

6.1. Above and below ground

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Abstract

Underground musical cultures within cities have been celebrated or condemned for their visibility. They have confounded journalists and would-be members of such cultures through their invisibility and through the barriers which they pose to entry. This dual character of underground music scenes – their visibility and invisibility – is the focus of my article.

As visible expressions of taste and political identity, undergrounds contribute to the theatricality of cities. They occupy space, invite judgement, and participate in the spectacle of visual diversity which has long been one of the key features of cities. At the same time, as obscure worlds whose logics and practices often escape easy identification, musical undergrounds enhance the sense that key features of contemporary urban life are invisible, indecipherable, mysterious.

This tension between the visibility and invisibility of musical undergrounds regularly poses problems for those (journalists, tourists, critics) seeking to find and observe musical scenes. If the notion of music scene has continued usefulness in musical analysis, it is perhaps for the ways in which it joins the labour of cultural expression to the effervescence of urban sociability. The relationship between these two things is not one of simple translation. Cultural labour may be hidden behind sociability just as the making of culture may obscure the building of social links which is one of its key effects. 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, interaction. In these public contexts, cultural activity is subject to the look which seeks to understand. Just as clearly, though, scenes make cultural activity invisible and indecipherable by 'hiding' cultural productivity behind seemingly meaningless (or indistinguishable) forms of social life.

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The main issue I want to address in this article is that of the visibility of music scenes. In doing so, I'm bringing together two of my key interests. One of those is the very notion of a musical or cultural scene, to which I have returned intermittently in my work over the last twenty years. The other, a more recent interest, is the culture of the urban night. I have recently completed a two-year team project on the urban night, and am seeking to expand this into an international network.

Let me begin by talking about where I live. I come from Montreal, in Quebec, in Canada. To say that is already to say something politically sensitive: many people in Quebec do not think of themselves as living in Canada. And many people in Montreal do not think of themselves as living in Quebec. This is symptomatic of the ways in which identification with one's city has become, for so many, a primary identification. We speak of a Montreal music scene now, but hardly at all any more of *la Musique Québécoise* or Canadian music.

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More precisely, I live in a neighbourhood of Montreal called “Mile End”. Since the late 1990s, Mile End has been considered the most vital area for rock-based music in Montreal and probably in Canada. It is the home of the influential group Godspeed Ye Black Emperor, of their record label Constellation Records, of house music label Mile End Records; it is the “birthplace” of Arcade Fire, the location of Casa del Popolo, probably the most important venue for alternative rock-based forms of music in Montreal, and of the important venue Cabaret de Mile End; and it is the neighbourhood in which dozens of bands and other musical configurations started and in which some continue to live: Mozart’s Sister, Grimes, Blue Hawaii, Braids, Sean Nicholas Savage, Mac DeMarco and TONSTARTSSBANDHT, Purity Ring, Doldrums. My friend Francois Mouillot will be speaking later in the conference about some of this activity.

The Mile End neighbourhood is slowly losing some of its centrality now, as musical activity moves north, in the face of ongoing gentrification. But for much of the 2000s, Mile End was considered the epicentre of Montreal and Canadian musical activity. In 2010, it was the centre of what, borrowing from Greil Marcus, people began calling the “New Weird Canada” a musical underground characterized by high levels of eccentricity (<http://www.aux.tv/2012/09/the-new-weird-canada-exploring-the-emerging-music-underground/>).

And so journalists came to report on the Mile End scene. The challenge they confronted, though, 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 the case for music which is not particularly theatrical, and which is often marked by a cultivated casualness. In any case, darkened rooms convey little of the geography of a scene. As a result, most of the images of Mile End which circulate are images from which music is absent. Music was the cultural activity which founded the idea of Mile End as a scene, but the visual signifiers of that scene communicate little of music.

As an experiment, I typed the phrases “Mile end” and “Music scene” into Google Images. Here are the first 31.

In only 3 of these images do we see any relation to music: in one, a musician performs at the inauguration of a park; in another, a musician speaks in a seminar; in the last one, we see the logo for the Montreal house music label Mile End Records. Mostly, we see images of buildings which bear no necessary relationship to music: churches, shops, restaurants. We see streets. We don’t, in fact, see many people, and those we do see are mostly in one photo of people, in the lower left, of people sitting outside the Café Olympico. This is the café which journalists typically describe as the meeting place for Mile End’s hipster music scene.

I’m interested in the way in which this absence of images of music in Mile End does many things. First of all, this absence of images enhances the sense that the music here is underground music – it is underground, not only in the sense of being experimental and often transgressive, but because it is invisible. The scene does not offer itself up for easy understanding. When I first moved to Montreal, the markers of a scene were highly visible, in the ways in which punks dressed and occupied public space. In Mile End now, it is rather as if musicians are like aliens who live among us, undetectable. Secondly, because the image of Mile End focus on buildings and streets, they contributes 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. Thirdly, and I will return to this later, the absence of images of music confirms a tendency of 21st century urban life: that cultural activity, even of the most avowedly

Let me talk more broadly now about music scenes and visibility. The question of the visibility of musical scenes and subcultures may be said to fall between two positions which were elaborated in the 1980s and 1990s. One of these is the idea that subcultures already are subject to a look: the look of surveillance, the look of power. Subcultures inhabit that look, and they seek it out. But everything they do is devoted to ensuring that the look of others does not reach at the understanding which is one of its objectives. Here is Dick Hebdige, in his 1989 book *Hiding in the Light*: "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" (Hebdige, 1989, p. 35). And later: "Subcultures are both a play for attention and a refusal, once attention has been granted, to be read according to the Book" (p. 35).

Two years later, in 1991, Hakim Bey will suggest a very different kind of politics. The enemy is no longer, as with Hebdige, a marginalized underclass which must find ways of asserting its identity. Nor is the enemy a power engaged in surveillance which seeks to understand and therefore to control. Rather, the enemy is a logic of consumerism which turns every subcultural image into a cinematic commodity. Subcultures seek to undermine the Society of the Spectacle by building marginal, short-lived spaces of invisibility. In a society which transforms everything into "cinema", the radical gesture is that which fails to attract the look. For Hakim Bey, the purpose of a radical politics is to create temporary autonomous zones which leave no traces and attract no looks:

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 undefinable in terms of the Spectacle (Bey, 1991).

Now Hebdige and Bey are not offering different theories of the same thing. Hebdige, as we know, is talking about the long line of spectacular subcultures, which runs from the London street gangs of the 19th century through the punks of the 20th. Bey's idea of Temporary Autonomous Zones will become a key part of the ways in which rave culture in the 1990s came to theorize itself. They are talking about very different sorts of undergrounds and very different sorts of cultural politics. One way of describing the difference between them, perhaps, is to say that Hebdige is iconophilic: he sees visibility and the image as key to resistance, and conceives cultural conflict in terms of semiotic warfare. Bey, on the other hand, 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. Let me just offer two hypotheses:

- 1) One hypothesis is that what, for Dick Hebdige, is typical of street subcultures has long been true for racial minorities, sexual minorities and so on. The resistance of African Americans and Latinos, of transgender communities and so on 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. This is the classic struggle for the visibility of the oppressed and marginalized.

2) Hakim Key'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. By the time Hakim Bey is writing, though, the refusal to fight at the level of the image is also a refusal to conceive of cultural struggle in terms of race, gender, sexuality –all of these things which function at the level of the visible. Hence, we have the perception of 1990s rave culture as sexless or ungendered, as implicitly white and unconcerned with a politics of social identity.

Perhaps we might say, in 2014, that neither of these positions, nor the things they describe, continue to have pertinence. We might want to say that spectacular subcultures, seeking out and resisting the gaze of power in public space, are hardly with us anymore. We might want to say, as well, that Temporary Autonomous Zones of utopic invisibility only exist in parodic forms, like the Burning Man Festival or beach parties in Ibiza. This might be the case in Western Europe and Canada and the United States, but I suspect it may be different elsewhere.

Let me now return to the Mile End scene in Montreal. In March of 2014, the newspaper the Ottawa Citizen, ran an article entitled "Day Trip: A day in Mile End, Montreal's 'hipster capital'"

(<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/Trip+Mile+Canada+hipster+capital/9669130/story.html>).

What interests me about this piece, which was generally successful in its characterization of the neighbourhood, was the image which accompanied it: the image 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 center 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 the material supports of music – records, instruments, etc. – 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 material supports of a scene originally founded on music: like the objects which have accumulated and been repurposed and which 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 which characterize the scene. Their relationship to the scene is kind of indexical: they point towards tastes, but express them only impartially.

The more interesting image of Mile End, in my view, one which figures among the first 31 images turned up in the Google Search which I spoke about earlier. Half of all the media pictures of Mile End seem to be pictures of people sitting outside one particular café, the Café Olympia. Journalists rush to this café as if the secrets of the Mile End music scene are contained there. When I was interviewed by a radio station once about the scene, they insisted that we record the interview there. If this is the Mile End scene, however, it is clearly not spectacular and resistant, in Hebdige's terms, seeking the light of surveillance. And it is clearly not in any way a Temporary Autonomous Zone working to produce and maintain its invisibility. Even if many of the key people in the Mile End music scene may be found there, at particular times of the day or night, the Café Olympico does not offer much more than an image of relaxed conviviality.

The idea of scene has benefitted a great deal, I think, from the recent boom in what we can call urban cultural studies, from studies of city culture. Within the study of the urban, the concept of “scene” has been able to leave the debate over subcultures and tribes, a debate which David Hesmondhalgh so expertly summarized several years ago. “Scene” now returns us to the question of visibility in urban life. Scene, as sociologist Alan Blum 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 (Blum, 2003).

But this image of public conviviality sits in an uneasy relationship to music or other cultural forms. Does the image of people at Café Olympico reveal the secrets of the music scene or disguise 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, which were the conventional ports of entry to this scene, uncertain as to 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 which camouflaged a real, more secret scene to which they would never find access.

It is in relationship to these ideas that I want to conclude with a number of hypotheses about the place of cultural and musical scenes in city life. Some of these are obvious, I think, others, I hope, less so.

(1) the notion of scene now is difficult to separate from a logic of gentrification.

Here is a possible definition of scene now: A scene is that cultural phenomenon which arises when any purposeful activity acquires a supplement of sociability and when that supplement of sociability becomes part of the observable effervescence of the city. This is not a complete definition, but I think every definition of scene must account for something like a supplement of sociability. If there is only cultural work and no sociability, we have little more than a network or a production centre. If there is all sociability and no underlying cultural expression, we have only leisure and consumption. In today’s cities, a scene is the supplement of sociability, conviviality and effervescence which gathers around the making of culture. And, as we know, this supplement has come to be highly valued in the economic transformation of cities, within in processes we call gentrification.

(2) what were once marginal or secondary aspects of scenes – their “support” system – are now fully assimilated within ideas of creativity and innovation. The problem of cultural undergrounds now is that they are easily assimilated within official discourses of incubation and innovation. I don’t want to belabour here the critique of ideas of the creative city or the creative class. But I do want to note that those things which Harold Becker 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,” a *Washington Post* journalist suggested last year, and the displacement of music by food as the locus of creative energies is visible in a variety of places (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/are-foodies-quietly-killing-rock-and->

roll/2013/05/10/632f1718-b8fb-11e2-b94c-b684dda07add story.html). It is also the case that cafes and restaurants are dominant in the visual representation of cultural scenes: we do not see, very often, images of studios or venues, but we see images of restaurants and cafés which are taken to express the same tastes as might be expressed by those studios or venues were there visibility more available or seductive.

(3) Hypothesis 3: From the 1960s through the late 1990s, music was severed from the conviviality of public eating and drinking. In the 2000s, the connection between them has been restored.

I've been interested for some time in a period which roughly begins in the 1960s, when, in Western countries at least, activities like dancing became separated from activities like eating an evening meal. In many countries, the "supper club" was a central cultural format: one sat and ate, one got up and danced, live performers played. This broke down in the 1960s with the rise 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. The 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 courses, but I'm 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", and the same phenomena is noticeable in Montreal, Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Bogota and other cities where I have been recently. In a bar à ambiance musicale, people eat and drink to the accompaniment of curated music, usually involving a dj. Music recedes from the centrality of live performance but moves forward from the status of unnoticed background.

There is obviously much to regret in this shift: 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. The conviviality of conversation has long been considered, by musicians and others, as a stark contrast to the unsettling force of music. The bar à ambiance musicale presumes a clientele drawn in equal measure to the possibility of interesting music and convivial conversation. what was once (and still is, sometimes) a battle over transgressive noise caused by music is more and more a battle over loud street-level conversation and collective smoking.

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 added cafés to attract customers and increase revenues. These cafés became restaurants, with outdoor terrasses and curated music and now the bookstore is little more than a decorative backdrop to what is essentially a restaurant.

In Montreal, as in Paris and several other cities, one of the most widely perceived threats to a certain kind of culture has come with the transformation of almost every available space into a restaurant or bar. Retail book or record shops, and small music venues are dying. The restaurants which replace them are not usually corporate or obviously evil; they are very often opened by genuinely creative 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 taken over by 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, abandoned industrial lofts became performance spaces in the 1980s and 1990s. Now it is restaurants who are central to this conversion, usually at the expense of small, independent retail stores which close, but whose markers of entrepreneurial authenticity are so often maintained by the owners of the restaurants which open within them.

(4) Hypothesis 4: 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 world of 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; sociability was scarce. And so we saw the wide variety of artworks which saw as their mission to produce new kinds of interconnection: through such things 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: interesting music continues to be made and heard, late-night spaces of transgression continue, in cities around the world. But as images of convivial café 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 the triumph of a soft complacency in which the divisive cultural struggle over meaning has disappeared?

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