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Rhythmanalysis and circulation

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Introduction

In a perceptive account of life in the city in which I live, Julien Besse writes of the ways in which Pop Montreal, an annual festival of music and culture, replicates the everyday rhythms of Montreal experience. 'As Pop Montreal melts into a sense of the everyday', Besse muses, one can't help asking the question: '[what] if life was like this all the time?' (Besse 2015: 113). In fact, he suggests, the year-round experience of living in Montreal is, indeed, very much like that of attending Pop Montreal (if you are a young twenty-or-thirty-something who spends their time going to music shows and other kinds of cultural events). Rather than disrupting the flow of city life, in a carnivalesque, transgressive overturning of habits or rhythms, the Pop Montreal festival simply draws temporary parentheses around events and behaviours typical of the endless routines of Montreal life. 'All through the year', Besse writes, 'the Pop Montreal attendee goes to conferences and exhibits, eats locally, freely practices the sexualities of their choice, attends talks and participates in debates' (116; my translation). The Pop Montreal festival itself is little more than a lightly augmented version of Montreal life as it is lived on a daily basis.

We find, intertwined in this analysis (even if they are not named), the notions of rhythm and circulation which are the focus of this chapter. As a festival, Pop Montreal might be expected to disrupt or at least interrupt the normal rhythms of Montreal life. As French geographer Luc Gwiazdzinski suggests in his account of urban festivals, such events – through their 'transitory and cyclical character, through their capacity to metamorphose all parts of a city, to rewrite its pathways, its orientations and its [sense of] centralities' – invite a city's residents to experience the city's rhythms in new ways, to imagine other ways of living and moving through it (Gwiazdzinski 2011: 332–3; my translation). Besse's argument, however, is that this is not the case with Pop Montreal. As a festival which proposes particular pathways of movement through the city, from venue to venue and event to event, Pop Montreal imposes itself lightly upon the circulatory patterns of ordinary cultural experience.

Music festivals and the 'rhythmanalytic project'

In what follows, I will discuss rhythm and circulation in turn, before offering some tentative remarks on their possible reconciliation. If I will continue to take festivals as my privileged example, this is because they pose the relationship of music to time and space at so many levels. Festivals, like other musical events, form part of what Henri Lefebvre and Catherine Régulier (2004: 73), in their plan for a 'Rhythmanalytic Project', called 'the concrete modalities of social time'. City life, they note, is made up of multiple, overlapping rhythms – of movement, of sounds, of activities and routines. This multiplicity of rhythms produces the *polyrhythmia* – the co-existence of multiple rhythms – which is a feature of any city. The task of the *rythmanalyst* is not simply to catalogue this multiplicity, but to chart the ways in which different rhythms operate together in harmonious or conflictual ways. If cultural life in Montreal is marked, as it seems to be for Besse, by an ongoing, low-level pleasantness, we might say that this is because the rhythms of special events like Pop Montreal are often in a relationship of *eurythmia* (or harmonization) with the normal flow of experience. That festival thus fails, in the terms offered by Lefebvre and Régulier, to produce an *arrythmia*, a radical interruption of rhythms which might make the event a utopian tear in the ongoing flow of city life, a glimpse of other possibilities of the sort described by Gwiazdzinski.

A music festival is both the container of what we might call internal rhythms, which organize its succession of events and experiences, and a participant within the larger rhythmic fluctuations of urban life. The internal rhythms of a musical festival are many. They include, for example, the fluctuating and sequential affectual states of those who attend them. This affectual economy unfolds across the states of arrival, waiting, engagement, intensity, attentiveness, distraction and disengagement which are part of any popular musical experience but repeated over and over in the duration of a festival. In live musical performance, the succession of these states has become standardized within those routines which Lefebvre and Régulier might call 'concrete modalities': the dimming of lights to suggest a performance is about to begin, the sequence of appearances of band members on stage, the delaying of favourite musical pieces to produce a sense of anticipation (or the early performances thereof to get them out of the way), and the complicated set of performative and technological gestures by which it is made clear that a show has conclusively ended. The rhythms of these affectual states are only broadly predictable: they will vary with the degree of professionalism of an event or performer, and according to gestures by which performers perform their acquiescence or challenge to well-entrenched expectations. (The various ways in which a concert may end – through ceremonial words of gratitude and goodbye, a silent departure from the stage, or a raucous encore in which audience involvement is solicited – are common examples of this variety.)

These features of musical performance might further invite a comparative analysis with other events and routines. Festival concerts, like air travel and restaurant dining, involve a significant activity of waiting, in relation to norms and schedules whose reliability is never absolutely certain. The duration of a festival concert, like that of a theatrical play or

religious ceremony, is subject to the vagaries of live human performance and technological functioning, but while the first may involve significant, improvised changes in the intended sequence of words and sounds, this is much less likely in the case of the other two. Like mall shopping, a large festival will offer simultaneous alternatives to accommodate the rhythms of fluctuating interest or attention; like conventions, festivals offer multiple spaces for those who prioritize open-ended socializing over adherence to a scheduled programme.

In their interaction with a broader context, the rhythms of festivals join and overlap with other means of marking time, which provide its frame and context (and to which a festival contributes). The most important of these are those which divide months and seasons from each other. Pop Montreal is both one of the last of Montreal's summer musical festivals and a way of sneaking summer-like pleasure into those days, at summer's end, marked by a return to the routine of work and school. In Montreal, as in many other cities, the end of summer is marked by a shift in journalistic attention from popular music to other art forms, typically of higher cultural esteem, like literature, theatre and cinema, which launch new titles or productions and hold their own festivals.

This distribution of cultural forms and events across the twelve-month cycle of seasons is one possible focus of a rhythmanalysis, one with particular pertinence in countries like Canada in which the meteorological distinction between seasons is strong. At the same time, cultural festivals participate in the slow and partial displacement of older systems for the organization of musical performance, such as lengthy 'seasons' of classical music concerts or the musical venue's schedule of bookings. While both of these persist, the model of the festival, which condenses musical abundance and variety within a brief window of musical bingeing, is expanding as these other models retract.

The scheduling of cultural events may thus enforce or challenge a city's ways of organizing time. Benjamin Pradel, in a study of the relationship of natural to cultural rhythms in cities, suggests that present-day cities have come to accord natural seasons ever greater importance in the differentiation of cultural experiences. Urban beaches, open-air cinemas, Christmas markets, and, in Montreal, outdoor winter electronic music festivals (like Igloofest) are attempts to exploit the distinct identities of natural seasons, counter-acting any tendency of urban life to become disengaged from the rhythms of meteorological seasonality (Pradel 2013: 24). Alternatively, cities may seek to disrupt the normal sequencing of cultural events within the twenty-four-hour cycle. They may pull musical performance out of the night and into the daytime (through such events as lunch-time raves or afternoon tea dances). Inversely, through *nuits blanches* and 'museum nights', they may pull the day-time activity of visiting arts institutions deeper into the night.

The rhythmanalysis of cities and the musical analogy

A rhythmanalysis, cultural theorist Ben Highmore suggests, is not methodologically rigorous. Rather, it is 'an attitude, an orientation, a proclivity: it is not "analytic" in

any positivistic or scientific sense of the term. It falls on the side of impressionism and description, rather than systematic data collecting' (Highmore 2005: 150; see also Revol 2016). A rhythmanalysis of cities, in other words, must take leave of the claims to formal rigour and systematicity with which those who analyse music speak in formal terms of measures and beats. While Highmore's designation of rhythmanalysis as impressionistic describes most examples of the practice, we may note the growing tendency in recent work to employ statistical methods and large data sets in the mapping of urban rhythms, offering an image of greater scientificity. The rhythms of certain behaviours (such as tweeting or photo-posting) are being mapped on the basis of millions of examples (e.g. Neuhaus 2015), and the graphic representations of rising and falling frequencies suggest analogies between patterns of urban behaviour and the musical score.

The very notion of a rhythmanalysis draws on the musical analogy, but there is variation in the extent to which its application to urban life requires a view of the city as somehow musical. In her book *Musical Cities*, urban designer Sara Adhitya maps a series of possible relationships between music, rhythmanalysis and cities. In what I take to be the first of her analytic moves, she follows Lefebvre's call to be attentive to all the audible, interwoven and overlaid sounds of the city, from our heartbeat through the music and noise which surround us. Music itself is thus absorbed within a broader soundscape. This soundscape – already an example of *polyrhythmia* – will itself, in a second move, be caught up in other sorts of rhythms which are not necessarily audible or sonic: those produced by the tempo of human movement or by such cycles as those created by the changing of traffic lights change or the rapidity with which urban dwellers walk. In an even further move, Adhitya invites us to turn our attention to the rhythms frozen within static structures – to the ways in which, for example, the built environment contains both intervals and unbroken lines, and thus produces variations of emptiness and fullness which we might consider rhythmic. All of these phenomena together enact what Adhitya, quoting geographer Anne Buttimer, calls 'the orchestration of various time-space rhythms' (Adhitya 2017: 7), a designation which returns us to the over-arching model of music.

Adhitya's own practice, in urban design and architecture, is directed towards producing what she calls a Sonified Urban Masterplan, 'an audio-visual tool for the representation of the urban masterplan, which allows us to play the composition of the city like a piece of music' (2017: 44). This tool is a means of translating visual data into sounds, so as to register, in sonic form, intensities and rhythms implicit in phenomena which are typically inaudible. It is also intended to make us conscious of the extent to which, in however unintended and uncoordinated a fashion, a city is 'composed'.

This notion of cities as 'composed', through an analogy with music, recalls the various attempts over the years to think of cities as in some way 'written' or 'spoken', in practices modelled on textuality or speech. In an efficient summary of such attempts, Paul Connerton quotes Roland Barthes's suggestion that, by moving through urban space, 'we speak our city'; he further invokes Michel de Certeau's well-known claim that 'the act of walking is to the urban system what the act of speaking is to the language system' (Connerton 2009: 115). In these models, however, the emphasis is on the individual's appropriation of the city's constituent features. Those who pursue the analogy with music, in contrast,

typically have little to say about the individual performance of urban rhythms – there are few claims that to move through the city is, somehow, to 'play' it like an instrument, in the way de Certeau's urban dweller 'writes' the city by walking through it. Rather, attention is focused on the city's capacity to 'compose' itself in the interweaving of its various rhythmic elements.

For a nuanced critique of the 'composed' city, we might turn to the work of Ato Quayson, who challenges the notion that sound and rhythm unproblematically fill (or organize) the space of cities:

> the measure of music is also a metronome of our emotional responses to it, and that is what allows it to be pleasant or unpleasant to the listener. Space, on the other hand, is populated both by objects, whether these objects be trees, pylons, and so forth, and the more labile and ephemeral human social interactions that also come to fundamentally define our experience of it. Thus there is a physical- cum-social interactional materiality to space that distinguishes it from the sonic (materialities?) of music.
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> (Quayson 2014: 28)

Across the variety of writings seeking to elaborate a rhythmanalysis of cities, we may distinguish between two poles of theoretical affinity. At one of these, analysts will quickly depart from the musical dimensions of rhythm, focusing on cycles of collective movement and finding their inspiration in such fields as time-geography, studies of urban infrastructure (such as transportation systems) or human kinesics. At the other pole, music persists as the conceptual centre and privileged analogy of a rhythmanalysis, inspiring work which builds upon metaphors of orchestration and composition.

For the first of these, a politics of urban rhythms in relation to music might take the prosaic form of proposals to synchronize concert times with the needs of an early-rising work force, or late-night transit with the closing hours for clubs. Music, from such a perspective, is no more privileged than other urban activities in its relationship to the cycles and schedules of city life. At the second conceptual pole, music is, in contrast, privileged as the model by which the city might be lived and experienced. From this point of departure, a rhythmanalytic politics of the city might seek to instil a sensitivity to all its rhythmic features, propagating something like a 'deep listening' to the city of the sort theorized within music and sound studies. Such a politics might, as well, be attentive to the role played by musical rhythms in producing social relations of cohesion or fragmentation. Johan Fornas, writing earlier in this century, offered the argument that then-new mobile technologies for music listening (like the iPod) enclosed the human subject in an isolated space from which the world was experienced as a highly individualized rhythmic unity. 'In Lefebvre's classical rhythm-analysis', Fornas argues, 'urban experience was understood as polyrhythmic, whereas iPods tend to let every-thing move in step with you as you move in step with the music, erecting sensory gates around sound ghettoes, in line with the growth of gated communities' (Fornas 2006: 16). This new individualism detached the iPod-wearer from any engagement with a city's polyrhythmia, its shared and collective sonic dimension.

If this rhythmic unity, for Fornas, was the basis of an intense individuality, others have offered examples of shared rhythms serving as the basis of solidarities and group identities.

Drawing on the notion of 'speedtribes' developed by theorist and music label owner Steve Goodman, Alex de Jong and Marc Schuilenberg argue for a broader conception of 'sound communities', to define those clusters of social relations which emerge through a collective commitment to specific categories of 'sounds and rhythms' (2006: 102–3). Sound communities would include those which gather around club-based music genres distinguished by particular narrow ranges of beats-per-minute, or by particular operations to interrupt or otherwise subvert dominant rhythmic patterns. If this notion of rhythm as the basis of community recalls many of the claims of ethnomusicological work on the deep rhythmic foundations of collective life in non-urban communities of the Global South (e.g. Stewart 2010), the *speedtribes* or sound communities discussed by de Jong and Schuilenberg are the shifting, transitory clusters of affinity more typical of the contemporary city. A rhythmanalysis of urban music might be seen as interweaving this interest in 'sound communities' or *speedtribes* with an attentiveness to the broader notion of 'temporal communities' theorized a few years earlier by Boulin and Muckenberger (1999: 55). Such communities are distinguished by the ways in which they 'occupy' distinctive temporalities of city life.

Circulation

In the summer of 2019, as the Lil Nas X track 'Old Town Road' concluded its nineteen-week run at the top of *Billboard*'s Hot 100 chart, music journalist Jason Lipshutz speculated as to some of the reasons for its success (Lipshutz 2019). Others had noted how the track's brevity (at less than two minutes) inspired listeners to keep hitting the replay button on media platforms hosting the track (Hinz 2019), thus pushing it up the charts that register such plays. Lipshutz himself, however, tied its success to the variety of spaces, both on-line and off-line, through which 'Old Town Road' circulated. Early on, the track had gathered momentum through innumerable uses on the platform TikTok, where it served as soundtrack for short video clips which each followed its own trajectory of sharing and viewing. As re-mixes, new video clips and a series of guest vocalists multiplied the media instantiations of 'Old Town Road', they extended both its commercial lifecycle in time and the sequence of cultural spaces across which it could be seen to circulate.

For our purposes, the most interesting development in the lifecycle of 'Old Town Road' was its popularity in elementary schools, where young people knew the words, sang them in groups on breaks and performed the dance moves which had come to gather around the track. The cultural lifecycle of 'Old Town Road' saw it move between digital and non-digital spaces, between media platforms and school years, with re-enactments in the latter filmed and posted on the former, stimulating further re-enactments in what became a series of complex feedback loops. This take-up and re-performance of mediated music in physical spaces has been typical of musical culture since the early days of sheet music, as we know. In 2019, the recording industry took Little Nas X's success as proof that physical spaces like the schoolyard and street had now been reinvigorated as sites for the accumulation of

musical popularity. The track's circulation across an ongoing series of platforms and non-digital spaces produced the rhythms of re-versioning and renewal by which its incredible success was assured.

Most of the time, music is caught up in an almost infinite variety of circulations, from those which send music tracks up and down popularity charts to the patterns of human migration which have moved musical styles around the world. Attempts to effectively capture the circulation of music often unravel in the face of the magnitude of the challenge, and due to the variety of processes which might be considered circulatory. At the same time, while notions of circulation would seem to bear intimate affinities with the project of a rhythmanalysis, they are generally applied separately from each other. Typically, circulation is set against rhythm as space is opposed to time. In a political economy of music, circulation is one name for the distribution of musical commodities. In ethnomusicology, it stands for those processes by which musical forms travel across space, losing or retaining their original features, resisting or nourishing processes of musical syncretism. In both cases, a rhythmic dimension figures only implicitly, as the repetition of certain patterns – the sales arcs of musical commodities, for a political economy, and the recurrent cycles of emergence, up-rooting and hybridization, for an ethnomusicology.

The circulation of people, objects and cultural expression may be organized rhythmically, of course – one need only think of the fixed cycles of daily distribution of newspapers in the twentieth century, or the regularized arrival of musical recordings in retail stores on particular days of the week. People circulating through cities will encounter a variety of different rhythms of all kinds and experience the relationships of polyrhythmia, eurythmia and arrythmia elaborated by Léfebvre and Régulier. The jarring arrhythmic transitions in cities, as one moves between the muzak of one retail store and the electronic club music of another, divide up the rhythms of a city, just as the eurythmia of automobile horns and loud car radios collaborates in producing a sense of vibrant urbanity. Both experiences fuel our broader perception of urban space as polyrhythmic, as a particular complex set of rhythmic relationships through which we circulate.

Tomas Fouquet's rich account of the lives of young women in the Senegalese city of Dakar offers an effective example of the interweaving of rhythmic patterns and circulatory routes in the weekend night-time behaviour of this social group. Fouquet begins by noting, as have others before him, that night may be considered a space-time (*espace-temps*). Night is a segment of the 24-hour temporal cycle, of course, but in a variety of discourses (touristic, regulatory, economic and so on) it is spatialized, presented as a territory to be visited, governed or exploited. For the young women of Dakar whom Fouquet studies, the night is a time in which life acquires greater speed and in which the horizons of possibility are opened up. The day, in contrast, is associated with a slowness and confinement whose causes are the inertial features of collective life, which restrict movement and enforce the boundaries of gender, class and age (Fouquet 2017: 91). In Fouquet's analysis, the circulatory pathways of Dakar women who go out on the town at night pull them into 'global rhythms', evoking other cities whose levels of prosperity and opportunity are perceived as greater. These global rhythms are experienced as liberating escapes from the atrophied rhythm (*rythme atrophié*) of their own society. Collective movement through the night, then, is a

form of circulation within urban space. It is also a process of disengagement from rhythmic complexes in which multiple features of colonial history, social structure and individual possibility have become encrusted.

To return briefly to the example of Pop Montreal, with which we began, we may note how the organization of an 'event' (an annual festival) as a set of routes to be travelled accomplishes that spacing of time and timing of space which have been a prominent interest of geographers over the last four decades or more (e.g. Parkes and Thrift 1975). Time becomes spatialized when the rhythms of musical experience (the passage from commercial club to after-hours venue, for example) trace lines of circulation across the city. Space becomes temporalized when movements across urban space 'stick' to particular swaths of time – when, for example, the late-night fast-food venue becomes the space in which a late-night of clubbing or concert-going is concluded. Rhythm and circulation become necessarily intertwined once one recognizes that every fluctuation in speed or duration shapes the meaning of the spaces in which it is felt, just as every movement in space bears a temporality which feeds the broader rhythms of urban life.

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