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Revaluing and Suspecting. On the Present Research Conditions

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The subjects dealt with by research on music and sound, as well as their theories and methods, keep diversifying in the face of the emergence of new phenomena and of the adoption of terms and theories originated in other disciplines, promising novel reinterpretations of long installed practices and expressions in research agendas. That diversification becomes particularly notable in sound studies. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sonic Methodologies*, published by Michael Bull y Marcel Cobussen (2021), is more than eloquent in that respect. Through its 849 pages, researchers of different disciplines reflect on methodological questions and show that it is possible to think of sound from a wide variety of theories and disciplines, such as biology, history, urban studies, literature, pedagogy, philosophy, technology studies, medicine, acoustics, art, anthropology, and ethnomusicology, among others.

Acknowledgement of sound ubiquity is not the only factor which nurtures the thematic, theoretical, and methodological diversity in our areas. Another one is also the constant innovation process in the creation, commercialization, distribution, and consumption of music triggered by sound digitalization and, in particular, by the appearance of the virtual environment and its associated technological developments. This constitutes a challenge in various aspects, above all, in the methodological one, as we scholars face the necessity of: a) using new terms, b) rethinking and readapting old methodological resources, and c) making a leap into using suitable tools for data processing. The studies on the technological and practical dimensions of music data processing make use of a series of technical terms, mainly coming from the music and entertainment industry, information technology, and communication studies. So, in order to speak, for example, about the Bizarrap phenomenon, we must do it with terms such as "platformization", "prosumer", "playlistism", "accessibility",

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"datafication", "posfactual society", "cyber-modernity", "tagging", "streaming", among many others. The use of these and other terms is a necessary condition to do research into the music which circulates in the networks. *Without these technical terms there are no case studies* since a phenomenon becomes a case study when a set of terms make it possible to name it, highlight its peculiarities and, above all, question it.

As it has been said, it is also unavoidable to revalue and readapt the methodological resources which were effective in pre-digital and pre-virtual scenarios. One of them is fieldwork. In the area of cultural studies, mainly interested in urban practices, fieldwork has shown its first breakdown. For the ethnographic aspect of music studies, fieldwork is an experience of proximity, of face to face relationships, of long stays, of reflection on the verticality and horizontality of relationships, of self-discovery, of decentralization, etc. In many cases –there are exceptions, of course– cultural studies have reduced that totalizing experience to a narrowed down action: brief and discontinuous attendance to a place and a handful of interviews. Studies on the creation, commercialization, distribution and consumption of music through the networks have struck a second blow to fieldwork: it is no longer a face to face relationship of proximity and coexistence, but communication mediated by a screen –also here, there are exceptions. There are structural and contingent reasons which explain this metamorphosis. Undoubtedly, the benefits which digital communication technology offers in terms of feasibility, costs, speed, ease and register have led to prefer an interview mediated by a device to an in-person one, which involves a bigger investment in transportation time and money. It is evident that the confinement imposed during the pandemic has helped to invigorate that tendency. The truth is that *fieldwork in urban environments tends today to be a kind of decaffeinated survivor,* which must inevitably be mentioned in research and in financing applications in order to be "methodologically correct", although little remains of it.

The conversion of music into data and the transformations that this has generated in its creation, commercialization, distribution and consumption, have also awaken the need for going deep into the knowledge of new methods, in particular in the creation, the processing or, at least, the understanding of the so-called Big Data. Dealing with a huge amount of data is something recent and still limited within music and sound studies. Bibliographic production shows not only naïve but cautious uses of Big Data. This issue raises a question which deserves to be highlighted. In general, theories and methods adopted from other areas of knowledge come from disciplines which hold a critical position toward society

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–and even toward their own methods and theories–, such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, cultural studies, etc. The question is if the use of Big Data and of the tools to process it, mainly coming from companies such as Google, Microsoft, Yahoo!, Facebook, and Amazon, whose exclusive purpose is selling, do not go against the critical tradition of the above mentioned disciplines. In other words, *how risky is the academic use of data and processing tools conceived with the only intention of making people into consumers?* I leave the readers with the concern which this question may arouse on them.

In short, diversification of music and sound studies, regarding subjects, methods, and theories, is bringing about a refreshing change in research routines. Since the beginning of the current century, the transformations which have occurred in the uses of music are being accompanied by transformations of the same depth in research designs. In some cases, as the ones synthetically mentioned in preceding paragraphs, it is necessary to rethink the old methods and, in turn, venture into the use of tools associated with the emerging technologies. It is, once again, about re-evaluating and, above all, creating suspicion in the face of the seduction of data and the tools which process them, created by companies which dominate the digital/virtual market of music.

Bibliography

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