conceptuality is a "tool in the service of spontaneity/improvisation". These factors thus shape the aesthetic and musical expressions.

I believe that this focus on the philosophical rather than the formal best explains the numerous jazz visual articulations by approaching the genre on a conceptual level, thus rendering the formal not as predetermined. Whitten (2020:412) further argues that jazz for an abstract artist could serve as valuable "raw material" with the potential to generate endless possibilities, provided one can "decipher its emotional codes". This idea of encoded work aligns with Frank Bowling's (2017) view that disguise and secrecy are traditional elements of Black art aesthetics. Contrary to opinions of classical African art as straightforward, practical, and clutter-free, Bowling (2017) contends that while communal understanding operates within such work, the tendency is to complicate and make compositions more intricate in classical African visual arts. Therefore, for Whitten,

jazz is an expression of this aesthetic tradition. The notion of infinite possibilities rather than fixed outcomes also suggests the potential for limitless stylistic interpretations, reflecting the multitude of subgenres, techniques, and styles involved in jazz practice. This is because the form is underscored and sculpted by theoretical concerns. In light of Whitten's comments on jazz and freedom, his aesthetic output is inherently political, even if not explicitly expressed, as freedom remains a political concern regardless of one's political views.

Whitten (2020:15) further affirms the influence of *jazz as an aesthetic model*, citing John Coltrane's 'sheets of sound' improvisational technique as directly informing his concept of 'planar light' in his work. The term 'sheets of sound' was coined by jazz critic Ira Gitler in 1958 to describe Coltrane's improvisational style, which produced "cascading waterfalls of notes, scales, arpeggios, figures, sometimes played in short bursts, at other times expanded into breathlessly elongated phrases" (Gioia, 2011:225). This creates a sound densely packed with notes, hence the term sheets of sound. For Whitten, these sheets of sound are transformed into sheets of light (or planes of light), arguing that every emotion he experiences is "compressed into a plane of light" (Whitten, 2020:15), essentially implying that the very manipulation and application of his materials serve as a form of experiential encoding and embodiment. Jazz, in this context, functions as both an *aesthetic model* and a *paradigm*. From this perspective, jazz, alongside visual art, can be seen as fundamentally expressive and communicative art forms. Whitten achieves visual density through his tessellation painting style, which leaves no space for the ground surface to be visible.

In *Flying High for Betty Carter*[47], shown in Figure 27, Whitten (1998) has created a work that, at first glance, appears to be a bird's-eye view of a settlement that oscillates between a densely populated city and a congested informal settlement, especially if one follows the construction of the white cube-like shapes that resemble housing zones. The red areas

[47] Betty Carter, was an African American veteran vocalist who passed away in 1998, the year of the works completion.

disrupt my cartographic interpretation as they seem intrusive, almost like lesions on a body. The dark area, for me, signifies the focal point of the composition due to its visual weight and high contrast with the surrounding colours. Initially, I thought it could represent an ocean or water, but it appears dark, almost like a black hole about to swallow the surrounding spaces, thus suggesting a source of threat. However, upon closer reflection, I wonder if the surrounding areas are not the actual threat to the dark region, as if they surround and encroach upon its capacity to manoeuvre.

Figure 27: Jack Whitten. *Flying High: for Betty Carter*. 1998. Acrylic on canvas, 270.5 × 214 cm. (artsy.net).

My cartographic perception of the image reminds me of the Black spots of apartheid planning (Figure 28), which were areas in South Africa in which those designated as Black

could own land. These were areas that were themselves produced by anti-Blackness and the exclusion of those marked as existing outside of humanity.

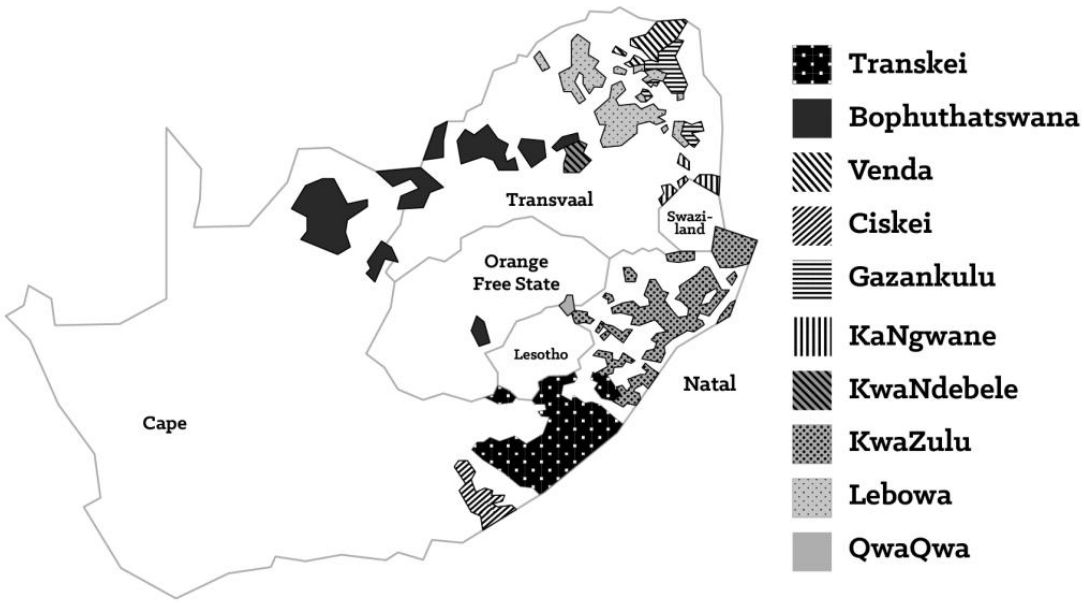

Figure 28: Map of South Africa Before 1994, with Homelands. n.d. (pressbooks.pub).

'Taking off' in jazz is an expression that captures the figurative and sometimes literal act of catapulting or elevating one's musical faculties. Often during improvisation, the soloist begins to expand the established musical range of a composition, diverging from the recognised melody or theme, and starts exploring unfamiliar territory within a given piece. It is the moment when the individual establishes their own expressive voice within a group context. Taken in this manner, Flying *High: For Betty Carter* (Whitten, 1998) illustrates that even in the transcendental musical or spiritual ascent, one is still hovering over a regime of anti-Black reality, whereby the humanity of the Black is suffocated and strained, whether the content of the music or its creator brings this to light or seeks escape from it. My reading of the work elicits feelings of conflict, contrast, and encroachment.

The work is created through a tessellation process developed by the artist, where liquid acrylic paint is poured into large moulds made from found objects. Once solidified, the acrylic slabs are broken into pieces, which are then glued onto a surface. This produces a

visual effect reminiscent of mosaic work, as the artist applies the paint in a manner similar to a tile installer. This is why the image appears pixelated. Whitten's aesthetic experiments exemplify the idea that his work is underpinned by the philosophical spirit of jazz, which he sees as an expansion of freedom.

With the examples discussed so far, I have broadly addressed improvisation. To move forward with a critical analysis, I must establish the formal and ideological foundations of improvisation as it is practiced in jazz.

On Improvisation

It is undeniable that jazz has been the musical style most responsible for showcasing improvisation as a sophisticated and expressive art form since the 20th century. However, it must be recognised that improvisation predates jazz and exists in other types of music and art. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify the specific nature of jazz improvisation as a means to assess its relationship with abstract art.

In general terms, improvisation is synonymous with unplanned and spontaneous creativity. Besides indicating the methods of artistic creation, the term is also used to describe the byproduct of this process. Consequently, the term improvisation refers to creative acts or materials that are generated through spontaneity (Bresnahan, 2015:573).

When described in such broad terms, it seems that improvisation has no distinctive qualities separating spontaneous creative efforts in the arts from those in other human activities, whether scientific, conversational, or otherwise. This presents a problem, as fields such as music, dance, comedy, and theatre often refer to improvisation in relation to specific modes, methods, and features of their respective performance practices. Careful examination in any of these areas shows that improvisation is by no means simply 'making it up on the go'; rather, it involves study, mastery of technique, deep knowledge of one's discipline, extensive practice, and even planning. Furthermore,

performers in these fields employ improvisation to achieve a desired effect within a specific discipline, genre, style, tradition, or idiom.

In visual art, methods of improvisation include working without any preconceived image or composition in any style. These can include automatism or the revisional compositional method, whereby the artist begins with an image and then procedurally reconstructs it. Some artists well known for employing spontaneity as a method are Sam Gilliam and Frank Bowling. They each employ a duality of control and a deliberate lack of it when applying paint to their surfaces, allowing selected pigments to be absorbed into the canvas and blend with other colours in a way that they have partial control over, mainly through manoeuvring the canvas. While such techniques are undoubtedly improvisatory in the broad sense of the term, they raise questions about how they qualify as jazz improvisation, and specifically, which particular qualities and sensibilities of jazz improvisation are being explored procedurally in the creation of artworks. Furthermore, another question that arises is how the work can be analysed formally and a jazz visual language deduced by examining the finished visual piece as the primary object of focus, rather than solely the process of creation. To answer these questions, I must first clarify jazz improvisation by examining its formal characteristics, followed by its underlying ideologies.

The Forms of Improvisation

Various improvisatory structures can be found in jazz music, some of which include melodic paraphrasing and modal or harmonic improvisation. Each method relies on its internal logic. For example, with melodic paraphrasing, the improviser adds and distorts the notes and/or the rhythm of pre-existing melodies, usually from popular compositions. Harmonic improvisation, on the other hand, ignores the melody and instead uses chord progressions by choosing between consonant and dissonant notes within a given chord (DeVeaux & Giddins, 2009:43-44). In modal improvisation, the soloist is not limited to the confines of any chordal progression but

instead enjoys greater flexibility, although it is constrained by restrictions on melodic progressions based on a given scale, which is any set of notes organised according to pitch or frequency (DeVeaux & Giddins, 2009:43-44). These include scales such as blues, minor, and diatonic, among others. Within a given performance, a well-skilled musician might use a combination of these techniques.

There is also another improvisational technique in jazz that diverges from all aforementioned styles; namely, free improvisation. This is a musical approach that emerged during the late 1950s, primarily in the music of Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor. The style derived its name in critical circles from the 1961 album *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* by Coleman. However, among musicians in the 1960s, this musical phenomenon was widely coined as 'the New thing', revealing an awareness of its revolutionary sensibilities and equally a reluctance to tame it through naming or defining. Compared with popular forms of music and preceding styles of jazz, free jazz gives the impression that the structure and form of the music are either inconspicuous, unstable, or absent. The bass and drum sometimes interact in an asynchronous rhythm and pulse, and there's also a reluctance to abide by traditional chord and harmonic progressions; meanwhile, soloists redefine traditional phrasing, intonation, sound, and articulation (Lawn, 2013:275). While musicians associated with free jazz label have made several diverging approaches in terms of the musicality of jazz, what aligns them is a tendency towards both the avoidance of adhering to a single idiom or style, and the rejection of traditional forms. Because the music emerged during the heightening of the African American civil rights and African anti-colonial movements, the style is sometimes understood as mirroring the liberatory concerns of the time (DeVeaux & Giddins, 2009:43-44).

Improvisation, regardless of structure, results from a dynamic interaction between the band members' existing musical knowledge and their collective exploration. In group settings, the soloist engages in a dialogue with the rhythm section while simultaneously navigating various musical principles (Monson, 2002:114). In solo performances, the

individual musician primarily communicates with different musical elements such as pitch, rhythm, and melody. Jazz improvisation, especially from the blues tradition, is often characterised by 'vamping' and 'the break'. 'Vamping' refers to an improvised musical introduction, whereas 'the break' is a pause or interruption in the established rhythm of a piece (Murray, 1998:112). It is during the break that the musician expresses their creative independence within a group context.

In light of these complex issues of aesthetics, procedure, and structure, I find the uncritical association of jazz improvisation with automatism to be reductionist in the sense that it fails to account for the instrumental role of structure and composition in jazz musical practice, including in improvisation. Jazz can be more accurately described as embodying a complex interplay between structure and improvisation rather than representing "pure inspiration, produced in a trance, and devoid of intellectual content- a widespread attitude in Surrealist circles" (Hadler 1995:254). Responding to a Jackson Pollock exhibition in 2006, jazz musician-composer Ornette Coleman (Kaplan, 2006) claimed that whilst he views Pollock's work as "free form", in the sense of lacking a clear focal point and discernible structure, he observes intentionality rather than randomness in the work. This conclusion appears to be supported by Pollock (Pinnington, n.d), who asserted that his painting style is defined by control over the flow of paint rather than mere accidents. Coleman, therefore, alludes to the interplay between structure and improvisation, between "forethought and spontaneity" (Arnason & Mansfield, 2013:380), which is encapsulated in both his music and the action painting style of Pollock.

Other shared aspects between jazz musicianship and abstract painting include their focus on extraction, variation, and development from existing material as improvisational starting points (Shaw-Miller, 2022:3). In jazz, this involves either reworking existing songs, like the beboppers do, or using improvisational techniques such as deviating from the established structure, melody, or rhythm of a piece. In abstract painting, this process occurs through utilising existing visual or sonic material, as Arthur Dove does when he

paints while listening to music. Wosene Kosrof's use of Amharic script also aligns with this quality.

Furthermore, as poet, writer, and music critic Amiri Baraka (2010:17) notes, Black music primarily concerns an expression of a specific positionality shaped by being Black in the world, and is only secondarily about attitudinal expressions of music-making. The basis of a shared culture, according to Baraka (2009:19), is "a common psychological development". This stems from shared social, economic, and political material conditions. What is known as Black music stems from this particular positionality, which is defined by being marked as Black in the world. Most importantly, Baraka (2010:20) asserts that for "the blues and jazz aesthetic, to be fully understood, must be seen in as nearly its complete human context as possible. People made bebop. The question the critic must ask is why?". In the following segment, I explore the ideological foundation of jazz improvisation.

On the Ideology of Jazz Improvisation

Arthur Jafa (2003:249) described jazz improvisation as follows:

> "Classically, jazz improvisation is first and foremost signified self-determination. This actually precedes its function as a musical gesture. For the black artist to stand before an audience, often white, and to publicly demonstrate her decision-making capacity, her agency, rather than the replication of another's agency, i.e, the composers, was a profoundly radical and dissonant gesture."

A good starting point for understanding the ideological composition of jazz improvisation is the essay *Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives* by musician, composer, and scholar George E. Lewis (1996). The essay explores the logics of two distinct traditions, which he named 'Afrological' and 'Eurological'.

Lewis (1996) uses two prominent figures in modern music as his conceptual anchors for both improvisatory traditions: Charlie Parker (1920-1955) for *Afrological* and John Cage (1912-1992) for *Eurological*. These figures exemplify the dominant influences in

improvisational philosophical logics from the mid-20th century to the present day. The terms *Afrological* (African-American) and *Eurological* (Euro-American) function metaphorically to describe specific behavioural and musical belief systems that reflect particular musical "logics" (Lewis, 1996:93). The argument is that these constructs are historically emergent rather than ethnically essential, thus allowing for transcultural and transracial interactions rather than signifying authenticity (Lewis, 1996:93). The aim is not to delineate racial or ethnic components but rather to situate these musical logics within their social and cultural contexts. In other words, anyone can perform the music, but its historical character remains rooted in these terms.

Lewis (1996:94) suggests that *Afrological* improvisation is characterised by the perception of sonic symbolism as being utilised by both social reality and formal ambitions, and is commonly understood by African American improvisers as expressing ideals of racial progress. Music is regarded as serving a social function. The *Eurological* school follows the bebop revolution but aims to establish its roots in the European tradition from which its work radically departs. They define themselves by distancing themselves not only from bebop specifically but also from jazz in general, denying it as a residual factor in their development (Lewis, 1996:92). The *Eurological* conception of improvisation that emerged in the 20th century was influenced by John Cage and his musical colleagues including Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, and Morton Feldman. Under this paradigm, Cage proposes that "sounds are to come into their own, rather than being exploited to express sentiments or ideas of order" (Lewis, 1996:97). Cage's theories are rooted in his interpretations of Zen Buddhist philosophy (Leach, 2015:110).

Chance and indeterminacy[48], often called aleatory, are essential to this improvisational sensibility. These trends helped revitalise improvisation within the Western musical tradition after over 150 years of dormancy. While members of the New York School visual art scene were openly adopting jazz influences, figures such as Cage and Feldman,

[48] Indeterminacy in relation to musical practice is the quality of structuring music that leaves certain aspects undefined, indeterminate and open to interpretation so as to invite chance in musical creation.

who were also part of it, denied its impact (Lewis, 1996:100). This reveals that the New York School was intellectually divided, multifaceted, and diverse rather than single-minded. From an ideological standpoint, these represent two opposing views of real-time musical composition[49]: on one side, the understanding that music is embedded in social experience, and on the other, that it exists outside of social, cultural, and ideological contexts. I argue that it is crucial to place discussions of improvisation within their intellectual tradition to contextualise their cultural, social, and musical distinctiveness. This approach aids in analysing improvisation in jazz compared to other musical forms.

In further developing the *Afrological* improvisational discourse, I wish to invoke Kgositsile (2017:222), who asked, "Isn't sound continuity, isn't sound memory" (2017:222). I see music as an aural technology that people employ to transmit their worldviews, histories, traditions, and experiences. Sound, therefore, cannot be disconnected from its vector, which in this case is the Black body. The blues, serving as the foundation of jazz music, can be understood as being encoded with the historical and cultural continuity of Black people. Jazz is, after all, a music that emerged from a specific socio-cultural-economic context characterised by anti-Blackness and capitalist exploitation resulting from slavery and colonialism. This theorisation poses a challenge to the primitivist view of jazz as instinctive and unrestrained spontaneity. At the core of the primitive myth is the comparison of jazz as the Other of Western concert music. Western culture tends to prioritise writing over other forms of knowledge creation. Therefore, since classical music focuses on the composer's score, it is seen as the pinnacle of intellectual music. At the same time, jazz, as an oral tradition centred on improvisation, is thus regarded as intellectually inferior. I now wish to explore the implications of these theorisations in terms of how they can underpin other cultural expressions that these ideals have influenced.

[49] I am referring here to the nature of improvisation, which is in essence the act of composing music through performance.

Fred Moten (2003:78) notes that claiming a soloist is not saying anything is considered an insult in musical terms because it implies their articulation lacks substance and coherence. Conversely, being told that you can 'tell stories' or 'make the horn talk' is regarded as a high compliment. Phonically, this refers to a musician's ability to closely imitate vocal qualities through attack, articulation, and timbre. In jazz musicianship, music is largely viewed as a form of communication.

Improvisation and "saying something"

Based on my observations, it seems that in several instances (including with Ncaphayi), when visual artists aimed to depict jazz visually, improvisation was the main focus of their efforts. I believe this stems from the idea shared by both jazz musicians and audiences alike that a solo represents the personal story of the performer within both group and individual improvisational settings. It is also often implied that the improvised solo itself is the core of jazz. Since creating visual art is generally seen as a largely individual pursuit, this suggests possible motivations linked to the individualistic approach that visual artists bring when engaging with jazz.

The improvised solo also carries connotations related to authenticity and 'truth' because the soloist is expected to genuinely attempt to express something authentic. This view is challenged by jazz pianist Vijay Iyer (2004:393–395) who argues that the narrative does not only reveal itself in a structured, coherent solo or "as a simple linear narrative, but as a fractured, exploded one". In other words, the story is multi-layered and finds expression within each note and "a lifetime of improvisations" (Iyer, 2004:395). Extending this idea outward, I suggest that visual works are themselves imbued with the stories of their creator, even if the subject matter does not explicitly contain discernible narrative devices such as titles or characters. The succession of artworks produced over an artist's lifetime is also another layer of the story. This is also the case with instrumental musical symbolism.

The musician's story is reflected in their personality, technique, and overall musical approach. Iyer (2004:402) further argues that the sonic symbols can also reveal extra-musical connections, such as social and cultural relations embodied by the performer. Fumi Okiji (2018:70) contends that the logic of storytelling in jazz is based on the supposed orality of the genre, which traces back to its development from the blues; however, she finds that this logic often fails to account for the communal nature of oral traditions. She states that storytelling in jazz is not only solitary and narrative-like (limited to a beginning, middle, and end), but also cyclic and communal, as jazz musicianship relies on repetition and incompletion. A performance of a musical narrative is extended through future renditions, even by other performers (Okiji, 2018:70–71). Okiji also argues that accompanying performers help shape and colour each improvisational performance through musical interplay. Therefore, stories are open-ended and sometimes retold by others, with the expectation that the individual expressive qualities of the narrator will be reflected in each performance (Okiji, 2018:70–71).

I want to draw attention to another aspect of jazz visual culture that deepens our understanding of the dialogical relationship between visual abstraction and jazz music by paying closer attention to music and composition, as exemplified in Wadada Leo Smith's graphic notation. This forms the basis for thinking about an iconology of abstraction.

The Language Scores of Wadada Leo Smith: Towards an Iconology of Abstraction

Traditional (Western) music notation can be described as an approximate means by which the composer communicates musical ideas in written form, allowing musicians to reproduce those ideas with some degree of accuracy (Sauer, 2009:123). The staff sheet on which the notation is recorded conveys instructions on how the music should be realised, guiding the performer on instrumentation and musical cues such as rhythm, pitch, and tempo. It must be emphasised that notation systems are merely a communication tool for

the composer, as the performer ultimately determines how the music is experienced by the audience, especially concerning the auditory experience. The score is a primary example of visualising music. However, in jazz, the score presents an incomplete representation of the music, as it only provides a transcription of the notes to be played and cannot convey the articulation, which is a crucial aspect of the genre.

In the 20th century, composers emerging from the Western classical music tradition and seeking to challenge its conventions began questioning the relationship between composer and performer, which is traditionally understood as musicians performing the musical ideas of the composer (Leach, 2015:95–96). Their enquiry focused on reconsidering the role of the performer in relation to a composition, changing from a mere articulator of a composer's musical ideas to someone actively involved in the creative process through performance. This led to explorations with improvisation, based on indeterminacy and aleatory techniques that aimed to harness chance as a creative act (Leach, 2015:95–96). As a means to explore these concepts, the role of the traditional Western staff sheet score proved critical, as modernist composers such as John Cage and Earle Brown, among others, began to see it as restrictive and introduced innovative modes of music notation. Some composers also turned to the visual arts, using line, shape, and colour to explore their musical ideas. These are commonly called graphic notation.

Graphic notation can broadly be described as the writing of music through imagery, symbols, markings, or shapes that do not form part of the traditional (Western) notation system or are used alongside it.[50] Unlike traditional notation, graphic notation has no single method of execution, as it depends on the individual composer's preferences and the performer's musical imagination, largely operating as a co-pilot.

If we briefly observe the scores for both *Chaos* (Colding-Jorgensen, 1982), see Figure 29, and *Not Music Yet, For Zubin Kanga*, *For solo piano 7 minutes or 42 minutes in duration*

[50] It must be noted that what qualifies as graphic notation today also describes various non-Western notational systems, some which predate both the conception of graphic and Western traditional notations. Tibetan and ancient Egyptian notation are both examples.

(Young, 2012) (Figure 30), we might be forgiven for mistaking them as modernist or contemporary fine art works rather than as musical scores, as both images conform to the abstractionist visual language widely propagated during the 20th century. *Chaos* employs the vocabulary of geometric abstraction, featuring monochromatic shapes, dots, and lines on a white background. *Not Music Yet*, on the other hand, portrays the characteristics of post-painterly abstraction with its washes of blue, grey, and black. In the latter, the watercolour technique exposes a tension between control and its absence, as the pigments bleed into each other in a manner that suggests the artist does not have complete control. These works propose a way to think about musical interpretation through largely unmarked signs. I then turn my attention to the practice of graphic scores within the jazz tradition to further my analysis of abstraction as a musical language.

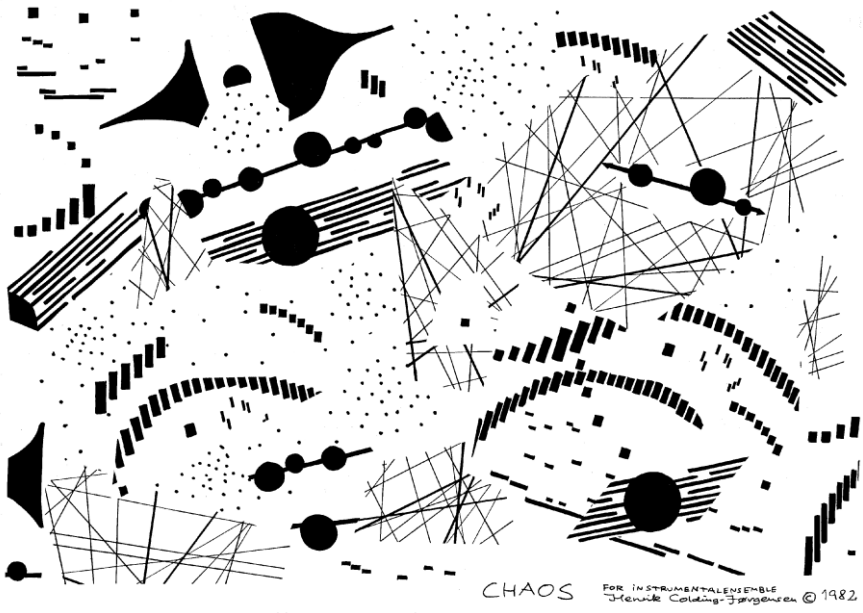

Figure 29: Henrik Colding-Jorgensen. *Chaos: For instrumental ensemble*. 1982. Graphic score. 29,7 x 21 cm. (Henrik.coldingj.dk).

Figure 30: David Young. *Not Music Yet, For Zubin Kanga, For solo piano 7 minutes or 42 minutes duration*. 2012. Watercolour on paper, score. 109 x 78 cm. (Kanga, 2014:44).

Graphic notation within jazz has been extensively explored by musicians who, at different points in their lives, were members of the Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. These include African-American musicians-composers Anthony Braxton (b. 1945), Matana Roberts (b. 1975), and Wadada Leo Smith (b. 1941). While the works of Roberts and Braxton individually warrant their own study, given the scope of this research, it is Wadada (their preferred moniker) whose visual language, providing a closer proximity to the visual art language of non-figurative abstraction over a broader body of work, has been featured in several exhibitions and writings. For these reasons, his work is the primary focus of this section.

Beginning in 1967, Wadada developed his own notational system and musical language that he argues enables greater improvisational freedom. He named it *Ankhrasmation* (formerly Ahkreanvention). The word combines *ankh*, the ancient Egyptian symbol of life, *ras*, an Ethiopian term for head often linked to leadership, and *ma*, meaning mother. Etymologically, *Ankhrasmation* reflects a tendency towards ideas of creation and the creator, especially through the use of *ankh* and *ma*. The *ankh* symbol also represents eternal life, highlighting themes of spirituality and cosmology. The title furthermore indicates a distinctly Afrocentric (and Afrological) perspective on improvisation.

Smith's musical practice often mirrors his engagements with religions such as Rastafarianism and Islam, which he followed at different stages of his life (Bivins, 2015:246). Although his work is rooted in spiritual concerns, he does not view prior knowledge of spiritual beliefs or practices as a prerequisite for appreciating or understanding the music's transcendental qualities; for Wadada, an earnest effort to meet the music on its own terms is sufficient (Bivins, 2015:246). Most of his musical output can be described as sparse, meditative, and closely related to ambient styles, largely due to the subtle yet intricate interplay between rhythm, silence, and sound. While his music can be considered part of the jazz tradition, it resists being confined to a single genre. Smith also performs and composes for contemporary classical ensembles. His music often includes social commentary, which can be quite explicit in album titles, such as in his four-hour-long magnum opus *Ten Freedom Summers* (Smith, 2012).

In *Ankhrasmation*, Smith states that he is not creating graphic scores but rather symbolic graphic language scores. This distinction is important because, generally speaking, graphic scores that originated from the post-1950 Euro-American Western tradition do not specify how they are to be performed or set criteria for their successful realisation. A language score relies on communication and contains language that must be used and expressed for its successful execution. In the categorisations of improvisational tendencies outlined by Lewis (1996), Wadada is part of the *Afrological* improvisation lineage, as he bases his musical practice on communication as a social dynamic. Wadada (Wilmer, 2018:24) theorises his improvisatory practice as follows:

> Improvisation means that the music is created at the moment it is performed, whether it is developing a given theme or is improvisation on a given rhythm or sound (structures) or, in the purest form, when the improviser creates without any of these conditions, but creates at that moment, through his or her wit and imagination, an arrangement of silence and sound and rhythm that has never before been heard and will never again be heard.

Ankhrasmation, as a music language, abandons (although it occasionally incorporates) the dominant Western five-staff notation system and instead investigates colour, line, shape, and pattern as methods of notation (Figure 31) (Corbett, 2016). Wadada (Corbett, 2016)

asserts that although his scores can be appreciated aesthetically, their primary purpose is as supplementary pieces to the creation of music. Regarding their musical interpretation, Wadada (Pope, 2016) states the following:

> Scores are constructed in a way that can be used to produce music, but the music itself is not on the score…The score is this doorway where you become aware of elements like structure, shapes, colour and [the] connection of those shapes and colours and lines and dots. You have to transform that into some kind of reference, [and] then you're able to actually get to the music.

Smith revealed that the interpretational modes of *Ankhrasmation* include references to biology, fantasy, and imagination, with each musician determining the nature of the reference (Oteri, 2012).

Figure 31: Wadada Leo Smith. *Sarhanna.* 2011. Language score. (kqed.org).

Examining his ideas on his language score and improvisation, it is clear that value lies not necessarily in chance itself, but rather in the concept of creating from a state of spontaneity. Although a lack of premeditation characterises both chance and spontaneity,

chance is random, while spontaneity in this context refers to musical and conceptual flexibility — the ability to oscillate between the known and unknown in both ensemble and solo settings in real time. There is a deliberate effort to harness the act of creation, considering the role of time, in the sense that what is performed only belongs to the moment of execution and is unlikely to be replicable. Ultimately, the uniqueness of each performance is fundamental, and the scores facilitate this by their distinctive visual language and interpretive parameters that promote individual reflection. *Ankhrasmation*, therefore, aims to stimulate the improviser's creative imagination through a symbolically constructed and self-reactive interpretive process.

Nina Eidsheim (2019:22) argues that *Ankhrasmation* "stresses that meaning is both personal and contextual" as its interpretation and realization depend on the individual performers' "associative chain," which itself reflects their enculturation. *Ankhrasmation* as a system simultaneously explores three modes of notation: graphic, proportional, and indeterminacy. Proportional notation is a system that conveys the length of musical ideas through the use of space and length; for example, symbols printed closer together are meant to be interpreted differently than those printed farther apart, as is the case for symbols printed longer or shorter (Dixon, 2021:3). Indeterminacy in relation to composition involves creating notation so that performance and interpretation can vary significantly each time. This can be achieved by allowing performers to interpret notes, time signatures, and other musical cues individually. Consequently, a chain reaction occurs as they each need to improvise in relation to each other's interpretations. This renders the realisation of the score a communal act, as meaning becomes temporal, subject to constant change with each performance, and is collectively determined. Wadada leaves the tempos unspecified and the colours open to interpretation, he also positions his symbols in alternating spaces and lengths (Dixon, 2021:3–4).

If all members of an ensemble are assigned to play the orange circle in *Four Symphonies - Symphony No. 1: Fall* (Figure 32), then each must independently research what both the colour orange and the circle represent to them. The triangular shapes at the top and

bottom of the circle represent velocity units, and the musician must decide how fast or slow to play them (Smith, 2017). This process should be repeated when deciphering all elements in the score.

Figure 32: Wadada Leo Smith. *Four Symphonies - Symphony No. 1: Fall*. 2016. Language score. (wadadleosmith.com).

It is through self-conducted research and study that ensemble members can interpret the symbolic meanings of the *Ankhrasmation* score. Instead of these meanings being prescribed by the composer, as is often the case in musical scores, in Smith's musical language, the performer actively participates in creating meaning and thus decides what the colours and symbols mean to them personally (Pope, 2016). The musicians are instructed not to share their research findings and journeys because Smith believes this aspect is of primary importance to enrich the experience, thereby ensuring a limitless range of possible interpretations. *Ankhrasmation* is therefore inherently social and

collectivist in its scope. It also frames meaning-making as collective, adaptable, and subject to change. This presents challenges to notions of fixed meanings.

Given that Wadada composes and performs various musical styles, it is worth noting that he does not alter his compositional language depending on the ensemble or genre (Oteri, 2012). With this in mind, the question that arises for me is what makes a score particularly jazz rather than belonging to other musical forms. Does the score evoke jazz depending on the musical background of the performers, or is the compositional language itself embedded with identifiable jazz characteristics? In this study, I aim to explore whether specific visual markers for jazz can be identified within non-figurative language. Next, I introduce iconology into the study of *Ankhrasmation* scores. The iconographic analysis enables me to situate the graphic scores within particular cross-pollinated cultural contexts, informed by both jazz musical practice and abstract art. Although these graphic scores do not align with traditional Western musicological iconographic traditions, they remain responsive to their vocabularies. The goal is to demonstrate how abstract images can be considered representational.

I argue that it is in the practice of Wadada where the seemingly irreconcilable tensions between the visual and auditory become to some extent distilled into the experience of translating visual material into musical form. Although a solid foundation has been established by the musicological work of *Ankhrasmation* by Dixon (2021), their study concentrates on monochromatic works that feature the staff sheet. Therefore, the more graphical, gestural, and colourful work that is the focus of this study still requires further musicological analysis. This would lead to a better understanding of how the scores are performed and would enrich my aesthetically focused pursuits. While I am not attempting to interpret the works through a musicological transcription process, I am interested in an aesthetic assessment of the musical qualities in abstraction; therefore, my tools of analysis are not a rigorous music theory study seeking to interpret the score as a music document strictly on a performance level. In other words, the language scores

present the challenge of bridging a visual musical language through the mode of abstraction, which involves interpretation and representation.

Meaning in Abstraction: Towards an Iconography of Abstraction

When examining purely abstract images, there is a common tendency to assume that such imagery is not intended to be representational but instead functions as an illustration of itself, especially if the image lacks an obvious referent. From this assumption arises the reductionist argument that images not based on a referent cannot operate as signs. However, this view contains a logical flaw, as many figurative works depicting animals such as unicorns, dragons, and other imaginary creatures serve as signs despite not being derived from any referent (Nöth, 2021:19). Nöth (2021:19) suggests that these issues originate from an inadequate sign model, which can be addressed by examining visual semiotics through a broader analysis of imagery production. Before engaging in an iconographic study of abstraction, I first want to explain why abstract images can be regarded as representational.

I want to use the sign model of art historian Erwin Panofsky (1955:66) in his seminal treatise on iconography as a framing device for the study. Panofsky surmises iconographic methodology into three levels.

- *Pre-iconographic description*: An identification of the formal contents in an image
- *Iconographical analysis*: The study of the conventions and motifs utilised in the composition. Oftentimes in historical works, these are corresponded with textual works such as the bible in religious works and other written accounts from the time of the work's creation.
- *Iconological interpretation*: Interpreting the intrinsic meaning of the image. This is achieved by situating the conventions within their historical contexts, including time, place, culture, and ideology.

Iconography is usually applied to figurative works because it is assumed such works, especially historical ones, commonly include accepted conventions of representation, whether through specific body postures, colours, characters, figures, or narratives. Non-

figurative abstraction is often regarded as idiosyncratic and lacking conventional symbols. Therefore, it is believed that meaning cannot be understood through iconography alone, as such works are deemed incapable of conveying meaning via this analytical method. In the iconographic analysis of historical works, textual references are considered essential for gaining a deeper understanding of the culturally constructed symbols. Frequently, iconography is also viewed as promoting a kind of orthodox interpretation, producing singular or static symbolic interpretations that position the art as secondary to other objects of study, such as written records, which seem to predetermine the work's interpretation by situating the imagery within the context of specific socio-political histories.

Suppose that the function of signs relies on emphasising images that contain clear referents, which are visible and form a world of "reality" as a prerequisite for considering depictions as functionally representative signs. In that case, it must be recognised that even figurative works are guilty of representing historically intangible depictions, such as Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, since no one can claim to have witnessed the depicted event (Nöth, 2021:21). The Western genre of history painting is full of portrayals that take significant liberties when representing 'reality', including but not limited to using models and substitutes for historical and imaginative figures. Here, Gustave Courbet's adage of "Show me an angel and I'll paint you an angel" (Goodwin, 2012) seriously questions the validity of what is widely considered 'reality' and thus 'visible'. The point is that it is common in art history for fictitious depictions with no direct reference to the visible world to serve as iconic signs. Therefore, the reductionist argument that pictures can only be signs if they have a material object as their referent can at best be described as ahistorical.

In jazz, for example, the colour blue holds symbolic significance and has various interpretations, such as blue notes or melancholy. Blue in jazz is inherently linked with the music as a genre (the Blues) and evokes a musicality closely associated with social and psychological navigation through the Black experience.

Since signs do not need to be connected to any specific state of objecthood, imaginary, fictional, or real pictorial references can all serve as signs. A pictorial sign is thus essentially any representative or object, whether imaginative, another image, mythological, or even actual events creatively transformed by an artist (Nöth, 2021:23). Figurative abstraction heightened the detachment of images from their referential objects. They thus reached a point where the image functions as an autonomous arrangement of line, form, and colour. This produced a context in which "pictures become thus reduced to pure forms and colours, which point to nothing but to themselves" (Nöth, 2021:26).

Non-figurative images serve as signs not only on a self-referential level but also as objects that indicate their context as artworks, distinguishing them from another category of objecthood (Nöth, 2021:23). Such artworks also reference historical and contemporary art styles, even when they reject them. The term 'non-representational' implies that the image is not depictive; however, broad representation encompasses not only depicting referents but also the subject matter, which often extends beyond the boundaries of a visual referent and may sometimes be found in the image's title.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to connect the theoretical and formal aspects of the abstraction-jazz discourse. While both forms share a common compositional vocabulary, they cannot have a one-to-one equivalent, as each represents different reception modalities and procedural techniques. For example, although visual artists tend to focus specifically on improvisation when engaging with jazz, its nuances in terms of varying techniques and processes are often lost in translation, leading to a misrepresentation of improvisation in jazz practice that, at times, aligns it with primitive myths of intuition and unrestrained spontaneity. A duality of structure and spontaneity characterises jazz improvisation more clearly. It is also supported by a conceptual framework that views music as a social phenomenon. The two interpretative modes of jazz—as an *aesthetic model* and as a *paradigm*—offer different perspectives for interpreting artworks, thereby providing a

foundation for understanding issues of representation and interpretation in the absence of a serialised symbolic language. Wadada Leo Smith's language scores offer a direct way to explore the musical registers of visual work and demonstrate how abstraction can be representational. What is needed now is to focus on the work of Mongezi Ncaphayi, which will require moving beyond formalism and delving deeper into content and social context.

Chapter 4: The Black Abstraction of Mongezi Ncaphayi

The study's central thesis addresses two questions: how can sonic expressions be conveyed visually, and how can visual representations be interpreted through sound? In response to these questions, the study has so far aimed to present a sort of group portrait that features jazz visual culture by addressing these issues to several artists and their various stylistic approaches as methods of selectively contextualising jazz visual representation. Through both historical and visual analysis—primarily formalist—I examined these cross-modal issues in both historical and contemporary examples, highlighting the formal nuances of each respective field.

In this chapter, I go further beyond formalist boundaries by incorporating social and historical contexts into my interpretations of the artworks, as the artist's work necessitates such an approach. From our first conversation (personal conversation, August 20, 2024), Ncaphayi insisted that I look beyond the music's surface as a merely pleasant auditory experience and instead focus on what the music is doing and communicating. I interpreted this challenge as a push against narrow formalism.

Formalism refers to theories of art that assert the appreciation and evaluation of art can be self-contained by mainly focusing on its formal features, such as line, shape, colour, etc., and thereby placing other considerations like historical context or artistic intent in a secondary position (Noaparast & Noaparast, 2011:103). Form relates to the visual components of the work, including line, colour, shape, and others, so beauty is judged based on formal relationships rather than expression or subject matter. Abstract art, which appears to ignore mimesis, is thus understood as consisting of form as its subject matter, exemplifying the kind of art supported by formalist theory. Aesthetic evaluation is, therefore, limited solely to the visual aspects of the work.

Chinese-American activist-musician Fred Ho (2012) discussed the aesthetic aspect of jazz in particular and art in general, questioning the validity of the formalist view that separates art from social and ideological concerns. He claimed that humans cannot create "outside of history, independent of societal structures and support or opposition (e.g.,

from artistic institutions or industries), or apart from artistic traditions that evolve within cultural patterns and practices". This anti-formalist view is supported by Walton (1970:336-337), who argued that history is essential to aesthetic evaluation and that non-aesthetic factors are also important. The anti-formalist perspective maintains that the aesthetic value of an artwork depends on its relationship with other artworks, art historical categories, and traditions.

These contextual discussions, centred around selected artworks, highlight the unique relationships between Blackness, jazz, abstraction, and the significance of listening as a crucial part of the creative process. Through visual and contextual analysis, combined with interviews, I position Ncaphayi's practice within jazz visual culture and clarify the different levels present in his work.

The selected artwork ranges from 2013 to 2021. My choices are brief and limited, displaying only a few snapshots of the artist's prolific output. I have focused on works that clearly illustrate the main themes in this part of the study: migration, jazz, and transcendence. *Migrant Workers' Hostels* (2013), the earliest piece in this section, is described by Ncaphayi (2025) as the most significant in his career. It marked a key transition into his adoption of abstraction and is the smallest in size. *Wisdom of Uncertainty* (2019), a medium-sized etching, underscores their strong emphasis on transcendence, while *Serpents and Visions* (2021) represents a stylistic departure through its vibrant painterly watercolour and ink visual language, centred on mapping and history. I have selected these works for their technical, stylistic, and thematic differences, which I hope offer a tangible, albeit limited, scope of the artist's range.

The Ncaphayi Form

For Ncaphayi (2025), music and art are an extension of the same creative drive rather than separate disciplines; a view undoubtedly shaped by his artistic upbringing, which exposed him to various forms of artistic expression, including visual art, music, and

ballroom dancing. Jazz, as a musical, cultural, and social form, has long persisted in his visual expressions and functions catalytically at the aesthetic production level. For Ncaphayi (2025), jazz is not merely music, as he states:

> Poetry is jazz and painting is jazz. Jazz is a movement rather than a musical form. It's all about freedom. It represents freedom, integrity, tolerance, and respect for anything living. It has to do with history, it has to do with remembrance and memory, with pain. Its something sacred that we need to respect…I would say it is a religion…It is the most truest form of religion because it has to do with sound…and music is the most truest of art forms.

These comments align with the view expressed in this study that jazz is not only a style of music but also a culture that encompasses more than sounds and involves a broader discursive discourse. As will be demonstrated in this section, through his engagement with music, Ncaphayi's oeuvre operates on multiple levels, including musical, historical, social, existential, and political, resulting from his exploration of jazz.

Thematically, I notice that his work focuses on two main themes: migration and the transcendental. Migration, broadly defined as dispersal across places, is a relatively novel interest among abstract artists. Issues related to the transcendental, however, have been a recurring motif since the start of modernist discourse. If the transcendental is seen as synonymous with the supernatural, spiritual, mystical, sublime, or otherworldly, such themes have been explored by artists like Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Mark Rothko. Historically, both art and music have served as powerful channels for this kind of exploration.

In southern African San society, for example, the practice of communal musical production is central to the trance or medicine dance. Through rhythmic hand clapping, dancing, and singing, the San can induce supernatural potency that transforms the shaman's neurologic preceptors as they enter a state of trance during which they navigate the spiritual world and perform acts such as rain calling or healing (Lewis-Williams, 2005:140). Upon regaining consciousness, the shaman illustrates their visions on rocks and cave walls, thus making the visions perceptible to the rest of the community (Lewis-Williams, 2005:141). The art, therefore, visualises the shaman's navigation of the spirit

realm, which they enter primarily through song and dance. I find these notions of music as a sensory transformative modality that, at times, can induce a perceptible experience relevant to Ncaphayi's works.

The most significant trance-like experience in Ncaphayi's (2025) context occurred around 2005 during a music-inspired painting session featuring Keith Jarret's 30-minute composition titled *Oasis*. Ncaphayi (2025) describes this as a state of transcendence, which brought feelings of elation and a distorted sense of time. It also proved to be creatively inspiring, leading to a highly experimental, spontaneity-driven formal language. This event marked a crucial phase in his artistic development, as it opened him to the potential of music as a creative conduit in his art-making (Ncaphayi, 2025). Although he was primarily producing figurative works at that time, he began to explore abstraction deliberately through the lens of music. Ncaphayi's full shift towards abstraction happened around 2012 during his workshop at the Boston Museum (Khosi, 2016). This stylistic transition continues to influence his visual language today, with music remaining a central element of his work.

It is crucial to clarify the role of music in his work to develop these ideas further. Music fulfils different functions in Ncaphayi's art-making. It serves as an aesthetic model for his abstract work, which seeks spiritual resonance. Music is vital for achieving these aims, as he perceives it as "the most transcendent form of non-objective art, since it can evoke images in listeners' minds with sound" (Tyilo, 2016). This view aligns with arguments by theorists like Walter Pater (Herzog, 1996:122), who suggest that music symbolises purity of form, making it the most abstract art form, as it requires no illustrative, narrational, or moral persuasion to communicate with an audience. Therefore, Ncaphayi aims to create visual vistas that can embody these qualities of transcendence in visual form. For him, instrumental music is the equivalent of abstract art, while mimesis closely correlates with vocal-based music.[52] He describes abstraction as resembling "a person who cannot sing

[52] Private conversation with Mongezi Ncaphayi 20 August 2024.

in words but sings through sounds", adding that "musicians paint with sounds…and as a painter I play music" (Ncapahyi, 2025).

The Art of Listening in the Visual Creative Process

Listening as part of the creative process can involve responding to specific musical cues and attempting a visual interpretation of the sounds. It can also include listening during idea generation, where the goal is not to respond to a particular piece of music but rather to use the music as a catalyst for another purpose, drawing compositional cues from it to solve visual challenges. Finally, it can serve as a musical background and sonic furnishing in the studio, playing a smaller role in the overall art-making process.

In an interview with Motlatsi Khosi (2016), Ncaphayi slightly pulled back the curtain on his working process and explained his approach to listening to music, as well as how it manifests as part of his creative process. He comments that in the initial stages, he engaged in repeated listening to music to understand better how the music made him feel (Khosi, 2016). The focus is therefore not on the formal qualities of the music or on excavating the artist's intentions and purpose, but rather on how Ncaphayi, as a listener, responds to the music (Khosi, 2016). This leads to a far more subjective interpretation than a purely formal musical analysis could reveal, as it shifts the focus from merely the sequence of notes to the subjective feelings and responses induced by the listening experience.

In a different interview, he elaborates on his listening process and emphasises that it involves paying close attention to the affect produced by the music. He has stated, "I did something with regard to what the music was doing to me right then. I wanted to translate this and that's why I started creating abstracts" (Besnard, 2019). Ncaphayi (2025) questions the idea that his works depict music, as he states, "No, I am not painting music. I just use music as a conduit, as a transporter that takes you somewhere". These

comments highlight the difference between portraying music as a subject and creating with music as an aesthetic model and discursive framework.

Ncaphayi is not the first artist to see listening as central to his creative process. An exiled Dumile Feni remarked, "When I listen to jazz, I get ideas. Even in London my mind is taken back home" (Ngakane, 1970:13). For Feni, the act of listening served as a stimulus for both historical memory and creativity within the context of exile. His comments suggest that his work is influenced by jazz, even if this is not explicitly evident in the titles or visual representations, as the genre's role in this instance is at the level of idea generation. Another visual artist who incorporates listening into his process is Sam Nhlengethwa. For Nhlengethwa, listening is part of a synaesthetic approach in which jazz acts as an aesthetic model for his visual thinking, translating the compositional language of jazz into its visual equivalents. Nhlengethwa (The Artists Press, n.d.) describes his process as follows:

> As I paint, I listen to jazz and visualise the performance. Jazz performers improvise within the conventions of their chosen styles. In an ensemble, for example, there are vocal styles that include freedom of vocal colour, call-and-response patterns and rhythmic complexities played by different members. Painting jazz allows me to literally put colour onto these vocal colours.
>
> Jazz is rhythmic and it emphasises interpretation rather than composition. There are deliberate tonal distortions that contribute to its uniqueness. My jazz collages, with their distorted patterns, attempt to communicate all of this. As a collagist and painter, fortunately, the technique allows me this freedom of expression. Like a jazz musician who can depart from the original melody altogether and improvise on its harmonic base, I create a well-balanced final product with interesting textures, perspective and dimensions from juxtaposing pieces from different original backgrounds. What I am doing is not new though, as there are other artists before me, who painted jazz pieces e.g. Gerard Sekoto, Romare Bearden, Henri Matisse.

Nhlengethwa asserts that listening to music stimulates a synesthetic interest in the literal translation from musical modes to visual forms. Ncaphayi, on the other hand, presents an interpretive approach where the affect produced by the music is interpreted onto the pictorial surface. On one side, the focus is formal, concerning isolated musical structures that Nhlenghethwa concentrates on in his cross-modal interaction. It is not that he

transcribes the music into visual form, but rather that he highlights specific qualities of the music to utilise as models in his visual constructions.

Jackson Pollock, who has become an icon of modern American painting, is often mythologised as having painted while listening to jazz. However, there was no record player in his studio, which was only wired for electricity in 1953, and by then he had moved beyond his famous drip technique that is frequently discussed in musical terms (Harrison, n.d.:5). Artist Lee Krasner, who was also Pollock's wife, has been quoted as confirming that he often enjoyed extended jazz listening sessions at the house, which is separate from the studio, which sometimes lasted several days. His record collection, however, shows a preference for jazz from the 1920s and 1930s, especially traditional Dixieland and ragtime, rather than the bebop or other types of modern jazz that he is often linked with. In fact, it has been noted that he did not particularly favour the modern jazz vanguard (Harrison, n.d.:3–4). Consequently, this highlights a disconnection in the critical discourse about the true influence of Pollock's engagement with jazz.

An artist who wore the jazz modern vanguard as a badge of honour was Jean-Michel Basquiat, who not only featured its leading musicians as subjects of his work but claimed that bebop was his favourite music. Basquiat was also a music collector and owned roughly three thousand jazz records. Part of his creative process involved listening and dancing to bebop whilst composing his paintings (Beckstette, 2015:176).

Listening practices vary from artist to artist, as can the styles of music to which they listen. What unites these artists in their listening practices is the use of recorded music. This is an important factor to consider as jazz is, at heart, a performer's art form, with temporality functioning as fundamental to the creative act.

Given this context, I find that the artist has more in common with the composer than the jazz musician in terms of the parameters of their creative acts as they relate to their audience. Like the visual artist, a composer is free to remodel and adjust their work non-linearly and decide which version the audience will be exposed to. In contrast, especially through the arena of performance, the improviser has no revisional liberties at their

disposal as the aspect of temporality governs their creation. The audience experiences each aural articulation in real-time sequentially.

Recorded music offers the listener the luxury of control over the environment, time, and sequence of the performance. This is what enables the kind of analytical listening needed to produce the work discussed in this section. In Ncaphayi's work, it is clear that the role of music is to serve as a creative impulse towards creating "something new, something different" rather than attempting a mechanical translation of notes into pictures (Khosi, 2016). Ncaphayi (Nkomo, 2022) also states that listening activates feeling, which then guides seeing. This listening, which induces feeling and directs the artist's imaginative eye, aligns with the concept of what Uhuru Phalafala (2024:17) called 'deep hearing'. Deep hearing involves "the expansion into the present moment during wandering, a full presence, a dwelling in the break that invites presence of mind, body, and spirit, and deliberately listens into the onto-triad" (Phalafala, 2024:17). As an auratic, multi-sensorial modality, it is essentially a full-bodied and embodied experience, achieved by attuning the body to hearing/feeling as a way of generating knowledge.

A Leap into the Unknown

Regarding his artistic intentions, Ncaphayi considers his work a journey that encourages the audience to look within themselves and venture into the unfamiliar. This requires a receptive audience willing to surrender and be open to exploring the unknown, thereby aiding the process of self-discovery (Besnard, 2019).

Observing the work *Wisdom of Uncertainty* (Figure 33), I find the etching characteristic of Ncaphayi's oeuvre as it features a combination of both structure and loose play. I find that the use of horizontal lines in their organised repetition brings a sense of order to the composition, while the diagonal lines result in instability, as their repetition gives the impression of being clattered and inconsistent. In jazz terminology, these might be interpreted as being 'offbeat'. In jazz, the term 'offbeat' refers to playing rhythmic motifs

outside the regular (on beat) or established pattern. The interplay between structure and loose play becomes a trait that reoccurs with the two overlapping white rectangles as they provide an area of familiarity, even producing an illusion of dimension. This stability is interrupted by the black spots that pass through and surround the rectangles in no discernible direction. These might suggest a passage or movement through space and time. Throughout the image, the white flecks and black dots float aimlessly but counterbalance one another, both in colour and visual weight. Each contains areas of high concentration and of sporadic sparseness. The application of blue is also consistent with this underlying structure because although it dominates the composition, it is applied in varying tonal values, with some areas darker and others lighter.

Figure 33: Mongezi Ncaphayi. *Wisdom of Uncertainty*. 2019. numbered 5/10. Colour etching. 70,5 x 76 cm. (artnet.com).

The strength of any composition resides in the interplay of its varying parts; too much variety causes chaos, and too much consistency results in monotony. Thus, a successful work creatively brings harmony amongst these opposing forces. The underlying interplay of both structure and loose play also underscores jazz improvisation. This structure could be attributed to Ncaphayi's spontaneity-driven compositional approach, which he (Art Africa, 2015) explains as follows:

> "I rely on my intuition and spontaneity, and yes, they just evolve as I make them. If I put a mark down, the second mark would be based on the first mark and so are the rest of the marks, shapes and colours. I let the artwork guide me through its various directions. When it has reached that end point, the artwork tells me to stop."

This conversational mark-making can be compared to what is known as call and response in jazz. As an improvisational technique, it primarily involves the exchange of musical dialogue or ideas between a soloist and their accompanying musicians. In practice, this can take the form of a musical phrase or motif being introduced by a soloist or the rhythm section, which prompts a musical response from the rest of the group, or another soloist, leading to an improvised musical exchange (Lawn, 2013:48-49). The statement-counterstatement exchange need not be repetitive; if the players are highly skilled, then the back-and-forth can lead to dynamically complex interactions that extend throughout a performance (Terefenko, 2014:110). Ncaphayi, in his compositional process, engages in a visual form of call and response as a soloist, perhaps in the free jazz mode, given his inconspicuous sense of structure.

He has also remarked on how he would enter a print studio and, rather than mixing his own ink colours, he would instead start with those left over by previous artists as a way to challenge himself spontaneously (Nkomo, 2022). He further remarked on how he likes to "mess up and work with that and grow from that…" (ibid.). This reminds me of jazz pianist Herbie Hancock's anecdote about messing up and playing the wrong chord during a Miles Davis improvised solo, only for Davis to pause briefly and "correct" Hancock's mistake by playing notes that transformed the initial error into the correct chord ('Miles Davis according to Herbie Hancock,' 2014). This anecdote demonstrates the

potential for real-time musical dialogue at a high level, but the point is that one does not acquire this ability innately, but only through practice and close listening. I would argue that Ncaphayi's visual compositional flexibility is also not the result of pure intuition but repetitive experiments in spontaneity, which is itself a form of practice and skill development.

My reading of the title *Wisdom of Uncertainty* leads me towards a jazz album bearing the same name by the David S. Ware Quartet (1997), a premier jazz group of the 1990s and a leader in the New York scene. The album is one of the band's string of acclaimed works from the 1990s. Tenor saxophonist David S. Ware leads the band and features bassist William Parker, drummer Susie Ibarra, and pianist Matthew Shipp. The group's music has been described as "introspective, but explosive, and nearly sanctified in its ecstatic beauty" (Freeman, 2001:38). Ware is part of a cohort of saxophonists whom I refer to as 'firebreathers' because their sound gives the impression of eruptions emerging from their instruments, similar to a volcano. Commanding both attention and awe in their abilities to physically push the boundaries of breath control while remaining musically coherent, they are known for producing a sonically volatile style through their overblowing techniques. Examples of such playing include late-period John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, and Charles Gayle. Rather than producing a gentle and tender sound, these musicians produce a sound that rallies physical intensity, almost screeching and teetering towards the edge of unbearable noise. Their sound at times resembles screaming or shouting.[53] Freeman (2001:38) has likened Ware's sound to "weeps and roars". This wail has aesthetic and historical relevance in Black artistic production.

Moten (2003:2–4) considers Saidiya Hartman's meditations on the centrality of violence to slave-making by focusing on Frederick Douglass and the moment that introduced him

[53] I interpret these expressions as musical extensions of the slave field holler. Sometimes referred to as field cries, this was an alternative mode of communication rendered illegible to whites, and used by slaves who were barred from talking while working in the fields (Tanner & Megill, 2013:24). This tradition became elemental in the blues and is also used in jazz. The key trait of its iteration in the music described here is the overblown technique that produces a strongly timbral expression, privileging sound over notes.

to slavery: The screaming of his Aunt Hester, who was given a brutal whipping. Moten (2003:7) finds this moment pregnant with theoretical implications for radical Black aesthetic production. In the same essay, Moten quotes Edouard Glissant who avers that, "since speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream" (Moten, 2003:7). Glissant's comments reveal a coded articulation within the scream that often comes off as illegible to those not attuned to its expression.

The scream also plays an important role in 20th century-Black musical performances. A prominent early example is Abby Lincoln's vocal performance on the 1960 composition *Protest*, a segment in the composition *Triptych: Prayer/ Protest / Peace* from the album *We Insist! Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite* (1960) in collaboration with Max Roach and Oscar Brown Jr. The album occupies a revered place in the jazz canon as a modernist forebearer of genre's overt interests in protest and politically[54] inclined content, and at the same time, a nexus between modern jazz and 1960s avant-garde or "the New thing" as termed by musicians. Moten (2003:22) sees Lincoln's performance of *Protest,* which includes over a minute of extended shouts and screaming, as echoing Aunt Hester's scream and its political rumblings. Lincoln's performance of *Protest* can be viewed as a forerunner to the overblown shrieks, wails, and screams that defined the musical excursions of people such as John Coltrane[55], Albert Ayler, and Pharoah Sanders, especially in the second half of the 1960s.

I think this is what Nkomo (2023) might have been referring to when he said that he found Ncaphayi's works "scream", "thunder", and bellow. This is because Ncaphayi's work, which at times can come off as simultaneously chaotic in its compositional anxiety, subtle in its mode of attack and free in its visual make-up, is underscored by the same force represented by the wail in Black music, which is a coded articulation that can be illegible

[54] The album responds to the Civil Rights Movement, African Independence, and the Sharpeville Massacre.

[55] Drummer Max Roach commented on hearing cries and wails in Coltrane's *Alabama* which he attributed to the anti-blackness imposed by the white settler society in the US (Turner, 2021:188). The song was recorded in response to the 1963 Ku Klux Klan bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, resulting in the deaths of four African American girls.

to its unintended audience. The artwork "*Wisdom of Uncertainty*" (Figure 33) embodies for the artist the notions of being comfortable with uncertainty and the unknown, and of finding knowledge and wisdom in the process. As Ncaphayi has stated, the audience must be willing to render themselves receptive to his meditative articulations (Besnard, 2019).

Mapping, Wandering, Migration and Self-discovery

Ncaphayi (2021) revisited the David S. Ware quartet in another work titled *Serpents and Visions*, shown in Figure 34, which I suspected was named after the sixth track on the group's 1996 release *Oblations and Blessings*. The origins of the titles for both *Serpents and Visions*, and *Wisdom of Uncertainty* were retroactively confirmed by Ncaphayi[56] (2025). The two creatives share a common interest in spiritual enlightenment and self-discovery. Ware understood music as being in service of "the search for what man is about … the expansion of consciousness" (Bivins, 2015:211), a position not dissimilar from Ncaphayi's assertion that his work is about self-discovery (Besnard, 2019). Based on these comments, along with the artist's explorations of the transcendental and improvisation as a quest for self-understanding, Ncaphayi's artistic output might best be understood as a form of wandering, as theorised by Phalafala (2024). Wandering in Southern African cosmologies is a form of knowledge attainment of self, others, and the world as expressed in the Setswana principle *go tsamaya ke go bona*, which translates to 'to wander is to see' (Phalafala, 2024:15). This implies that wandering, and the navigational experiences of the unfamiliar is central to understanding oneself, others and the world.

The thread between the commentary of both artists is a focus on the spiritual. Whereas Ware's belief is underscored by practices such as meditation, yoga, and a strong belief in

[56] He admited to sometimes struggling with titles, which can lead to borrowing from music records, occasionally involving playful modifications of the titles. The title can be assigned to the work either after completion or during the creative process. Titles are based on the feelings evoked by the artwork, the titled are always considered and not random (Ncaphayi, 2025).

the East Asian philosophies of Tao and Hindu teachings (Bivins, 2015:211–212), Ncaphayi is more concerned with notions of the intangible and individual knowledge of self. These ideas recall Cecil Taylor's comments that improvisation is synonymous with self-analysis as it involves the player navigating the unknown terrain through "conscious manipulation of known material" (quoted in Moten, 2003: 73). Ncaphayi (2025) himself likens improvisation with spontaneity and argues that it allows the artist to be honest, which is the essence of art. It enables the artist to reflect the true sense of self because it demands the artist to be present-minded. This stems from notions that connect improvisation with authenticity in jazz practice.

Improvisation, whether in traditional relational models such as melodic paraphrasing, modal, or harmonic improvisation — or even in the elusive structural form of free jazz — is intertextual rather than self-contained (Elsdon, 2013:65). In his study of Keith Jarrett's unconventional solo improvisation concert performances, Elsdon (2008:51-52) suggests that, although devoid of any structural planning, a stylistic language develops throughout numerous performances. Ake (2002:102) argues that, despite being promoted as spontaneous events, the now legendary solo concerts contain several discernible formal features: "In general, his stylistic palette includes a seamless blend of quasi-Romantic rhapsodies, diatonic folklike passages, "free" counterpoint, angular atonality, extended techniques (such as plucking or strumming the piano strings, striking the frame, etc.), and protracted ostinatos". Additionally, Elsdon (2008:56-63) writes that Jarrett's structural vocabulary for his solo piano improvisations incorporates stylistic passages such as the ballad, the folk ballad, and the blues vamp. These passages are seamlessly woven throughout the concerts as interludes and improvisational segments. Although not consciously aiming for structure, the musicians' imagination is still influenced by their acquired experience, skills, and knowledge, which subconsciously shape the improvisations.

Both Ake's and Elsdon's musicological studies indicate that improvisation is not only structured but also intertextual, rather than self-contained. A critical examination of

improvisation requires the analyst to be intentional in considering "everything he has learned from *other* improvisations by the same musician," suggests Jost (quoted in Elsdon, 2013:65). Recognising this intertextuality in Ncaphayi's visual works makes it evident that overlapping visual motifs and thematic interests recur across several of his pieces. This includes his repeated use of flat colour, short strokes, repetitive diagonal lines, organic and geometric shapes, and the negotiated tension between structure and loose play. This language is also evident in a more recent artwork, such as *Adored Value* (Ncaphayi, 2024), as shown in Figure 1.

In *Serpents and Visions* (Ncaphayi, 2021), see Figure 34, the preferred materials are watercolour and ink on paper. The resulting composition is quite vibrant in its use of yellow and reds, in contrast to the cool blue-dominated Wisdom of Uncertainty (Ncaphayi, 2019). Watercolour and ink, due to their porous nature, allow for unpredictability in the flow of water-based pigments on paper. In *Serpents and Visions* (Figure 34), the loose flow of ink creates the illusion of colours bleeding into each other, merging at specific contact points and blending into different hues. This is a result of using a wet-on-wet pigment application technique, whereby wet pigment is applied on top of a layer of wet pigment before it dries, producing a sometimes stain-like quality. This is evident in the interaction between red and yellow, where a blood-like stain appears on the bottom left. The overall tone of the colours is volatile and unpredictable, clearly a result of limited control over the pigments. The most noticeable feature of the work is the black thin linework, which weaves like a tapestry, forming a volume-less mass with visual weight. Through the joining of short, thin lines, the impression is that of organised but irregular lines, perhaps suggesting a lack of cohesion. The short blue strokes continue this interplay of organised yet not uniform, branching off in different directions. When I asked the artist why many of his works are executed on a large scale similar to this one, he replied that, as an artist exploring abstraction, he finds it natural to work on larger surfaces (Ncaphayi, 2025).

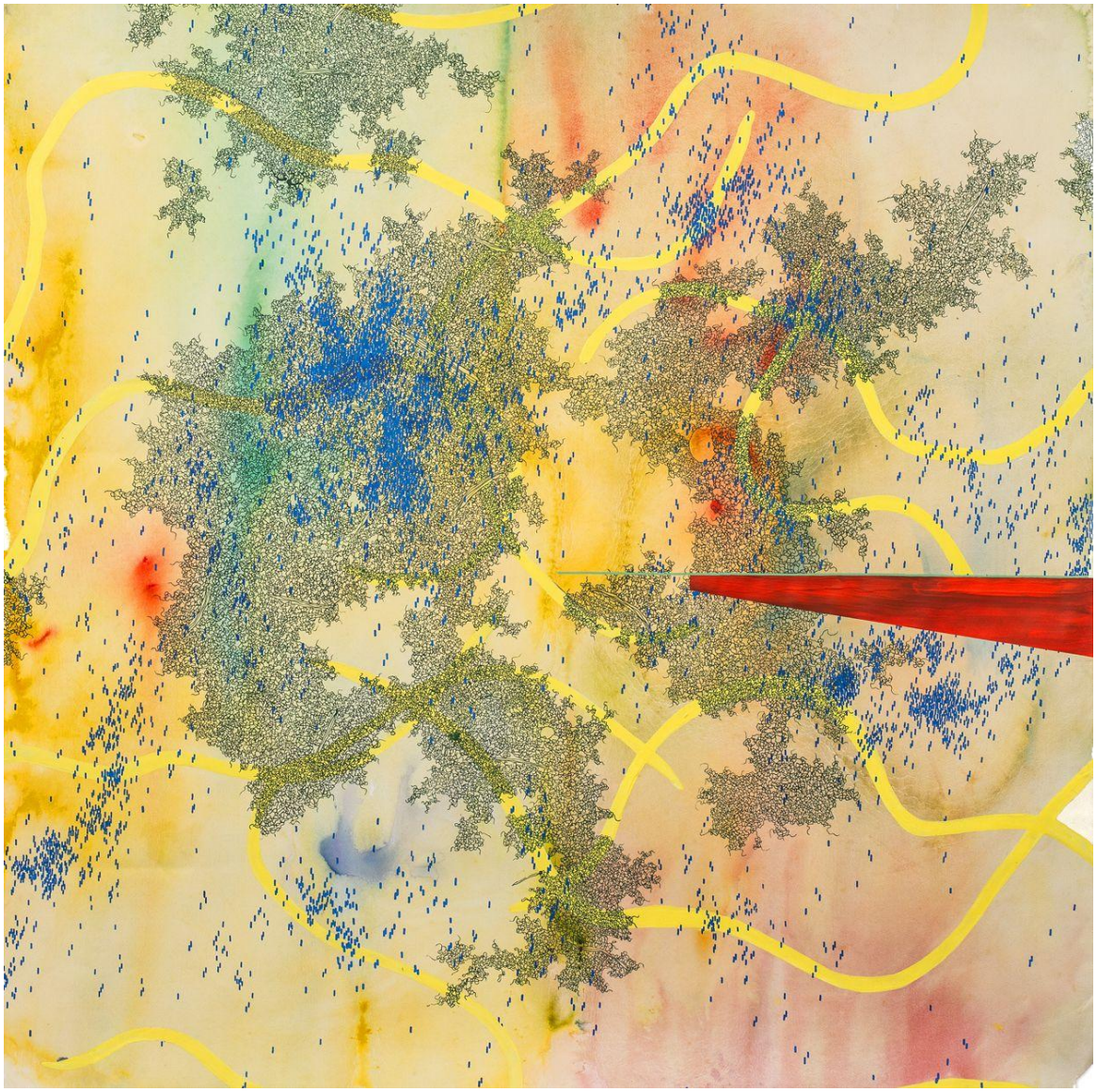

Figure 34: Mongezi Ncaphayi. *Serpents and Visions*. 2021. Indian ink and watercolour on Fabriano. 140.5 x 140 cm. (artsy.net).

If these images are to be compared to any visual domain, it would be maps. *In Serpent and Vision* (Ncaphayi, 2021) (Figure 34), for instance, the long, flowing yellow lines might signify pathways and routes, while the intricately drawn interlocking linework creates what resembles either a landmass or high-rising mountains. The blue flecks evoke crowds of people in motion. The flat quality of the work almost gives it a bird's-eye view over a terrain, intensifying the map-like aspect of the piece. I see cartography as a practice grounded in the abstraction of existing or imagined landscapes through stylised

representations of often enormous sites, such as mountains, valleys, rivers, and oceans, scaled down to smaller sizes and simplified with shapes, colours, and lines to enable easier interpretation. A glance at the terrain view on Google Maps supports this perspective. Imagination plays a crucial role in mapmaking and was even more significant before the advent of satellite imagery, as cartographers relied heavily on imagination combined with knowledge gained through travel and observation. Additionally, maps have been created for imaginary sightings, and it is in the space between the ethereal and physical worlds that I situate Ncaphayi's mapping practice at a symbolic level. This sense of navigation also connects to Ncaphayi's (2025) view that improvisation teaches one how to respond to unfamiliarity and unplanned circumstances in life.

Regarding the cartographic orientation of his work, Ncaphayi (Besnard, 2019) comments as follows:

> My works are like maps, searching where you are going, allowing yourself to receive things, allowing yourself to be exposed to something new. Instinct is important. You have a map, you are going to a place you don't know, maybe you have to jump or to swim, and you are scared but you do it. The map was right, and you look at what you discover. Open yourself up to your inner self, this is the unknown of your inner being, the other aspect of yourself that you don't know. To see the unknown, you need to open up, and evolve so that we can be better people – the self-discovery, and it goes forward.

Maps primarily serve a navigational purpose, guiding the viewer in understanding geography, distance, direction, and space. In these works, navigation can be psychological or spiritual, or relate to concrete and physical movement. The navigation depicted here is of an unknown and uncharted realm, the ethereal. Maps can also show people's movement across landscapes and migrations. Both migration and transcendence involve a form of relocation, if not a re-orientation, from one's current reality into another.

With migration, this is often geographic, while transcendence refers to a spiritual or psychological journey, one that alters a state of consciousness.

Migration is commonly understood as the movement from one location to another, typically involving a physical relocation. This is a theme that Ncaphayi explored in his earlier figurative work that investigated mining, familial, regional, and national histories (Khosi, 2016). For example, in his 2013 Gerard Sekoto award-winning work for his entry into the 2013 Absa L'Atelier Art Competition, *Migrant Workers' Hostels* Ncaphayi (2013), shown in Figure 35, he depicted endless rows of migrant worker hostels in this stylised manner with very little detail aside from the outlines of the building structures, black squares for windows, and rows of vertical lines representing corrugated iron. Such compounds housed migrant labourers, mostly from mines, who had to reside in these single-sex hostels separated from their families (Art Africa, 2013). The artwork is an etching produced on a copper plate, which, although not considered a precious metal due to its abundance, is still subject to the exploitative relations of the migrant labour system.

Ncaphayi (2025) described the work as his most important work in the sense that it served as a creative breakthrough, as it was the culmination of a developing visual language which began to stray from figuration and into abstraction. Furthermore, as the Absa L'atelier winning work of 2013, it effectively helped him break through the mainstream art industry.

I argue that by removing direct references to the body, the work shifts our focus towards the infrastructure and structures of oppression. Particularly when considered within the context from which Ncaphayi speaks—South Africa—a country with a turbulent racial history marked by, among other things, spatial injustices. The compounds themselves are aesthetic relics of historical forces that have manifested through the complexities of bureaucratic, urban planning, architectural, legalistic, social, and economic factors. These compounds serve as monuments of native dispossession and settler colonial capitalist expansion, and in my view, their continued use testifies to the endurance of these oppressive structures in the 'new' South Africa.

These histories illustrate the impact of capitalism and colonial displacement in South Africa. Black South Africans, recovering from the loss of independence due to multi-generational colonial wars of territorial conquest, the first of which was initiated in 1659, began participating in the colonial migrant labour system in the urban areas of Natal and the Cape as early as 1830 (Coplan, 2007:18). This system was fundamental to the industrialisation of Southern Africa, driven by the mining industry that developed in the 19th century. Migrant labour was relied upon as an unrestricted workforce for the economy.

Further wars of dispossession were consolidated in the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, following the end of the Anglo-Boer War. With the war's conclusion, ensuring a steady supply of labour in the mining sector became a primary concern for the British administration (Ansell, 2005:5). For the proletarianization of African peasants to succeed, colonial imperialist policies had to restructure the existing African subsistence farming economy, removing their economic self-sufficiency through the new relocations that followed colonial conquest (Magubane, 1979:71).[57] The 1913 Native Land Act reinforced this pattern of migration towards urban areas in pursuit of economic betterment.

Although the type of migration described was often in search of socio-economic betterment, in the context of colonialism, capitalist expansion, and exploitation, it was detrimental to a majority of the population because it separated many families and alienated the humanity of workers.[58] Thus, migrant labour and these hostels come to symbolise the parasitic relationship between the settler colony and the natives in South Africa. Ncaphayi's (2025) own family migrated to Benoni from the Eastern Cape in search of greener pastures during the era after the Witwatersrand Gold Rush, which began in 1886. In Benoni, jazz and politics coexisted, with figures like Oliver Thambo and Thandi Klaasen crossing paths within the same community (ibid.). With mineshafts spread

[57] For further detail see Magubane (1979:71-101).
[58] For more of this perspective see Phalafala (2023).

throughout Benoni, Ncaphayi (ibid.) also mentions frequenting the mining hostels in his youth and being fond of the mining dance groups. The artwork thus represents an intersection of national, family, and personal histories.

Figure 35: Mongezi Ncaphayi. *Migrant Workers' Hostels* (detail). 2013. Etching and spite bite. 23 x 23 cm. (mail&guardian.co.za)

In his later embrace of abstraction, Ncaphayi did not abandon these interests; instead, they remain central to his work. As he states, "the mining, the history, the displacement, and the migration, these are all issues translated into abstraction. These are issues I still think about and it is something I am still exploring" (Besnard, 2019).

These histories intersect with the development of jazz, not only in South Africa but also in the US. Jazz is a music born from the forced displacement of West Africans into the American colonies via the transatlantic slave trade. Displaced from their nations, territories, languages, cultures, and spiritual systems, diasporic Africans had to adapt to

unfamiliar geographies, languages, cultures, and religions to serve the colonies' economic interests. Through this forced displacement, diasporic Blacks reshaped their cultural and religious practices, which were influenced by both Western and African cultures.[59] From 1910, forty-five years after the abolition of slavery in the US in 1865, a period known as the Great Migration began, during which millions of African Americans left the South and migrated to the North and Midwest in search of social and economic opportunities. This chapter in African American history coincides with the development and spread of jazz as the music moved from New Orleans to northern and midwestern cities, where regional styles[60] began to emerge as a result of this relocation. Jazz is fundamentally an art form that was born and nurtured through forced displacement, proletarianization, and urbanisation.

The music arrived in South Africa during the 1920s through American gramophone recordings and films (Ballantine, 2012:7). It has flourished within the vocal and instrumental musical traditions that evolved in urban areas, influenced by the historical migration patterns of the South African Black working class.

These histories intertwine with the development of jazz in South Africa by the Black and Coloured urban proletariat during the 20th century. Townships such as Sophiatown and District Six, which were located close to cities and provided easily exploitable labour, also served as urban cultural hubs, and many musicians emerged or lived in these areas before their destruction, led by the apartheid government.

Abstraction and the Weight of Blackness

Although abstraction has roots that stretch back over 70 000 years[61] within Southern Africa, in 20th-century South Africa, it was seen as a mode of expression not authentic to

[59] For more on these histories see Baraka (2002).
[60] Styles such as Chicago, Kansas City jazz developed in the cities.
[61] The oldest recognized abstract artifact and the oldest evidence of abstract thinking in human history was found in Blombos cave, Western Cape.

natives. South Africa enters modernist abstraction through Ernest Mancoba (1904–2002) and his experiments in Paris during the 1940s. Due to Mancoba's geographic isolation from the region, combined with limited support from global art institutions, his pioneering experiments were denied the flow of influence to both present and future generations of artists, at least until the end of apartheid. By that time, abstraction had become an ostracised form of expression, especially among Black artists.

From then on, abstraction in the South African mainstream was largely the province of white interests. The 'proper' art to be produced by Blacks, which the white settler market craved, consisted of serene depictions of natives that comforted white patrons' perceptions, as Mancoba noted in 1938 (cited in Cohen, 2018). In 1984, Thami Mnyele (2009:24) described this as "sentimental caricatures of a primitive community of people who were satisfied with 'their way of life'". Such illustrations would later be labelled under the racially essentialist category of township art.

To artists such as Louis Maqhubela (1931–2021), abstraction represented a form of resistance against stereotypical portrayals of Black identity and its anticipated role in the market (Martin, 2016:232). Unfortunately, anti-apartheid cultural organisations and artists regarded abstraction as inadequate for the cultural struggle against apartheid, criticising it for lacking "the immediacy of communication with the masses," which led to a somewhat restrictive aesthetic orthodoxy favouring figuration and allegory (Mnyele, 2009:24). Consequently, abstraction was wrongly stereotyped as non-representational and thus apolitical, rendering it a muted mode of expression within the South African art scene from the 1980s onward. It was viewed as an elitist, decadent, and self-indulgent preoccupation, especially in comparison to pressing political issues that demanded aesthetic responses directly connected to the masses. This atmosphere prompted art historian, curator, and scholar Marilyn Martin (1943–2022) to ask: "Is there a place for Black abstract painters in South Africa?" Martin (1991:25) lamented the precarious position of Black artists, who were compelled to operate on the fringes of commercial,

cultural, institutional, scholarly, and political support for their aesthetic choices. She remarked on how "abstraction seems to be forbidden" for Black practitioners.

However, looking back at South African art history and the works of Black artists, abstraction has had a complex historical trajectory. For example, the work of BC lent itself to abstract qualities due to its experimental nature in terms of material and formal qualities. I especially think of the work of Motlhabane Mashiangwako and Thami Mnyele, who created figurative works featuring abstract segments throughout their compositions. This demonstrates its aesthetic liberatory potential through formal experimentation and ideological possibilities, considering the overt political language of the work. It seems that critics of abstraction took issue with the absence of the Black figure and recognisable sightings referencing the physical world in the work of Black artists, not with the inclusion or adoption of abstraction. David Koloane (1999:332-333) wrote that in South Africa, only Black artists are warned not to lose their ethnically defined "authenticity" and "identity" in their aesthetic explorations. For Koloane, such arguments are remnants of the apartheid logic of Otherness and racial essentialism. The "authentic" African is a trope born from the myth of primitivism.

These historical fissures influence how abstract art is received in South Africa today. Ashraf Jamal (2017:380) argues that the politics of representation related to liberation remain central to the ongoing dominance of the Black body as a motif in politically engaged art in the country, even three decades after the first democratic elections. Reflecting on these histories, Athi Joja (2019) notes that although some progress has been made since the anti-apartheid struggle, the contemporary art scene encompasses a diverse range of stylistic approaches, with no single school of thought dictating the acceptable forms of expression. Joja (2019) also emphasises the persistent expectation for marginalised artists to depict their backgrounds in a way that aligns with the dominant Western cultural gaze within the contemporary art world. Abstraction, especially when it removes visible cultural and racial markers, allows the artist to partly subvert the dominant Eurocentric racializing gaze and that of the art market.

In this context, abstraction becomes a practical option for artists aiming to evade the imposed expectations of how Blackness and Africanness should be performed and presented to the dominant Western culture and its art market. The refusal to perform one's identity does not indicate a lack of interest in political discourse, as Ncaphayi's work shows. Ncaphayi's (2025) adoption of an abstractionist aesthetic to subvert direct and explicit expression was the primary motivation for his shift towards abstraction. There was also an intention to explore the transformative potential of art by creating visual beauty from a painful and traumatic upbringing, characterised by witnessing violence as a common aspect of life (Ncaphayi, 2025). Not wanting to limit his sociopolitical expressions to what he perceived as aggression in the politically charged figurative works of other artists, he instead sought to explore a more subtle and occasionally gentle approach that aims to convey ideas of hope and self-transformation. For Ncaphayi (2025), abstraction signifies "non-confinement" of expressive content and form.

This act of refusing the Western gaze or subverting identity aligns with Afro-modern abstractionist movements that politically underpinned both bebop and free jazz discourses in response to cultural and political imperialism, as well as market forces, during the 1940s to 1960s. This radical politics of withholding corresponds with Edouard Glissant's (1997:189) call to demand the right to opacity.

Black Abstraction and Glissant's Right to Opacity.

The Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant (1997:189) proposed a response to Eurocentric dominance with 'the right to opacity'. This is the assertion of the right not to be understood, to avoid the appearance, recognisability, and visibility of Western normative frameworks. Glissant presented this proposition in response to how Eurocentrism sought to force an evaluation of the world based on Western standards. This leads to accepting rather than rejecting what cannot be easily understood. It is a provocative act within the context of Western cultural and intellectual dominance,

asserting the subaltern's right not to be forced into Western modes of 'understanding'. This intellectual move aims to dismantle the binary between the Self and the Other (Glissant, 1997:190).

Although Glissant (1997:189) theorised this in response to minority cultures evading dominant cultures, I emphasise cultural dominance rather than numerical disparity, as the numerical minority can culturally subdue a majority, as in South Africa. The essence of the argument, I contend, highlights the cultural and socio-political dominance of one social group over another. Seen this way, demographic numbers are not the key aspect; rather, it is the relational dynamics between social groups. In South Africa, although the Indigenous population constitutes a numerical majority, they remain socially and culturally subordinated by the European settler minority.[62] The right to opacity, therefore, is a counter-hegemonic act that aims to refuse being Othered.

A counterargument could be that adopting abstraction might signify the subjugation of marginal cultures by the dominant Western culture. However, this assumes that abstraction is inherently Western, which is problematic because it dismisses non-Western cultural histories and contributions; in other words, it perpetuates the very Western-centric view it claims to oppose.

I therefore call for consideration of adopting abstraction by Black artists in light of the cultural dominance by a white minority. However, first, I outline how abstraction, as a mode of representation, can be understood as fostering opacity.

According to Glissant (1997:189–190), the very processes through which Western thought seeks to understand populations and ideas lead to reduction because they rely on comparison to an ideal scale. This forms the basis for understanding, and consequently, acceptance by measuring people and ideas against Western norms for proximity and

[62] I am of the view that the native-settler antagonism was not resolved by the 1994 consensus, contrary to popular opinion, as it failed to restore title to territory to the disposed indigenous African majority, and as such, the country remains a settler colony.

compatibility. Essentially, it is a process of Othering.[63] The Other (non-Western) is crucial in defining the Self (Western), as it provides a conceptual fidelity of what lies outside of the Self. Thus, the Other is seen as the stranger, the unknown, and the different. The goal is to contain and control the Other. On the relations of power between African artists and the West, Olu Oguibe (2004:13) writes that "it is forbidden that African artists should possess the power of self-definition, the right to *author*-ity. It is forbidden that they should enounce outside the gaze and free of the interventionist powers of others". South Africa is a settler colonial society whereby the Black majority live in an asymmetrical power relationship with the white minority in terms of social, economic and cultural relations. In the South African context, Glissant's (1997) call for the right of opacity can also be understood as resisting the art market's gaze, which imposes standards, expectations, and rewards on practitioners from marginalised backgrounds to present, perform, and represent their cultural identities.

While accepting difference disrupts the hierarchical scale, it still recognises the scale, allowing for its existence. Glissant (1997:190) suggests that the goal should be to eliminate the very idea of the scale by preventing reduction and instead embracing opacity, thereby making the concept of the Self in relation to the Other obsolete.

Although Glissant's (1997:189-194) theory has legalistic implications regarding the recognition and rights of social groups, I want to emphasise its aesthetic dimensions. In the field of cultural production, artists from marginalised backgrounds are expected to comment on their identity or cultures through their creative practices. These efforts can partly be attributed to Western culture's marginalisation and exclusion of such backgrounds from mainstream and canonical spaces, prompting responses of self-affirmation and politics of visibility by artists emerging from outside Western norms. Examples include artists such as Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, Zanele Muholi, Manyaku Mashilo, Cinga Samson, and Wonder Buhle, whose work I believe navigates, among other issues, the visibility of the Black body in an anti-Black world. These artists exemplify the urgency

[63] Said (1979) introduced the concept of the Other in their seminal text *Orientalism*.

and potential of claiming representation in a global order rooted in extermination and erasure.

If we consider the claims that South Africa is the youngest 'liberated' state in Africa, then such responses are inevitable given the context in which young Black artists operate. This context includes centuries of settler colonial dispossession, suppression, genocide, and cultural bastardisation inflicted on non-settlers in South Africa. This phenomenon is seen worldwide among people with similar histories. For instance, in Britain, Black British artists responded not only to the marginalisation of the Black experience but also to its "simplification and its stereotypical character" (Hall, 2009:270).

Hall (2009:271) finds that such politics concern what he terms 'relations of representation', which are defined by the response of Black practitioners to the imperialist culture's misrepresentation of Blackness through fetishisation and stereotyping, and by producing a counter and 'positivist' mode of Black representation that privileges positive depictions of Black people. African-American art also experienced a similar historical trajectory, in which the initial response to the white settler colonial aesthetic hegemony was a concerted push towards race-affirming, positivist depictions that respond through reference to perceptible phenomena (Harper, 2015:2). This implies that the art must follow a realist paradigm or at least be a variation of figuration. As early as 1969, Frank Bowling[64] (2021:141) wrote on how Black art is not merely defined by skin pigmentation but more fundamentally by the experience of living a Black life, which moulds and shapes the artist who identifies with the rest of Black people and then reflects this in their work.

Although I find the inclination towards figurative, race-affirming art commendable, considering the socio-cultural and historical context from which it emerges, as an aesthetic proposal, it risks essentializing Blackness by prescribing its content and form. This can lead to an unofficial aesthetic orthodoxy, resulting in muddy debates about what

[64] Bowling is a Guyanese-British artist, who authored several polemical essays on the notion of a Black aesthetic.

constitutes 'proper' Black art. Hall (2009:271), in 1988, noted that this strategy was characteristic of an earlier figure in Black British culture, but that a change was underway, best described as the "politics of representation". This shift involves discarding notions of Black essentialism and recognising the multiplicity of Blackness, with all its nuances of ethnicity, class, gender, nationality and sex. Various theories, such as radical queer and feminist theory, postcolonialism, post-structuralism, and Marxism, among many other theoretical provocations, have informed responses to this.

In light of these issues, adopting abstraction as a mode of representation thus provides a concrete gesture against the essentialising of Blackness by rejecting a vividly racialised aesthetic that risks reducing Blackness solely to skin colour. It also offers a symbolic retreat from the social and epistemic violence inflicted upon the Black body and enables overt systemic critiques that shift the focus of our criticisms indirectly away from the body, drawing attention instead to structural issues. As such, the argument is not that abstraction is the more suitable mode of expression but rather that it broadens the understanding of what constitutes Blackness.

Conclusion

In the context of socialising jazz practices, the work of Mongezi Ncaphayi can be classified as *Afrological*, as it situates the genre within historical processes such as migration, which are intrinsically linked to its history. Additionally, the work references the auditory qualities characteristic of Black expression, exemplified by the scream of Aunt Hester, which functions as an encoded articulation of Black subjectivity intended for comprehension solely by its designated audience. Ncaphayi, a Black South African artist engaging in non-figurative abstraction, utilises this scream to participate in a politically nuanced mode of representation that I contend aligns with Glissant's concept of the *right to opacity*—the right to withhold the presentation of one's identity and background in accordance with market expectations and the dominant Western cultural norms. This politics of refusal aligns with Afro-modern trends of abstraction observed in

jazz from the 1940s through the 1960s, particularly within bebop and free jazz, as responses to the pressures exerted by cultural imperialism and commercial exploitation. For Black artists, abstraction is not necessarily associated with notions of an autonomous, self-sufficient form, as is often observed in Western modernist abstract art. Furthermore, at a formal level, his interactions with improvisation, which he associates with spontaneity, resemble the musical form of call-and-response, embodying a dialogical mode of musical interaction. On both formal and ideological planes, Ncaphayi can be regarded as an insightful composer of jazz visuality.

Conclusion

Through an interdisciplinary framework incorporating art history, music criticism and theory, formalism, Black studies, and phenomenology and iconography this research endeavour has sought to examine the two primary questions guiding the study: 1) the manner in which sonic expressions are visually articulated, and 2) the means by which visual representations are sonically interpreted.

The first question is relatively easier to answer, considering over a century of responses by visual artists and musicians across various materials, styles, and mediums to this very question. The common reply from the music community is through notation, where literal notes and musical cues are scored using symbols meant to be interpreted musically.

In the visual domain, the primary approach is the figurative depiction of musicians, whether in recording studios or performance venues. These are known as environmental portraiture, where the image showcases the musicians within their professional context. The tendency in the visual domain is to highlight the performer by placing them within the processes involved in producing recorded music, which is the main format for musical distribution. However, because jazz is primarily a performer's art form, concert venues are the main site of musical creation and thus the primary context in which it is illustrated. The focus on the performer also extends to portraits of musicians in photographic studios. Alongside the performer, the instrumentation is also crucial for visually locating the sonic, by emphasising the tools of musical creation, especially those prominent in jazz, such as the saxophone, trumpet, double bass, and similar instruments. These serve as both visual and sonic signs of jazz due to their close connection to the genre. The union of performer and instrument yields the most common visual representation of jazz, where both are typically depicted during live performances and occasionally at rest. This constitutes the dominant visual language of jazz. As such, these visualisations have come to serve as the primary and consistent pictorial language.

Although once innovative during the 1950s and 1960s due to the efforts of several photographers, graphic designers and to a lesser extent visual artists, today they are seen as traditional, conventional, and visually conservative.

However, since music not only represents sound but also exists as a discursive practice, visual artists and graphic designers have examined the social and ideological aspects of music. They mainly do this through album cover design by illustrating scenes that emphasise these issues over performance aspects, as seen with Black Consciousness visual inflexions. In other words, this extends the sonic register. In the BC idiom, this was explored through the lens of African cosmologies and epistemologies, resulting in figurative works depicting humans in relation to the natural environment and the ancestral plane. The BC idiom, through its extension of the sonic registers, unsettles the stability of the dominant mode of jazz visuality.

The album cover, as a cross-modal medium, provides unique insights into the challenge of visualising the sonic. I have argued that the cover, because of its proximity to the music, shapes the interpretation of the music through visual mediation. However, this is not a monological relationship but rather dialogical, as the meaning of the visual is also affected by the sonic. Therefore, the album cover is the primary site where the musical and visual interpretations of jazz are negotiated. Although I focused on the broad shaping of jazz identity, a more targeted study of the representations of a single record label or musician could further expand the discussion of audio-visual mediated identities. Additionally, within the scope of this study, I have considered the album cover mainly as those designed not by the musicians themselves, but rather by photographers, visual artists, and graphic designers. However, some musicians have featured their visual work on album covers. In the jazz tradition, this notably includes Bill Dixon, Asher Gamedze, Cécile McLorin Salvant, Ornette Coleman, Muhal Richard Abrams, and Lloyd McNeill. This phenomenon warrants further research into the album cover as an extended site of artistic expression by musicians, enriching the literature on the multimodality of the

album as an artefact and adding another perspective to the question of visualising the sonic.

Abstraction, with its unique compositional language, challenges the coherence of the dominant visual language because it resists the standardisation that characterises both notation and the typical figurative works found in jazz visual culture. Yet, despite these challenges, abstraction has played a significant role in shaping the visual language of jazz. The integration of modern art and abstraction, particularly on album cover art, was crucial in changing the public perception of the genre from popular dance music to high modern art music.

In terms of a direct visualisation of the sonic in the language of abstraction, Wadada Leo Smith's *Ankhrasmation* language scores respond through their use of colour, line, shape and pattern, which convey musical ideas. Abstraction as a visual language is also understood to have formal correspondences with jazz, based on their shared vocabulary, which includes concepts such as composition, colour, gesture, improvisation, and rhythm, that operate across mediums (Shaw-Miller, 2022:4-5).

However, Diedra Harris-Kelley (2004:249) has warned against making uncritical analogies between jazz and visual art because neglecting the technical specifics of each medium would complicate rather than clarify the discussion. Peter Townsend (2000:92) also correctly argued that when jazz is represented through another medium, it becomes subject to the dominance of that medium's traditions, forms of expression, and vocabulary. This relationship creates resistance against a direct one-to-one correlation between the sensory modalities of sight and sound. Therefore, it is important to consider the nuances of these terms to develop a critical analysis across modalities.

Amongst the terminology commonly used across various media, improvisation stands out in critical and academic writing. The concept is widely regarded as a primary, and sometimes, misguidedly, the definitive characteristic of jazz. In his visual compositions, Mongezi Ncaphayi employs improvisational techniques through a spontaneous compositional style that avoids planning. His mark-making is relational in the sense that

each subsequent mark responds to the previous one; this process is similar to call and response found in jazz improvisation, whereby a musical statement (call) is met with a counterstatement (response) by another musician or the group, leading to a complex musical dialogue. He also uses the wet-on-wet technique, which explores elements of chance. His explorations with improvisation are shared by other abstract artists, including Pollock, Frank Bowling, and Jack Whitten, among others.

This interpretation of improvisation as analogous with spontaneity can be misleading, as although elements of spontaneity exist in jazz, improvisation often functions within structured forms of established thematic and rhythmic patterns and chord progressions. The loose link with unrestrained spontaneity reflects a primitivist misinterpretation of jazz that prioritises the musician's intuition. It is also important to recognise that within jazz, there are several types of improvisation techniques, each with its unique qualities, which are rarely accounted for in visual terms.

Another fundamental issue with emphasising improvisation is that it predates jazz and is currently practised in other genres. Therefore, it becomes essential to define it in specific terms as it is practised in jazz music. To this point, it becomes crucial to clarify not only its formal scope but also the ideologies that underpin its practice. According to George E. Lewis (1996), jazz improvisation can be understood as expressing an *Afrological* understanding of music, whereby improvisation is utilised in relation to social concerns and group progress. This contrasts with the form-as-content approach favoured by many abstract painters. Artists such as Norman Lewis, Jack Whitten, and even Ncaphayi, however, explore the social and theoretical frameworks of the music, which influence their formal concerns, thereby articulating a form of jazz improvisation in ideological terms. I find that among black artists who explore jazz, these social and cultural concerns intersect with their focus on the music's formal aspects. This is also true of figurative artists, including, but not limited to, Sam Nhlengethwa, Romare Bearden, Roy DeCarava, David Koloane, Dumile Feni, and Jean-Michel Basquiat. In the diverse works of these

artists, we see not only an interrogation of jazz performance and its performers but also an examination of Black life in terms of its historical, political, social, and cultural aspects.

The second anchoring question concerning the interpretation of visual articulations sonically presents a comparatively greater challenge, as additional research is necessary regarding the musical interpretations of visual materials, excluding notational systems. Nevertheless, there exists over a century of creative work which addresses this inquiry.

In the language of figuration, works featuring instruments commonly found in jazz, such as the saxophone or trumpet, can act as auditory symbols of the genre, thus allowing images with these instruments to be interpreted sonically.

Regarding album cover artwork, since recorded music is the primary way people engage with music, the history of jazz is mainly documented through recordings. Album covers act as a multimodal medium that conveys information about the associated recorded sound, which forms a sonic entity. More than just decorative, both visual and auditory elements are interconnected in a multisensory interaction where meaning is created and negotiated through the combination of sight and sound. Therefore, I argue that the visual aspects of the cover can be interpreted in conjunction with the recorded music.

Considering abstraction as a language, Wadada Leo Smith's *Ankhrasmation* language scores stand out as the most distinctive response within the study, having been primarily devised for sonic interpretation. Further scholarly investigation, potentially within the field of musicology, is requisite to deepen comprehension of their procedural implementation and construction, particularly in the case of scores that are more visually detailed and expressive, including those incorporating colour. The highly visual aspect of graphic scores continues to merit further academic inquiry. Concerning the sonic interpretation of *Ankhrasmation*, although social and cultural influences affect Wadada (Pope, 2016), their parameters for musical interpretation promote an open-ended methodology that emphasises personal interpretation and discovery through research.

Mongezi Ncaphayi's work explores sonic interpretation more discursively than purely auditorily, as seen in the *Akhrasmation* language scores. It highlights the cultural and aesthetic facets of Black expression, heavily inspired by the scream of Aunt Hester narrated by Frederick Douglass and musically interpreted by Fred Moten (2003:2–22). This scream, born from the violence of Black subjectivity in an anti-Black world, was jazzed into musical expression through the guttural blow of the saxophone, especially in the work of 1960s avant-garde saxophonists. Ncaphayi (2025) explained his art as a means to heal from the traumas of a background that normalised violence. From this violence, he strives to create visual beauty, not to hide or prettify it, but to express it in subtler ways. The violence screams from beneath his work's surface. Healing also involves nurturing his spiritual self, reflected in themes of transcendence. Improvisation, which he equates with spontaneity, acts as a vital catalyst in this process (ibid.).

Although it lacks the conventional motifs observed in figurative works, such as depictions of instrumentation and portraiture, or even the symbolic stability associated with music notation, non-figurative abstraction—despite its idiosyncratic nature—continues to serve as a means of mediating the musical, aesthetic, and cultural meanings of jazz.

While resistance to codified and formulaic representation and stylistic coherence may impede the language of abstraction in its pursuit of communicating with certainty and clarity, it is precisely this aspect that aligns it with predominantly instrumental music. Musical sound is, after all, "abstract, intangible, and ethereal" (Leppert, 2014:7). There exists an elusive quality within music, which constitutes part of its charm; efforts to visualise, record, document, and discuss it are driven by the impulse to capture it long enough to discern its social and cultural significance. Abstraction caters to this elusive quality, which resists explicit meaning if not outright incomprehensibility. As Ncaphayi (2025) contends, certain experiences cannot be conveyed through words; at times, feelings must prevail. Although instrumental music can undoubtedly serve as a means of communication and expression, attempts to precisely identify what is being conveyed or

expressed can be challenging, as music's expressive nature is unclassifiable and the language of jazz improvisation does not possess conventional universality (Gridley, 2010:179).

Jazz music and abstract art, although arising from different artistic modes and disciplines, share several common elements, including a shared vocabulary and key compositional focuses such as improvisation, gesture, timbre, rhythm, and colour. There are also extramusical links, such as the Afro-modernist challenge to Eurocentric cultural imperialism, racial stereotypes that influenced the politics of bebop and free jazz, and led to their formal abstraction of jazz traditions.

Unlike the abstraction in modernist art, which aimed for a form as an aesthetic content, modernist abstraction in jazz expanded to include socially conscious musical references and responses. Bebop and free jazz, in particular, can be seen as the point where Afro-modernism and abstraction intersect. The primary motivations for Afro-modern abstraction were to assert creative independence and to produce music that a predominantly white music industry could not easily co-opt. I find these aims align with Ncaphayi's politics of refusal to present his identity in a manner that is easily understood by both the Eurocentric racializing gaze and art market. I interpret these gestures as an expression of Glissant's (1997:189) right to opacity, which in this context signifies the right to avoid Western normativity.

Ncaphayi's visual output is therefore the intersection of several discourses, including Afro-modernity, jazz, Blackness, migration, transcendence, and abstraction. This study does not claim to encompass his entire body of work. Instead, it offers a snapshot of a larger portrait that presents his artwork as inherently communal through its engagement with jazz visual culture. A definitive biographical study remains to be undertaken, as does a stylistic analysis of his evolving visual language. Such research, combined with musicological investigations into abstraction in jazz, could enhance the aims of this study from an interdisciplinary perspective, rather than confining them within a purely cross-disciplinary framework.

As a form of jazz expression, abstraction is connected to its identity as a modern art form. It remains a crucial language where the aesthetic and political histories of jazz intersect. True to jazz's spirit as an experimental art, Ncaphayi's work offers reassurance in the unknown and encourages awareness of the historical rootedness of the present. It advances the pursuit of self-exploration and discovery. For me, this is essential in maintaining the genre's vitality against forces of ritualised conformity and stagnation, which, if misguided, can distort the fundamental ideals of tradition.

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Interviews

Ncaphayi, M. 2025. Interview with T.J. Kanyane on 6 February. Zoom.

Personal Communications

Kanyane, T.J. 2024. Conversation with Mongezi Ncaphayi, 20 August.

Appendix 1: Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. Could you provide a summary of how your relationship with music and visual art started?
2. When you first started to focus your creative attention on visual art, at what point did you begin to combine your interests with music?
3. At which period did your work become vested in abstraction?
4. Could you talk about the artwork titled Migrant Worker from 2013?
5. How do you perceive abstraction both visually and musically?
6. What does jazz as an idea mean to you?
7. How do you perceive improvisation as both a visual and musical art form?
8. How do you choose the titles of your artworks?
9. Is there any conceptual significance in your selection of mediums and materials?
10. Is there intentionality behind the differing scale in your work?