An Urbanized cultural studies?

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The academic unit in which I work, at McGill University in Montreal, is called the "Department of Art History and Communications Studies". It was formed in 2000 through the merger of two existing units which each felt the need for change. One of these was an interdisciplinary program in Communications Studies which offered only postgraduate degrees (a Masters and Doctorate) ; the other was a department of Art History which also granted an undergraduate degree. I begin with the example of this merger in order to explore some of the ways in which cultural studies acts upon disciplines to produce distinctive spaces of overlap between them. This action does not usually create those independent, interdisciplinary spaces imagined in narratives which romanticize cultural studies' challenge to traditional disciplinary divisions. In more limited fashion, perhaps, it produces the mutual recognition, across disciplinary lines, of clusters of objects and ideas that reconfigure the terms in which people conceive their own academic work. I will speak briefly here about two such clusters and their role in creating spaces of convergence between the two disciplinary "sides" of my department. One such cluster includes works and ideas engaged in what I call the "urbanization" of cultural studies, and will be the focus of much of this article.

The joining of Art History and Communications Studies within a single departmental structure is relatively rare in the Canadian context. Our department is still judged to be eccentric by people in other universities, particularly those where Communications Studies is practiced in a manner more faithful to the traditions of quantitative social science. In any case, the reasons for the merger of these two disciplines at McGill University were only partly intellectual. A Graduate Program in Communications had existed since the early 1970s, created in a climate of McLuhanist exuberance as a meeting place for scholars from more traditional disciplines who claimed an interest in communications. These included linguists, sociologists, theorists of literature and psychologists. The formal allegiance of most of these scholars, however, was to their home departments, and when the appointment

of new faculty in Canadian universities slowed down in the 1990s, departments were less and less likely to "lend" their members out to participate in an interdisciplinary program which was able to offer little in return. To merge with Art History, then, was to bring to Communications Studies the security of a departmental home, at a time when its very existence in my university was threatened. Art History already had departmental status, but its Chair was attracted to the merger as a way of bringing interdisciplinary energies into a unit which was otherwise quite old-fashioned[1].

To join Art History and Communications Studies in a single department was also to raise the question of how they might interact in intellectual terms. Out of caution, we retained separate degrees for the two disciplines, at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, respecting the need of those who graduated to be able to show their disciplinary credentials. Even at present, there are no formal spaces of pedagogical overlap between art history and communications: no joint degrees, and only the occasional postgraduate seminar open to students from both disciplines. In the beginning, many of us believed that, if areas of common ground would emerge, they would stem from the deep roots and core strengths of each discipline. Art historians, for example, might come to think of artistic forms and technologies in terms of their mediality; communications scholars, in turn, might be encouraged to pay greater attention to questions of form and style as these manifest themselves in media expression. This, in any case, was the scenario we used to justify the merger to the university administration, which accepted it with little understanding of its rationale.

Seventeen years since the department of Art History and Communications Studies was created, the points of common ground are still being worked out. When such common ground has emerged, I suggest, it has had little to do with the core concerns of each discipline. Instead, points of contact have appeared as members of both disciplines (faculty and students) have come to participate in the same developments in contemporary cultural theory. Rather than each side learning from the core historical expertise of the other, interaction takes the form of common involvement in the forward movement of that enterprise we call cultural studies.

For a variety of reasons, Communications Studies in English-speaking Canadian institutions has always been more humanistic and interpretive in orientation than is the case in the United States (or many non-English-speaking academic cultures). By the 1990s, in institutions like my own, it was difficult to disentangle the history of Communications Studies in Canada from the history of cultural studies itself. Indeed, American communications scholars like James Carey, who argued for a "cultural approach" to communications in the United

1 I was the Director of the Graduate Program in Communications at the time of its merger with Art History. I should make clear that this is my own interprÉtation of these events.

States, made explicit reference to the work of Canadian communication theorists, such as the historian Harold Innis, in laying the bases of that approach (Carey, 1989). The key currents of cultural studies entered the discipline of Art History more furtively, disguised for a long time as components of what came to be known as the "New Art History". (See, for one account, Jõekalda, 2013). More recently, it might be argued, key works in cultural studies have inflected Art History without the requirement that they be translated first into the terms of that discipline.

Common ground

At the moment in which I write, two broad clusters of theoretical work stand as important points of contact between the two disciplines in my department. One of these clusters, the focus of many presentations at the conference on which this book is based, has assumed coherence in recent years as the "new materialisms". This array of ideas, thinkers and agendas encompasses theoretical currents as diverse as Kittlerian media theory, object oriented ontologies, "thing theory" and material culture studies, new feminist materialisms, actor network theory, infrastructure studies, theorizations of the anthroposcene and so on. An alternate characterization of this cluster, as marking a "non-human turn" (Grusin, 2015), more economically captures the range of objects addressed within it, but perhaps obscures the shared theoretical project (that of materialist analysis) believed to be at its core. At the very least, one finds a lowest common denominator in all this work in its departure from the preoccupation with the divided, human subject which presided over so much post-structuralist theory.

The other analytic current that serves as point of overlap between Art History and Communications Studies in my department is what is sometimes called urban cultural studies. The work of a great many students at the Masters and Doctorate level, in both disciplines, is concerned with such urban phenomena as gentrification, the gendering of cultural spaces, the "festivalization" of culture, practices of cultural transgression, public art installations, cultural scenes and so on.

As I will suggest later, the emergence of these themes mirrors the broader "urbanization" of cultural studies itself, in which, to put it schematically, the struggle for space has challenged the conflict over meaning as the key focus of cultural-political analysis.

If "new materialisms" and "urban cultural studies" function with roughly equal strength as areas of cross-disciplinary overlap in my department, there are nevertheless clear differences between them in terms of what might be called their rhetorical economies. The work of students engaged in new materialist work will often be carried out at high levels of theorization. This theoretical scale is magni-

fied by the tendency of such work to be pulled towards high-level, even apocalyptic claims, often having to do with the extinction of the earth or the obsolescence of the human. The collective project of an urban cultural studies, on the other hand, is often dispersed within the specificity of innumerable small examples, each approached through what is usually a low-level theorization. An effect of this difference is that these two points of contact function in different ways to bring the department together. An interest in new materialisms manifests itself at the level of high-level theorization, in prominent books with which everyone is expected to be familiar. Work on urban subjects, in contrast, finds common ground in ephemeral objects of analysis like tattooing, graffiti or street art, which float between the disciplines of Art History and Communications and gather around themselves loose clusters of analytic tools.

The urbanization of cultural studies

Both the new materialisms and recent engagements with the urban have moved the project of cultural studies to a considerable distance from its founding themes and modes of analysis. One effect of this distance is that we may often wonder whether we are still involved in something we may call cultural studies. For many years, it has been possible to observe a tension between those for whom cultural studies is a specific project and points of departure, and others for whom it is always only the current field of interdisciplinary dialogue, the momentary state of things in an endlessly shifting history of attempts to critically understand the cultural. Put differently, while cultural studies has, from the very beginning, absorbed successive ways of theoretical revision, there is disagreement over how far this revision can go and leave us still working in something called cultural studies. Does this require, for example, that we remain faithful to such founding concepts as conjuncture and articulation? Must cultural studies continue to engage in the ongoing refinement and application of these concepts? Or might individual instances of cultural analysis stray from these while still claiming to participate in an unfolding history which remains that of cultural studies? Is the history of cultural studies the history of a set of terms and concepts, or that of an intellectual space (or “scene”) whose continuities across time are primarily institutional and political?

Urbanizing cultural studies

In what follows, I suggest that important currents within cultural studies have undergone, over the last two decades or so, something that I would call an "urbanization". By this term I designate more than just the increased interest on the part of cultural scholars in cities as contexts in which the politics of culture are played out. Rather, I suggest, "urbanization" is one way of naming cultural studies' engagement with modes of being together, with the interweaving of human and non-human forms, and with political struggles over space. If "urbanization" seems too specific and tendential a term to encompass (or claim ownership of) all of these developments in their fullness, it can nevertheless stand metaphorically for a broader interest in various kinds of proximities (of social groups, bodies, material forms and practices) and the political-cultural states which proximity entails. In this metaphorical sense, an urbanized cultural studies is one concerned with the multiple forms of "horizontalism", to borrow a term from theorizations of recent political activism (see, for an account, Graham, 2016: Kindle location 506).

What an "urbanized" cultural studies has partially displaced, then, is a cultural studies working at two other levels. One of these is the level of the citizen/consumer, engaged in its reading of textual forms or messages. (This is not the moment to rehearse the by-now familiar criticisms of a cultural studies overly invested in notions of the oppositional reading; both protagonists in these polemics are now far behind us.) The other is the level of the nation state as that mimetic space in relation to which the citizen/consumer negotiates ideological identities. A concern for these latter two levels marked Anglo-American cultural studies from the 1970s well into the 1990s. What bound these levels to each other was the sense that the terms of belonging to a broad (usually national) ideological formation were resolved or resisted in the act of individual meaning-making. The fragmentation of cultural studies since then has followed many pathways, of course, but several of them have followed the lines of inquiry opened up by an interest in proximities. An interest in proximities has meant a diminished interest in projected spaces of identification and representation, and a stronger interest in the intimacies, injuries and blockages of ground-level cultural practice.

Put simply (and perhaps crudely), a concern with meaning has given way to a concern with relations, assemblages, circulatory pathways and forms of attachment.

The urban and the night

I will pursue my interest in an urbanized cultural studies by looking at two events whose focus has also been a key object of much of my own research over the past decade: the relationship between cities and the night. The events I will recall here are separated by time and geography. The first was held in Manchester, in the United Kindgom, in 1994 ; he second took place twenty years later, in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in 2014. Each event brought together scholars, organizers of cultural events, artists and public officials. Both events produced book-length documents that have circulated outside the conventional pathways of academic scholarship. Their interest resides, for me at least, in the way both occasions stand as symptoms of significant shifts in the ways in which the politics of culture are conceived. As I hope to show, the urban night has emerged in recent years as one of those "open, porous sites of contestation" of which Lawrence Grossberg spoke in his presentation to the conference on which this volume is based.

In 1994, I was invited to Manchester Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom to give a talk. I spoke, my cv reminds me, about music in Montreal (the city in which I live) and the ways in which music has shaped that city's place in a moral geography of Canada. The theme of that talk was much less pertinent to this article than the fact that, just before I left Manchester for London, my hosts gave me a thick, photocopied document with the title *The 24-Hour City: Selected Papers from the First National Conference on the Night-time Economy* (Lovatt et al, 24). It contained the proceedings of an event that had been held at the Manchester Institute for Popular Culture the previous year. That conference had featured presentations by people in a variety of roles: organizers in Manchester's night club sector, police officials, city planners, journalists (well-known British music critic Jon Savage), and a number of academics, including Andrew Lovatt, Kate Paynter and Franco Bianchini. Together they spoke about the ways in which Manchester's night-time might best be governed, developed and protected.

I devoured this publication on my train ride to London. In ways that I will discuss shortly, it was a revelation to me, opening up a new area of interest and allowing various of my existing research interests to be reconfigured around a new object. Admittedly, *The 24-Hour City* remains an ephemeral, largely forgotten intervention in cultural analysis ; when they gave it to me, my Manchester hosts made it clear that very few copies remained from its small print run. The publication's existence is confirmed only in a few references in scholarly works, by Amazon and Google Books listings which indicate its non-availability, and on scam pdf download sites which offer it to you in return for giving up your credit

card information. I am tempted, nevertheless, to name it as one of the significant lost works of British cultural studies.

Like the much more widely-read *The Social Life of Things*, the volume edited by Arjun Appadurai and published in 1986, *The 24-Hour City* was transformative for me less because of the various arguments it advanced, or the methods it revealed, than for the ways in which it named a object of research (the urban night). In this naming, the publication authorized the gathering up of various research activities around a new object. Of course, neither the night, nor "things" themselves, had been unstudied before these interventions. However, just as the various currents within cultural studies we call "thing theory" and "material cultural studies" will identify the Appadurai collection as a founding moment, so, too, for me at least, the Manchester volume initiated a set of developments which led to my current involvement in a field I have elsewhere called "night studies"(Straw, 2016). And, as I will argue later, as well, the *24-Hour City* was an early symptom of what we might call the "urbanization" of cultural studies.

The timing of the conference on which these proceedings were based had been particularly interesting. By 1994, the most recent golden age of Manchester night life – the late 1980s period of acid house, of bands like the Happy Mondays and Stone Roses – had unravelled amidst the ascendancy of gang violence and drugs, and through the shift of collective interest to other cities of musical invention, like London. Three years later, Tony Blair would become Prime Minister of Great Britain and concepts like "night-time economy" or "the 24-hour city" would become central to a whole set of discourses, doctrines and practices about which, to say the obvious, we should be ambivalent. These ideas fed the cultural industry initiatives of the Blair government and the work of armies of consul-tants whose influence around the world has been considerable. The "night-time economy" became absorbed within broader notions of the "creative economy" whose legacies include intense gentrification, the privatization of significant parts of the cultural sector, increased precarity for those engaged in cultural labour and a whole set of other consequences with which we are familiar. (See, for an exten-sive overview and critical evaluation of these developments, Hewison, 2014).

For me, at least in retrospect, the *24 Hour City* conference and proceedings marked a transitional stage in the ways in which we might think about popular music. The event was about more than music, of course, but insofar as it had occurred in the aftermath of one of the last great postpunk formations of (mostly white) British popular music – the so-called *Madchester* moment – it also suggested a shifting of the terrain on which the politics of popular music might be conceived. Until the mid 1990s, if scholars thought about music in relation to broader poli-ical territories, these contexts were normally those of what Gramsci had named

the national popular (cf. Forgacs, 1999). In insightful analyses, American popular music was examined in its relationship to Reaganism as an broadly national ideological complex and structure of feeling (e.g., Grossberg, 1988) . The musical consumption of young British girls was set against the often contradictory ideological precepts of Thatcherist Britain (Macrobbie, 1993). In my own country, the important work of cultural studies scholar Jody Berland (1998) set Canadian music in relation to national traditions of thinking about spatiality and power.

The 24-Hour City publication, in contrast, set music amidst the struggles for space, resources and legitimacy which marked cultural politics in the contemporary city. Popular music's politics, here, became "urbanized", not simply through a shrinking of their terrain of applicability, but because the struggle for meaning at the heart of other versions of musical politics was displaced by the struggle for space. At roughly the same time, popular music studies was undergoing its own version of the broader spatial turn observable across the humanities. A key effect of this turn was to center important currents in popular music studies on cities. In articles (and the book-length works which followed), U.S.-based scholars Barry Shank (1994) and Holly Kruse (1993) wrote about urban localities as musical "scenes". In the United Kingdom, anthropologists Ruth Finnegan (1989) and Sara Cohen (1991) published book-length studies analyzing multiple practices of music-making in single cities (Milton Keynes and Liverpool, respectively.) This "spatialization" of popular music studies, in its concern for what might be called the distributive operations of musical culture, significantly dislodged a longstanding concern with the effects of commodification or technological change on musical traditions . We might see that latter concern as "temporal", insofar as its key focus was the capacity of musical forms to maintain their authenticity through time.

Music in cultural studies

The study of popular music had inflected the history of Anglo-American cultural studies in at least three moments since the 1970s. Early studies of youth subcultures had not focused exclusively on music-based subcultures, but the table of contents of *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain* (Hall and Jefferson, 1993) lists article on Teddy Boys, Mods, and Rastas, groups defined in key ways by their identification with musical genres. Musical choices, in these analyses, were one of the resources with which groups of mostly male working class youths negotiated their identities, in contexts which were usually those of diminished economic opportunities and threatened masculinities. In a second phase, marked by the important volume by Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), this negotiation came to be grasped more specifically as a battle over the sign. The semiotic warfare

Hebdige described had links to the "negotiations" of the earlier phase of subcultural studies, but Hebdige's own emphasis on the creative, expressive dimensions of subcultural signification signalled a new engagement with the vanguardish dimensions of popular music cultures. Finally, we find some of the earliest invocations of affect theory in cultural studies occurring in work on popular music, in the attempt to situate the political status of certain kinds of music elsewhere than in their lyrics or other conventionally political dimensions. I have already referred to the work of Lawrence Grossberg on rock music under Reagan, in which one finds an engagement with some of the theoretical currents (the work of Deleuze and Guattari, in particular) which would occupy a privileged place within affect theory in its later, full flowering. Earlier, however, in some of the first writings on club dancing, we find the effort to account for affectual relations prior to the emergence of a solidified vocabulary for doing so (e.g., Dyer, 1979 ; McRobbie, 1984).

By the early 1990s, the "spatial" turn in studies of music studies was roughly coincident with the consolidation of "popular music studies" as a relatively autonomous scholarly subfield, with its own journals, associations and theoretical canons. This autonomization nudged the field away from other currents in cultural studies itself, as technological changes in the production and consumption of music, the recognition of important urban-based music scenes and other developments seemed to give the field its own complex set of phenomena with which to deal. This autonomization continues, arguably, through the present day. However, a significant countervailing force since the 1990s, pulling currents within the study of music back into the broader terrain of cultural studies, has been the debate over "cultural economies", the "cultural industries", the "creative economy", "creative industries", and a string of other homonymic terms which have joined the analysis of specific cultural terms to higher-level meditation on the status of labour and value in contemporary capitalist societies.

To name the night as the object of public policy, as speakers at *The 24-Hour City* did, was to take the question of cultural policy away from the concerns with expression and representation, which have long dominated it (particularly in countries like Canada), and move it towards questions of rights (the right to assemble and to occupy space, the right to be safe and legal) and urban citizenship (the demand that night-time labour and nocturnal practices of cultural innovation be recognized as legitimate features of urban life). As suggested, this marks a move away from the sense of culture as mimetic (in relation to collective identities) towards a sense of its place within the economic and material practices of collective life. While music, as suggested, runs through the *24-Hour City* document as a theme, genres of music have largely disappeared form the analysis. In their place, we find questions of access, safety, and the preservation of collective space ; we find, as well, the claim that

a key feature of urban nightlife is the elaboration of new lifestyles and sexualities. If these are not the only issues which music raises – there is still much of value to be found in the political analysis of musical forms – they are nevertheless the issues which a cultural studies of music is best equipped to take up. To engage with these issues is not to commit to a circumscribed "policy turn" in cultural studies, of the sort analysed in detail by Jonathan Sterne and others (Sterne, 2002). Rather, it is to see those practices which constitute the realm of the cultural as bound up with multi-levelled acts of governance and regulation which enable and restrain them.

The second event I will discuss here occurred twenty years later, in 2014. I was invited to a symposium on night culture organized by the Colaboratorio, a collective of architects, event organizers, activists and artists based in Sao Paulo, Brazil. (I had met one of the organizers the previous year, at a panel on night-time culture held as part of Montreal's MUTEK festival, devoted to experimental forms of electronic music.) The other non-Brazilian presenters were the French geographer Luc Gwiazdzinski and the "Night Mayor" of Amsterdam, Mirik Milan. What was immediately apparent, at this event, was the extent to which, in the 20 years since the Manchester event, the night had solidified as the focus of cultural activism and policy at the municipal level. However, while those seeking to protect and develop a night-time culture in Sao Paulo engaged in battles over noise, gentrification, and legitimation similar to those transpiring in other cities around the world, other conflicts were more specific to the host city. The threat of violence and the weakness of municipal transport systems meant that night-time culture was strongest in the peripheries of the Sao Paulo and, while this dispersion of culture meant for a certain diversity, it also meant that clusters of cultural inventiveness had difficulty in communicating with each other. At the same time, new plans for the development of areas of downtown Sao Paulo threatened the operation of events (involving music and the visual arts) which took place in abandoned old buildings in the centre of the city.

The Sao Paulo event was organized as a set of talks and workshops, but, shortly after it began, a consensus emerged among the participants that we should produce a Manifesto of sorts. The result, the *Manifesto da Noite* (*Night Manifesto*), was published before the end of the year as a paper book and on-line document (Colaboratorio, 2014). This document contains the text of presentations from the event, but, most importantly, offers a list of principles reached through lengthy discussion. These include the demand that the "Right to the city", long a feature of critical urbanism, include a fully-developed "Right to the night", and that, just as the night be opened up (to cultural and social practices of all kinds), the health and welfare of those who work in the night receive greater attention in municipal governance. As in most political platforms for the night, the Manifesto sought to balance

claims about the alterity of the night (its status as space/time of transgression and aestheticized mystery) with others insisting on the preservation, within the night, of ideas of accessibility and democratic governance which traditionally have been conceived in the political language of the day.

The event which produced the *Manifesto da Noite* was shaped by concerns which circulate at the global level: over the gentrification of inner cities, and the threats to (mostly musical) activity which have come with noise complaints from new urban settlers, rising rents, and the shrinking of unregulated, informal spaces of cultural expression. These were given strong local inflection, of course, but one of the striking aspects of the event was the extent to which, in a profound back-and-forth, the longstanding concerns of cultural studies had become part of the common sense of urban cultural activism, just as that activism had provided many of the terms with which an urbanized cultural studies carried out its work of analysis. Ideas about the rhythmic character of urban life, the chronotopic character of the night (as a period of time imagined as territory), and citizenship in its cultural dimensions have moved through academic work and cultural criticism into the language of urban activism, which sends them back with renewed grounding specificity. And, conversely, in the dense intertwining of policy, politics and semiotic warfare which marks conflicts over urban space, cultural studies work has found sites in which to deploy its conceptual inventiveness.

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