Haphephobia and Urban Creativity
The 'Frightful' Case of Western Popular Music

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When we think about popular music[1], our mind immediately calls forth huge crowds at summer festivals, tarted up popstars captured by exciting music videos, recording studios up-to-date with cutting-edge technological paraphernalia and streaming platforms playlists compiled by hundreds of thousands of users. What we tend to overlook, instead, is where the musical languages spoken by those stars of the entertainment industry originate from. In most cases, these were far from reassuring places. Indeed, a considerable part of the original forms of popular music has thrived within environments characterised by social marginality and demographic thickening, where innovative forms of 'creative experience' have flourished, by means of new forms of inter-individual relationality.

The notion of 'creative experience' in the context of popular urban cultures has been investigated from two main perspectives: the objectivist one (typical of sociological structuralism and anthropological culturalism) which tends to consider social creativity as determined by an autonomous social and cultural structure, and the subjectivist one (typical of the 'formalist' stream of economic anthropology) which focuses on the active and unpredictable role of the individual, who serves as a transformation vector for the cultural structures of society. The present article takes an intermediate position, shared by many study orientations fully established from the mid-1970s onwards. 'Creativity' will be understood as a cultural and communicative process grounded on the tension between 'creative individuality' and a social structure that enables the circulation of its works, fueling processes of cultural production through the provision of a reticular societal framework (Becker 1982).

Popular music is a peculiar field of cultural production: it has archetypal and teleological links with the media system, but it has historically relied on environments within which musical codes are able to reach 'critical mass' and then grasp larger audiences wielding its imaginative power. The metropolis is the most typical of these settings: "The chief function of the city is to convert power into form, energy into culture, dead matter into the living symbols of art, biological reproduction into social creativity" (Mumford 1961: 571). That 'social creativity' at the heart of the prototypical forms of popular music unfolded in industrialised, cosmopolitan urban contexts, as a result of the dialectic synthesis of unremitting contrasts between overcrowded, multicultural areas and uptown districts inhabited by a middle-class which was eager for new kinds of entertainment forms. Urban creativity should therefore not be considered a merely individual phenomenon, as it results from the cooperation of a number of actors involved both in the social world and in production systems and supply chains. 'Creative acts', in popular music, occur within human interaction processes established by what I refer

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1 The notion of 'popular music' here used is that widely shared in sociology, cultural studies and musicology (cf. Middleton 1990; Frith 1998; Fabbri 2008). We will therefore understand popular music as a field of cultural production and consumption separate from art music and traditional music.

to as 'urban proxemics'. A spectre is now hunting such promising, yet dreadful places – the idea that certain conditions of cultural production can dissolve into the fear of living alongside one another.

Popular music and the city

Ulf Hannerz (1996: 61) argued that the most inventive individuals in the history of human consciousness were *marginal men*, "people who have acutely experienced a contrast between ongoing cultural traditions and who have thereby been provoked into new understandings". The history of popular music can be seen as a history of 'creativity into marginality', 'creativity in close proximity' and 'creativity within scary places' at the same time.

The original forms of musical expression that would constitute the main sources of entertainment music of the 20th century established themselves in the aftermath of the Second Industrial Revolution. In their diversity, they all have one thing in common: they are the product of accelerated processes of hybridisation of languages that only a few years earlier would have required much longer cultural assimilation times. Before the advent of media such as radio, record industry, film industry, and television, it was in metropolitan relationality that forms of '*culturemes* sharing' developed amidst individuals of different ancestries, catalysed in the slums of large urban areas by the processes of movement of goods and people introduced by advanced capitalism.

A great deal of popular music's pioneering languages has gained a foothold in working-class districts of large conurbations, often culturally diverse port cities (Fabbri 2008). For instance, Portuguese *fado* originated in the brothels of Alfama and Mouraria, the areas of Lisbon at the time with the highest crime rates, and combined native stylistic elements with other coming from the African or the Brazilian Creole population; Choro and *samba* in their most defined forms originated in the areas inhabited by the Afro-Brazilian Bahians who moved to Rio de Janeiro, and mixed together both European elements (and themselves hybrid such as Bohemian *polka* or Masovian *mazurka*) and above all Angolan, Congolese (*lundù*) and Cape Verdean (*batuque*) dances; Spanish flamenco began amongst the Andalusian gypsy minority, with the resulting stylistic richness (the Romani peoples originate in India, and along their migratory route it is unlikely that they have not absorbed musical elements typical of the regions they traversed), while also retaining Byzantine, Arabic and Jewish features. Social marginality, cultural recombination, and urban relationality concern almost all the types of popular music worldwide-emerged at the beginning of the last century, such as Greek-Turkish *rebetiko*, Argentinean *tango*, the *Neapolitan song* or the countless constellation of Caribbean styles. This issue acquires further significance if we consider the African-American genres: *jazz, blues and ragtime* shared common cultural origins in folklore, but the codicological synthesis they have reached was entirely due to the interactive processes triggered by demographic gatherings in geographically limited areas. If in the processes of acculturation of minorities of African origin we may find joint roots in all three genres, it is once they got immersed into the new urban contexts that the extraordinary musical, cultural, and conceptual dissimilarities become evident. The argument maintains its cogency whether we turn our gaze to more recent cultural phenomena. Hip hop culture is today the 'groundwork' of the most commercially successful youth music. Its 'sonic' expressions in *rap music* emerged from rather depressed urban areas, such as the Bronx in the mid-1970s or Compton in the late 1980s.

The above-mentioned examples do not represent exceptional occurrences, but rather a constant feature: the ability of multiethnic, densely populated cities to foster creativity through creolisation processes. Today, the erosion of spaces generally designated for urban cultural creation have gradually made way for immaterial networks of cultural production. If on the one hand it shall be acknowledged that processes of late globalisation (and thus whatever related to multiculturalism, migratory flows, multiple identities, complex networks) have in some way increased the possibilities that new creolised local scenes may be emerging, on the other hand it shall be admitted that over the last two

decades, urban popular music has gone through a period of substantive stalemate. While the former slums that witnessed the aforesaid emergence of styles that then spread worldwide have been either gentrified or have become tourist attractions bereft of any cultural authenticity, those new urban areas with comparable qualities seem scarcely able to set new creatively lively encounter spaces. Those formerly terrifying, yet culturally surprising neighborhoods no longer seem to instill fear, whereas new threats hover around the future of musical creativity.

Haphephobia and Digital Proxemics

'Haphephobia' is "an anxiety disorder characterized by a fear of touching or being touched", often related to fear of germs, fear of crowds, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Smith 2018). Obviously, the connotation used here does not entirely correspond to the same one shared in psychology; therefore, the concept will be applied metaphorically.

Throughout the global coronavirus pandemic, we have experienced real fear of connecting with others, albeit with no evidence of such phobic traits pointed out by clinical psychology. Recent virus containment measures imposed by governmental health policies – based on physical distancing – have had an immediate impact on the field of creative production. The meeting-places embedded within the city have undergone drastic redesign: theatres, concert halls and public spaces have dramatically reduced their functionality, whilst Internet-based interaction spaces have grown as a 'ersatz'. This scenario might seem unprecedented, though it is actually part and parcel of a well-established process that has been ongoing for years.

By the mid 1980s, as a consequence of the emergence of extensive processes of culture individualisation (Featherstone 1991), urban communities have gradually reduced their influence on the field of cultural production. The altered relation between culture and the city has been mainly studied from the standpoint of cultural consumption, understood either as subordinate to technological and media apparatuses or with regard to the interaction between urban geography and listening modes (Chambers 1994: 49-53; Bull 2007). Nevertheless, today, the realms of cultural production and consumption can hardly be observed separately, since they both operate within the media system, where those cultural exchanges that once belonged to urban space now take place. Indeed, the platformisation of culture has ultimately accelerated the processes of dislocation of cultural

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creation spaces from urban communities driven by human interaction to virtual communities based on computer-mediated communication. A number of today's most successful popular music subgenres among youth audiences – such as *Soundcloud rap, K-pop, chillwave, vaporwave*, and so on (Born & Haworth 2017) – did not only circulate mostly within virtual environments, but took the Net as a proper art world, as the main place of creative interaction at the production stages. It is in the online communities of the participatory web, which facilitate "grassroots creativity" (Humphreys 2008), that new music creators get together, interact and exchange their *culturemes* (Jenkins et al. 2013). Even though computer-mediated communication reserves certain frightening threats (i.e. cybercrimes, privacy infringements, etc.) and some hindrances in the information transfers, digital spaces appear to be more comfortable in comparison to metropolitan suburbs, and digital relationships eventually turn out to be privileged in the creative production context. Moreover, the fact that the Internet is a predominantly textual and despatialised medium implies a subtraction – from the processes of creative interaction – of all those nonverbal communication elements that characterize urban proxemics. The kinesthetic, haptic, visual, and sensory factors involved in human interaction are totally by-passed, and out of that hence comes a totally altered sense of 'spatial empathy'.

According to numerous widely shared arguments among popular music scholars, popular music in the past twenty years has witnessed an abrupt slowdown in the process of redefinition and innovation of its languages, which today are mostly oriented towards recombination rather than novelty. Curiously, these regression processes have coincided with the increased relinquishment of urban space as a creative environment. It can therefore be assumed that the fear of physical contact has a direct impact on the creative charge that can be freed in urban space. Interpersonal distance could reduce the individuals' ability to interconnect their experiences according to the traditional modes of cultural creation and transmission: it is thus inevitable that the city's layout will not be renewed by these dramatic changes in individual and collective behaviour patterns.

Ultimately, it is possible to deduce that creativity in popular music largely depends on human contact, especially if it is engaged in urban areas marked by marginality, and therefore cloaked by a potential, generalised sense of 'fear'. Obviously, music scenes still exist, but over time they have lost the disruptive energy that was typical of the historical forms that shaped the defining features of contemporary western popular music. Some might argue that areas like Shoreditch (London), Williamsburg (New York), Kreuzberg (Berlin), Fitzroy (Melbourne) or the Mission District (San Francisco) perfectly represent the idea of 'creative districts'. These are indeed zones bustling with cafés, galleries, clubs, and activities that generally evoke an idea of urban creativity. In actual fact, they constitute the pinnacle of a process of displacement of working-class, immigrant and ethnic communities (Mould 2018: 249). None of these neighborhoods seem to genuinely reproduce cultural clashes or the Simmelian "unexpectedness of onrushing impressions" (Simmel 1950: 410): they rather tend to be more and more inoffensive, homogeneous, and characterised by an increasingly predictable social geometry (Hubbard 2017: 106-111).

Conclusions

Nowadays, the dislocation of the spatial dimension of musical creativity from urban to digital environments is crystal-clear. Presumably, individuals will increasingly tend to meet less and less within urban communities, favouring despatialised meeting-spaces that are totally deprived of the material and communicational qualities enabled by urban space. The fear of physical contact – or 'haphpephobia' – could have pervasive, irretrievable effects on some forms of artistic production inextricably connected to urban proxemics, such as popular music, which has an original co-implication nexus with the city and the possibilities it offers.

The repercussions of the recent health crisis are still quite uncertain. However, some of its outcomes on the spatial dimension of urban creativity are already plainly evident, although the impact of 'social distancing' on cultural production is neither predictable nor straightforwardly measurable. At the same time, as history has taught us, popular music has owed many of its production, reproduction and consumption processes to a kind of relationality that is inevitably ruled by a logic of non-mediated, physical interaction, which lies in a well-defined spatial framework. The current situation does not suggest opportunities for a return to the city as an exclusive place of creative interaction: some will welcome the emerging scenario as something new and exciting; others, admittedly, will be gripped by a profound, unrestrainable sense of fear.

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