

Visibility and conviviality in music scenes

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Understanding Mile End

Since 1999, I have lived in a neighbourhood of Montreal called Mile End. Throughout these years, Mile End has been considered the most vital area for rock-based music in Montreal, and in Canada more broadly. It is the home base of the influential group Godspeed You! Black Emperor, of their record label Constellation Records, of house-music label Mile End Records and of the influential recording studio Hotel2Tango (for a detailed account of this musical configuration, see Mouillot, 2017). Mile End is also the ‘birthplace’ of Arcade Fire, the location of the Casa del Popolo (probably the most important venue for alternative rock-based forms of music in Montreal) and the neighbourhood in which dozens of bands and other musical configurations started and many continue to live – at least intermittently.

In 2016, it was common to hear that the Mile End neighbourhood was slowly losing some of its cultural centrality, as musical activity moved north in the face of ongoing gentrification. However, for the first fifteen years of the new century, Mile End was considered the epicentre of rock-based musical activity in Canada. In 2012, it was one important site of what, borrowing from Greil Marcus, people began calling the ‘New Weird Canada’, a musical underground characterized by high levels of experimentation and eccentricity (Trapunski, 2012).

As journalistic interest in the Mile End scene exploded, particularly after the *New York Times* wrote about it in 2005, a stream of reporters from various media came to investigate the neighbourhood. The challenge they confronted was that the Mile End music scene was difficult to capture in visual terms. Music consumed in dark rooms, in lofts or bars, is not particularly photogenic. This is particularly true of music that is not particularly theatrical, and which is often marked by a cultivated casualness. In any case, darkened rooms conveyed little of the geography of a scene, of the neighbourhood in which it had grown or the broader ambiances into which it had settled (and which it had helped to create).

Most of the images of Mile End that circulated in press coverage intended to cover musical activity were images from which music was absent. As an

experiment, I regularly type the phrases ‘Mile End’ and ‘music scene’ into Google Images and save the results. Typically, of the first 30 or 40 images through which I scroll, only a few bear any relationship to music. In one compilation of these images is a musician performing at the inauguration of a park, another speaking in a seminar and the logo for the Montreal house-music label Mile End Records. Mostly, there are images of buildings that bear no necessary relationship to music: churches, shops, restaurants. Usually, these buildings are located along Bernard or St Viateur streets, the key east–west arteries of the neighbourhood. In only half of the images, roughly counted, are there people, and they are usually sitting in cafés or restaurants. For a long time, the most predictable image was one of people sitting outside a place called the Café Olympico. In the early 2010s, journalists, prompted by their local informants, usually described this as the informal meeting place for Mile End’s hipster music scene.

This relative absence of images representing music does several things. First, it enhances the sense that the music in Mile End is underground music – not only in the sense of being experimental and often transgressive, but because it is invisible. The scene does not offer itself up to be easily understood or decoded, and indeed, the images of casual coffee consumption that are so common counter the reputation of the earnest, even militant, musical production for which the scene is sometimes known. When I first moved to Montreal in the late 1970s, the markers of its rock-based music scenes were highly visible, in the ways in which adherents of punk (and, later, New Wave) dressed and occupied public space. As Erik Cimon’s (2016) documentary *Montreal New Wave* shows, the city embraced the exuberant stylistic explosion that followed punk more enthusiastically than most North American cities. In Mile End, it is rather as if musicians are hiding among the general population, undetected.

A second effect of the absence of music from images of Mile End is that, in their focus on buildings and streets, these images contribute to the sense that music here is deeply grounded in space and locality, even if music itself is almost never shown in the places in which it happens. Viewers scan these images for evidence of music, but in doing so they are mapping a space rather than observing a cultural activity. A third effect, to which I will turn at greater length shortly, is that the absence of images of music confirms a tendency of twenty-first-century urban life that cultural activity – even of the most avowedly oppositional kind – will be absorbed within a generalized sense of lifestyle, the most visible features of which are the spaces of public sociability and consumption, like restaurants and cafés.

We may contrast representations of the Mile End scene with those of another ‘scenic’ phenomenon: the configuration that Eric Davidson (2010) calls the ‘Gunk Punk’ scene. Gunk Punk names a loosely connected scene devoted to the music of the 1990s which fell stylistically between hardcore punk and messy power pop or garage rock – music performed by bands like the New Bomb Turks and the Ding Dongs. If representations of Mile End’s music scene are so often

devoid of any pictures of music, Davidson's book is the opposite. It is full of photographs of music being made: every image, it seems – including the one that adorns its cover – is of a band playing in a club. With time, as one reads through the book, all these images come to look the same. In particular, the spatiality that seems almost alone in defining the Gunk Punk scene is that of the generic club. One has the impression that there were no spaces or neighbourhoods with which it was associated, no places in which the scene converged and drank coffee in the afternoon. Rather, one is faced with a scene held together by a thin line of taste that joined together, across the United States and Western Europe, those musicians who were too archival in their tastes to simply want to make hard-edged punk and too punky in their tastes to simply want to be 1960s garage band revivalists. 'Gunk Punk' was just the name of the network and of a set of endlessly repeated concerts that formed along this line of taste. It was visible only in the moments of its enactment.

Scenes and subcultures, visible and invisible

The question of the visibility of musical scenes and subcultures, and the political meanings of this visibility, may be said to fall between two positions that were elaborated in the 1980s and 1990s. One of these is the idea that subcultures, from the moment of their first appearance, are subject to a look: the look of surveillance, a look that seeks to decode, to understand, to categorize. Classic subcultures, it was suggested – like the street-corner gatherings of teddy boys or punks – seek out these looks in order to inhabit them. At the same time, the behaviours and attitudes of subcultures are devoted to ensuring that the look of others does not reach the understanding that is one of its objectives. Dick Hebdige (1989, p. 35) states that:

Subculture forms up in the space between surveillance and the evasion of surveillance, it translates the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasure of being watched. It is a hiding in the light ... Subcultures are both a play for attention and a refusal, once attention has been granted, to be read according to the Book.

Two years later, in 1991, Hakim Bey would suggest a very different kind of politics. The key actors in subcultural politics were no longer, as with Hebdige, a marginalized underclass that must find ways of asserting its identity. Nor was the most important enemy a power engaged in surveillance in order to understand, and therefore to control. Rather, the enemy against which subcultures now struggled was a logic of consumerism that turned every subcultural image into a spectacular, cinema-like commodity. The subcultures most worth studying were those that sought to undermine the society of the spectacle by building marginal, short-lived spaces of invisibility. In a society that transforms everything into spectacle, the radical gesture was the one that failed to attract the look. For

Bey (1991), the purpose of a radical politics was to create temporary autonomous zones that left no traces and to which no looks were directed:

Getting the Temporary Autonomous Zone started may involve tactics of violence and defense, but its greatest strength lies in its invisibility – the State cannot recognize it because History has no definition of it. As soon as the TAZ is named (represented, mediated), it must vanish, it *will* vanish, leaving behind it an empty husk, only to spring up again somewhere else, once again invisible because indefinable in terms of the Spectacle.

(Bey, 1991, p. 405)

Clearly, Hebdige and Bey are not offering different theoretical accounts of the same thing. Hebdige, as we know, is talking about the long line of spectacular subcultures that runs from the London street gangs of the nineteenth century through to the punks of the twentieth century. Bey's idea of the temporary autonomous zone would become a key element in the ways by which rave culture in the 1990s came to theorize itself. One way of describing the difference between them is to say that Hebdige is iconocentric – he sees visibility and the image as key to resistance, and conceives cultural conflict in terms of semiotic warfare – while Bey is iconophobic, condemning the image for its inevitable complicity with a mediatized consumer culture.

We can say many things about these two approaches to visibility, but I want to talk for a moment about their implications for the question of identities – for the question of bodies marked by race, gender and sexuality. The problematic relationship with visibility that, for Dick Hebdige, is typical of street subcultures has long been true for racial minorities, for the bearers of certain sexual identities and so on. The resistance of African Americans, Latinx or transgender communities has involved the claim to the right to occupy public space and to assert those visible identities where they might not be wanted. However, this occupation of public space will often include a resistance to any easy understanding. Hakim Bey's fight for invisibility, on the other hand, is a refusal to fight at the level of the image. There is a history of this struggle for invisibility at the heart of black American politics, and in particular in the thinking of Ralph Ellison. To be invisible is to find places, not just of refuge, but of community and self-development (for recent discussions of the politics of invisibility, see Talbot, 2007, p. 12; DeGuzmán, 2014, pp. 43–4). By the time Hakim Bey was writing, though, the refusal to fight at the level of the image also, on occasion, was marked by a disinterest in conceiving of cultural struggle in terms of race, gender, sexuality – all those things that function, in important ways, at the level of the visible, of the marked body. This is one source of the perception of rave culture as sexless or ungendered, as implicitly white and unconcerned with a politics of social identities.

Signifying lifestyle

Arguably, the last decade or two has seen a declining role for music scenes as spaces for the representation of subcultures as they were classically conceived. In the shifts involved here, various displacements have occurred in the realm of the visible. Increasingly, musical activity is represented (or displaced) by the signifiers of urban lifestyle, which organize themselves into at least two sets. One consists of the forms of material culture that fill the spaces of hipster bohemianism. The other set of signifiers collaborates to convey an image of public sociability. We may find examples of both by returning to the example of the Mile End neighbourhood in Montreal.

In March 2014, the *Ottawa Citizen* newspaper, which is published in Canada's capital city (two hours by road from Montreal), ran an article entitled 'Day Trip: A day in Mile End, Montreal's "hipster capital"' (Johansen, 2014). What interests me about this piece, which was generally successful in its characterization of the neighbourhood, was the photographic image that accompanied it: a photo of a vintage boutique selling old clothes and other kinds of vintage objects. Images such as these now serve with increasing frequency to represent the neighbourhood. If the original centre of the Mile End cultural scene was music-making, that activity was, and largely remains, invisible and unrepresented. There are obviously formal problems with representing music in visual terms, and it is commonplace to note that images of the material supports of music – records, instruments and so on – are usually used to stand in for a substance that is sonic rather than visual. What is interesting in the case of Mile End is that imagery now quickly steps over the material supports of music to show us the non-musical materials of a scene originally founded on music, like the objects that have accumulated and been repurposed and that now fill hipster vintage shops. Scenes generate this accumulation of material goods as one of their underlying processes; these material goods then become the visible tokens of the tastes that characterize the scene. Their relationship with the scene is indexical in the sense that these objects point towards the tastes that participate in the scene, but express them only partially.

Urbanizing scene studies

The other set of signifiers attaching themselves to urban music scenes are those of urban sociability, of what I would call public conviviality. By relocating itself within urban cultural studies, the concept of 'scene' has been able to leave the debate over subcultures and tribes, a debate that David Hesmondhalgh (2005) so expertly summarized several years ago. 'Scene' now returns us to the question of visibility in urban life (e.g. see Casemajor and Straw, 2017). 'Scene', as sociologist Alan Blum (2003) once argued, designates the theatricality of urban life, the ways in which part of the pleasure of the city comes from seeing people together in convivial situations.

However, this image of public conviviality sits in an uneasy relationship with music or other cultural forms. Does the image of people at Café Olympico in Mile End reveal the secrets of the music scene or camouflage them? 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. Seeing people who look like musicians or artists sitting together, drinking coffee, we may think we have witnessed and understood a scene. 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 hung around the two main Italian coffee shops in Mile End – the conventional ports of entry to this scene – uncertain about where to begin. They were unsure whether the easily observed social effervescence in these places was the scene itself or simply a set of distractions that camouflaged a real, more secret scene to which they would never gain access.

It is in relation to these ideas that this chapter offers a number of hypotheses about the place of cultural and musical scenes in city life. The first is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate the notion of scene from a logic of gentrification. Let us define a scene as that cultural phenomenon that arises when any purposeful activity acquires a supplement of sociability, and when that supplement of sociability becomes part of the observable effervescence of collective life. This is not a complete definition of scene, but I think every definition of scene must account for a supplement of sociability as one of its constituent features. If there is only cultural work and no sociability, we have little more than a network or a sphere of cultural production. If, on the other hand, there is only sociability, and no underlying cultural labour or expression, we are dealing with little more than the broadly dispersed effervescence of city life. Scenes translate cultural work into the visibility of public socializing, then offer the energies of the latter as symptoms of the cultural ferment and creativity that they thinly veil. This ferment and creativity, then – as is well known – become instrumentalized within the self-promotion campaigns of cities and their neighbourhoods.

My second hypothesis follows from this: that what were once marginal or secondary aspects of scenes – their ‘support’ system – are now fully assimilated within ideas of creativity and innovation. While I don’t want to labour the critique of ideas of the creative city or the creative class, I do want to note that those things that Howard Becker (1982) once saw as part of the ‘support system’ of an art world or scene – cafés, bars and restaurants – are now enshrined as full players in a culture of creation and innovation. ‘Food is the new rock’, the *Washington Post* suggested recently (Richards, 2013), and the displacement of music by food as the locus of creative energies is visible in a variety of places.

My third hypothesis is that, in the contemporary life of cities, music has come to be more and more embedded in a generalized conviviality marked by conversation, the consumption of food and drink, and a structuring of atmospheres in which music has lost some of its centrality. In many respects, this tendency restores a set of relationships that had been fractured over the last half-century or more. In many countries, up until the late 1950s, the 'supper club' was a central cultural format: one sat, ate food and drank alcohol, conversed with friends and then got up and danced while live performers played. Then, from the 1960s through to the late 1990s, in countries of the Global North and elsewhere, music came to be severed from the conviviality of public eating and drinking. A key development in this severing was the rise, in the 1960s, of the discothèque and the dance club: one no longer went out only in couples or groups of couples; the taking of drugs to a certain extent displaced the activity of eating; and the rise of the DJ meant that one danced to unbroken sequences of records, rather than pausing between songs to return to a table and to conversation. This severing of relaxed conviviality from the consumption of music in a sense freed music to move later into the night and to assume more experimental and oppositional forms.

The late-night consumption of music continues, of course, but I am interested in the ways in which music and the conviviality of eating/drinking are now collapsing back on each other. In France, for the past several years, people have noted the rise of *bars à ambiance musicale* (bars with musical ambiance) and the same phenomena is noticeable in Montreal, Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Bogota and other cities that I have visited recently. In France, the *bar à ambiance musicale* is judged to be a specific kind of venue, requiring a distinct licence from SACEM, the music rights licensing organization:

Les bars à ambiance musicale are establishments whose principal revenues come from the sale of drinks and, optionally, food (without a dance floor or dancing, and without performances aimed at an audience which has come for the purpose of hearing such) for whom music is an accessory activity but constitutes an essential element of the environment and background.

(SACEM, n.d., my translation)

In a *bar à ambiance musicale*, people eat and drink to the accompaniment of recorded music, usually curated by a DJ. Music recedes from the centrality of live performance but moves forward from the status of unnoticed background. The soft buzz of conversation has long been considered, by musicians and others, as an unwelcome challenge to the unsettling force of music. In the *bar à ambiance musicale*, conversation has won the battle. Similarly, as these bars host their largest clientèle in mid-evening, rather than later, music has been pulled back, in many cases, from its association with the deepest night, from that space/time in which, historically, the most transgressive forms of expression have been thought to unfold. While, in neighbourhoods around the world, battles over the

disturbing character of loud music heard late at night continue to divide urban populations, conflicts are just as likely now to centre on the loud street-level conversation and collective smoking of those standing outside a *bar à ambiance musicale* in mid-evening.

Conviviality and the multi-purpose space

More broadly, we can see changes in the relationship between cultural forms and spaces of conviviality. In Mexico City, repertory cinemas add restaurants or bars as appendages, to make up for the declining attraction of cinema itself and to add sociability to the consumption of cinema. Bookstores in the same city have added cafés to attract customers and increase revenue. In some cases, these cafés have become restaurants, with outdoor terraces and curated music, such that the bookstore becomes little more than a decorative backdrop and heritage feature. The commercial resurgence of Montreal's Boulevard Saint-Laurent in 2017 has been ascribed, in part, to the decision by yoga studios and fashion boutiques to add cafés and restaurants with recorded music backdrops to their premises, to retain customers and contribute to a general sense of social buzz along the street (Freed, 2017). The broader tendency here is one that seeks to build possibilities of social interaction into every form of cultural consumption.

In Montreal, as in many other cities, one of the most widely perceived threats to a certain kind of culture has come with the transformation of almost every available commercial space into a restaurant or bar. Retail book or record shops have continued to close, largely as a result of logics internal to their industries, but venues devoted to live music are closing as well. The restaurants or bars that replace them do not necessarily or even usually belong to corporate chains; they are very often opened by genuinely imaginative people for whom food and drink are full participants in the new culture of urban creativity. But here, again, many of the cultural processes we once associated with music are now being taken over by the sale of food and drink. Since the 1960s, music promoters have played a key role in repurposing older forms of urban architecture: the ballrooms of the 1930s became the psychedelic concert halls of the 1960s; ethnic social clubs became punk venues in the 1970s; and abandoned industrial lofts became performance spaces in the 1980s and 1990s. Now it is restaurants that are central to this conversion, usually at the expense of small, independent retail stores, which close, but whose markers of entrepreneurial authenticity are often maintained by the owners of the restaurants that open within their premises.

My final hypothesis is that, in the current historical moment, the organization of culture follows the perception that what is scarce is sociability, not interesting cultural expression. In the 1990s, those who theorized what is called relational aesthetics in the visual arts came up with a similar idea: what art must resolve, they argued, is not an absence of meaning but an absence of interconnection (see the various articles collected in Bishop, 2006). Meaning was everywhere, it was claimed; what was scarce was sociability. And so we saw the wide

variety of artworks that had as their mission producing new kinds of interconnection, through such actions as the serving of meals in a gallery. We might ask whether something similar is happening with music. The late-night venue in which one encountered the new and the previously unheard is losing ground to the mid-evening *bar à ambiance musicale*. Here, one talks with friends against a background of music that is kind of interesting but demands no intensely focused attention. This is not all that is happening, of course: elsewhere, interesting music continues to be made and heard, and late-night spaces of transgression continue to develop, in cities around the world. However, as images of convivial café or craft brewery life come to define important cultural scenes – like those of the neighbourhood in which I live – we need to ask the question: Have we finally found that more perfect world, in which culture settles into the routines and the intimacies of everyday life? Or is this, rather, the triumph of a soft complacency in which the divisive cultural struggle over meaning has disappeared?

Conclusion

The politics of musical undergrounds are increasingly marked, I suggest, by their ‘urbanization’. By this I mean that music draws its political force less and less from a politics of form or expression, from challenging convention or expanding the range of available musical forms and experiences. Rather, music finds itself caught up in broader struggles over the transformation of cities. In one version of these struggles, music is reduced to the noise that troubles newly gentrified neighbourhoods and sets new settlers of neighbourhoods against venue owners and performing musicians. In other instances, the economic viability of live music venues is calculated relative to the potential economic returns from restaurants, cocktail bars or condominiums that might occupy the same spaces in an age of rising property values. In another arena still, music’s defenders have little alternative but to capitulate to the language of municipal urban innovation agendas, justifying music’s existence by locating it within a range of cultural fields (like gaming and software design) in which cities glimpse their rosy economic futures. Symptoms of all these developments include the push to appoint ‘night mayors’ in city governments, campaigns to designate nightclubs as ‘heritage’ institutions protected from market forces, and the movement to brand certain cities as ‘Music Cities’ in an appeal to tourists and local consumers. In 2017, whether we like it or not, the contemporary politics of popular music express themselves most forcefully in relation to these initiatives. If waves of underground music, from be-bop to punk, once derived purpose from their attacks on the musical commodity and the musical forms believed to sustain it, newer waves now express their radicality in the claim to occupy space in the contemporary city.

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