

Pop Music, Cultural Sensibilities and Places: Manchester 1976–1997

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This paper’s claim is that popular music is able to implement places in powerful ways, forming new modalities to conceive and perceive them.

This is the result of a layering: popular music mediates places as textscapes, soundscapes and landscapes. Song lyrics referring to places make up a band’s textscape. The use of local music tradition, vernacular or typical city noises constitute a band’s soundscape. Finally, the landscape consists of all the visual elements (e.g. covers) referring to the same particular locality. Turning to the regeneration level, it seems important to note that music in itself is ethereal, but its production, circulation and fruition rely on material factors located in cities.

This kind of implementation on the representational and regeneration level could be analysed in Manchester. Since the late 1970s, the local popular music scene has adopted a particular ‘cultural sensibility’. Bands such as The Smiths, The Fall, and Joy Division were able to root their poetics in the city, offering a chance to re-imagine it. In the same period, the independent music entrepreneur Tony Wilson developed The Hacienda FAC 51, which set the trend for the regeneration of a whole district.

This case represents a convincing example of a cultural innovation, which relies on redefining the symbolic value of the city’s architectural and social past.

Popular music is nowadays more and more understood as a symbolic capital. Symbolic capital is here meant as based on products and practices, which are consumed for their emotional or intellectual contents (Scott 2001). This kind of capital has been often taken into account in describing the new and pervasive economic development of post-industrial cities. This phenomenon could be confirmed by analysing the way European cities use successful bands and music scenes in promotion and placing strategies. Their presence is traceable in tourist material, city reports in magazines and newspapers, in biddings (e.g. European Capital of Culture) and in regeneration or preservation projects (e. g. Cavern Club in Liverpool, the Battersea power station in London). Certain municipalities have also started adopting dedicated policies to boost local scenes and to increase their visibility (e.g. rehearsal spaces, training schemes and urban festivals).

These strategies are directly connected to the narratives of the 'creative city', as developed by Charles Landry (2000) and Richard Florida (2002) and adopted by big and small municipalities around the globe. These narratives usually advocate 'urban culture' as an instrument of place re-imagining and regeneration. In addition they are aware that, despite deindustrialisation, cultural industries remained in the city and could be nowhere else than there. Cities are understood as places of consumption and spectacle, where 'urban culture' becomes a tool to boost local economy.

Nonetheless, 'creative' policies towards popular music have often failed or have even been harmful. My claim is that these policies tend to neglect some basic aspects of popular music production, consumption and circulation:

1. popular music has always been deeply involved with places and cities in particular
2. the production of popular music is based on the interaction of individual 'cultural sensibilities' and the industry. This interaction could take different forms, for example it could originate out of conflict
3. circulation modifies the place images produced by popular music
4. popular music is able to reshape both the place image and built environment, without the municipality acting as a negotiator

On the level of production, I would like to refer to the concept of 'cultural sensibility', which is here defined as the subjective reaction to certain social or spatial circumstances with a cultural expression. This could be the expression of an individual subject and then adopted by a wider group or it could originate out of interaction within a scene and then spread to the masses. It is cultural sensibility that asserts a certain aesthetic or emotional value to a place. Peter Hall in his study on historical continuities in urban civilisation distinguishes 'cultural/intellectual', 'technological/productive' and 'technological/organizational' cities (Hall 1998 and Hall in: Verwijnen & Lehtovuori 1999). Within the 'technological/productive' typology, he identifies 'creative-innovative cities', referring specifically to the birth of cultural industries and mass culture in the US of the 1950s. On the other hand, in reference to 'cultural/intellectual' cities, the author affirms that (they) 'are not likely to be stable or comfortable places; but they must not have surrendered to total disorder either. Rather, almost invariably, they are places in which the established order is under prolonged challenge by the *new creative groups*, whether or not that challenge takes an explicitly political form' (Hall in: Verwijnen & Lehtovuori, 1999, italics by me). With this latter typology, Hall unfolds a very important aspect of urban creativity, i.e. the involvement of people. In fact, in the view of many scholars concerned with popular culture, people are not only passively consuming goods, as 'mass'; they are also creatively determining the production of culture (Chambers 1986 and Fiske 1989), including the aesthetic choices shaping certain images of the city, which is why I define them as 'cultural sensibilities'.

My thesis is that, today, European ‘creative cities’ could be analysed combining Hall’s ‘creative-innovative’ city (with its stress on the mass production and the built environment) and the ‘creative-cultural’ (with its stress on the presence of new groups challenging the established order through the creation of new place-images).

Considering the circulation of places, we must state that products of popular music are not unique, they are reproduced in thousands, millions of copies; they are built upon transitoriness (Chambers 1986). Record buyers and gig-goers shape their image of particular cities according to the representations they enter in contact with as records or live gigs. Circulation amplifies the creative dimension of a place (the city is perceived merely as the place of a particular scene) and produces new meanings and images. Examples supporting this statement could be Seattle as the capital of grunge, New York and hip-hop, Nashville and country, New Orleans and traditional jazz, Chicago and urban blues, Detroit and the Motown sound.

Manchester between 1976 and 1997 could be considered a place where the cultural sensibility of a few became an instrument to re-imagine the city, its built landscape and its culture. This paper examines the work of new wave and post-punk bands such as Buzzcocks, Joy Division, The Smiths, The Fall and the following *madchester* scene, which spread out of the interaction between the local *indie* music bands and the US imported house music.

The time dimension is based on two events which symbolically started and ended the considered era. In 1976, the infamous London punk band The Sex Pistols played twice at the Lesser Free Trade Hall on 4th of June and on 20th of July. The first gig was attended by fewer than 40 people. The second, after just six weeks, was attended by many more and it was already evident that the audience was composed of the initiators of the developing music scene. This included two members of Buzzcocks (who organized the first gig), Morrissey, the future singer of The Smiths, members of Joy Division, the future NME journalist Rob Morley and the future Factory Records founder Tony Wilson (Nolan 2006). The presence of such a notable contingent of listeners could be read as a confirmation of the existence of a creative milieu based on higher interaction, which is a basic element for understanding local creativity and innovation (Landry 2000). The individuals listed above, involved in various roles as members of the local popular music scene, were proud, independent, self-determining, aware of the cultural distance from London, and of their own industrial and working class heritage (Milestone 1996 and Haslam 1999). In 1997, The Hacienda FAC 51, a club owned by a local team, including Tony Wilson and New Order (the band which featured the three remaining members of Joy Division) closed, ending in a way the creative parable of this scene. That same year the national political context changed drastically, with the election of Tony Blair as Prime Minister. The people involved in the scene, shifted their interest on the national level (which turned local popular music scenes into the all-encompassing ‘Brit pop’); in addition, the internationalization of their success, made them less committed to the local sphere.

Popular music is analysed here because of its ability to implement places in a credible authentic way, forming new modalities to conceive and perceive them. This is the result of layering: popular music products and practices mediate places as *textsapes*, *soundsapes* and *landscapes*. Lyrics and titles of songs referring to places make up a band’s *textscape*. The use of local music tradition, local vernacular or typical city noises constitute a band’s *soundscape*. Finally, the *landscape* consists of all the visual elements (covers, posters, clothes, photo shootings, videos, stage scenography...) referring to the same particular locality or to its previous representations. The mediation of places through three ‘scapes’ turns popular music into a powerful tool for re-imagining places and builds alternative images of cities, circulating around the world in millions of copies.

The Manchester scene made significant use of landscapes; nearly all of the considered bands, from Buzzcocks to Joy Division and The Smiths were pictured, especially at the beginning of their career outside, in open space, posing in front of factories. Chimneys,

cobblestone streets, red brick buildings have been part of the Manchester imagery since the descriptions of Friedrich Engels and the novels of Charles Dickens (Shields 1991 and Moretti 1998). These bands adopted the considered architectural elements as symbolic 'authenticity seals' for their local belonging, confirming the narrative that makes everything 'popular', something 'for real'. In addition, two other considerations could be made. First, showing the empty and decaying temples of capitalism can be linked to the gloom expressed by these bands. They exemplify the emptiness of capitalist society and of industrialism, which can be best grasped as, when money stops running in, unemployment grows and whole districts are left in physical and social decay. Second, it could be read as an ironic overtone. In 1985 the Smiths posed in front of the Salford Lads Club (youth leisure club) for a shot by Stephen Wright, which appeared in the gatefold of the band's 'The Queen is Dead' LP (1986). The club was opened in the beginning of the 20th century, to keep the local Salford youth 'off the streets' and educate them to become 'good citizens', as usual for many other philanthropic initiatives of the time (Lindner 2004). The Smiths posing in front of the club, located at the end of the real 'Coronation Street' opens up a series of questions concerning identity, as the band was increasingly getting media attention for its overt subversion of working class values, while celebrating, at first sight, idleness, criminality and social indifference.

With textscape, I refer to the use of localities, toponymies, street names, monuments, districts, more or less recognizable as such. The references to the quite unmistakable built environment are variously present in songs by these bands. The Smiths refer to iron bridges, disused railway lines and cemetery gates. Additionally city's districts are more or less openly referred to, in particular the, at the time, most rundown and disfavoured, like Whalley Range, Cheetham Hill and Ancoats. The band Joy Division relies less on the direct nomination or representation of the built environment and concentrates much more on its subjective psychological effects. In their lyrics the built environment is evoked because of its monotony and desolation, structuring a sinister textscape, which only through circulation goes back to being identified by the listeners with Manchester.

The soundscape of Manchester is built upon the use of local music tradition, local sound and noises and the vernacular. With 'local music tradition' I refer to the influence of early North American Rock'n'Roll and Soul music (which in the UK is epitomized as *Northern Soul*), widely played in local fairs, workers' clubs and local pubs, the places of the working class. The use of certain sound effects (harmonica, synthetic drums) has often been associated with industrial noises (trains, alarms, heavy industry machineries). In addition, the Mancunian accent is easily recognized and sometimes accentuated by the bands' singers, both in performances and interviews.

Manchester as a place is present on all three levels of representation, which could be adopted in pop music. The city's local music scene was able to deconstruct previous media representation and was able to develop, through individual sensibilities, a different image of the city. Through circulation this image reached millions of people, who were able to make it their own, reshape it again and keep it viable.

Also from the point of view of regeneration, Manchester is a very interesting case study. In fact, as in many other cities around the world, the local independent pop scene developed a fascination for the dilapidated city centre, using run down factories as rehearsal rooms or gig venues. This fascination grew into entrepreneurialism, with The Hacienda FAC 51, a club founded in 1982 by a team of entrepreneurs including the TV journalist Tony Wilson, the members of New Order and their manager, Rob Gretton. The club was located in the Northern Quarter, on the corner between Albion Street and Whitworth Street West, in a former yacht exhibition hall. Thanks to this club the *madchester* scene developed, the first European scene of house music (electronic music based on the performance of DJ and not of a band), connected to the use of ecstasy (an illegal and potentially dangerous drug). An urban cluster

formed, as new clubs, record stores, small shops opened in the same area, while the club became famous all over the world. Unfortunately, at the same time criminality rose because of the drug market control.

The local municipality was not able to be effective in the area and in the scene for a complexity of reasons (speculation, not addressing popular music industries directly as a partner, confusion in dealing with licensing issues and nightlife control, see: Lovatt 1996; Quilley 2000; Brown, O'Connor et al. 2000). In addition, it discovered more fruitful partners (sport, with the Olympic and commonwealth games biddings; education with the Manchester University Agenda 2015). Additionally, the scene was for a long time very diffident of any possible external intervention from politicians.

Pop music offers powerful representations of places, which are able to affect the image of a city as a whole and its material design; working on the ethereal level and on the material level. Individual sensibilities and their networking are indispensable for the creativity and authenticity of a music scene. All these elements could lead us to confirm the role of popular music as symbolic capital. Nonetheless, municipalities could still find difficult to obtain a cultural and economical profit or a benefit for the whole citizens, as long as sensibilities, representation and circulation are not taken into account at a political level.

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