Practicing Urban Media Studies:
An Interview With Will Straw

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In this interview, Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell discuss with Will Straw, professor of urban media studies at McGill University, Canada, his views of this subject area. Professorships that would explicitly focus on the intersection of media studies and urban studies are rare internationally, Straw's position being one of them. The interview sheds light on how urban media studies came about and were institutionalized at McGill University, how Straw practices urban media studies in his own teaching, and how he sees the future of this "interdiscipline." The second part of the interview addresses two of Straw's main research topics and their relation to urban media studies: his studies on scenes and the night.

Will Straw is James McGill Professor of Urban Media Studies in the Department of Art History and Communications Studies at McGill University. He is the author of *Cyanide and Sin: Visualizing Crime in '50s America* (Andrew Roth Gallery, 2006) and coeditor of several volumes including *Circulation and the City: Essays on Urban Culture* (with Alexandra Boutros), *Formes Urbaines* (with Anouk Bélanger and Annie Gérin), and *The Oxford Handbook to Canadian Cinema* (with Janine Marchessault). He has published widely on popular culture of all kinds and is the author of more than 150 articles on music, cinema, and urban culture.

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Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
Thank you very much for accepting the invitation to talk with us about urban media studies, Professor Straw. During the past eight years, we have promoted in ECREA's [European Communication Research and Education Association] Media & the City working group stronger ties between the broad fields of media studies and urban studies. We have coined the interdisciplinary endeavor that has both an educational and a research angle urban media studies*, and, until recently, we believed no such scholarly constellation exists anywhere. Therefore, we were excited to learn that you have been involved in a similar effort already for*

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years and that your professorship even has this very name. Could you provide us with a bit of a background concerning this title? How is it that your university has a professorship in urban media studies?

Will Straw:
Yeah. Actually it's not so many years since I have this particular professorship. There are two things, first of all, which have to do with the organization of academic life in Canada. One thing I have personally done for many years is offer a graduate seminar, my principal graduate seminar for master's and doctoral students, on media and urban life. Sometimes I call it "urban media studies," sometimes "media and urban culture," but it has been a consistent part of my teaching for about 15 years. It's a course with some core ideas and focuses, but because so much is happening, I change it a lot every year. The second part, though, is the fact that I now have the title of "James McGill Professor of Urban Media Studies," and the rationale for that is quite banal. It's not as if my institution took a collective decision: "We need this." Rather, for reasons having to do with my own career, I was granted what they called a James McGill Professorship and I was allowed to give it the title that I wanted. So, I decided this is the perfect chance to take the title of "urban media studies," and it's as simple as that. I wanted to signal to the rest of the university that there is such a thing as urban media studies. In the context of Canada, this is quite important, because we tend to think of media in national terms: the protection of Canadian culture, the building of nation, and so on. So there was a slight bit of subversion perhaps.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
In other words, you aimed to move the main focus of media studies from the national level to the urban level?

Will Straw:
Yeah, I have a larger argument about how culture and media in Canada have become urbanized, in the sense that the key questions now are about proximity, about living together. This is assuming an increasing relevance relative to the issues of the past, like questions about defining the national character or defining a national culture. As to how I have developed the interest in this topic, when I began university, I wanted to be a journalist and I started to study undergraduate journalism, but then for various reasons, I dropped out and eventually came to film studies, in which I had been previously interested without studying it. There is, of course, a long tradition of looking at the relationship between media and cities that mostly has to do with journalism, such as the Chicago School of Sociology, looking at the role of journalism in a civic culture that is more or less urban. I was interested in this tradition, but what really gave me a renewed interest was—and I know this is getting unfashionable—reading Kittler on cities (Kittler & Griffin, 1996) and asking, "How is there a mediality of cities?" I have written about this (Straw, 2014a), and I am very interested in how cities remember. How do they stock or store things from the past? I am interested in them as systems of circulation (Straw & Boutros, 2010). I am interested in them as kind of platforms and about 10 years ago, I became very much interested in the analogy of the city and mediality.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
What is of pivotal relevance, in your view, for the development of the field?

Will Straw:

I have always believed that communications and media studies are best when they stay close to the human sciences and not simply to the social sciences. I am proud of the fact that I was one of those who created my department, which is one of art history and communication studies. I did so, because I wanted communications to be close to art history, which is obviously very much a discipline in the humanities. So, I have always been interested in writings on the relationship between literature and the city, for example. Then key works for me were those like French writer Pierre Sansot's (1971) *Poétique de la ville*, and also works by David Henkin (1998) on city reading: the idea of cities as spaces of textuality. Now, I think there have been kind of dead ends in the analogy of the city as text; it has not entirely fulfilled its promise. But you can also think about cities not as texts, but as full of various kinds of textuality: a textuality that moves through the city in multiple ways, that attaches itself to walls and buildings, and that circulates through speech. So, there is a way in which retaining an interest in mostly literary approaches to cities can give communication studies a kind of finesse, a subtlety that is often missing in traditions of strictly social science analysis.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:

Can you clarify what you mean by the social science approach to communication? In Italy and Finland, where we come from, the distinctions between the less quantitative approaches in social sciences and the humanities are not so clear-cut. We realize this does not match with academic traditions in Anglo-Saxon countries.

Will Straw:

You are absolutely right. I spend a lot of time with French colleagues, who are media scholars, and I have noticed exactly what you say: Their work embraces much of what I would consider the social sciences. Even the Italian bookstores I have visited here in Bologna this morning show this. It's kind of puzzling: I was looking at books and in many cases I was thinking, "Why is that in the social studies section?" In my view, it's partly an institutional difference. In Canada, communication studies came out of literary departments, Marshall McLuhan, for one, was a scholar of James Joyce. In the United States, media studies are just as likely to come from social psychology and from disciplines that are much more concerned with measuring impacts, measuring effects, and so on. There are sophisticated social science approaches to media that I don't want to dismiss as crudely statistical. But what I mean is that I do want an approach to media—to clarify with an example—that includes cinema in all of its culturally inflected ways; that includes literature as a form of media production that is more or less urban.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:

One of the common methodological concerns that we can notice within present urban media studies is the attempt to go beyond a conceptualization of media simply as agents of representation. Although a focus on representation is obviously of key importance in tackling issues concerning the media city, it seems to be not sufficient to bridge the gap between the fields of urban studies and media studies. What is your take on addressing the question of representation in the urban context? Put more generally, in what sense are media and the city coconstitutive in your view?

Will Straw:

That is a very interesting and very big question. If we think of the movement called the "cinematic city movement" in the study of cinema (see, for example, Alsayyad, 2006; Clarke, 1997; Mennel, 2008; Tonkiss, 2005) that lasted from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, we could say that some of that work was very good, but some of it was simply focused, as you suggest, on how films represent the city. Yet, within that research approach there was something more: Some of the key texts, like the one by Benjamin Singer (1995) on modernity, were really about whether our urban modernity and cinema are somehow coconstitutive. Of course, the main concern there is about urban modernity producing cinema in its various forms, but it wasn't simply about how cinema represented the city. It was about how cinema partook of the modernity in speed, in its ephemerality. So, I find that what one wants now is a view of media within the broader circulation of urbanity. In fact, to me, some of the most interesting works on journalism are, for example, by French historians of the press like Dominique Kalifa (2019) and Marie-Eve Thérenty (2007) and her colleagues (Kalifa, Régnier, Thérenty, & Vaillant, 2011). They look at the 19th century and at the ways in which journalism occupies a particular role in the circulation of discourse within cities. It very often translates the orality first of parliamentary speeches, but secondly of café/Bohemian gossip into textual form. It produces new journalistic forms that translate those forms of oral speech. I think once you have this idea of cities as complex spaces of circulation, you understand that journalism is a particular moment and platform within this kind of translation. This interests me very much.

I am also very interested in another project that I have been working on for too long, for 15 years, on gossip and tabloid newspaper culture in New York in the 1920s and 1930s. This culture begins by taking the backstage gossip of vaudeville and theater and developing journalistic forms that can somehow circulate that, but also capture some of its secrecy. I think that's what a good urban media studies might do. In the case of cinema, the key question for many people changed in the last 20 years from the old Bazinian question "What is cinema?" to the question "Where is cinema?" In other words, what are the spaces of the city in which moving images are to be found? What therefore is their proximity to other urban spaces and practices? How can you expand that to ask about the place of cinema going in the daily itineraries of people as they move through cities, and so on? Again, I think that these kinds of questions can help us develop interesting urban media studies.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
You introduced earlier a distinction between city as text and city as textuality. Can you elaborate this distinction a bit further?

Will Straw:

I think the question of how is a city like a text is an interesting intellectual puzzle and there are interesting things, for example, about how a newspaper front page is like a city (for example, Fisher, 2006). Both, in a way, are labyrinths of a sort. But the city is also a social entity, with inequalities, power relationships, and all of these other things. Since the 1960s, people have constantly tried to develop an urban semiotics. But my question is: Is there anything more there than trying to use the jargon of semiology in urban theory or urbanism? I feel that this approach has been kind of a failure, because the city is not simply a text. Of course, we have the tension between the written and the oral, the circulatory energies of texts, and so on, and those are part of urbanity, but you cannot conflate the city with text or even with textuality. Yes, we read the city, and De Certeau (1980) would say that we also write a city, but those to me are always analogies that are only momentarily useful and interesting.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
What is there, in the urban experience, that is not textual or cannot be compared to text?

Will Straw:
One can save the textuality approach by textualizing everything, of course. There is even a point at which you can say, "Okay, well, maybe buildings are not texts, but they are rhetoric." Or since the body engages in performances, you can choose a way in which you move a little bit toward theatrical models that are kind of textual, as in a sort of puzzle I could incorporate all that within the textual model, but what is the point? Even good textual analysts of literature now are saying that we need to look at the relationship of the book as an object and bodily interconnection or prosthesis. All of this is opening up in a way that makes the textual seem kind of quaint. I do believe that people are going to be good urban media scholars if they've spent a couple of years in their undergraduate education studying textual theory, narrative theory, and so on, but I no longer believe that that should dominate. When I first began being interested in cities, I had quite a strong background in semiotics. It was one of these things like psychoanalysis that I felt I needed to know, even if I didn't really end up using it. As I said, at the end it seems to me just a matter of calling with new names things for which urbanists or architectural historians already had their own names. So, the notion of the city as text seemed to me much less interesting than the idea that Kittler and others (Kittler & Griffin, 1996) have posed of the city as medium. Although even then I'm not sure that the city is a medium; rather, it partakes of mediality, that is, it transmits, it stores, and it processes. Those are Kittler's and others' famous definitions of what makes a medium. The city does more than express or communicate. I think the city partakes in processes of textuality and meaning in multiple ways, and those are not all about simply expressing—they are not about signifying. I would not say the city is a medium, as Kittler's question implicates, but I would say that in various ways different parts of the city partake of and participate in mediality. Of course, to say that the city as a unity does this is to ascribe a unity that the actual city does not coherently and homogenously fulfill. Nevertheless, it is medial in multiple ways. It transmits people, it stores histories. It processes languages—of fashion, for example—and so on, into various kinds of graphic forms. All of these are part of the mediality of the city.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
So, when you stress the idea of urban mediality over the idea of the city as a medium, you want to take your distance from a unitary idea of how the city works? Do you want to stress its diversity, even incoherence, its polyphonic way of working?

Will Straw:
Yes, but the fact is that the city is other things as well. It's a place in which food and money are distributed unevenly, for example. You could use an idea of the city as medium and tinker with it enough to make it include all these things, but that's not useful to me, because if you are saying the city is a medium, are you saying it is *essentially* a medium? No, of course not. It's also a political, economic, biological, biopolitical entity. We were never going to really answer the question "Is the city a medium?" in an absolute way. I do think there is an adequation of certain concepts that is greater than the adequation of others, but it really is in part the usefulness of them getting at certain things. Take the question of how cities store. It is something I was kind of interested in before Kittler, but he puts it together as one of the fundamental functions of the city. Of course, the city does more than that, but his is a productive idea that leads to lots of new work, which to me is interesting and that's how a field develops.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
Your course on urban media studies probably reflects your view of the field. How is it structured?

Will Straw:
Yes. Well, it changes quite a bit, but what I do in the very first week, and this has turned out to work quite well, is to say there are all of these models: the city as text or language or speech, the city as marketplace, the city as a larger version of the village, the city as system or machine, the city as organism, the city as laboratory, the city as archive, the city as ethos, and basically, urbanity is believed to reside in each of those. In each case, there are a number of authors and writings you can point to as exemplifying the model in question. Then, I go through these and I get the students to talk about the advantages and disadvantages of each model. At the end, I do something very crude, which is to say, "Which is your favorite and which is the least?" This is interesting in part because it is the city as text-language-speech that most often ends up being the least convincing.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
Would you illuminate, even if briefly, each of those eight models and mention some of their key points?

Will Straw:
I guess we have already discussed about the city as text. The city as marketplace is based on the idea that the city emerges when an agricultural surplus is produced in ancient societies, so originally it becomes the place of transaction. It doesn't mean you have to have a market with stalls and so on, but just generally the city is a space of exchange: It's about the distribution of a surplus. Obviously, there are many different accounts of that. Of course, you can expand that beyond strictly economic markets to talk about cultural markets, transactions of lifestyle, of sexuality, and so on, in which case it becomes metaphorical. In this model, the ideal modern city is a bazaar; the city is a space of circulation.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
Then we have the model of the city as an expanded village.

Will Straw:
The idea of the city as an expanded village basically says that the city begins like the village as a place in which people come together for protection and sociability, and that there is no qualitative difference between the city and the village. It argues that the transition from the village to the city is one of scale, not of kind. I look at how various authors have looked at places like Greenwich Village or Times Square in New York (Taylor, 1992) and tried to find within them something of the village. Then, I contrast that with other views, like Jane Jacobs (1961), who would say that what is essential about these places is that there is an urbanity that is not simply the reproduction within the city of the village. Or Iris Marion Young (1990), and in particular her idea that people don't go to cities to find the village; they go to cities to hide and be eccentric and to live out nonconforming sexual identities and so on.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
What about the role of media in these models?

Will Straw:
In each case, media have a particular status and role. In the model which sees the village and the city as different only in scale, the role of media is to constantly reproduce feelings of solidarity. It's always about the comfortable assimilation of everything as meaningful and thereby intelligible. From the opposite perspective, truly urban media then are those which constantly make us think that there is something in the city that escapes our immediate apprehension.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
Does this idea of the city as a village relate somehow to your interest in gossip?

Will Straw:
The very term *gossip* refers, I think in Danish, to someone like a godfather or godmother: someone within the immediate proximity of a family who talks. So, the initial definition of gossip presumes an intimate kind of network. But, of course, gossip becomes the quintessentially urban form of uncontrolled circulation of rumor and talk, moving over a few centuries away from that dependence upon an intimate connection to capture the uncontrollability of discourse within the city. And now we have the gossip columns in newspapers and Twitter and everything else. If you look at gossip magazines in New York in 1905–1906, which were produced for the rich elites, there was gossip that simply told them all the secrets they already suspected of the people they knew, with whom they took their vacations on Cape Cod, and so on. Then, gossip becomes bound to a celebrity culture from which most people are at a great distance, thereby shifting to a whole other scale that does not presume the circumscribed worlds in which previously it had moved.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
Then we have the model of the city as machine or system. . . .

Will Straw:
The city as system and machine, then, is a model that reigns through the 20th century in modernist architecture. In architecture, there is the idea that the city is a system for the fulfilling of certain functions, for moving people, and so on (see the good overview in Mumford, 1965). Understandably, students immediately react negatively to this, because it is so dehumanizing, and is the basis for approaches to urban administration that see noise and malfunction as challenges that must be overcome. Shannon Mattern's (2017) "The City Is Not a Computer" is a very important text in this respect, in my view. More recently, I have updated the idea of the city as system or as machine with notions of the city as assemblage and network (Farías & Bender, 2012), depicting the city as a network of bodies, materialities, technologies, objects, natures, and humans. The strong version of this is that the city is a self-correcting mechanism oriented toward its own smooth functioning. The weak version is maybe that the city ideally would be a mechanism, but it's fragile, and so the whole historical point and labors of city administration have been about trying to control that. This gets me into the ideas of circulation, which interest me a lot. Is the city as system and machine like the nervous system that the body has?

Then, I move to the idea of city as organism, where the metaphors are not machinic, but biological. Then, of course, there is a long history from the 19th century of the city as a jungle, the city as a wilderness. There are also the more positive versions that view the city as an ecology, or as a natural entity in the sense of things

being interconnected and interdependent. We deal, here, with such approaches as what Mary Poovey (1995) calls anatomical realism, the Chicago School of Sociology's notion of the city as organic and so on.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
What about the city as a laboratory?

Will Straw:
There are some scholars for whom the principal distinctiveness of the city is that it is a place for the production of the new and that this is what distinguishes it from the repetitive production of agricultural agrarian societies. Chad Heap (2003) has an interesting discussion of the Chicago School's sense of the city as a sexual laboratory. So, the city is a space of experimentation: not just new forms of cohabitation, but new forms of solidarity, new forms of conjugal relationships, new forms of sexuality, new forms of subcultural belonging that replace or displace the family, new ethics of citizenship, and so on. There's an interesting article by Berking and Neckel (1993) on urban marathons, which depicts them as an experimental field of modernity: The city becomes a playground for adventures of the self. My students tend to like the idea from Park (Park & Burgess, 1925) that the city is a laboratory or clinic in which human nature and social processes may be studied. The notion of the city as laboratory is, more and more, provocative and contested, because it is maybe too complicit with ideas of the creative city or the endlessly improving city. Yet, I think it warrants discussion. What are the ways in which cities live and die? Do cities really become stagnant, or is there an endless experimentation that we define as essentially part of urbanity?

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
Then there is the city as archive. . . .

Will Straw:
This is the one that perhaps has most interested me. My interest grows in part from my more specialized research on how cities dispose of secondhand or used commodities, and how cities are very good at finding places to hide things, or finding places to accumulate things even when their immediate use value seems to have disappeared. Lefebvre (1968) talks about how one of the essential democratic features of the city is that it accumulates things that don't belong to me, but that I can enjoy. I can walk around Bologna and enjoy all these results of what might have been a horrific capitalism, but nevertheless the city has preserved them as a source of my enjoyment and not simply as the manifestation of its own power. The whole modernist idea was to get rid of the city as a space of accumulation to start anew as tabula rasa, but I think most of what we like about urbanities is the multiple layering of temporalities. This makes cities pedagogical in a sense, because as spaces they are constantly instructing us in the different relationships of the old to the new. In elaborating the idea of the city as archive, I use an article by Philip Fisher (2006) on James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which explores the analogy that I've referred to earlier between newspaper and city and the idea that in both the modern novel and in the city, you have a shift. Applying Fisher's idea of tabulation, that is, lists and inventories, to cities makes them appear as ways of storing tens of thousands of separate decisions, facts, and so on, rendering these visible, accessible, and perceptible in various ways.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
Finally, we have the city as ethos. What is it about?

Will Straw:
I include this partly because I want to open onto affect theory, but the idea goes back at least as far as the work of Simmel (1971) on the city as a particular sensual complex and on to later work on the sensualities of the cities (Nead, 2000). It's just that there is so much interesting work now around ambiences and atmospheres and the very idea that urbanity is above all a particular sensibility (e.g., Burstein, 2002; Thibaud, 2013). I have added this one in the last two years because it bounds to a lot of very interesting new work, and also partly because it bounds also to my own work on how scenes develop (Straw, 2002). I'm trying to bring it into dialogue with stuff on ethos and ambience. But basically for me it's relevant because if by cities we mean something like urbanity, there are strong arguments that more than anything else, it's about new kinds of personality, new kinds of subjecthood that involve new kinds of ethos and ambience.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
So, we would like to turn now to two of the main topics you have addressed in your work: your studies on scenes (Casemajor & Straw, 2017; Straw, 1996, 2014b; Marchessault & Straw, 2001), and the ones on the night (Straw, 2014c, 2016, 2019a, 2019b). Both of these topics seem to us to have relevance also for urban media studies. We would start with a definition of the concept of scene*, with which you made a key contribution to subcultural and popular music studies.*

Will Straw:
Well, I would basically say you have a scene when you have two things. You need on the one hand an activity or an object of veneration, of production, of desire. Then, you also need a supplement of sociability that takes shape around that. If you're simply talking, for example, about people who make electronic music, then you're talking about a production culture and there's a whole literature that describes that. If you're only talking about atmosphere and ambience, there is a literature of affect, but it's the relationship between the two that matters: how cities produce, out of activities of work and cooperation, various kinds of sociability, and how cities themselves as spaces are dotted with these clusters in which we can see a relationship between a visible public sociability and intimacy, on the one hand, and underlying relationships of production and exchange on the other. Yet, I think the history of my interest in scene is interesting in terms of this discussion: When I first thought about scene, around 1989, I was one of two or three people thinking about it. We didn't think at all about cities. I mean, we were thinking often about these American college towns that had these musical cultures, and I proposed the notion of "scene" in opposition to that of community: The 1991 article that I wrote was called "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Scenes and Communities in Popular Music" (Straw, 1991).

What I came to realize 10 years later, when the whole kind of urban cultural studies was taking off, was that this provided a new context for that idea. When I published the paper in 1991, no one was really thinking about cities: There was a little revival of interest in Walter Benjamin, but all of the writing on cities which we have since was not really there. So, when I reread my piece from 1991, I realize that my idea of scene was about an urbanity that I was opposing to the kind of static notion of community. What I was basically trying to do was to set the values of musical cosmopolitanism against those of deeply rooted community,

and arguing that even in these local musical cultures, which so much valorize their own deep-rooted localism, there was nevertheless a cosmopolitanism. This meant that if you traveled around these college towns in the United States, you would find more or less exactly the same things. You could not say that those local specificities of style had deep roots within long-standing traditions anyways. That article had a certain impact, but the initial impact in the 1990s was about comparing the notion of scene, not to that of community, but to that of subculture. That was the role of the concept, as David Hesmondhalgh (2005) notes in his well-known article "Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes? None of the Above." It was really about a morphology of units of musical culture. During this period, I did not engage in the debate very much, but what happened in the 2000s is that with all of the ascendant discourse on creative cities and buzz on atmosphere, a new context for the concept of "scene" seemed to emerge, and in that context I was drawn back into thinking about scene. This happened also because I was part of international research projects thinking about the culture of cities, the informality of urban cultures, atmospherics, and so on. Thinking about the relationship between cultural practices and the revitalization of neighborhoods, for example, I found myself thinking and writing about scenes more and more, but from a perspective I would call that of an urban cultural studies.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
What about media? How do they participate in scenes?

Will Straw:
In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the big questions about scene were: In the age of the Internet, what happens to scenes? Do we have virtual scenes? Do we have cyber scenes? That discussion goes on but, again, the surge of interest in cities themselves has brought the concept of scene back into the question of spaces, of real spaces. For a while, we looked at them in terms of their virtuality, but nowadays the notion of scene is tied to notions of gentrification, tied to regulation of the night, tied to the occupation of neighborhoods: It has been reterritorialized, you might say, even though interesting stuff still goes on about the virtual. But there is a tendency to think about media as nonmaterial mediators. When seen from a scene perspective, however, media are about the transformation of spaces, even if they're domestic spaces. In any case, we don't have to think that this relationship between media and scenes starts with the Internet: You know, I would not be sitting here or have done any of this work had I not—when I was 13 or 14 years old—participated to a "scene." One of my uncles once gave me two Marvel comics: It was like 1967 and I got totally into comics, and I got into writing for comic fanzines, produced on mimeograph machines. And then I moved into science fiction fandom, where I spent a lot of my time. My involvement took place by mail: I was in all these networks where I became a kind of semifamous person: No one had ever met me in person, but I knew a lot about the history of fandom. All of which is to say that this was about endless epistolary exchange. Of course, that was a virtual scene as well, but there are long histories of this before the Internet. Nonetheless, an argument I would make is that the politics of music have become urbanized; they have become about the right to occupy space, the right to be free of police harassment, the right to do things at night. So, even genres that were not obviously political are into a politics of space: the right to occupy urban space. Notwithstanding their virtuality, the politics of music in important ways has made these scenes urban. Yet, I'm going to be honest: A lot of work is still needed for the analysis of the relationship between scenes and media. I still don't have an all-encompassing answer about the role played by media in the constitution of scenes.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:

The second topic you have been working on that we see as very productive for urban media studies is the night. In your work, you explored urban nightlife cultures and the experience of the night, your main point being that the night is not a natural phenomenon: The experience of the night is constructed. You also pointed out that media had a big relevance in constructing city night and city nightlife. Conversely, the night has played a big role in the development of media formats and forms of media engagement.

Will Straw:

Well, I have to say you are giving more coherence to the topic than I did. Long before there was a field that I would call night studies, I was interested in the night. My master's thesis was on *film noir*, which is a quintessential sort of night-time popular culture genre and in the early '90s I became very interested in representations of what they call the "sinful city." I wrote an article on Montreal (Straw, 1992), since Montreal has this long-standing reputation as a city of the night. I was very interested in these exposés of vice and sin in American cities. But again, as I said, when I began working on scenes, there was not this thing called urban cultural studies where I could give meaning to this interest in scenes. Similarly, when I was working on night, there was not this idea that night was an object of study. Since the mid-2000s, all of a sudden there's a field we can call night studies, well anchored by works like those of the French geographer Luc Gwiazdzinski (2016). There were early books, of course, like the one by Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1995), but not a field. Now, I've spent much of the last year writing afterward and prefaces (Straw, 2019a) for others' books on night, where I summarize the development of this field. You can clearly see a rise in scholarly interest in the night. But there's also a rise in the night on the part of cities themselves, in what to do with their nights, from the first recognition that there is such a thing as a nighttime economy to the development of *nuits blanches* (nighttime art events), museum nights, and more recently, the emergence of these political administrative figures like the Night Mayor, the Night Ambassador in cities like Amsterdam, Paris, London, now New York, and so on (Straw, 2018). So, to me, this is incredibly interesting and, partly, I am following it on an almost empirical level in terms of "what's happening?" I have a blog called theurbannight.com where every day I put up things from newspaper articles that Google searches for me. I'm interested in the idea of whether the night is a territory that requires its own political representation, a realm of experience that has required, at least historically, its own forms of media, and so on. It's interesting to watch a whole set of questions come on to the agenda not only of academics, but also of activists and city administrations, around something called the night which has always been with us.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:

How do media participate in the construction of urban nights?

Will Straw:

First of all, I would say there is a lot of historical work that remains to be done on the relationship of media, predigital media, to the night. It is one of my big projects: looking especially at print culture and its relationship to the night. The emergence of forms of the newspaper that took the night as their realm, together with the forms of writing and visual representation. Now, what people would say is, of course, that the Internet is 24/7: There is no night Internet. One of the things of interest to me is that this is not entirely true, and in the article I wrote on night media (Straw, 2016), I look at the fact that in many parts of the world, if your only access to the Internet is in your local public library and it closes at 5 o'clock, the Internet

goes dead. I'm also interested in people's behaviors with digital media, over the 24-hour cycle. There are studies that show you peaks and valleys in Facebook, Twitter posting or tweeting, or in the publication of Instagram stories. If I had another career, I would devote myself almost exclusively to those. As it is, I follow what other people are doing on this topic. I am interested in the fact that this interest in the night has become so prominent and again: Just as Internet culture is seemingly displacing all other interest of concerns, the concrete habitation and use of cities and of places has become equally strong and equally invested in by activists, thinkers, and so on. Think about the political movements over the last five or 10 years, from Occupy Wall Street to Tahrir Square in Istanbul. These have taken the night as their focus, even as the differences between night and day have supposedly disappeared.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
There's clearly a link between the two things. . . .

Will Straw:
Yes, the night has become territorialized. In a way, it always was, but the very idea of a Night Mayor suggests, for example, that there is a political constituency that imagines the night as spatialized.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
This is interesting. What do you mean when you say the night is becoming territorialized? And how does this interact with the concept of scene?

Will Straw:
Well, this is exactly one of the things I'm trying to do now: bring together my interest in night, where I didn't even talk about scenes, with my concept of scene, because obviously there is a connection. The night produces a particular morphology of urban behaviors, particular kinds of regularities that occupy the city at particular moments of the 24-hour structure. Since we are in Italy, think about *aperitivo*. I'm sure people have studied *aperitivo* culture, which is obviously a transitional moment between day and night, but also between work and the domestic sphere. So, there are ways in which the city is constantly remade and its territories are reorganized regularly over the course of the 24-hour cycle. And media play a role, because media organize our experiences of time over the 24-hour cycle despite the supposed disappearance of differences in that cycle.

Simone Tosoni and Seija Ridell:
Listening to you convinces us that both "scenes" and "the night" should definitely be included in urban media studies curriculum. Thank you so much for sharing your highly inspiring thoughts with us, Will.

Will Straw
My pleasure!

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