GOING WITH THE FLOW, FLOWING WITH THE SLOW

INTERPRETING TOGETHERNESS AT AMSTERDAM'S ZWANENBURGWAL

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SOMETHING'S HAPPENING HERE

How are we to know a place, how are we to dwell in space? Consider, please, the following:

Exhibit A: *The Zwanenburgwal as seen, Tuesday, March 23, 1 pm*

http://socialscience.nl/2013/04/03/zwanenburgwal-audio/.

Exhibit B: *The Zwanenburgwal as heard, Tuesday, March 23, 1 pm*

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Neither visual nor aural representations of the Zwanenburgwal can offer complete depictions of the site, but both are essential and influential factors in how people perambulate through it. Despite the purported objectivity of ocular-centric modes like maps, which quantify and stultify place in their overreliance on the visual, it is the multisensory perceptions and social practices occurring through time in space that create that space.[i] The reverberations of the social activities and natural cycles that take place in a space – its soundscape – communicate important information about the pace of life therein, and allows passers-through to engage with it and each other accordingly.

[i] *De Certeau's plain but powerful terms are used throughout this essay: space is practiced place (1988:117).*

The flexible and intersubjective nature of the construction of meaningful space is perhaps nowhere more evident than in an open, public site, such as the Zwanenburgwal, which gives the impression of being in-between other, more 'official' spaces with more concrete rules shaping comportment. Nestled between the Waterlooplein (spectacle, heritage, and consumption) and the Stopera (commerce and administration), with a major cycling and pedestrian commuter artery running through it towards Amsterdam's medieval centre, the Zwanenburgwal sees constant activity. It is a point at which two major flows converge, as commuters overlap with tourists and other 'strollers', each group being broadly defined by their impetus to reach variably flexible destinations in variable degrees of haste. With little to hold them at the Zwanenburgwal or tie them together, passers-through are generally atomized and move through the space quickly.

Musical experience and affect remain unfettered by words, irrevocably interior and individual

SHARING MUSIC, SHARING MORE?

But what happens to these flows of individuals, I ask, when music is added to this spatial situation? A rotating cast of live musicians can be found on any given day at the Zwanenburgwal (provided the rain stays away). Art and literature on music as a catalyst of inclusivity is abundant, and one need not be a music scholar to

attest to the effusive sense of togetherness that a musical experience can entail. Will a musical performance change the way people behave at the Zwanenburgwal, and thereby change the place into a space to 'hang out' with others rather than one to quickly pass through? Unfortunately, the collectivizing 'magic of the music' is seemingly impossible to locate empirically; musical experience and affect remain unfettered by words, irrevocably interior and individual, leaving the listener with only her own perception and experience from which to extrapolate that of others.

Part of the problem with pinning down this sense of we-ness, it seems, is its implicit goal of unity, uniformity, togetherness. Alfred Schutz's work on the phenomenology of music exemplifies this stance, with its concern on the sharing of inner time as orchestrated through that singular organ of music, the passive ear (1964). Schutz privileges time at the expense of space, bifurcating spatial experience from the acoustic field (Pedone 1995:204). Space is supplementary to communication, as the "primordial situation" of all possible communication is the sharing of the other's flow of experiences in the inner time, and the togetherness of this musical tuning-in relationship is experienced as 'we' (Schutz 1951:177). Perhaps, though, if we shift our expectations for the intersubjective texture of a shared musical encounter towards a weaving together of individual *durées* instead of a confluent flow, we can find a means of understanding music's impact on time, space, and sociality without collapsing the jumbled-up diversity within the encounter.

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Enter Lefebvre and his rhythmanalysis project, which holds that life is a tangle of repetitive and cyclic practices through which individuals use a particular sense of time to occupy space. "Everywhere there is a time, a space, and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm" (2004:14). Rhythms, he writes, are necessarily comparative, and social rhythms are sustained intersubjectively, whether through overt communication or sensory perception. Like any other stimuli, music, a focal feature unfolding through time and space, can influence one's rhythm; however, in important contrast

to Schutz, Lefebvre holds that “musical time resembles [rhythms] but *reassembles* [rhythms]” (64). In a given encounter, like the daily musical performances at the Zwanenburgwal, each individual will have his or her own rhythm as she navigates through space, time, and the social; it is the relationship between rhythms – the patterning and degree of their harmonization – that the researcher can perceive and pursue, and that can tell us something about the extent to which people are generating leisurely space and time together.

With music, and the collective loitering it seemed to encourage, the Zwanenburgwal was transformed

This became the orienting goal for my short fieldwork stint at the Zwanenburgwal. Having previously passed through the space countless times as both a stroller and a commuter, when the time came to examine how the other people were using it, the openness of the site and the illegibility of any coherent behavioural rules became quickly apparent. Eventually, however, it became clear that, though the physical and visual space itself was not changing, the sounds that could be heard therein were, and behaviour and interaction in the space were also changing accordingly. This could be sensed in observing and hearing people’s actions, even in the minute and mostly silent ways they were manifest. Music seemed to braid together the variable flows of people, slowing down (and sometimes stopping) the commuters and alerting the tourists and strollers that something was happening here; with music, and the collective loitering it seemed to encourage, the Zwanenburgwal was transformed from an empty container to an enthralling social field, a worthy stopover or perhaps even a destination in itself.

My question thus became: to what extent does music influence the rhythms of (inter)personal comportment at the Zwanenburgwal? And, from this, how can rhythmanalysis help us perceive the formation and enacting of intersubjective bonds in a public space? Based on the preliminary theoretical argument advanced in this introduction, I will next describe and present my findings from the approximately fifteen hours I spent at the Zwanenburgwal between late February and early April, 2010, conducting participant observation. This admittedly short empirical exercise will be further

nuanced in the theoretical and methodological discussion to follow, as even a mere rhythmic snippet can help us rethink how we inhabit (and analyze) a familiar setting.

STOP, THERE, WHAT'S THAT SOUND?

The Zwanenburgwal became my second home over this month and a half period, as I'd regularly spend an hour or two at a time sitting in various places around it or passing through it on my cycle route in and out of Amsterdam's circular centrum. I also went on 'soundwalks' of the space, entering it along different routes to pinpoint where certain musical sounds could be first detected and the effect this had on my visual and haptic engagement with the site. Adams et al. (2008) have recommended the soundwalk methodology as a means of identifying and understanding people's experiences and perceptions of acoustic urban environments, and it complements Lefebvre's recommended behaviour for rhythmanalysts, that is, listening first to one's own body and then from it to appreciate external rhythms (2004:19). Engaging all of the senses, not just sight, one has to be grasped by the rhythms that surround them. The focus starts from the body but does not remain there.

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I attended the site between 12PM and 3PM on weekdays, predicting that this would be its busiest period, as foot tourism's midday peak coincides with professionals zipping to and from their lunch engagements. Most of the days were light overcast and between 10 – 15 degrees Celsius, with a mildness typical of the season. Weather (its own set of rhythms) is understandably an important factor in determining how to use an outdoor, exposed space, and on the days when it was not so pleasant, the space saw less traffic, and musicians hardly played.

But when the weather was fine, there were almost always musicians to be found at the Zwanenburgwal, generally positioning themselves close to the base of the bridge leading to the Staalstraat.

[ii] Two other performers could regular be found during this period: an older Roma woman with an accordion, and a young Irish man playing the fiddle. Each performing unit produced a different kind of sound, and different patterns of engagement – between individuals, with the musician, and with the physical aspects of the Zwanenburgwal – could be observed. The woman was largely ignored and her music did not inspire people to change their pace or dwell in the space longer than necessary. The young man was treated as a spectacle, with people slowing down and watching him *more often. Given the scope of the assignment, however, I here focus on the*

Later, I will discuss one particular performing unit[ii], an ensemble of 2 – 5 middle-aged Bulgarian men playing Balkan or klezmer music with clarinets, saxophones, and accordions. But before this case, I will explore the conditions perceived during relative, ambient silence to contextualize the more overt musical effects.

AMBIENT SILENCE

> *February 23, 1:30PM. Bright but high overcast. Quiet, quiet... a pair of women sit and chat at Spinoza's base. Nobody is really stopping as they come over the bridge, most continue straight towards the Waterlooplein. A couple points at the sculpture as they approach, they look at it as they pass but head for the inscription instead. They walk back around its other side, closer to the water, opposite the two women still seated. They check their map and move along the Amstel. (Excerpt from author's field notes.)*

Walking through the space, I find the silent Zwanenburgwal pleasant but I am not compelled to stop in it, especially if there is already a person or two there. Those I pass keep their heads down and do not meet my eyes. When there are few people passing through the space and it is mostly empty, however, I am sometimes attracted to the solitude it seems to promise. Zipping through it on my bike, it is easy to miss if there is no music and few people.

Physically unbounded by sound-obstructing buildings and open to a number of directions, the Zwanenburgwal is never completely void of sound. But even though a number of sounds constantly resonate there, it can be characterized as a quiet space, and people seem drawn to its relatively silent sonic ambience. There is typically little inter-group conversation or acknowledgement among those at the site, as people keep their voices low and have enough space to maintain and respect personal 'bubbles'. When there is no music, people will still pause at the Zwanenburgwal, take a photo, or examine the sculpture of Spinoza. But, in general, from my observations, when following performers are present, *more* people spend *more* time in the space, and display a greater range of behaviours in relation to each other.

THE BULGARIAN ENSEMBLE'S PERFORMANCE

Bulgarian ensemble, as it attracted the most contrasting change of rhythms from the 'normal' situation of relative silence.

> *March 1, 2PM. Windy, partially cloudy. Warm in the sun but quite cool otherwise. Just two of them today. Accordion and clarinet. Can also hear the brick-tapping of construction at Café Dantzig. They play the same tune... epic endless dirge. An older woman stops and looks over the bridge – takes a moment for herself? She's back on her way. A couple walking over the bridge – they are looking around for where the sound is coming from. They see the musicians. The woman points at Spinoza and they stroll towards it, gaze up towards his head. A different woman stops between the musicians and the Waterlooplein, slightly behind them even, arms loosely crossed, looking out towards the Amstel but also at the people coming over the bridge. She is smiling. An older man pulls over next to the Stopera and droops over his bike... 10 minutes or so like this then back on his way.*

I remember clearly the first time I heard this ensemble play; I was struck by how engaging their music was and whatever conversation I was having quickly disintegrated. It felt surreal. They cannot be heard too far away (cresting the bridge from the Staalstraat; passing the last market stall from the Waterlooplein; approaching the corner of the Stopera along the Amstel) so it is somewhat shocking when the sound is heard and quite suddenly you are upon them (once you realize where the sound is coming from). Their music is powerful but it is not overpowering. I still find myself smiling when I hear them play and often this expression is matched by others.

The Bulgarian ensemble is a regular fixture at multiple sites around Amsterdam, and has a distinctive, full sound. Indeed, with their relatively diminutive presence at the base of the bridge, it often takes people a few instances to locate where the music is coming from. Cyclists and pedestrians alike are more often seen grinning when the music is playing, and often noticeably slow their pace through the Zwanenburgwal space. Cyclists pull over more frequently when this ensemble plays, often not dismounting and parking, but just resting to the side and gazing vaguely towards the ground or to themselves.

The lingua franca seems to be an appreciative smile

Rather than directly observing the musicians, people tend to survey the site more openly. Many (primarily those on foot) take photos of Spinoza, with both cameras and smartphones, and from the bridge more often than when other music (or no music) is playing. The photo-taking is often disorderly, but few seem to notice or mind that their frames overlap and include strangers. Few take photos of the musicians directly, with the exception of an Asian family who stood right in front of the ensemble one day and, when invited to do so by one of the musicians, began posing with the band. Other observable behaviours include map-checking, sitting at the base of Spinoza for a few moments (generally not directly facing the musicians), and reading the plaque next to the statue. Typically, the space is more populated when the Bulgarians play than when there is no music, but even though there is more gathering there is still very little direct, audible interaction among strangers. The lingua franca seems to be an appreciative smile, often directed outward to match the surveying of the site.

MAKING SENSE OF MOVEMENT

Clearly, the music did not have strangers dancing together in the *fietspad* [bike path], drawn into a singular sense of time structured by the unfolding music. It did, however, alter the way people interacted with the space and each other. Considering the situation, with its non-uniform reactions to the performances, calls into doubt Schutz's claim that the meaning of a musical text is within the temporal structure of the music itself, that its performance 'restores' the composer's inner stream of consciousness and draws others into this temporal flow, a mutual and undifferentiated 'tuning-in'. Schutz suggests that listeners need no particular frame of reference to make sense of music, but, in examining a situation where individuals from inestimable cultural backgrounds interact with each other, it becomes apparent that there are numerous ways in which a person will engage with music and the sense of temporality it offers.

It may, then, be both more accurate and more empirically verifiable to think of space and time together – 'space-time' – and investigate how people together create a temporal sense of place through their activities, or in other words, how through their actions while slowing down and dwelling in the place they generate a sense of the Zwanenburgwal as a pleasurable leisure space. These activities will not be strictly simultaneous or synchronized – owing to the multiplicity of both individualized and cultural ideas about proper public listening behaviour and the structuring of personal boundaries – but they are intersubjectively performed, as individuals entering the space perceive it in terms of sound *and* sight of the social *and* the environmental and determine how they will act accordingly. Whether they intend to or not, anyone passing through the Zwanenburgwal will be confronted with the music and the others present, with their whole bodies as they navigate the actors linked together in this spatialized auditory field. Their physical slowing and related reactions do not represent a suspension of their rhythm but an attenuation of its 'beat' in relation to their encounter with others' rhythms, how they are spending their time in the space.

There are many factors that the perceiving ethnographer cannot know about this phenomenon: the intentions and motivations people bring to the encounter, the meanings they generate in the music and the space, the level of their consciousness and reflection on the 'experience' at the time, and the perceived quality of their intersubjective connections. While we can observe and hear the practices that take place during the musical encounter, we cannot definitively conclude the subjective state they indicate; we cannot be sure to what degree the other observed practices in the site are self-conscious strategies of self-preservation in a decentering urban field, as Lofland's (1973) analysis of privatizing public space suggests, or if they are less- or non-reflective behaviours of leisurely dwelling based on sedimented habits and implicit correlation with what they perceive others doing nearby.

But what we *can* tell is that, even through such inconspicuous actions, people produce musical space-time together. Wunderlich (2010), in her application of rhythmanalysis to London's Fitzroy

Square, suggests that certain places can be experienced as "temporally distinct," an aesthetic that is created and sustained in the intertwining of social activities and movements. As people hear the music and slowly walk down the bridge or pull over on their bikes, they become attuned to the space. Demonstrating interest in what else it might have to offer, they together generate a temporal distinction for the Zwanenburgwal as a space of leisure, calm, and enjoyment. The music is a plane cutting through otherwise unrelated and individuated experiences, but the Zwanenburgwal's burgeoning sense of leisure time does not result solely from the original intentions of the composer or even the performers. Such "common temporal experiences" suggest a sense of time is both intersubjective and place-specific, "produced and perceived jointly" (45). They are not dancing in sync, but they are changing their pace in relation to each other.

They are not dancing in synch, but they are changing their pace in relation to each other

We can interpret the increased instances of such collective behaviours as evidence that sound inevitably but non-uniformly cuts across otherwise individuated boundaries, creating 'eurhythmic' (complementary) but not 'isorhythmic' (identical) garlands among bodies, to borrow from Lefebvre's vocabulary. And we can understand that musical sound (like any sound) is generated and experienced in a complicated temporal-spatial-social framework; neither of these three can be properly considered without the others. Rhythmanalysis, with its focus on how places are always in a process of becoming and temporarily/temporally stabilized by patterns of personal flow, can bring a semblance of structure to the messiness of the urban public everyday.

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