Figures of urban saturation

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> . . . the modern metropolis with its tramways, underground railways, its electric . . . lamps, display windows, concert halls, and restaurants, cafés, smokestacks, masses of stone, and the wild dance of impressions of sound and color, impressions and experiences which have an effect on sexual fantasy, all variants of a spiritual constitution, which brood voraciously over the seemingly inexhaustible possibilities of means to life and happiness (Max Weber, 1910)

In the epigraph which opens this essay, the sociologist Max Weber embarks upon an inventory of features of the modern city. His list moves from transportation systems to sites of urban entertainment, and from there to the sensory experiences produced by the city as a totality. Weber concludes by speculating about the ways in which the variety of these phenomena might affect human morality and psychic life.

The specific features that Weber finds in the city are less interesting to me here than the cumulative effect of plenitude to which his list so clearly aspires. We find, exemplified here, the rhetorical device of the *copia verborum*, the list marked by an abundance of words (Sève, 2010: 57). Even the most prosaic writings on the modern metropolis will sometimes dissolve into inventories such as these – into elongated sentences which depart from prosaic convention in their effort to convey a sense of the city's limitless variety. I call sentences such as these figures of urban saturation, insofar as their very incompleteness gestures towards cities so full of objects, places and experiences that these may never be exhaustively catalogued. Abundance yields to saturation when a manner of writing suggests that a list could go on forever, that it is potentially inexhaustible. Weber's list is like the establishing shots of so many films with urban settings, in

which the busy, cacophonic variety of the city is evoked. Having conjured such variety, these lists, like film narratives, must leave it behind in order to follow the pathways of more focused attention.

This essay looks at a variety of writings offering visions of the saturated city. Some of these writings follow the model exemplified above by Weber, in which saturation is evoked in the poetic reverie of the elongated list. Others, more systematically, will portray cities as organized according to morphological unities (like the cultural scene or the media centre) which divide up the features of the city in a legible manner. Still other accounts will capture the saturation of the city by evoking an all-pervasive substance, like detritus or textuality, which spreads over the city in its entirety.

Media, Information, Communication

In his study of Berlin in the year 1900, Peter Fritzsche describes the German metropolis as a city of words. Berlin is overrun by "the accumulation of small bits and rich streams of text that saturated the twentieth-century city" (Fritzsche, 1996: 1). Fritzsche finds the source of his "rich streams of text" in a series of media, described in an elongated list whose form recalls Weber's epigraph: "From morning until night people walked through the city encountering schedules, advertisements, regulations, handbills, instructions, clocks, labels, newspapers, and myriad other printed forms" (3). This textual saturation of the city produces contradictory effects. On the one hand, the very abundance and variety of texts produces a cacophonic abundance, a variety of information which makes the city an "unstable, pliable form" resisting comprehension (3). On the other hand, these streams of text, in the ways in which they name and differentiate the city, perform an orienting function; they "guided readers simply by measuring and standardizing the urban inventory" (3). As in many other diagnoses of the "media-saturated city", saturation here does not endow cities with a thickness of place, as Edward Casey has described it, nor with the "deepening of affective feeling" which is normally a consequence of this thickness. (Duff, 2010). Rather, the effect of media saturation is a thinning of semantic substance and an endlessly circulatory restlessness. In the "city of words" the "rich streams of text" are unlikely to attach themselves in durable fashion to places or to practices.

A more stable inventory of communicative features and functions is often noted in treatments of the Latin American city, and, in particular, of its historical centres of power (the *centros historicos* built by Spanish and other colonizers.) In his analysis of such centres, Fernando Carrion is faithful to the expanded notion of media found in the work of Friedrich Kittler and others, for whom media do not simply "communicate", but perform the multiple functions of processing, storage and transmission. In such a definition, the communicative infrastructures of the city include public spaces of oral exchange (like squares or parks), the archival spaces of libraries and government bureaucracies, monumental commemorations (like statues) of historical figures or events, and the transportation systems through which geographical points "communicate" with each other. Carrion writes:

> In the historic centers, the most varied media and forms of communication converge (telephony, radio, television, postal service, cinema, theater, schools); they embrace the greatest concentration of socializing places (public and civic spaces), they possess the greatest accumulation of concentrated information (libraries, archives, buildings); they have the greatest number of symbolic manifestations (churches, monuments, squares); they contain the most diverse means of transportation (ports, railways, vehicles); and they attract multiple users (Carrion, 2003: 147).

This is an image of a city centre saturated by media. However, it suggests the efficient cooperation of institutions within a division of functions rather than the promiscuous circulation of Fritzsche's "small streams of text". For Carrion, the media operations of the city are embedded in durable infrastructures which allow historical centres to acquire, over time, the "thickness" that Casey has described. Saturated by media and information of many kinds, historic centres become deep repositories of affect and collective memory.

A more modest version of media saturation returns us, briefly, to Berlin. The book *Vinyl : The Analogue Record in the Digital Age*, by Bartmanski and Woodward (2015), is a study of the cultures which have formed around the collecting and exchange of vinyl musical recordings in present-day Berlin. That city, the authors suggest, is "one of the most saturated and still-

expanding vinyl markets in the world," a "mecca" for those seeking examples of a technology once deemed obsolete (170). Vinyl records are a minor rather than defining feature of Berlin life, of course, but the city has the second highest number of shops in the world devoted to selling this media technology. (Tokyo has the most.)   In this, Berlin is like Buenos Aires and Hong Kong, both of which have been identified by journalists and others as the world cities with the largest number of bookstores (Ha, 2016). Only for Berlin and Buenos Aires, however, does the ubiquity of these media forms (the vinyl record and the book) nourish an urban imaginary centred on cultural erudition and connoisseurship. For Tokyo and Hong Kong, this ubiquity is simply the sign of a broader abundance of amenities.

In their analysis of Berlin's vinyl culture, Barmanski and Woodward trace the ways in which vinyl serves as the focal point of communities, as the circulating object around which networks of affinity and exchange take shape. For large numbers of individuals involved in Berlin's cultures of vinyl, movement through the city follows pathways etched by the dispersion of vinyl recordings across urban space. This is, of course, a very different image of the saturated city than that found in Fritzsche's "city of words", in which an endlessly circulating textuality made Berlin a monumental capital of culture. In present-day Berlin, in contrast, the ubiquity of vinyl is an effect of the city's late twentieth-century cultural marginality. In the years in which it was divided, Berlin was criss-crossed by visitors and occupiers from elsewhere, large numbers of whom brought vinyl records and left them. Since 1999, Barmanski and Woodward suggest, the city has been a "cosmopolitan and artistic centre in the making" (170). The unsettled fluidity of Berlin in the present has preserved its status as a place to which people migrate and to which artefacts are bought. The accumulations of vinyl in Berlin are thus the residues of people's comings and goings, physical reminders of the city's status as crossroads. Of course, Berlin is no more "saturated" by vinyl than is Lyon by *saucisson* or Montreal by bagels. In all three cases, however, the distribution of a category of object throughout the city serves to perpetuate a set of minor, affectual attachments which contribute to the thickness of local belonging.

Waste and detritus

Alongside decayed *roués* with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin,

alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, maquereaus, brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ- grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars - in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la bohème*.

Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire, 1852

Of the many images of the saturated city, the most disturbing are often those which present cities overrun by detritus. The richness (and occasional tragedy) of these images stems from the ways in which their version of detritus so often extends from the dilapidated ruins of capitalist production to the encroaching, destructive force of natural substances, and frequently encompasses human populations themselves. Marx' well-known inventory of the human populations of French bohemia exemplifies this variety. It is partly a list of marginal professions, but in its references to "ruined offshoots" and to bohemia itself as a floating, decomposed masse, it approaches the description of biological decay. Images of the city saturated by degraded versions of the human have been a longstanding feature of social hygiene movements in which prejudices of various sorts assume the mask of an ameliorative project of urban cleansing. In his study of "environmental racism", Michael J. Durfee (2017) has traced the variety of ways in which ideas concerning urban detritus have come to be interwoven with the treatment of racialized populations. More fancifully, an extended inventory of degraded forms of the human has been offered by Nick Yablon, who finds, in recent science fiction films set within collapsed global cities, "[i]magined ruinscapes, populated variously by cyborgs, gangs, vampires, zombies, or survivalists" (2009: 2).

It is common to see the use of biological metaphors for the city as a nineteenth-century phenomena (Bernstein, 1991), but such metaphors persist in later writing which attempts to describe cities saturated by the residues of capitalist production. Kracauer, in his "Farewell to the Linden Arcade," offers another of the suggestive, elongated descriptions we have been collecting here: « The arcade bazaar is teeming with them; nail clippers, scissors, powder boxes, cigarette

lighters, hand-stitched Hungarian doilies." If this begins as a list of the minor treasures offered at second-hand markets, our comfort is challenged by the commentary which follows: "Like vermin the odds and ends appear in swarms and terrify us with their claim to keep us perpetual company. As if wanting to devour us, they crawl through the worm-eaten bulding in which we live, and if someday the rafters come crashing down, they will even darken the sky." (Kracauer, 1995 : 339). As the discarded artefacts of capitalist production assume the character of vermin, resisting destruction and crawling through the interstices of our built environment, the natural and social worlds collapse in upon each other and the city is saturated with the signs of its own ruination.

The city in ruins is one, apocalyptic version of the city saturated in waste. Often, however, the detritus of cities is endowed with various kinds of pedagogical potential. For François Dagognet, detritus may inspire a « *hylétique* (une science de la matière) » (1997 : 11) through which we will learn to read the waste of material life as an inventory of signs; the dirt and bodily excretions (like sweat) found on objects may be seen as forms of *tatouage* carried out (consciously or not) by human populations upon the world of material objects and structures. For Michael Sheringham, it is through detritus that a city archives itself; urban history is to be found in the "hieroglyphic blobs of gum splattering the sidewalk, runic streaks and crevices on pavements or blank facades, encampments of bottle banks [points de collection pour les bouteilles], hoppers [paniers] for supplements to supplements and household non-desiderata" (Sheringham, 2010: 1).

The city saturated by cast-off objects has figured prominently within well-known political and artistic movements. Martha Rosler has traced the ways in which the artist-bohemian of late modernity came to assume the task of searching amidst the detritus of the saturated city for objects whose meaning and value might be rehabilitated: "We artists have been expected to liven up patrons' lives by dusting off the discarded, the overlooked, the obsolescent, translating these elements into treasures of taste and allegories of morality" (Rosler, 2002: 7). More broadly, the obsolete spaces and things of the modern city have been embraced by several generations of artists or philosophers because, in their very uselessness or inefficiency, these residues are seen as resisting ideologies of technological advancement. This has been a particular theme, Boscagli suggests, of French thinkers, from Barthes through Debord and Baudrillard (Boscagli, 2014:

149). If, in Bill Brown's phrase, "the postwar era look[ed] like an era both overwhelmed by the proliferation of things and singularly attentive to them", important schools of artistic production, from the *nouveau roman* through the object-art of Claes Oldenburg, have responded in their work to the saturation of environments by things (Brown, 2001: 13)

Scenes and saturation

To return, briefly, to the communities of vinyl record collectors in Berlin, we may see such communities as constituting a cultural scene of sorts. It is to the notion of cultural scene as figure of saturation that I now turn. If, in its simplest definition, a cultural scene is a social world, marked by its devotion to a particular cultural object (a genre, style or medium), then vinyl quite clearly sits at the centre of such a scene in Berlin. In the 1990s, the concept of scene began to partially displace such concepts as subculture or community in academic writing on music and other cultural forms. There are multiple reasons for this displacement, but the simplest, perhaps, is that « community » and « subculture » came to be seen as too fixated on the human, particularly during a period in which, across the human sciences, one came to speak more and more of assemblages or networks implicating both the human and non-human. "Scene" could easily be conceptualized in ways which set human actors among objects, places, technologies and a variety of other phenomena, and which emphasized the urban environments in which scenes typically were embedded.

As I have suggested elsewhere, scenes may be seen as engaged in "processing" the abundance of materials to be found within urban life. In this respect, certain scenes arise in response to the saturation of cities by the cultural residues of the past. Those individuals devoted to psychedelic music of the 1960s, for example, will pass their time in a wide variety of activities: searching for vintage clothing within flea markets, collecting old musical recordings and playback technologies, gathering posters for old concerts, documenting performance venues now disappeared, producing discographical lists, publishing fanzines devoted to their musical interests and so on (Straw, 2014b). We may observe, here, traces of the principal that Marcel Roncayola and other historians of the city have put forward: that the original and founding mission of cities was that of disposing of a surplus (Roncayola, 2002: 22). If, in the case of our

psychedelic music scene, the surplus to be worked upon is residual and sedimented (rather than the result of primary agricultural or artisanal production), it is nevertheless a response to the saturation of the city by things, styles and practices which endlessly circulate through contexts in which attempts are made to resuscitate their value.

This sense of cultural scenes, as engaged in the retrieval of a city's sedimented abundance, is one among many understandings in which "scene" names a dispositif, a machinery. More typically, the machinery of the scene is engaged in the production of new forms of cultural expression rather than the processing of a cultural past. In this account (which takes the form of another elongated list), Emin and Guibert map an expanded topography of music scenes:

> Aujourd'hui, la scène englobe les différents maillons de la filière musicale : de la création artistique (groupes de musiciens, artistes) au distributeur (liste de distribution et label phonographique) en passant par des intermédiaires (salle de répétition, dirigeant de groupe, diffuseur, autoproduction…) et s'étend même à des médias alternatifs (fanzines, webzines), tous associatifs. Elle comprend également des travailleurs indépendants aux métiers qualifiés (location de véhicules de transport avec chauffeurs pour les tournées, ingénieurs du son, assistants de projets, graphistes et concepteurs de sites web…) (Emin and Guilbert, 2017 :100).

We find, here, what I have elsewhere called a restricted definition of scene. In such definitions, scenes emerge around objects of cultural devotion (such as styles of music); the scene encompasses all of those activities, people, places and things in which that cultural devotion is activated (Straw, 2014a). A scene thus functions as something like a dispositif for the production and dissemination of a cultural form. Elsewhere, in prominent works of French philosophical thinking, we find a different version of the scène as dispositif, in which it functions as a visible arrangement of things, whose effect is to produce a certain knowledge. As Gilles Deleuze once noted, the tableau had always haunted Michel Foucault (Deleuze, 1986 : 86), and key conceptual interventions, for the latter, had often organized themselves first as scenic tableaux. The most famous of these is certainly the famous scene of torture and murder that opens *Surveiller et Punir*. This is a scene not only in the ways in which it is of a striking visibility, but insofar as we

are presented with an almost hieroglypic arrangement of bodies, objects, acts. For Jacques Rancière, as well, the scene serves as an epistemological support; it is what, in his book *Aesthetis*, he calls a little optical machine which, through its arrangement of ideas, objects and places, performs a pedagogical function (Rancière, 2011: 12)

To more fully reconcile the notion of scene with that of saturation, however, we must move away from conceptions of the scene as "dispositif" – as a machinery of cultural production – towards an account of the scene as a social space marked by excess. In one of the earliest theorizations of scenes -- a study of musical culture in Austin, Texas -- Barry Shank had recourse to terms suggesting the condition of saturation: "A scene itself can be defined as an overproductive signifying community; that is, far more semiotic information is produced than can be rationally parsed" (1994: 122). I take, from Shank's emphasis on an overproduction of signification, the notion that a musical scene (musical, in Shank's study) involves excesses of feeling, meaning and activity which go beyond those required for its simple functioning or intelligibility.
To develop these ideas – in ways which may betray Shank's own conceptualisation of scene – I suggest that a scene is less an organizational principle within the cultural field than one of the means by which cities perform their urbanity.

We are a dealing with a scene when behaviors which are otherwise private – intimate conversation, the acts of eating, drinking and touching – now take place in public places. As the Canadian sociologist Alan Blum has suggested, the creativity of the city manifests itself above all in its capacity to make a place for intimacy within collective and public life (Blum, 2003 : 179). Scenes thus take shake in a back and forth between visibility and invisibility : a small group of underground artistic collaborators becomes visible by drinking coffee together in a public space and, in so doing, offering itself up to being deciphered by those who look at them. If there is saturation here, it is in the manner in which subcultures, professional groups, coteries, and friendship circles, even as they pursue their expériences of intimacy and public sociability, contribute to the general effervescence of cities. For the researcher, the challenge is not – or not only – to find scenes in the city, but to trace those processes by which work, neighbourhood life, circles of collaboration and artistic practices produce scenes – that is, acquire those supplements of social performance that we may call *scenic*.

In a frequently cited article, the Belgian sociologist Pascal Gielen (2011) suggests that the world of contemporary art defines itself more and more according to the model of scene. 'Scène' describes the fluidity, precarity and mobility of this world, but it names, as well, the excesses of sociability which characterize it. The idea that the world of contemporary art is scene-like finds confirmation in the increasingly event-centred character of this world, with its biennials, its *nuits blanches*, its openings, its fairs, and so on. For Gielen, as well, the world of contemporary art is scene-like in the obligation it imposes to produce a constant visibility, grounded in spaces and events – a visibility which hides, quite effectively, the mysterious flows of money and power which render such scenes possible. The increased use of the term 'scene' within artistic milieux confirms one of the hypotheses of Nicolas Bourriaud – that what is lacking in the contemporary world is less expression or meaning, but interconnection (1998)

It seems clear to me that the majority of urban cultural forms today seek to create, around themselves, and above all else, contexts of sociability. This has not always been the case : in fact, the history of museums, libraries and symphony orchestras has been marked by the exclusion or expulsion of sociability throughout the course of the twentieth century. The consumption of culture was presented, much of the time, as a pause or parenthesis within sociability. In the current moment, the directors of cultural institutions have come to the realization that a supplement of sociability is essential to their survival. In a double movement, the directors of cultural institutions first incorporate, within their functioning, a sociability which, a half-century earlier, would have taken shape outside their doors. These institutions then look to ensure that the scene-like movements which they have create inscribe themselves within the series or networks of scenes characteristic of their urban milieu.

Following Luc Gwiazdzinski (2016), we might say that each cultural site is becoming a hybrid space. Thus, repertory cinemas, the French *bars à ambiance musicale,* bookstore cafés and art galleries seem to obey the doctrine, proposed by Bourriaud, concerning the importance, in the contemporary context, of interconnection. If, 25 years ago, a bookstore opened a café principally in order to increase its revenues, it does so now in order to create a scene, through which it may continue to confirm the ongoing vitality of the book and of literature.

The rise of 'scene' as a model is part of a general urbanization of cultural life and of cultural forms : not only because the spaces of culture are increasingly urban, but because the very meaning of cultural practices is conceived more and more in terms of a work upon and with the materials and relations which define urban life. If scenes are figures of urban saturation, this is, in part, because scenes are the mediating social substance through which even the most exclusive and hibernatory of cultural practices partake in the effervescent sociability of the contemporary city.

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