Cultural Studies

Some Things a Scene Might Be

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Postface

I am honoured to contribute some closing remarks to this issue of *Cultural Studies* devoted to the idea of cultural scenes. I am writing this at the beginning of a six-month leave from teaching and am reminded of my very first sabbatical in 1990–1991. This was the year in which I wrote my first article on the notion of scenes and coedited, with John Shepherd, the issue of this journal in which that article appeared. My article, inspired by rich exchanges with Holly Kruse, Barry Shank and others, has had a longer shelf life than anything else I have written. It has brought me cherished friendships and collegial relationships with scholars in Brazil, France and elsewhere; it has ensured that, even when I felt I had nothing more to say on the subject of popular music, I was still offered a seat at the table with those who study it.

The work of Kruse, Shank and myself on scenes 'landed' in popular music studies at a fortuitous time, marked by an observable spatial turn in cultural analysis more generally. The spatiality implicit in the idea of scene has inoculated it from the risk that it simply become one more label (like *subculture* or *fandom*) for the groupings of people which take shape around cultural objects or activities. I sometimes think that this inoculation protected the idea of scene until it could take its place within the ascendant urban cultural studies of the last decade or so. In 2014, *scene* circulates in a variety of different theoretical and cultural spaces. In Brazil, it is one influence on rich, multilayered studies of musical cultures, like those produced by my dear colleagues Janotti and Perreira de Sá (2013). In North America, *scene* has entered into debates over the status of culture as amenity – debates which surround the contested work of Richard Florida but which recently have found their fullest academic development in the 'scenes perspective' developed by sociologists originally based at the University of Chicago. (See the article by Silver and Clark in this issue.) In French-language work in sociology and urban studies, the notion of *scene* is being set into productive tension with concepts like *field* and *network*, whose prominence in Francophone social theory over the last quarter century is well known.[1] And, clearly, in the articles assembled in this issue of *Cultural Studies*, we have rich

evidence of the usefulness of the term *scene* outside of the exclusive study of popular music.

The adaptability of *scene* to these different contexts is ensured in part by two inescapable features of the term: on the one hand, its persistence within everyday and extra-academic talk about culture, notably within the ubiquitous 'creative city' discourse of recent years; on the other hand, the unsettled and oft-noted flexibility of the term, an effect of the haziness for which it is sometimes dismissed and of a fluidity often seen as the source of its generative power.

In the remarks that follow here, I want to delve into some of the things that a scene might be and some of the ways in which scenes might usefully be imagined. I will do so by drawing out some of the claims or insights I have found in the selection of articles gathered in this issue of *Cultural Studies*. The concepts organizing this postface are little more than notions grabbed from a potentially limitless list, but they are the ones I have found most useful in thinking about scenes and discussing them with others, in classrooms or other contexts of exchange.

Scenes, I suggest, might be seen as all of the following: as *collectivities* marked by some form of proximity; as *spaces of assembly* engaged in pulling together the varieties of cultural phenomena; as *workplaces* engaged (explicitly or implicitly) in the transformation of materials; as *ethical worlds* shaped by the working out and maintenance of behavioural protocols; as *spaces of traversal and preservation* through which cultural energies and practices pass at particular speeds and as *spaces of mediation* which regulate the visibility and invisibility of cultural life and the extent of its intelligibility to others.

The scene as collectivity

One genealogy of the scenes perspective follows the concept out of subcultural theory, and is principally concerned with the sort of collectivity which a scene might be. This concern was at its most explicit, perhaps, in David Hesmondhalgh's influential article (2005) on 'Subcultures, scenes or tribes', whose title offers (and ultimately rejects) a typology of forms with which to designate the copresence of people. One of the earliest questions poised to the notion of scene was whether it could be imagined outside of relationships of physical proximity. Were the affinities of people dispersed across space – a shared taste for a genre of music, for example – enough to generate a scene? Was it necessary that these people, physically separated, engage in ongoing communication and other forms of collective interaction in order to constitute a scene? If a scene was to be more than the statistical accumulation of consumers around a cultural object or practice, what levels of self-conscious collective identity and ongoing sociability were required to make it so?

The articles gathered here set scenes, for the most part, in distinctively bounded localities of variable scale: the brothel area of Yokohama, Japan (Yoshimizu), the Queen Street West neighbourhood in Toronto (Deveau), 'downtown' Manhattan (Eichhorn), Sydney, Australia (Drysdale), the Windsor/Detroit border region (Darroch) and individual zip codes across the USA (Silver and Clark). The analysis of the Bangladeshi Heavy Metal scene by Quader and Redden captures scenic activity as a national phenomenon but is based on fieldwork carried out in a single city, Dhaka.

Grimes's article on the video game *LittleBigPlanet* is the only essay here whose chosen scene bears no relationship to physical proximity. It pushes the notion of scene as collective unity in productive new directions and in doing so holds out the promise that game studies may be one of the fields in which the theorization of scene is renewed most vigorously. Video games, Grimes shows here, not only link together spatially dispersed gestures of affinity (like the simultaneous playing of a game) but also serve as the ground for other, more complex sorts of collective behaviour. Games allow for collectivities of people distributed in space to produce spectacles out of intense and focused interaction. Indeed, we may see the complex and roughly simultaneous interaction of players' bodies in multi-user games as producing new sorts of physical 'proximity' inviting further theoretical reflection. At the same time, sociability and affective surplus take shape in the collective playing of games, rather than (as is often the case in geographically dispersed music scenes) emerging in communicative activities distinct from those acts in which the key object of attachment is consumed. As Grimes suggests, the 'scene' of the video game is poised conceptually between two other kinds of spaces: on the one hand, privatized (and thus 'unscenic') spaces, like basement computer rooms, in which individual consumers play; on the other hand, the higher-level, 'highly corporately controlled space[s]' of mediated player networks which transcend the spatiality of any single instance of collective game-playing. The scene of collective game-playing Grimes studies draws creative energies from the privatized space of the player even as it works to pull back (and win territory) from the more abstract ground of corporately constructed brand-space.

The scene as a space of assembly

By suggesting that spaces are 'spaces of assembly', I mean that scenes perform the often invisible labour of pulling together cultural phenomena in ways which heighten their visibility and facilitate their circulation to other places. Scenes, in this respect are spaces of enlistment and convergence, which act in dynamic fashion upon creative labour to constantly reorder its locations and outcomes. Electronic music activity in Montreal, for example, is sometimes pulled together within a scene anchored by the Mutek recording label and festival; in turn, a 'Mutek scene' travels to other cities, like Mexico City or Barcelona,

where it both brings together instances of local electronic music activity and itself becomes part of larger electronic music scenes in those cities. Scenes are caught up in the processes of nesting and fractal duplication which undermine attempts to map them as simply adjacent places on topographical surfaces.

Darroch's rich examination of cultural scenes in the border regions of Detroit, Michigan, and Windsor, Ontario, captures the multi-scalar structure of such scenes. Detroit's music, contemporary art and other scenes are often grouped within a more broadly identified Detroit 'creative' scene which has become the focus of international attention. Windsor, in turn, has its own cultural and artistic scenes, whose relationship to the cultural activity of Detroit is complex. For example, scholars and artists in Windsor may pull cultural activity transpiring across the border into their construction of an international 'cross-border' scene. That 'cross-border scene' might be the name we give to exclusively Windsor-based activity which takes the border as its object and purpose but the term may also designate histories of cross-border interaction and name a unity which encompasses all of this interaction. In some instances, Detroit functions within this cross-border scene as something like a source of the raw cultural material upon which Windsor activists and scholars work. In other instances, people and resources in both countries are seen as partners in the elaboration of a cross-border scenic identity.

Across these differences of scale, clusters of cultural phenomena with the status of scenes are pulled within larger scene-like clusters or spun off conceptually as adjacent scenes. Scenes are 'points of assembly' in that sense that, at all levels of scale, they gather together cultural phenomena and endow them with a coherence. That coherence is one precondition of their being joined to other scenes or of their pulling away from other scenes in processes of autonomization. Tourist guides these days struggle to capture the complex topographies produced when, say, foodie/restaurant or design/retail scenes form on the edges of gentrifying artistic scenes and then develop their own dynamics and trajectories of expansion. A music or visual arts scene may be surrounded by restaurants, bars and boutiques which serve as the supports for the former (in the way Howard Becker saw art worlds as requiring cafes and artistic supply shops). Alternately, all of these things may join together as roughly equal partners in a more unified scenic effervescence (Becker 1982, p. 4).

The scene as workplace and space of transformation

Scenes are workplaces in the sense that much of the activity which transpires within them involves a transformative work carried out upon materials and resources. If this work is not normally the most visible element of a scene, it is, nevertheless, useful to ask of a scene what transformation of materials goes on within it. Whatever else happens within Montreal's Mile End neighbourhood

music scene, significant amounts of time and interaction are expended in discovering and repurposing objects (old clothes, furniture and vinyl records, for example) and spaces (lofts and apartments) and drawing these together within practices whose outcome is a relatively coherent collective identity. The recognition of scenes as workspaces runs through several of the articles collected here. The artistic activity that Darroch observes in Detroit involves, at least partly, the transformation of Detroit's cultural legacies (of techno music and muralist modernism) through acts of updating, recreation or homage. This work is often the locus of the experimentation which gives certain scenes their avant-garde character. Windsor, Darroch suggests, offers 'an arena for experimentation in which artists and students work with and against the urban environment'. For the heavy metal musicians studied by Quader and Redden, the underground scene in Dhaka grounds its relative autonomy in the ways in which it is an incubator of experimentalism and innovation.

Eichhorn's article on the role of copy machines in the Downtown New York scene of the 1970s and 1980s is in part about how information about a scene is disseminated through photocopied media. However, it is also about a scene-like culture of production engaged in making photostatic objects which expressed sensibilities and documented or promoted various activities of the neighbourhood. Were photocopiers part of the communicative infrastructure of a separate scene (that of Downtown art-making), or may we speak of a copying scene in which this art was one of several 'raw materials' (alongside resumes and missing animal announcements) underpinning the late-night sociability and exchange of the late-night copy shop? Scenes possess a *trompe-l'oeil* character in as much as slight shifts of attention may make seemingly subsidiary practices into their core organizational centre. Like the science laboratory studied by Latour and Woolgar (1986), whose key outputs are scientific articles (rather than 'discoveries' or the other outcomes usually associated with laboratories), scenes often invite a defamiliarizing analytic gaze which upsets the customary ordering of their primary and secondary activities.

The scene as ethical world

To say that scenes are *ethical worlds* risks obscuring the collisions of value and sensibility which gather within them. Nevertheless, the elaboration of scenic identity out of disparate cultural phenomena often follows the shaping of tastes, political identities and protocols of behaviour which set the boundaries (however fragile) of a scene and serve as the basis for its self-perpetuation. The ethical structure of scenes is built upon low-level, implicit rules like those which govern greeting rituals or the buying of drinks. The most interesting dynamics take shape in a back-and-forth between those values which preside over specifically cultural activities and those directed at broader phenomena like capitalism or gentrification. To return to the Mile End neighbourhood of

Montreal in which I live, the commitment to preserving certain features of local life (pre-gentrification markers of ethnicity, like Italian coffee shops or Portuguese bakeries) is tightly interwoven with the anxieties of musicians and other musicians about hype or selling out. These two impulses interact in what we might see as ongoing displacements: the risk of preciousness which might settle around the musician's commitment to artistic purity is hidden within a broader and more generous commitment to the preservation of community; at the same time, any appearance of self-interested exclusivism in the resistance to further gentrification may be expressed in a more noble form as a commitment to protecting the cultural space fought for by authentic cultural producers.

Deveau's article on the alternative stand-up comedy scene in Toronto's Queen Street West neighbourhood captures some of these dynamics in sharply observed fashion. The anti-establishment ethos which surrounded the Rivoli Theatre, site of the ascendancy of comedy troupe *The Kids in the Hall* to network television success, is able to accommodate the troupe's success by leveraging an image of itself as an underground cultural incubator in which genuine culture is to be found. (It thus joins a long series of such places of discovery, like the Cavern Club in Liverpool or the Pasadena Playhouse Theatre in Los Angeles, whose reputations as genuine were not diminished by their capacity to launch success.) Recurrent reference by members of *Kids in the Hall* to the Rivoli as the place in which they are 'discovered' both reinforces this sense of the Rivoli as a place of underground innocence and confirms the Kids' own pedigree as products of the underground. In this case, the discovery of artists performing at the Rivoli, and their ascension to higher levels of success, is the result of visits to a Rivoli-centred scene by representatives from the outside world, not of the scene's complicity with that world.

The scene as space of traversal, acceleration and deceleration

Scenes are the spaces through which cultural forms and practices move at variable speeds. It is always possible to designate, as scenes, phenomena of sufficient longevity that different cultural practices succeed each other within them: the Downtown New York scene, the college-based poetry scene, Montreal's *musique actuelle* scene. Some will want to see each of these clusters of practice (like those which produced *No Wave* as one moment in the history of Downtown New York culture) as producing its own scene; others find it more interesting to designate, as scenes, those cultural spaces which maintain some consistency while accommodating the passage of different practices or styles through them. A useful question, then, is that of the effect of scenes upon cultural time. If scenes are spaces within the circulation of culture, do they accelerate the movement of styles and forms or slow down that movement? Do scenes act as archival spaces of preservation and memory, anchoring cultural

activity in rituals of living and being together? Or by subjecting cultural activity to intense collective attention, do scenes produce rapid obsolescence and thus function as places of forgetting? In Detroit, Darroch suggests, ruins function as both of these: as the marks of a historical decline too devastating to be easily reversed (the scene as space of deceleration) and as spaces of opportunity open to relatively easy transformation through artists' projects and urban activism (the scene as accelerative space).

We may point to something of a reversal in the function or ascribed meaning of scenes in recent years. A quarter century or more ago, it was easy to imagine scenes as territories of effervescent, fragile cultural activity whose commitment to invention and change stood in contrast to the unchanging permanence of a city's architecture and social relations. Increasingly, it seems, scenes are cherished for their decelerative properties, for their role as repositories of practices, meanings and feelings threatened by the processes of gentrification and commodification. The articles by Drysdale, Deveau and Yoshimizu are all concerned with the ways in which histories of use inscribe themselves upon places and confront the destabilizing effects of gentrification and property development.

The Wheel Club is an event held every Monday night in a tavern in Montreal's west end. It has existed for many years as a time/space in which a stable core of older country musicians plays with successive generations of younger players, for an audience which is genuinely intergenerational. Anyone can get up and play, but there is a prohibition on the performance of songs composed after 1966 (the year in which, the event's key organizers believe, good country music ceased to be written). At one level, the Wheel Club scene might be seen as simply decelerative and museum-like, ensuring the ongoing availability of particular historic forms of country music. However, the event's openness to musicians new on the scene has meant that its canonical corpus of pre-1967 country music is regularly reinterpreted by the bearers of identities distinct from those which first popularized this music: by transgender cow-punks, rockabilly purists, hipster ironists, people of colour and others. In this respect, the Wheel Club is a socially accelerative scene, its stable musical repertory serving as the point of continuity against which shifting configurations of cultural identity become visible.

In Drysdale's analysis of the Sydney, Australia, drag king scene, the withering of the places and events constitutive of that scene was accompanied by a strengthening of the collective memories which gave coherence to the scene and invested these changing spaces with meaning. '[A]necdotes', Drysdale writes, 'capture the simultaneous ephemerality of social moments and their retrospective consolidation into collective forms of recognition'. Put differently, the accumulation of traces and memories in Sydney's Newtown district acts as a decelerative force, slowing an otherwise rapid transformation of the area's meanings and values which might come with gentrification. Roughly similar

processes unfold in the remnants of the Koganecho district examined by Yoshimizu. The distinctiveness of this case, however, comes from the ways in which the uprooting of the Koganecho scene led to the dispersal of many of its key people and practices elsewhere. The memory traces of Koganecho's history as a site of sexual commerce mark 'particular objects and places', and new, fragmentary forms of its past sex trade are now to be found in the district, but key components of its past have been broken apart and dispersed.

The scene as space of mediation

The question of a scene's mediation is less one of its presence within media than of its status as a space of transit between visibility and invisibility. Among the many uncertainties which hover over the notion of scene, that of its decipherability and observability is key. For Silver and Clark (in this issue), as for Alan Blum (2003, pp. 165–167) and others, scenes are defined in a large measure by their theatricality and by their status as publicly observable clusters of urban sociability. Conversely, in the article by Deveau, and in many studies which delineate the logics of hipsterdom or undergrounds, scenes are marked by an obscurity whose result is that their purpose and constitutive logics escape comprehension. The knowability of scenes may require a labour of memorialization; for Drysdale, scenes not only look outwards but also 'face backwards, anticipating their retrospective narration as socially intelligible moments'. In Eichhorn's study of the Downtown New York copy scene, it is, rather, a question of mediation: documents produced in moments of hidden labour circulate, often without attribution, as the tokens of scenic activity.

Scenes make cultural activity visible and decipherable by rendering it public, taking it from acts of private production and consumption into public contexts of sociability, conviviality and interaction. In these public contexts, cultural activity is subject to the look which seeks to understand Just as clearly, though, scenes make cultural activity invisible and indecipherable by 'hiding' cultural productivity behind seemingly meaningless (or indistinguishable) forms of social life.

Five years ago, when both national and international media sent reporters to cover Montreal's high-profile Mile End cultural scene, these countervailing logics of a scene played themselves out in ways that were both revealing and amusing. Journalists hovered around either of the two Italian coffee shops, the conventional ports of entry to this scene, uncertain as to where to begin. They were unsure whether the easily observed bubbling social effervescence in these places was the scene itself or a set of distractions which camouflaged a real, more secret scene to which they would never find access.

Afterthoughts

If *scene* has a future, this may have much to do with the multiple directions in which it may be pulled by prominent recent tendencies within cultural analysis. One of these tendencies feeds an interest in materialities – in infrastructures, objects, assemblages and surfaces. The status of *scene* in relation to the materialities of culture warrants further reflection, which work like that of Grimes in this issue begins to address. Scenes may hover above the materialities of cultural life as their expressive surplus, designate the social glue which makes these material elements cohere, or organize the mobility of material forms and their attachment to place. Another tendency in cultural analysis will pull the concept of scene towards an interest in affect. As Drysdale's article here shows, scenes might be considered spaces for containing and stabilizing affectual relationships to cultural practices or forms, or for embedding such relationships in behavioural routines or ways of being together. At the same time, the language of affect theory may usefully specify the supplementary levels of effervescence, theatricality, solidarity or tension which make a scene different from a simple network, cluster or locality. Indeed, as cultural analysis more broadly moves between poles which have been designated, variously, as those of structure and agency, infrastructure and affect, or circulatory matrix and creative act, *scene* may continue to name the conceptual space in which the distance between these poles is crossed.

Note

1   See, for example, the description of the international colloquium, 'Champs, mondes, scènes au prisme des réseaux. Quelles implications en sociologie de l'art et de la culture?', to be held in Montreal in October, 2014: http://w3. aislf.univ-tlse2.fr/spip/spip.php?article2368.

Notes on Contributor

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