

# CULTURAL SCENES

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*“In the modern place people of various ages and origins meet and find a kind of aesthetic alibi for their presence together in the clash or juxtaposition of styles.”*  
– Marc AUGÉ (1996, p. 177)

Since 2000, I have been part of an interdisciplinary research project studying the culture of four cities. “The Culture of Cities” project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, under its Major Collaborative Research Initiatives program<sup>1</sup>. At its core, the project involves scholars from a half dozen universities within Canada and collaborators from several other countries. Over a five-year period, we have been engaged in comparative analyses of Toronto, Montreal, Dublin and Berlin. These cities were chosen, in part, based on the research history and expertise of the research team but, more importantly, because they share certain characteristics that invite comparison. (Dublin, Montreal and Toronto, for example, have all engaged in the revitalization of their waterfront areas in recent years.) The project is committed to interdisciplinary dialogue among its members, who range from academics clearly identified with the humanities (such as art historians and scholars of theatre) to sociologists studying such issues as urban amalgamation. An overriding concern of the project has been the capacity of cities to retain their distinctiveness in an age marked both by global cultural flows and by the rise of cultural development models that threaten to produce a new uniformity across different cities.

A number of concepts have served as points of convergence for the various research activities carried out within the project. One of the most productive of these has been the notion of a cultural *scene*. *Scene* is a term which flourishes within everyday talk about urban cultures but which, until recently, was marginal within academic writing on cities. Journalists, tourists and city-dwellers will speak

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of the Temple Bar scene in Dublin, the techno music scene in Berlin or the new hotel bar scene in Montreal, but the scale and character of the phenomena being referred to will fluctuate with each usage. *Scene* designates particular clusters of social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which circumscribe them. Scenes may be distinguished according to their location (as in Montreal's St. Laurent scene), the genre of cultural production which gives them coherence (a musical style, for example, as in references to the electroclash scene) or the loosely defined social activity around which they take shape (as with urban outdoor chess-playing scenes). *Scene* invites us to map the territory of the city in new ways while, at the same time, designating certain kinds of activity whose relationship to territory is not easily asserted. (How, for example, would one locate the Montreal Anglophone poetry scene on a map?)

In one of the first academic works to address the concept, Barry Shank (1994) suggested that a scene might be defined as "an overproductive signifying community" (p. 122). Within a scene, he claimed, "far more semiotic information is produced than can be rationally parsed" (p. 122). Scenes derive their effervescence from the sense that the "information" produced within them is forever in excess of the productive ends to which it might be put, that the performativity characteristic of a scene involves the "display of more than can be understood" (p. 122). A scene's tendency to escape comprehension is not (or not simply) a result of the exclusivity or impermeability that might, at different points, be seen to characterize it. A scene resists deciphering, in part, because it mobilizes local energies and moves these energies in multiple directions – onwards, to later reiterations of itself; outwards, to more formal sorts of social or entrepreneurial activity; upwards, to the broader coalescing of cultural energies within which collective identities takes shape.

*Scene* has resonated strongly within the Culture of Cities project because of the variety of interdisciplinary perspectives it serves to draw together. *Scene* is one way of speaking of the theatricality of the city – of the city's capacity to generate images of people occupying public space in attractive ways (see, for example, Blum, 2003, pp. 165-167). In this respect, *scene* captures the sense of effervescence and display which are long-standing features of an urban aesthetic, as it has been elaborated in literature, music and cinema. Those whose primary interests are the playful or experiential dimensions of urban culture are drawn to *scene* as a concept that expresses these dimensions in flexible terms. *Scenes* is not merely the name we give to informal ways of organizing leisure, however, as if one stepped into a scene from a radically different sphere of work or commercial exchange. Scenes emerge from the excesses of sociability that surround the pursuit of interests, or which fuel ongoing innovation and experimentation within the cultural life of cities. The challenge for research is that of acknowledging the elusive, ephemeral character of scenes while recognizing their productive, even functional, role within urban life. Scenes are elusive, but they may be seen, more formally, as units of

city culture (like subcultures or art worlds), as one of the event structures through which cultural life acquires its solidity. Scenes are one of the city's infrastructures for exchange, interaction and instruction.

Artistic scenes, for example, have long interacted with traditional structures for the transmission of creative interests and skills. In earlier periods, training was transmitted through the more formal and hierarchical relationships of mentor to student, master to apprentice. Formal training persists in the cultural field, of course, institutionalized within art schools or in the career ladders that mark the music or film industries. Increasingly, however, the knowledges required for a career in artistic fields are acquired in the movement into and through a scene, as individuals gather around themselves the sets of relationships and behaviours that are the preconditions of acceptance. Here, as in scenes more generally, the lines between professional and social activities are blurred, as each kind of activity becomes the alibi for the other. The "vertical" relationship of master to student is transformed, in scenes, into the spatial relationship of outside to inside; the neophyte advances "horizontally", moving from the margins of a scene towards its centre. A variety of urban media (from alternative weekly newspapers to Internet-based friendship circles) now act as way-finding aids in this process.

The most commonly identified scenes are those associated with music, for a variety of reasons. The production and consumption of music lend themselves more easily to a mobile urban sociability than does involvement in other cultural forms. Antoine Hennion has noted the intimate relationship of music to multiple forms of social mediation: "musical activity inscribes itself within bodies, within collectivities, within ways of doing things, within movement" (Hennion, 2000, p. 10; my translation). Music provides a pretext for being out in the city, for consuming culture in moments of collective interaction which are embedded in the more diffuse public life of cities, in drinking and in public, collective conversation.

Bruno Latour (2000) has invited those studying science to stop asking how society "produces" science and to turn, rather, to an analysis of the ways in which scientific work produces particular social relations and textures. Similarly, we might move from the question of how urban culture "produces" scenes to that of how the activities transpiring within scenes produce urban culture as a set of institutions and textures. Urban culture requires investments in space and other resources. These investments, in turn, involve a transformative engagement with economic interests, dominant trends and multiple sorts of public policy and regulation. We must learn to see these engagements as forms of cultural experimentation through which the existing state of things is tested and transformed in an ongoing fashion. Montreal's present-day Anglophone pop-rock music scene, for example, hailed for its vitality in a number of recent press accounts (e.g., Perez, 2005; *New York Times*, 2005), has extended itself spatially through the investment of money and energies in the otherwise hidden, upper floors of bars or clubs along the city's Boulevard

St. Laurent. Venues like the Jupiter Room, Korova, Sala Rosa and the Mile End Cultural Centre constitute a loosely affiliated series of sites for musical activity. Each of these upper-floor venues, in turn, is appended to a bar or club operating near street level and drawing a more demographically varied and commercially stable clientele. The ongoing extension of this music scene, out of bars of more long-standing popularity into underused spaces, has produced a particular continuum of activities along this urban strip (Allor, 1997). In some cases, the everyday commercial activity of the lower-level bars serves to cross-subsidize the more intermittent use of upper floor spaces for live performances. In others, the regular holding of special events brings about, through the spill-over of people and spending, the commercial rejuvenation of lower-level bars which were on the verge of unfashionability. The emergence of Sala Rosa as an important venue for experimental culture in Montreal has altered the status of the Spanish social club and restaurant just below it. Sala Rosa's cultural events pull a new clientele into a hitherto moribund strip on St. Laurent Boulevard, thus helping to reconnect the Spanish social club to the broader social energies of the city. Cultural events, in turn, draw credibility from their association with this space of long-standing communal, slightly exotic sociability.

Music and other cultural forms are not simply alibis for the social interaction that goes on within scenes, however. Their importance within scenes ensures that the commercial investment which produces new places or rituals for socializing comes to be intertwined with a history of cultural forms, and with the arcs of fashionability and popularity which give cultural history its particular dynamic. As scenes shift from one set of places to another, they are not simply engaged in their own movement as collective phenomena. In their often restless movement, scenes inscribe the broader history of social forms upon the geography of the city and its spaces.

We may consider, for a moment, the example of Manchester in the United Kingdom. Much of Manchester's recent cultural character stems from the fact that the city is home to one of the largest student populations of any city in Europe. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Manchester was one of the most important Western cities in the field of popular music, the birthplace of highly influential cross-fertilizations of post-punk rock and forms of dance music. The relationship between these sets of achievements may appear obvious and direct, but this is not entirely the case. Universities everywhere generate forms of learning and expressive practices that are in excess of their intended function as places for the imparting of formal, disciplinary knowledge. Predictably, universities are important sites for the accumulation of social and cultural capital. In the cities which surround universities, these forms of capital often interact in multiple ways with what Sarah Thornton (1995) has termed "subcultural" capital. Subcultural capital brings together the interpretive skills and hip credibility which people acquire through their involvement in particular subcultures (like that which surrounded raves for

many years). The cultural capital of art schools, for example, may be strengthened by these schools' ongoing proximity to centres of subcultural capital, from which such schools pull the people and ideas that perpetuate their cutting-edge status (Goldsmith's in London, for example). Conversely, subcultural capital may draw on (and be inflected by) more traditional forms of cultural capital, as when locally based music acquires a knowing, cosmopolitan edge through the involvement of educated, mobile people within it (as has been the case, at different moments, in the music scenes of Austin, Texas, New York City or Seattle, Washington).

In the case of Manchester, it was not simply that university life produced, as one of its economic spin-offs, levels of consumption and spending which allowed the institutions of local musical activity (bars, nightclubs, music stores, etc.) to flourish. We might ask, for example, how the forms and meanings of Manchester's music took shape within clashes of social class and educational difference which the city's dual status as student capital and declining industrial centre helped to nourish. We might note, as well, that the co-presence of universities and cultural activity led Manchester to be one of the principal incubators for new urban cultural policies of the 1990s. Students and young academics were drawn to the city for its cultural life. Some of these individuals, in turn, helped to transform particular academic units into innovative centres of new urban policy thinking (e.g., the Institute for Law and Culture at Manchester Metropolitan University). Their reflection on the cultural activity transpiring around them fed back into that community in ways that magnified that community's significance, contributing to a mythological vision of Manchester as both a special case and as a more broadly applicable model for urban policy. The city became, in a very real sense, an "overproductive signifying community", generating ideas and energies that, over time, it could scarcely contain.

One lesson of the Manchester example is that large numbers of creative people active on the edges of formal institutions will generate unexpected explosions of creative innovation. Historians offer multiple examples of the ways in which surpluses of population and limited formal opportunities have shaped important cultural moments. Jerrold Siegel suggests that a baby boom among the French middle class during the middle of the eighteenth century squeezed large numbers of youth out of bourgeois professions (which became overcrowded) and into the marginal spaces of Parisian bohemia. In these spaces, young people expressed their marginality in eccentric lifestyles and in the new artistic languages of revolt (Siegel, 1986, p. 19). Philip Nord (1986) has argued that the excesses of anti-Dreyfuss nationalism in France at the end of the nineteenth century owe some of their energies to a crisis of overproduction in the book publishing industry, which compelled dozens of out-of-work Parisian authors to turn to journalism for sustenance, advancing themselves by climbing aboard the sensational political bandwagons of the time. Richard Candida Smith (1995) has traced the roots of the Beat generation to a postwar "overproduction" of poets and writers in the United

States following World War II, when the *G. I. Bill* led ex-soldiers to study creative writing in numbers which exceeded the capacity of literary markets to handle their output. Local beatnik scenes emerged, in part, as answers to the problem of where and how these creative energies might find expression.

More recently (and in the context of the Culture of Cities project), Geoff Stahl (2001) has traced the ways in which large numbers of young Anglophones, drawn to Montreal in the 1990s by low rents and the ease of a Bohemian lifestyle, have produced a music scene whose influence is disproportionately high relative to the numbers of people involved. These Anglophones, most of whom came from elsewhere and many of whom do not speak perfect French, inhabit a scene which survives, in part, because the workplaces most likely to offer them English-language work are cultural in character. These workplaces include the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the weekly alternative newspapers *Mirror* and *Hour*, and the Anglophone universities – institutions offering forms of informal cross-subsidization for an experimental music scene and serving, through their cultural mandates, to magnify the significance of that scene. It is no accident, Stahl suggests, that *Brave New Waves*, CBC Radio's influential avant-garde, late-night music program, is based in Montreal.

Scenes take shape, much of the time, on the edges of cultural institutions which can only partially absorb and channel the clusters of expressive energy which form within urban life. Just as they draw upon surpluses of people, scenes may be seen as ways of “processing” the abundance of artifacts and spaces which sediment within cities over time. The “exotica” music subcultures of the mid-to-late 1990s were devoted to the collecting and public playing of easy listening vinyl records which had accumulated within junk stores and private homes over thirty or forty years. Collectors and dealers took part in the movement of these records from places in which their value was unacknowledged to clubs which introduced theme nights on which these records were played, or to specialty stores in which they were re-sold as objects of connoisseurist interest and renewed economic value. Like the second-hand clothing stores along Montreal's Mont-Royal strip or the shops on rue Amherst which specialize in postwar household items, scenes take shape when specialized interests foster low level forms of entrepreneurship and sociable communities of interest. Since the mid-1970s, the scenes which have surrounded disco and its successor forms of dance music have been organized, in part, around the importing, selling, manufacturing and public playing of a particular specialized artifact, the twelve-inch vinyl single. In this respect, scenes take place in relationship to what Gaonkar & Povinelli (2003) have called the “edges of forms”, the assemblages of things, places, technologies and artifacts along which people move and live (p. 391).

Some of my own research centres on an earlier Montreal-based music scene, which flourished in the 1970s within and around the culture of discothèques. In the mid-1970s, the discothèque business expanded significantly in Montreal, as

in most other cities throughout the Western world, a development spurred by the popularity of new, hybrid musical styles (which collectively came under the label *disco*). In New York, the growth of the nightclub industry during this period was seen as a major factor in the revitalization of the downtown economy (Billboard, 1979b). Montreal, for several years, was considered by the music industry to be one of the three most significant markets and production centres for disco music in the Western world (after New York and London). The city's key role in this cultural moment was the result of a number of factors. The first factor was Montreal's Francophone character, which, it was claimed, made rock music less pervasive as a popular music form than it was in Toronto or other North American cities (see, for various accounts, Billboard, 1977a, 1977b, 1977c, 1979a). As a result, the musical tastes of Montrealers were considered to be more tolerant and diverse, thus rendering the city more open to emergent styles of the sort played in discothèques. Second, the looser regulation of alcohol sales and closing times in Quebec (relative to the rest of Canada and parts of the United States) had long made Montreal a nightlife capital. Discothèques of the 1970s therefore perpetuated longstanding traditions and mythologies that cast Montreal as a privileged place for drinking and dancing. Finally, disco culture in Montreal had significant roots within a number of linguistic and ethnic communities, crossing the French-English divide and drawing, to a significant degree, on members of Allophone populations (such as those of Italian background). As a cultural form, disco music was less obviously tied to spoken language as an expressive form than were rock music or the traditions of the *chanson*. Disco music was characterized by long instrumental (wordless) passages and by lyrics that were frequently inconsequential. Its rhythmic structures pulled together strands of Afro-Caribbean, Latin, big band and even Mediterranean musical forms. While all musical forms generate audiences of distinct coalitions of taste and population, the audience that surrounded disco music was unusually complex and unique in the Montreal context.

Bruce Willems-Braun (1994) has written that urban fringe festivals “destabilize and reformulate the multiple discourses which organize the city” just as they serve to reaffirm the longstanding meanings of particular urban sites (p. 91). The discothèques of downtown Montreal in the 1970s attracted new, relatively unprecedented mixes of population (Francophone professionals in their 30s alongside young Anglo club kids, gay men mingling with heterosexual couples, Hispanic immigrants and Westmount socialites) in ways we might consider destabilizing. At the same time, as in New York and innumerable other cities, discothèques confirmed a long-standing sense of the urban downtown as the site of semi-illicit pleasures and social promiscuity. Their success in the mid 1970s laid the groundwork for what now seems to be a permanent nightclub culture in most Western cities. The persistence of the culture over the past two decades has pressured those involved in making and enforcing urban cultural policy to recognize the importance of night time economies.

Montreal's disco culture of the 1970s was a *scene* in part because of the intense public theatricality that came to surround it; it was celebrated and chronicled in nightlife-oriented newspaper columns and specialized television programs. More importantly, for our purposes, disco culture in Montreal produced new forms of cultural brokering, small-scale entrepreneurship and collaboration within social and professional networks that took shape on the fringes of the mainstream music industry. At the heart of these processes was the figure of the nightclub disc jockey – a figure who scarcely existed a decade earlier but who became central to the culture of the urban discothèque. In a strict definition of the profession, nightclub disc jockeys were those individuals who chose the records to be played in the nightclubs and had developed the skills to move seamlessly from one record to another. With time, however, the ability of disc jockeys to judge the public response to records, and their reliance on recordings which circulated within an international underground, led them to become intermediaries in a complex set of cultural and commercial processes. Disc jockeys became active in importing disco records to Montreal, selling them in specialty stores (which, in many cases, they opened and managed) and commenting on them for professional publications. Through these activities, disc jockeys became important intermediaries between record companies seeking to capitalize on the disco boom and nightclub customers who were seen as potential buyers of disco records, but whose tastes were difficult to monitor. By the late 1970s, record companies were commissioning disc jockeys to produce remixed versions of songs to be played within discothèques. As they developed remixing skills, disc jockeys were more and more encouraged to start their own record labels, producing disco records outside of the structures of the dominant music industry. The same networks which had given disc jockeys access to records from elsewhere (from Miami or New York, for example) served to disseminate their own records outwards from Montreal. By the end of the 1970s, Montreal dance records were selling in large numbers throughout North America and Western Europe.

At the end of the 1970s, the public face of Montreal disco – the nightclubs and their patrons – changed more or less in step with rapidly evolving international styles in nightclub décor and customer dress. The more invisible elements of this scene were those by which disc jockeys wove together various elements of the disco music apparatus: acquiring and adapting records for local tastes, reporting back to record companies on the success or failure of records among their patrons, and channelling their own skills into the production of new recordings. In pulling together the material artifacts and strands of information necessary to their craft, disc jockeys traced lines of connection between the local and the international, and between various kinds of commercial activity (record importing and retailing, the specialized music press, radio broadcasting, and so on.) Perhaps most significantly, Montreal-based producers of dance music imported rhythm tracks from music studios in the south of the United States and added new vocals, often in the French language. In doing so, they developed forms of international collaboration



within a very small-scale industry. At the same time, disc jockeys were active in transforming their own subcultural capital into more mainstream forms of cultural veneration. Montreal disc jockeys organized local disco music awards or hosted weekly disco music programs, all of which were broadcast on local television stations.

Like local theatre or skateboarding scenes, Montreal's disco scene of the mid-to-late 1970s was not the object of any formal cultural policy but was shaped by multiple forms of public regulation and incentive. In the case of disco, these include: alcohol licensing laws, municipal zoning regulations, public performance regulations controlling the use of recorded music as entertainment, Canadian content regulations to encourage the airplay of Canadian music (or French-language music), tariff regulations governing the importing of foreign recordings, agreements between nightclubs and local musicians' unions and so on. At higher levels of generality, Montreal's disco culture rested on a demographic base which was itself the product of immigration laws and trends, linguistic regulation and education policies which made Montreal home to four large universities. To these we might add those economic policies and trends that made the decline of downtown nightlife much less precipitous for Montreal in the 1970s than for other North American cities.

While it is true that we may never draw a stable, analytic frame around a cultural *scene*, firmly capturing it for subdivision and analysis, it is no less true that the policies that shape urban cultural forms are almost never to be found exactly where we go looking for them. Discussions of cultural policy in Manchester will speak of the student influx as a challenge to public security, but will almost never see the building of universities (and creation of a uniform tuition system for the European Union) as a highly effective intervention in local music scenes. Similarly, no one would have imagined that the Canadian government's Local Initiatives Project youth employment scheme of the early 1970s would have, as one of its long-lasting effects, the development of Canada's network of artist-run centres, institutions which remain important anchors within local artistic scenes. Public policies of all sorts help to shape the spaces within which cultural scenes coalesce as moments in a city's collective life. Scenes actively seize these spaces in their own restless, creative quests for opportunity.

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## NOTE

1. The Principal Investigator of the Cultural of Cities Project is Professor Alan Blum from York University. The account of the project given here is entirely my own.
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Will STRAW

*Les scènes culturelles et les conséquences non voulues de la politique*

### RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article découle de l'expérience acquise au cours d'un projet de recherche interdisciplinaire de cinq ans portant sur la culture urbaine dans quatre villes. On y développe la notion de *scène* pour justifier les paramètres peu définis qui caractérisent l'activité culturelle urbaine de même que les relations complexes qui existent entre cette activité et les modèles plus vastes de la vie sociale à l'intérieur des villes. La trame de la vie urbaine est tissée à même l'investissement et le changement qui caractérisent l'histoire des scènes. Prenant comme exemples Manchester en Angleterre et Montréal au Québec, le présent article sert à démontrer comment les activités culturelles, telles que la musique, ne font pas qu'habiter les scènes, mais ont une influence sur les fondements sociaux et institutionnels des villes, de sorte qu'elles donnent lieu à des ensembles de connaissance et de comportement.

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Will STRAW

*Cultural Scenes and the Unintended Consequences of Policy*

### ABSTRACT

This article draws on the experience of a five-year interdisciplinary research project concerned with urban culture in four cities. It develops the notion of *scene* to account for the loose boundaries which surround urban cultural activity and the complex relationships of this activity to broader patterns of social life within cities. The textures of urban life are produced in the ongoing investment and change which characterize the history of scenes. Using examples from Manchester, England and Montreal, Quebec, this article shows how cultural activities such as music do not simply inhabit scenes, but work upon the social and institutional foundations of cities so as to produce distinctive complexes of knowledge and behaviour.

Will STRAW

*Los escenarios culturales y las consecuencias no deseadas de la política*

### RESUMEN

El presente artículo resulta de la experiencia adquirida en el transcurso de un proyecto de investigación interdisciplinario de cinco años referente a la cultura urbana en cuatro ciudades. Se desarrolla el concepto de *escenario* para justificar los parámetros poco definidos que caracterizan la actividad cultural urbana así que las relaciones complejas que existen entre esta actividad y los modelos más amplios de la vida social al interior de las ciudades. La trama de la vida urbana está tejida incluso en la inversión y el cambio que caracteriza la historia de los escenarios. Tomando como ejemplos Manchester en Inglaterra y Montreal en Québec, este artículo sirve para demostrar como las actividades culturales, tales que la música, no hacen que ocupar los escenarios, pero tienen una influencia sobre los fundamentos sociales e institucionales de las ciudades, de manera que dichas actividades engendren conjuntos de conocimiento y de comportamiento.

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