

Interview – Will Straw and the importance of music scenes in music and communication studies

Jeder Janotti Junior

The academic systematization of the music scene idea has been proposed by Will Straw as a differential mode of music circulation in the urban tissue. At first Straw tried to perceive the sociability networks which shaped the consumption of alternative rock and dance music in cities like Montreal, Toronto, Detroit, Los Angeles and London. This perspective attempted to make a distinction between music communities and scenes, the active aspects of the latter going against the geographic stagnation of the former. Since then, the idea of scene has gradually become an important tool for communicational studies on music consumption and production, at the same time that it has generated a series of discussions concerning its scope and, especially, its limitation when, according to a portion of its critics, it would favor the sociological aspects of music appropriations at the expense of its aesthetic aspects.

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In a generous interview granted in March to professor Jeder Janotti Jr. from the Graduate Studies Program on Communication at UFPE, Will Straw updates and reconsiders a number of controversial issues which still configure the discussions around the idea of music scenes.

As it is possible to observe in his answers, Straw shows how his proposal attempts to give an account of the relationships established in the global circulation of massive popular music, without ruling out possible agreements with restricted circulations and regionalized references. Before stating the validity of a strict notion of scene, the Canadian researcher acknowledges that, similarly to the music consumption and production, the notion of music scenes has also undergone significant transformations in recent times.

As can be seen in Straw's statements, as time goes by and with the development of music-oriented social networks, the notion of scene has gone through changes, acquiring new possibilities and importance within music and communication

studies. After all, as every productive notion, the idea of scene had to be broadened so as to embrace the transformations that affected the music world throughout the first decade of the 21st century.

Jeder Janotti Júnior: Dear Will Straw, cultural and communication studies have been a big contribution to popular music studies for many years. How do you assess the current academic scenario of these studies?

Will Straw - I think we can point to two tendencies. On the one hand, there is the acknowledged richness of popular music studies, manifest in its institutional health, in the proliferation of journals, programs, etc. On the other hand, there is the perception, expressed by some, that the field has lost some of its excitement and its innovative character.

My personal opinion is that the field of popular music studies is characterized, at present, by a great deal of high-quality research. A great deal of this is historical. We now have very good historical works on such phenomena 1970s New York disco, Brazilian samba and other genres, British mod culture, French popular music of the 19th century, Japanese noise music and so on.

However, what has diminished, it seems to me, is a sense of polemic, of lively debate over key concepts in popular music studies. The older debates concerning authenticity

have, to a large extent, been concluded, with virtually everyone agreeing that authenticity is “socially constructed” (a convincing but not very helpful idea). Similarly, the question of music’s relationship to place has resulted in the widespread acknowledgement that this relationship is varied and complex. Debates over the relationship of music to new media are too busy running after current developments in the new media field to produce any conceptual vocabularies of lasting value, it seems to me.

The risk for popular music studies, it seems to me, is that their most interesting questions will be taken up in other fields. “Sound studies,” for example, is a much livelier field at present than popular music studies in North America, thanks in part to the work of my friend and colleague Jonathan Sterne. Other aspects of popular music are studied within a broader analysis of technological innovation, as in the scholarship of the British anthropologist Georgina Born. And much of the best work on popular music is happening in the writings of anthropologists like Ana Ochoa, whose principal identification is not with popular music studies.

Jeder Janotti Júnior: Twenty years after your first publication about music scenes, how do you see the current status of this idea?

Will Straw - In my view, the last twenty years have seen the notion of scene developed in two directions. In one of these, “scene” is

one element in a lexical series that includes “subculture,” “tribe” and other social/cultural unities in which music is presumed to exist. The well-known work of Andrew Bennett, David Hesmondhalgh and others has been concerned with which of these unities is most useful in the study of music. In another direction, “scene” is deployed in attempts to theorize the relationship of music to geography, to space. Here, I would point to the founding work of Barry Shank and Holly Kruse, but, as well, the research of Chris Gibson, Geoff Stahl and others concerned with cities or other regions. I would note that Brazilian work is strong in both of these directions – in analyzing social categories and in conceiving of the ways in which musical practices articulate a sense of space.

Personally, I think two things. One is that the idea of scene may be usefully revitalized with a Detour through other work on urban culture more generally. I am thinking of Alan Blum’s article on scenes in his book “The Imaginative Structure of the City,” in which he ties the notion of a scene to a broader sense of the public theatricality and visibility of urban culture. In other words, the sense of “scene” as “that which is scene” needs to be developed further. In this respect, I’m also interested in the way in which scene fits within the sort of public culture seen by historians as having emerged in Western cities in the 19th century: a public culture described by Guillaume Pinson and other French historians in terms of the category of the

“mondaine”, the “wordly”, the public sociability of artists and bohemians.

At the same time, I think scene has much to gain by a tighter dialogue with theories of networks and infrastructures. In particular, I think we need greater attention to the role of low-level institutions like bars, shops, venues in creating networks through which musical practices and people circulate. A notion of “scene” need not have active human agents at its centre; it may also be about circulatory networks, nodes and pathways.

Jeder Janotti Júnior: Has the notion of scene emerged in a moment of tension between popular music studies of musicological and communicational nature? To what extent has this idea permeated this old debate? Is it still on?

Will Straw - Well, I think quite clearly that the notion of scene pulled important parts of popular music studies away from musicology – towards cultural geography and anthropology. Whereas the concerns with authenticity and identity that marked the earlier wave of popular music studies lent themselves to both musicological and sociological analysis, the analyses of scenes generally had little to say about musical form and style. On the other hand, as popular music studies has come to occupy a stronger place within Faculties of music around the world, “scene studies” are now more likely to co-exist alongside more conventional musicological kinds of analysis.

Like subcultural studies in the 1970s and 1980s, the geographical “turn” in popular music studies in the 1990s and 2000s gave those studying popular music rich conceptual materials with which to work in the absence of formal training in musical analysis.

Jeder Janotti Júnior: To what extent is the idea of music scene still alive as we look at the current live music circuit and at the circulation of music on the web?

Will Straw - This is a big question for which others are perhaps more qualified to respond than me. I do know that, in the early days of the internet, one saw attempts to overlay studies of internet-based musical communities upon the idea of scene. Given that many definitions of scene include a notion of internationally dispersed networks in which face-to-face contact is minimal, it is not surprising that one would attempt to use scenes in describing internet-based forms of interaction. My personal opinion is that this encounter between scene studies and studies of music on the internet has not produced much that we would consider innovative.

Jeder Janotti Júnior: Are cities still the big reference point for the analysis of the appropriation of cultural goods?

Will Straw - In many respects, the huge boom in studies of urban culture since the 1990s has given us a much richer set of tools for analyzing

cultural consumption. In particular, it has forced us to extend the scope of our analyses beyond the simple encounter of citizen-consumer and object-text. In the urban context, we are obliged to consider the circulation of cultural goods and the variety of points – geographical, institutional, economic and affective – at which these goods encounter users and consumers. This has drawn the best cultural studies closer to an urban cultural anthropology, producing some very fine work.

At the same time, the urban bias in cultural studies persists, and we know very little about the consumption of cultural artefacts in rural or other non-urban sites.

Jeder Janotti Júnior: Most of the criticism about the idea of scene points to the lack of methodological systematization, what do you think about that?

Will Straw - As I have argued elsewhere, the lack of methodological rigour is intrinsic to the notion of “scene” insofar as the nature of the links it posits between various practices, styles and values can never be fixed in a formula. One can settle this by describing these links in very specific terms in individual case studies (which, nevertheless, might lack applicability to other examples) or by retaining the looseness of the term. My personal preference is for the latter; the term can serve as a kind of floating signifier within other frameworks of analysis

(like circulation theory or actor-network theory) in order to balance the tendency of these frameworks to produce overly-rigid models of cultural practice. “Scene”, as I have suggested, requires that one move from the localized practice to a broader conceptualization of cultural sociability and theatricality.

Jeder Janotti Júnior: What tips would you give to somebody who is beginning to do work on scenes and wants to avoid the shortcomings of an ethnography of personal taste?

Will Straw - I would suggest two procedures:

(1) Begin by de-subjectifying the analysis. That is, do not begin with music fans and practitioners and what they do. Rather, begin with some substance (a genre of music, for example) or a category of event (the playing of music) and follow it through the various networks of people, objects, places and assemblages which sustain and produce it. Remember that everyone enters a scene at a particular point in its constitution and development. Scenes are not created collectively in a moment of shared, participatory activity which would directly express the values of that collectivity.

(2) Always be comparative. Compare one musical scene to another, so as to defamiliarize both of them. Or – and this is even better – compare a musical scene to the social activities

and infrastructures that form around certain non-musical activities (like academic work, religious activity, fashion and so on.)

Jeder Janotti Júnior : Besides the ethnographic and the consumption practice approaches, how else can we study musical scenes?

Will Straw - I have touched on some of this already, but I would begin by seeing how scenes engage in what Friedrich Kittler has defined as some of the key functions of media: “storage, transmission and processing.” Individuals may not participate in any of these consciously, but the scene as a whole is a system for remembering, moving and transforming cultural expression and social energy. Stand back from the individuals in the scene and analyze its mediality in the terms I’ve described.

Jeder Janotti Júnior: In the beginning you articulated the notions of field (Bourdieu), social logic of cultural goods (Miège) and quotidian practices (De Certeau) to analyze the existence of music scenes. Does this articulation remain up-to-date?

Will Straw - At a fundamental level, I remain a Bourdieusian, in the sense that I believe culture develops principally through principles of differentiation which are bound to a logic of social advancement. When I wrote my original scene article, Miège was important as someone

who was concerned with cultural commodities and with the manner of their circulation and valorization. Many of these concerns have been absorbed within the anthropology of circulation put forward by Gaonkar and Povinelli, who provide perhaps the most important influence on my recent thinking on the subject. Certeau has become less and less of an direct influence, despite my fondness for his writing. I would even suggest that there was little in my original invocation of Certeau which was not present as well in Bourdieu.

Jeder Janotti Júnior: In the early 21st century a lot was said about virtual scenes and about an assumed decadence of urban scenes, what do you think about this debate? Is it still on?

Will Straw - I think we must separate a certain globalization of scenes from their virtualization. When I think, for example, of the electronic scene in Montreal associated with the Mutek Festival and its various activities, we can see that they have taken their “brand” around the world, and that their events in Montreal draw on regular collaborators from far away. In certain respects, this is little different from what was common in jazz music in the 1960s/1970s, or classical music for much of the 20th century. So, while I think there is an intensification of musical globalization, and this is clearly related closely to the internet, I’m not sure that an older model of globalization is any less pertinent.

At the same time, music is embedded in place more than ever. Musical festivals are more important that at any time in history, and the life of clubs, venues and concerts is still strong. In my original article on scenes I spoke of the replication of a range of tastes in one place after another. I think this is still going on, and while musical styles may be cosmopolitan and circulatory in character, musical events are still very tied to place.

Jeder Janotti Júnior: Another piece of criticism involves the comprehensive character of the term, many times there is reference to local scenes, national scenes or globalized scenes. Does this distinction exist to you? Is there a common idea that is present in the different utilizations of the term scene?

Will Straw - The notion of scene will not in itself resolve the problem of levels – of the relationship of the local to the national and the international. The pertinence of any definition of scene will be constructed within individual works of analysis.

My own interest is in scenes as urban phenomena, insofar as they interact with other urban scenes to produce the complex textures of urban culture. If I were more interested in the trans-urban circulation of musical styles and musical affinities, I might retain the notion of “scene” or might not. The pertinence of the notion of “scene” in such analyses will depend on the convincing

character of the analysis, on its ability to show how different levels of “operation” or communication share certain characteristics.

Jeder Janotti Júnior: To what extent have the recent transformations in the circulation of music affected the idea of music scene?

Will Straw - In a very banal sense, the decline of music stores, music magazines and other “institutions” of music has obviously changed what it means to be devoted to music and to engage in the quotidian acquisition of music or information about it. At the same time, I believe the rise of an audio-visual, internet-based culture has made music less important in peoples’ lives than was the case previously, and that this may be a long-term trend with important consequences for the notion of music scene. If a music scene is the life-world in which people, at important parts of their lives, spend a great deal of their time, then we may see scenes receding in terms of their cultural and sociological importance. (My graduate students who, a decade ago, were intensely involved in music, are now just as devoted to television series and the culture of restaurants!)

When scenes were based on a notion of musical scarcity – on the difficulty in finding music of the sort one liked, or people with similar tastes – scenes became important refuges and resources for people. Now that this is no longer the case, I think the specificity of musical scenes will be lost. At the same time, a bohemian/culturally-oriented way

of inhabiting cities has grown in importance, and music scenes will survive as subsets of these lifestyles.

Jeder Janotti Júnior: Ever since it came out, the idea of scene, has been linked to journalism and to cultural critique, and the notion of music critique seems to be changing. Does this affect the function of nominating scenes which in the past seemed to be the role of critique?

Will Straw - I still think scenes are supported by the identification and documentation of musical activities, and this continues. The Montreal “scene” of the past 15 years continues to be the focus of intense press, blog and social media coverage. Newly emergent styles, like Chicago Footwork, or newly hyped scenes, like U.S. dubstep, are still the object of old-fashioned kinds of trend-spotting and identification. An apprenticeship in the history and values of musical form is still a key part of involvement in music and this is made all the more easy by Youtube, Facebook affinity groups and other aspects of new media. The New York Times declared recently that the internet had killed the idea of musical snobbery, giving everyone access to any kind of music available, but I’m still enough of a Bourdieusian to think that people cluster within taste groupings that tend towards exclusivity.

Jeder Janotti Júnior: At first a distinction was made between musical communities and music

scenes. Do you think this separation is still valid? Is it still worthwhile to speak of musical communities? Why?

Will Straw - In Mile End, the Montreal

neighbourhood in which I live, there are a number of strong, overlapping communities based around music. The discourses of hipsterdom and the realities of cultural gentrification in cities around the world have, if anything, made the notion of musical communities even more prominent these days. As suggested earlier, I'm less interested personally in the notion of community insofar as it tends to be focused on the relations between people exclusively (and not on the relations of people to places, things and processes). However, as a great deal of interesting social theory comes to be concerned with the ways in which people co-inhabit the urban spaces of the contemporary world (and do so in contexts of increasing ethnic/racial/cultural diversity), I think the notion of musical communities may assume new importance. Jeder Janotti Júnior: Does the notion of scene apply to each and every appropriation of popular music in the cities or is it still restricted to specific consumer groups as in the cases you mentioned in your early writings (alternative rock and the dance scene)?

Will Straw - Of course it should apply to a larger set of musical styles. Indeed, I think the most

interesting work on scenes might be that which deals with forms and practices not usually considered within the "scene" framework: classical music, for example, or the revivals of 1940s swing music, or church music. The notion of scene is enriched when the examples serve to overturn the prejudices (about what is cool or subcultural or "scene-like") which have presided over popular music studies.

Jeder Janotti Júnior: Is there a current definition by Will Straw of the music scenes in current times? If so, what is this definition?

Will Straw - There is a certain amount of bad faith in my original definition. As some have pointed out, I was concerned as much with the movement and development of assemblages of style as with the sorts of worlds in which people lived out their relationships to music. The latter interest would become the focus of scene studies, giving us a great deal of interesting work (much of it by Brazilian scholars, I would add).

I would define scene today as the circumscribed spheres of sociability, creativity and connection which take shape around certain kinds of cultural objects in the course of these objects' social lives.

However, that doesn't solve anything!

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9/9

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