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Between the Marching Band and the Sound Walk

Samuel Bourdreuil

Abstract:
(Audio) mobility and (generalized) connectivity are the two key words of this special issue. What new art forms or renewed contents this new "sonic frontier" will deliver nobody yet knows and it is our goal to start to both document and assess these experimentations and their potentialities. Although we need to make further inquiries, I would like to sketch a framework (addressing this topic) in order to steer attention towards matters possibly overlooked. On the one hand, I propose to pay more attention to the concrete coordinates of these new sonic performances; on the other, I would like to loosen the vice that links mobility and connectivity, if only to get a better sense of what currently ties them together and to what effect. I will start with a digression about a vigorously mobile, though poorly connected, musical form: the "marching band". From there I will develop that a) a critical feature that concerns whatever new sonic trajectory is opened up in urban spaces: namely that they encroach upon or "overflow" other previous land uses; and contend that b) this background of "contested spaces" yields a dramatizing component (to use Deleuze's concept) which imbues both the aesthetic and the ideology brought about by these "new musical moments". I will build on some of the findings from a study we conducted into folk genres popular in Marseilles around twenty years ago: Techno Music and Raggamuffin. I will conclude with some open questions bearing less on the "sampling" and "composing/mixing/musicking" side of these new sonic devices, but rather on their potential to shape new "communities" or "publics" around their usage.

Introduction

My intention in this paper is to widen the scope of our attention in three directions. First, towards our existing urban soundscape, "always already"[1] replete with mobile sounds – the point here being that among this spectrum of mobile sounds some of them pertain not to mobile objects but to mobile subjects (I will come back to this point).

I will add some historical depth to this picture by focusing on typical forms of mobilized sound in our musical culture that emerged vigorously twenty or thirty years ago – to name them: Hip Hop, Sound Systems and Techno music. Arguably, this turning point in musical genres was brought about by new forms of instrumental mobility – for example the mobile sound system, the ghetto blaster and the DJ nomad.

My question will be: what use have they made of this? But, instead of trying to retrospectively trace the link between new mobility and potential new sounds (or sonorities), I will be more concerned with the spatial effects that these "mobile sounds" have had upon the ecology of urban musical performances. In short, rather than asking: how did they come to generate new sounds? I will start with a simpler question: where did they go? Where did these new "sound riders" actually ride their sounds – through what kinds of landscape? And did they contribute to the subversion of those landscapes? So, my narrative starts with the question of space, in so far as "space matters" even in aesthetic processes, but does not remain on this level. In a sense, the concept of

[1] A Derridian expression, here underscoring the fact that those sounds had always been there.

"relationality of space" (Massey 2005) is critical here, but even more so if we are able to import into the analysis its mirror term: that of the "spatiality of relations" – another wording for the Deleuzian concept of "dramatization", as I will develop further.[2]

From there, and lastly, I will try to situate these new musical-mobilities in the context of the communities engaged in propelling them: the question, rather than being about the use of mobility, focuses on the connectivity side of the equation. Finally, what kind of collegium can we envisage that could nurture future "musical moments"?

Sound as a Key Media for Urban Mobility

I am well aware that the central topic of this special issue is "audio mobility" and not "mobile sound". It is seemingly more about recorded sounds, audible sounds and about new ways of playing them while "on the move". My take on this topic will be more about "where" sounds play than about "how" to play them (better). Whatever these new kinds of mobile or mobilized sounds are or will be, they have to be played somewhere. To this we should add that, given the freedom of movement that these new devices afford, the question of the locations where they will or could be performed is both an open and a relevant one. So, to the extent that they could be performed in urban contexts, it is relevant to start by situating them on the backdrop of urban soundscapes and to steer attention towards certain features of those soundscapes, specifically their mobile

[2] See below footnote 10.

sounding components; if only because it will be amidst this "noisy" company that they will be displayed.

Of course, sounds are mobile or are not! If not, nobody would ever hear them. Then, sounds can be "emitted" by objects that are or are not mobile. The Doppler effect helps us to discriminate between static sources of sound and mobile ones. But further, some of those mobile sound sources are "just" objects, whereas others are, so to speak, piloted from within. Actually, a significant part of these mobile sound sources in urban space is of the piloted kind; a whole collection of moving hybrids, harnessing a human agent and some technical and material components. Important, in this sonic mass, is the presence of sounds designed to alert, or warn, displayed in a huge variety of pitch, tone, duration and timbre.

But there is more to it. It is not simply that we have here a whole gamut of mobile sounds, it is that these mobile sounds are aimed at regulating the crisscrossing of a quintessentially plural mobility; that is the commingling of a huge number of lines of traffic which urban life not only generates but also – in a sense – "boils down to". In other words, what we have here is audio mobility as an essential feature of the self-regulation of urban mobility taken as a whole. So much so that we could say that urban sounds for a large part "pulse" with the collective management of these critical contingencies aimed as they are at preventing possible collisions. One might consider that we should hear the "soundtrack" of a city as the aural transcription of a choreography of bodies on the move.

If the end result might have some aesthetic overtones, the building bricks of this concert are clearly designed for practical ends, namely for keeping circulation clear, often opening a passage ahead. There is little in the way of artistic or even expressive intention, at least not beyond that of asserting the right to continue a trajectory. The function of the mobile sound is to signal a position and a trajectory.

Skipping to the marching band, its purpose is more than just opening the way – although it is expected that, as the marching band comes, the attendance will clear the space. Here, undeniably, the sound is more than the signaling of immanent movement. And this can be affirmed on two accounts. Firstly, there would be no movement (to be signaled) if it were not for the sound fuelling and propelling the bodies that move (the sound is the origin of the movement and not just a side effect). Secondly, if a signaling function of the sound remains, alerting everybody in the vicinity that a band is coming, the function of it is not that people should stay away but, on the contrary, that they should enter into the sonic bubble that the band carries with it. It has an enticing function. Be a part, at least for a while, of the transient sphere that emerges.

As we all know, there are some martial overtones (or undertones?) in the practice of this "art form". If taken to its extreme, there is a "war machine" connotation: troops advancing, presumably in hostile territory, "pumping up the volume", either to scare possible opponents or to reassure the members of the band (or both). Here the archetypal reference would be that of "the poliorcetic fanfare". This is the band that, as

we are told in the bible, made the "walls of Jericho" crumble and tumble. This reference was actually revived by the Marseilles Ragga Culture at the end of last century, *Albert et sa Fanfare Poliorcétique* (by Jo Corbeau)[3] being one of the audio vehicles through which this culture manifested itself in the streets of the city. However, I propose not to adhere too closely to this military function, but rather to seize it as a variation in a broader field of exercises, whose aim is to assert domination over some patch of land. To be sure, this "agonistic" component can be transposed into a more amenable guise. In Carnival parades the "repossession of the street" is understood from the outset as being transitory. A bracket opened and closed in the stream of daily lives. In the same vein, if one recalls the traditional parades of ethnic or other minorities, the assertion of strength does not always need to be turned against other constituencies. What is at stake is more likely to be a public display of "a way of life", begging for and actually implementing a public ratification and recognition. In all of these endeavors, a territorial component is at play. To the extent that such movements are about claiming some kind of legitimate sovereignty over a given area, which notion constitutes the core of this concept of territoriality.

I will conclude on this point. In our brief "panoramic" survey of different forms, where sound and mobility are closely tied (in the sense that you cannot have one – the move – without the other – the sound) we have stumbled on this "art form" (the parade), which relies on a close collaboration between these two components. Now what puzzles me at

[3] "Poliorcetism" refers to the art of besieging cities. Jo Corbeau (Georges Ohanessian) was and still is one of the leading figures of the raggamufin music so popular in Marseilles at the end of the 20th Century.

this point, is that "parading" is not meant to convey ambient sounds but, rather, to deafen or muffle them; or, more aptly, to subdue them.

"MMM": Marseilles and One of Its "Musical Moments": 1980-2000

The parade is just one way among others of tying sound and movement together in urban places. The brief overview I will now give of the "musical moment"[4] that took place in Marseilles twenty years ago will provide me with an opportunity to unravel other threads (linking sound and mobility).[5]

In retrospect, the link between these musical genres (hip hop, raga and techno) becomes obvious: new sounds, new ways of "musicking" were, arguably, brought about by an increase in various kinds of instrumental mobility. But a closer look should yield some insights that will help us to "unpack" different components in this general association. To start with, these new sounds can be aptly characterized as possessing two kinds of mobility: an outward mobility – that is, a degree of freedom as to the location and dis-location of musical performances – and also an "inward" mobility – that is one contained in the music and due to the practice of sampling. However, these two kinds of

[4] The use of quotation marks aims at signaling some conceptual intent in the choice of the words. Besides the references at different musical pieces (Shubert, Rachmaninov), "moment" is to be interpreted according to the sense that sociological interactionist approaches have come to bestow upon it. Specifically, the Goffmanian notion that moments should be considered in the physical sense of the word (e.g "moment of forces") as well as time units will drive our approach below. See the introduction to *Interaction Ritual* where Goffman (1967) succinctly defines his scope: "Not (the study) of men and their moments; rather (the study) of moments and their men."

[5] In the following, I will rely on a study conducted with Raphaël Sage and Gilles Suzanne, on that "musical moment". See Bordreuil, Sage and Suzanne 2003 and, for a summarized presentation, Bordreuil, Sage and Suzanne 2005.

mobility did not hybridize immediately. According to information gathered during our study, although this juncture eventually came about, nonetheless it took some time to occur.

I will sketch out this process in few steps, paying attention to some of its critical moments and in order to render salient the interplay that took place between ecological and stylistic features: a sort of cross relevancy that fostered the development of these genres.

First, we will place radio in the center of the picture. As we know, radio was the birthplace of DJ'ing – the word itself originated there. We also know that a progressive "re profiling" of the DJ's job took place, as new skills evolved in the existing practice and new ways of performing tasks appeared. They started as "selecta,"[6] selecting discs, and inserting a few words between different musical tracks in order to present them. From there, they gradually speeded up the tempo, making the disks slide and glide on each other. In so doing, they dislodged the "bla bla" from its interstitial (and non musical) status, elevating it as voice-over, granting it by the same token a musical quality, that of (another) "flow."[7]

What interests me is the fact that this story was reshuffled or re-enacted here in no time, and yet on a specific space scale: that of an entire city. Time wise, it took two or three

[6] A selector (of records) in Jamaican slang.
[7] This development as well as the following one owes a great deal to Suzanne 2005.

years for the local kids to cover the distance of the road opened by their predecessors and to catch up with them. In the process, they revisited and reanimated the various positions (or posts) in the radio's sound production line, rapidly gaining professional expertise.

But there is another side to this story that matters too. Besides its rapidity, the fact that it took place simultaneously on the scale of the whole city was also of critical importance. At the beginning of the 1980s, within a couple of months, tens of new radio stations opened, accommodating a hundred would be DJ's who experimented with this new "radio art" and displayed their progressive mastering of it. Why did this sudden blossoming of local radios happen? The answer is that it coincided with the spread of the free radio movement made possible by the victory of the Left (French Socialist party) in 1981.

To resume, here we have two different kinds of rapidly expanding dynamics – a musical and a societal one – that are on a collision course, generating some beneficial side effects. On the one hand, radio is gaining a central role in the evolving musical cultures (it was more about providing new templates for "musicking" than about transmission) and, on the other hand, the huge spread of radio stations was multiplying the number of performers, thereby widening the collegium of local experimenters in this new sound art-form.

But, on a closer look, there are three features of this "MMM" that I would like to commentate and linger on for a while, to the extent that the interplay that took place in between these three features was of critical importance, not only regarding the local popularity of those musical genres but also regarding their aesthetics and content.

I will start with the experimental component of the tentative endeavours by these nascent Dj's mimicking the art of their masters. What strikes me here is that these explorations, instead of being run "backstage", in a laboratory kind of environment, were displayed immediately "front stage"; that is "on air", broadcasted to the attention of an entire city.

The second component concerns this "front stage" dimension. In what sense is a city a stage? Where does it fit in the diversity or the hierarchy of what are more usually defined as stages within the city? Conversely, and when it comes to (national) radio, audiences often stretched beyond the scale of the city. It is precisely herein that the novelty of the "free radio" movement lay, as it was enacted in Marseilles. For the first time ever, there was a whole new brand of sounds, both emitted from within the city and available at every point in it, but that were not destined to be heard outside of it. We don't know what the "sound of a city" is really about. It is a matter of conflicting interpretations. But, at that time, the city itself became a sounding entity. Was it the sound "of" Marseilles? In a sense, it is not of importance to the extent that it was a sound "out of" Marseilles that came into being. I would say that this added a new layer

to the notion and the reality of the city as a collective body. Sound generated a supplementary "embodiment" of the city.

The third component – one that has more to do with the internal mobility mentioned above – pertains to the "displacement and reworking of musical conventions"[8] operated by these new brands of music. The critical point here is that the (live) eventfulness (and playfulness) of musical performances came to be a central criterion in the aesthetic assessment. The expertise in rebounding, just in time, just on the right tone, became of central importance. This phenomenon was reinforced with the "landing" of a new template of musical performance, with as its centerpiece the "call and response" structure. This inserted a coefficient of horizontality that runs against the way radios function – arguably, a more vertical mode – in the performances.

So, with these three threads in mind, we are in better position to understand what happened next – and this on two accounts. On the one hand, conditions were ripe for these new sounds to expand beyond the radio station's walls, overflowing into urban places, be they squares, streets, stadiums, cafés and the like. To put it another way, the new template begged to enlarge the circles of its embedded protagonists. This was quickly enacted in the form of the "open mike" ritual: the practice of passing the microphone between the stage and the attendance. On the other hand, and as I described, the fact that the city was, so to speak, placed under a new sounding bell, allowed for a citywide crisscrossing of sounds emitted by hundreds of performers,

[8] In the following we will rely on the conceptual framework that Howard Becker laid out in *Artworlds* (1982).

echoing and challenging each other. Evolving out of these "reverberations" and perceived from within this "echo chamber", what started simply as some sounds emitted *from* Marseilles and directed towards the attention of its inhabitants, slowly but surely developed into something that came to be heard as *the* sound *of* the city – its sound track, so to speak.

Music on the Move, Urban Places: Both Put To the Test

I will now address the question of what can be said about this overflowing and its possible effects. I have borrowed (and stylized) the Deleuzian concept of "dramatization" in order to analyze these effects better. The idea underlying this redrawn concept is simple: dramas are about forces and space; about forces confronting each other in a same space and, in so doing, either intensifying themselves or re-specifying their content or their aims. That is what – here and in the following – dramatization refers and will refer to.[9]

How to apply this conceptual framework to our "Marseillaise" storyline? Simply with the idea that whenever an overflowing of a specific endeavor occurs, spreading outside of its ordinary or traditional precincts, this means that, by the same token, an encroachment

[9] This concept was proposed by Deleuze in the fifth chapter of his thesis work *Difference and Repetition* (1995). However, since its first formulation (1967), it underwent some consequential reworking. For example, in *Dialogues* (1987), Deleuze's motto that we always have to "take things by the middle" surely conveys some echoes of it. The same can be said of the dynamic of "deterritorialization/reterritorialization" as it is delineated in *Thousand plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Under all these different reformulations, the same idea runs, according to which "lines" (of growth) or "flows" (of forces) are sensible or vulnerable to the "out there" ("l'espace du dehors"). In other words, there is an irreducible spatial coefficient to the very dynamic of lines.

upon other values of usage, characteristic of the "invaded" locations, takes place. Therefore, one might expect some protestation, contestation and, in the wake of them, some counter justifications – all this ad lib. All in all, it was reasonable to expect that this overflowing would generate or trigger some form of claim staking, justifying the intrusion. It is as though the move would immediately be doubled by a rationale to be invoked in order to claim that move as rightful (according to a value set deemed relevant under the circumstances at hand). In this sense, one might consider that there is a political (or proto political) performativity inherent in this kind of musical overflowing. Or, in other words, something akin to a "cause", underlying or embedded in each musical overflowing.

Such a dynamic did take place in the Marseilles area. Indeed, given the specificity of the various musical genres, it promoted contrasting rhetorical lines. In short, what techno-events encroached upon most were patches of land situated at a distance from urban centers, but still, private properties. So, they were soon "framed"[10] as a frontal attack on legal order, and that master frame in turn came to be dramatized by the interventions of those (the police) in charge of defending this order. Subsequently, this generated a "TAZ" type narrative[11] which, on the one hand, fitted perfectly with the situation that

[10] The quote marks signal a conceptual use of the word. "Frame" is a key concept in recent interactionist approaches. Borrowed by E. Goffman from G. Bateson (Goffman 1974), its use was recently expanded by the coining of new parent categories ("master frame", "frame bridging"). See David Snow's works. A frame can be defined as an instance that structures the perceptions and interpretations of actors caught in specific situations, be they proximal or of a larger bearing.

[11] "TAZ" stands for "Temporary Autonomous Zones". This expression was coined by Hakim Bey and is the title of a book he published in 1991. Although, according to him, this idea inspired him throughout the 1970s, its influence was at its highest in the European "techno culture" of the 1990s.

was unfolding and, on the other, offered its supplementary glue that doubled the musical coalescing with an ideological (or proto political) one.

In parallel, the encroachments enacted by two other brands of DJ culture (raga and hip hop) were of the urban kind. Since they were impinging on public places and claiming them in the wakes of their performances, they mobilized other kinds of legitimacy, depending upon other values. For them the dramatizing component of their urban overflowing consisted mostly of taking up with local traditions of … overflowing! In other words, festive traditions. This is what they were good at. But this should not be taken as a trick, used to insert themselves fraudulently into those traditions in order to subvert them. On the contrary, the territorial presence they asserted through their own ways of overflowing the city was, at least in their minds, justified by the fact that they were embodying the "real" sound of the city; their mission was to retrieve this "real" sound. "Back to roots" was their motto. It was reinforced and justified by a rhetoric grounded on their discovery of the fact that reggae music came from the margins of the British Empire; that the words of their songs, though in English, were above all in bad English – that is dialectal. Thus, they equated this peripheral situation and subaltern linguistic status to their own situation – they too were living in a peripheral city (Marseilles as opposed to Paris) and speaking a despised variety of French: *le parler marseillais*. That having been said, it is insufficient to say that their performances simply expressed this rhetorical line: they "fueled" it, so to speak, by "parading" the streets, giving it more intensity and, reciprocally, heightening their conviction as performers that their path was the right one. The conquest of La plaine neighborhood at

the end of the 1990s was the peak of that musical moment, the space time when the dramatizing effect of this nomadic music was at its highest.

Conclusion: Two Kinds of Landscape and How to Pair Them?

I have adopted this wider historical approach in order to relocate the possibilities afforded by new audio mobile devices in the context of other kinds of urban soundscapes and social-audio mobility. I have no specific idea or even advice on how to make use of this approach. But – given the freedom of movement yielded by these devices, given the opportunities of sounding the (already sonorous) urban spaces that are one of their promises – I think it is useful to introduce this open sounding context to the design of the sonic performance not only as musical content, but also as actual context to the extent that they will be played within it. Whether building on it, composing with it, or playing the contrapuntal card.

I then skipped to another kind of scape – although I did not name it as such. It is the scape that the kids of the "MMM" would traverse on a daily basis and it would perhaps be better qualified as a "communityscape,"[12] a tapestry of circles that one did or did not belong to. This raises the question of the connectivity that was available at that time which, remember, was pre-Web and pre-digital equipment. In a word, the collectives I am referring to were poorly "wired"; however, they were "glued". How so? The answer

[12] This qualification refers to Arjun Appadurai's concept of "Ethnoscape" (1991). For Appadurai, ethnoscape is one out of five kinds of scapes, namely: technoscapes, financescapes, mediascapes, ideoscapes. One could say that "Ethnoscape" refers to people's movements as one kind of surrounding.

that I proposed is that, beneath the effective connections in between "nodes" of social networks (conveyed either via the cell phones or through face to face encounters in the streets of the city), another kind of commonality was in progress and a sense of it existed; one that characterized a "public."[13] Such a collective has some paradoxical features. It consists of members who are **not** tied to one another, except by the single fact that they are following the same unfolding narrative or spectacle. To which should be added this other critical component: in so doing, by following the same story, the pervasive sense that they are "in sync" with other "followers" emerges; which in turn fosters a sense of belonging to a wider community, as "imagined" as it might be.[14] Now, to the extent that following critical developments implies, more often than not, taking sides (on various issues), this doubling of musical tastes by "cause like" convictions, has ensuing spiraling effects.

In what way are these considerations relevant to the subject of audio mobility? I would suggest that, in order to tackle the question of community, we should widen our approach beyond its technical component. Evidently, the availability of instant connections between "field recorders" is worth exploring and putting to the (artistic) test, however, we should place this connectivity factor in the larger frame of our current

[13] For what follows the key references are the works of Gabriel Tarde (1901), Benedict Anderson (1983) and Tamotsu Shibutani (1966).

[14] In *L'opinion publique et la foule*, Gabriel Tarde tells us a rather banal story. That of a man at home and having nothing to do who starts to read a newspaper he just found. Although the first lines he began to read would actually yield some content he had not previously been aware of, the simple discovery that the paper's issue was already an ancient one suffices to empty the reading of most of its interest. At cause, according to Tarde, was this fleeting insight of that reading as being out of sync and thus a lonely one. Conversely, the other side of this coin is that, whenever we read a newspaper, we are lodging ourselves in the company of an indefinite crowd of other readers. Skipping from Tarde to Benedict Anderson, one can frame the work of the latter (specifically the idea of national entities relying on a commonality of readership) as an expanded version of the intuition of the former (at least for a part).

ecosystem of information: that is an ecosystem in which we are not simply networked nodes but also members of larger though imagined publics.

In some of the papers presented in this journal, a bridge is made between Sound Art experiments and more global issues. Environmental concerns provide some clear "Frame bridging" opportunities, allowing for the useful interlocking of different constituencies or stake-holders (be they naturalists, landscapers, designers, neighborhood associations, etc.). I think that paying attention to this transversal dimension and taking it into account when designing audio mobile performances is important. This, at least, is what I wished to stress in this paper.

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Biography

Samuel Bordreuil is a sociologist. His work focuses on the sociology of art and science, environmental sociology, sociological pragmatism and public space (pre and post Digital Age). He is Senior Research Fellow Emeritus at the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), at the Maison Méditerranéenne des Sciences de l'Homme. Director of the Mediterranean Laboratory of Sociology (LAMES) at the University of Aix-Marseille (AMU) until 2012, he was a co-founder and Scientific Director of the Marseille Institute for Advanced Studies (IMERA). Among his numerous publications three are of particular interest given the topic of this issue: "L'histoire de la 'Dog Poop Girl' revisitée: usages et mésusages d'un médium hétérotopique." *Réseaux* 138, 2006; "Dans la compagnie des passants." In *Marcher en ville*,

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