# '*Le numérique est partout*'. Locating the digital in Montreal's contemporary music and sound art scenes

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Montreal's contemporary music and sound art scenes have grown considerably since the turn of the millennium. Building on a tradition of experimentation and border-crossing in the city's avant-garde, free jazz, indie rock, and electronic dance music scenes, post-millennium contemporary music institutions have expanded support for exchanges between sub-genres and disciplines, particular those involving its vibrant visual art, theatre, science and engineering worlds. At the same time, various levels of government have worked to end the economic instability that marked the period between the two sovereignty referenda in 1980 and 1995. Urban renewal projects have capitalised upon the image of Montreal as a North American capital of culture, design, innovation and creativity. The city's collapsed industrial shipping and industrial infrastructure has been gradually repurposed to provide the foundations for a multimedia metropolis. In the city's diverse cultural sector, policy-makers and producers alike have often associated this renewal with a recognition of effects of 'the digital' and 'digital culture' both on creative practices and on the networks of production and consumption that support them.

In this report we examine the main transformations associated with digital technologies in Montreal's contemporary music and sound art scenes. We situate these transformations in relation to historical, social and economic factors both locally and transnationally in order to show both the specificity of how they have taken place in Montreal, and their relationships to broader patterns and trends. Our findings suggest that efforts to consolidate Montreal's contemporary music and sound art scenes around notions of the digital help producers and policy-makers to mould technological change to their social and aesthetic purposes, and moreover to sustain their practices in the face of new economic and political pressures.

The MusDig project, led by Professor Georgina Born at the University of Oxford, has sought to take stock of such recent transformations in the context of a large-scale survey of the ways digitalisation has affect musical practices around the world. Drawing support from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for Research and Technological

Development, MusDig undertook a programme of comparative, multi-site ethnography into the digitalisation of music and musical life in six countries between 2010 and 2015. While each individual study has focused on one main location and set of musical practices, investigators have also traced patterns of exchange between the locations and genres in question. Our findings thus blur the boundaries between popular and art musics, music industries and communication infrastructures, local cultural policies and transnational development projects. Finally, through our investigations and our analysis we seek to establish a new methodological framework for interdisciplinary digital music studies, combining the strengths of anthropology, sociology, media studies and material culture studies.

Main research in Montreal took place in 2011 and 2012 with the help of several local institutional and advisory partners, including the Department of Music and the Hexagram Institute at Concordia University, and the Institute for the Study of Canada and the Improvisation, Community and Social Practice (ICASP) research group at McGill University. The city became a hub for MusDig researchers. Research associate Patrick Valiquet conducted fieldwork on the electroacoustic studios at local universities as well as on music and sound art projects at artist-run organisations such as Studio XX, Eastern Bloc, Perte de Signal and The USER, and festivals such as Elektra and MUTEK. Research associate Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier conducted research in the local hip-hop scene, interviewing producers, fans, bloggers, and promoters. Finally, principle investigator Georgina Born visited on several occasions to conduct fieldwork at Hexagram-Concordia.

Taking so many intersecting approaches helped us to capture the diversity and contingency so central to the experience of digital technologies. We thus define the process of digitalisation not in opposition to the analogue, nor as the domain of particular computing applications, but as a hybrid material, social and semiotic process. Digitalisation involves the transformation of music and sound into information, but it is also used to make claims of modernisation and rationalisation more generally. It makes shifts in our immediate technological practices, and also gives us new ways of accessing transnational networks of consumption and professional recognition. Its effects cut across the cultural and economic domains of musical practice and thus highlight new relationships between them.

This report focuses in particular at the research we conducted in Montreal in the fields of

contemporary music and sound art. Although these fields are often overlapping, and the boundaries between them continue to be debated both by practitioners and by scholars, we believe that they can be considered together as a genre complex articulating many of the same transformations associated with digitalisation. Our study considers these fields of practice not only in contemporary terms, but also in light of their diverse genealogies. We thus extend our investigations far back in Montreal's cultural and political history, hoping to find the roots of the institutions and norms now taken for granted by musicians and sound artists. We also trace these fields of practice transnationally, sometimes uncovering connections across our studies, for example with the world of academic digital music research in the United Kingdom, or with the emerging digital popular musics of a Buenos Aires club scene.

Our research in Montreal's contemporary music and sound art scenes focused on registering narratives of digitalisation at a variety of levels. We sought to discover how claims to digital democratisation and diversification are used in policy and institutional discourse. We also gathered accounts of how digitalisation played into individual and small group practices. By combining these perspectives we sought to discover the relationships that musicians and institutions have constructed between the social, material and aesthetic aspects of the digital. In this report we address four contexts in which these relationships have been most important: first, at the policy level; second, in the workings of musical institutions and disciplines; third, in the careers of individual musicians; and fourth, in the affordances of new musical materialities and literacies. We sum up at the end of our report by exploring some of the general observations that can be made from our findings and possible directions for future development.

**Digital transformations in cultural policy**

It is difficult to deny the degree to which the digital has been deployed by policy-makers, entrepreneurs and curators over the past two decades as a catch-all for Montreal's diverse techno-cultural production sector. Initiatives like the CALQ's series of consultations under the *Arts et lettres – option numérique* programme reforms in 2011, the development of the *Quartier des Spectacles* between 2002 and 2010, ACREQ's *Biennale Internationale d'Art Numérique* (BIAN) in 2012, and the *Printemps Numérique* in 2014 are only the latest in a long series of high-profile projects that capitalise on the city's association with digital

technology.

Such initiatives blur the city's often-mythologised political boundaries. On the one hand, they mesh easily with recent Liberal government efforts to counterbalance sovereigntism by encouraging regional and global economic integration, and recasting the cultural sector as an arm of the tourist industry. On the other, they play upon notions of cultural recognition, linguistic survival and institutional traditions that nourish nationalist interpretations of the scene by emphasising its association with local expressive identity and the post-Quiet Revolution modernisation of Quebecois society.

Ambiguities such as these have played an important role in the success of neoliberal cultural policies around the world (Harvey 2005; Krims 2007; Gershon 2011). Broadly defined, neoliberalism is an ideology in which all relationships, identities and expressions are redefined as decentralised, self-managed economic transactions and thus all human activities transformed into 'free markets'. We find that Montreal's 'digital art and creativity' initiatives mobilise a variety of neoliberal management and governance techniques regardless of their orientation towards locally ideological concerns. 'Creative city' (Brault 2009) discourses permeate all levels of cultural governance. The provincial culture ministry and its principal granting body, the CALQ, for example, have lately pushed for an increase in public-private partnerships such as those funded by the Placements Culture programme, established in 2005. Support for Artist-Run Centres, a national system of institutions with roots in the federal student labour programmes of the 1970s, traditionally oriented towards education and pre-professional services, has shifted towards a SME (small and medium-sized enterprise) model favouring relatively stable, tightly curated collectives with higher potential for international exposure and technology transfer. Festivals highlighting digital productions by contemporary musicians and sound artists have tended towards greater convergence and cooperation, often incorporating and rebranding work by smaller institutions. Large-scale institutions supporting digital music research such as CIRMMT and Hexagram, established at the turn of the millennium by channeling major federal and provincial engineering funding into artistic research, are similarly oriented towards public-private partnership and technology transfer.

Despite the fact that many of these institutions have now adopted some aspects of neoliberal management practice, however, their transformation over the past decade and a half is not reducible to a single ideological position. Their convergence, for instance, has tended to

reduce rather than increase competition. Furthermore, boundaries between them continue to articulate social and aesthetic distinctions not necessarily commensurable with the progress of neoliberal marketisation. The accessibility of dominant institutions and funding bodies remains quite far from being an ideally free market in neoliberal terms. Artists and musicians are included or excluded not based on their self-motivated entrepreneurial skills but on their fit with an institutionalised organisation of career-stages, genres, gender, social mobility and education levels. Women are more likely to be found in the administrative departments of digital art and music institutions than on their concert programmes. Emerging professional hybrids such as that of 'maker', which mix artistic and technical skill-sets, tend to be excluded by galleries and festivals whose government funding enforces a system of peer-recognition based on established conventions of education and accreditation. Impasses such as these cannot simply be rationalised as local articulations of neoliberalism. They maintain long established patterns of social exclusion, affecting both the gatekeeping practices of institutions and the desires of emerging individual artists.

Finally, the comparative scope of the MusDig project enables us to see that the association of digitalisation with neoliberal policy reforms and institutional modernisation projects is not unique to Montreal. Digital technology and creative economy projects have played an important in urban revitalisation efforts such as those in Buenos Aires, in the reform of education and contemporary music advocacy institutions such as the Sonic Arts Network in the United Kingdom, and in the shift towards mobile phone technologies in the Kenyan music industry. Nevertheless, the prominent role such initiatives have played in producing the public image of digital technologies should not be taken as proof that they constitute an essentially digital approach to supporting music-making. The intersection of neoliberal cultural policy and digitalisation in Montreal is culturally and historically contingent, and may yet give way to new political and economic alliances.

**Digital transformations in cultural institutions**

While the rebranding of media art and electronic music institutions under the rubric of 'digital art' may on one level serve political and economic goals of policy-makers, it fulfils a quite different set of motivations for cultural producers and educators. On one hand, cultural institutions aim to establish support for musical practices that are changing in concrete ways along with technology. Our work finds this drive to be at the forefront of technological

innovation operating in both educational and festival contexts. We track its effects on the work of individual musicians and note the role played by the strategic investment of commercial music technology companies. On the other hand, cultural institutions turn to the digital in their quest to liberalise and democratise musical training and practice. Over the past few decades scholars in the music disciplines have increasingly questioned the canons and disciplines upon which the traditional Euro-American conservatory system has been modelled since the nineteenth century. Our work finds music educators increasingly seeking to foster more diverse creative expressions and higher social awareness. The incorporation of digital technologies into musical training and production processes influences the kinds expression they expect of students and thus conditions the kinds of personalisation and socialisation they teach.

Focusing on our university fieldwork, which took place mainly in the Music and Computation Arts departments at Concordia University, we can point to a number of ways in which these transformations are linked. Universities in Montreal are under pressure from policy-makers to produce 'innovation' that can compete with or feed into commercial sectors and raise academic research profiles. They are also under pressure to rationalise teaching and offer programmes which give students marketable skills. At the same time, especially in the arts and humanities, academic researchers have generated a significant amount of internal institutional critique aimed at breaking down disciplinary barriers and traditional forms of prestige associated with cultural production. One of the primary changes that these pressures have influenced is the rise of the 'research-creation' paradigm, known in other contexts as 'practice-led' or 'practice-based' research. In this paradigm, students and faculty of universities pursue their artistic practices as forms of knowledge production in their own right, valorising their work not only through the production of artworks, but also through publications, conference presentations, and marketable technology bi-products or 'technology transfer'. In one sense, programmes such as these generate new aesthetic possibilities, for example allowing practitioners to explore the boundaries between commercial and academic forms in ways which were not previously possible. In another sense, however, they erode the humanistic study of the arts by favouring outputs and forms of presentation drawing from managerial and engineering contexts.

Reports from students and faculty of experiences in new interdisciplinary programmes associated with digital musics and sound art were mixed. Although direct technology transfer

initiatives such as those proposed in the start-up grants for the Hexagram Consortium in 2001 had largely failed to produce results, engineering-style research papers and external commercial partnerships were integrated more successfully in our consultants' creative practices. Especially at the undergraduate level, students still come to the new interdisciplinary programmes with an interest in developing primarily in traditional creative roles (artists, composers, or performers) rather than service or technical workers, but they clearly integrate these forms of expertise into their practices. Their career paths, which we will look at in the next section, increasingly involve diverse sources of income and participation in which such training is a benefit.

As a whole, however, the liberalisation of canons and disciplines which has gone along with the digitalisation of academic music and sound art education has failed to solve these institutions' deeper problems with social and cultural exclusion. We found two areas where improvement was remarkably lacking.

First, women had to work significantly harder than men to achieve equal recognition for technical achievements, or rise to positions of power. Women's involvement in the historical development of institutions, practices and aesthetics was downplayed or forgotten entirely, even when those women were still present. On the whole, women's participation was concentrated in traditionally gendered practices such as textile-art, dance, and performance, while technical, compositional, conducting and directing practices were dominated by men. That we found this atmosphere of exclusion to be continuous with the environment outside of the university does not excuse it.

Second, the dominance of musicians from white, middle-class backgrounds in Montreal's academic music and sound art institutions is unmistakeable. This was especially true when we compared the demographics of the ethnographic interlocutors in Valiquet's and Boudreault-Fournier's studies. Sound artists and electroacoustic composers are overwhelmingly white, and hold at least one university degree. Hip-hop producers are overwhelmingly black, and aspire to sound engineering education at the CÉGEP level, if at all. We found only one university faculty member who had experience working in both milieu. He described his CÉGEP students as 'street smart', and claimed that only a few were worth grooming into university students.

Clearly, if digital interdisciplinarities are to live up to their claims of diversification and liberalisation, educators and policy-makers must work harder to question persisting social and cultural stereotypes.

**Digital careers**

As we just indicated, the digital democratisation of knowledge and resources has not come about equally in all parts of Montreal's diverse cultural production sector. The choice of creative practice in digital art musics can often be heavily influenced by cultural norms of gender appropriate behaviour (McCartney 2003; Rodgers 2011). It is also impossible to separate digital creative practices and approaches from the deliberate production of digital consumers by governments and businesses. As popular music scholars have long pointed out, there is a tight connection between using music technology creatively and consuming music technology (Théberge 1997). These pressures on the careers of contemporary music and sound art practitioners are certainly not going to go away. Nevertheless, the digitalised marketplace has changed the opportunities musicians are exposed to when they seek to make a living from their work.

The option of working full time as a recording artist, gallery artist or composer is becoming less and less viable. Recordings in the field of digital contemporary music and sound art are now primarily self-produced and self-released via online platforms such as Bandcamp or Soundcloud. Physical recording formats must normally be subsidised to be worth producing. When not able to fund such projects out of their own pockets, the musicians we consulted drew upon government funds either in the form of arts council grants or youth labour grants (particularly the provincial *Jeunes Volontaires* programme). Crowd-funding of contemporary music and sound art projects through platforms such as Kickstarter was rare, and widely seen as an inappropriate way of reaching audiences.

We discovered that musicians at all career stages and in most genres supplemented their primary creative practice with a variety of secondary occupations. At early career stages these occupations were often outside of the cultural sector altogether, while at later stages they included commercial design work, teaching, technical assistance, and consulting in various forms. The choices musicians and artists make in their quest to supplement their living are highly gender specific. Women are far more likely to find themselves in care professions,

teaching, or administrative work. Men are more likely to have a portfolio of professional commissions and consulting work. We found that men are also more likely to receive personal project grants from the federal and provincial research councils. Again, these inequalities are not unique to Montreal's contemporary music and sound art scenes, but continuous with more generalised sexism in contemporary Euro-American societies.

Having identified certain boundaries that have persisted, however, we must note that certain traditional career barriers are changing. Exchange between popular and art music genres happens frequently, and evaluation of non-academic work is often on par with or higher than academic work. It is perhaps more likely for a composer trained in electroacoustic music in one of Montreal's university or conservatory degree programmes to go on to work as an engineer in a video game studio, for example, than it is for her or him to pursue a traditional art music path of competitions and commissions. This is clearly entangled with efforts to dissolve disciplinary and canonical restrictions in academic music education, but it is impossible to say whether one caused the other.

Clearly digitalisation both opens and closes doors for contemporary musicians and sound artists. It allows them to reach new publics and develop new aesthetic norms. At the same time it may intensify competition for already limited resources, forcing more musicians to work commercially rather than in publicly funded cultural institutions. In this sense, new forms of entrepreneurialism can be seen not only as the result of positive reinforcement by governments through funding allocation, but also as a reaction to reduced access to careers in publicly funded institutions such as universities due to long-term processes of degree inflation and defunding.

**The politics and aesthetics of digital materiality**

Although the broader MusDig research programme addressed a very broad range of manifestations of the digital in musical practice, Valiquet's study in Montreal focused in particular on how musicians negotiate the aesthetic and political meanings mediated by technologies in their creative practices. In this regard, we can understand digitalisation not as a process excluding the analogue or the 'live', however those categories are defined, but encompassing and changing them. A look back at the instrumental trends in digital musics since the time of our fieldwork in 2011 and 2012 shows us that this is increasingly the case.

The programme of the 2013 MUTEK festival featured several performances and a documentary film focused on the increasingly popular use of modular synthesisers in electronic dance and experimental music. The second edition of BIAN in 2014 was organised around the theme '*Physical/ité*', highlighting 'the place of the body and the return of the material in the place of the digital'. Objects and information of all kinds are increasingly treated as extensions or inputs to a digitally organised universe.

This shift is not limited to practitioners of contemporary music and sound art, but bound up in a broader turn to technological materiality among academics (e.g. Salter 2010) and in the commercial world. We see it thus not as an effect of technological change by itself, but as part of a change in perspectives on technology which cuts across distinctions between practice and theory. One marker of the shift to materiality is the distinction between contemporary music and sound art itself. The turn away from the norms and canons of music has been articulated by musicians in Montreal since the 1990s as a way of moving closer to materials (e.g. Thibault 2002). The distinction between music and sound art or media art is not fixed. Both artists and institutions are constantly revising and contesting definitions, and strong official standards such as those set in federal or provincial funding categories are notoriously vague on how music is to be distinguished from sound art. Nevertheless, making a separation between the two means constructing two sets of expectations about creative practice and technological literacy. These expectations generate differences in practice, in access to technology, and in education.

In the practices we examined, contemporary musicians and sound artists engaged with digital materialities and literacies most often as mediations of genre and identity (see Born 2005; 2011). In live experimental electronic music and noise music, for example, which in 2011 and 2012 proliferated on the fringes of academic electroacoustic departments, musicians construct complex individualised hybrid setups or *dispositifs* in part as a way of distinguishing their work from the expensive, technically complex, team-operated software systems often used in academic research. Although they expressed this as a natural aesthetic decision, it also articulated a social distinction: noise music is not necessarily tolerated in Montreal's university music departments, and noise musicians see themselves as pushing against academic norms, despite the fact that the two scenes share several aesthetic assumptions. Such instrumental materialisations of identity can be found in most genres of contemporary music and sound art.

These distinctions can also be found in the shifting balance between digital and analogue recording formats, as well as between live and recorded commodity forms. While most genres have undergone a shift towards digital formats and distribution platforms, the way this relates to physical formats depends on the aesthetic in question. A sound artist working on a primarily conceptual project might choose to release work in a way that is integrated with the form of the work as a whole. This is the case, for example, in projects such as the trio KANTNAGANO's 2012 album *Blessure Narcissique*, consisting of a large-format vinyl QR code which directs the purchaser's digital device to a Bandcamp page when scanned, or Christof Migone's 2013 *Record Release*, in which pellets of raw black vinyl are sold as numbered originals in an artist's edition of 180 (see Kim-Cohen 2013). Both are in stark contrast with the adaption of a label oriented primarily towards the electroacoustic tradition such as Jean-François Denis' *empreintes DIGITALes*. Sustaining its focus on composer monographs, the label has changed formats since its establishment primarily to keep up with the improvements in reproduction resolution afforded by digital technologies. First the label released on compact disc, then on audio DVD. Recently the label has begun exploring new formats such as Blu-Ray audio and high definition surround sound streaming.

Variation in the value of live and recorded forms of expression can be found not only between genres, but also between social and political contexts. We can see this by looking closer at the range of creative responses by contemporary musicians and sound artists to the 2012 student crisis known popularly as the *Printemps érable* (Ménard 2014). While the political opinions of our ethnographic interlocutors leaned towards the student side of the conflict, expressions of dissent in the face of the repression of protest that followed were not integrated into their normally highly technologically mediated practices. We saw few expressions of solidarity from the digital music and art festivals that occurred alongside the most intense period of protest in May 2012. Musicians and sound artists embraced the highly 'unmediated' protest techniques that circulated over social media (see Sterne and Davis 2012) rather than intervene in the abstraction that tends to characterise their genres.

What is clear overall from our observations of digital practices in contemporary music and sound art in Montreal is that the aesthetics and politics of technologies are not fixed forever, but negotiated and renegotiated in relation to changing generic and social norms. While it is true that devices and protocols present their users with a set of material 'scripts' from which to

make creative choices, the ways that users 'de-script' these settings are historically and culturally conditioned (Akrich 1992). Because they shed light on the workings of the digital at the micro-level of practice and aesthetics, we believe our findings in this area can play a pivotal role in our interpretation of the scene as a whole. It is for this reason that we treat digitalisation as a cultural and material process, and not simply as a technological phenomenon.

**Conclusions**

In summary, the MusDig project has sought to develop a holistic and dynamic picture of digitalisation in Montreal's contemporary music and sound art scenes. We have benefitted in this task from our comparative, transnational perspective which allowed us to contrast developments in Montreal with transformations in other parts of the world. While it may be tempting for local observers, artists and policy-makers to treat Montreal as an isolated microcosm of cultural production in Quebec or Canada, we find that its fields of cultural production must be considered in relation to the transnational circuits they engage and the wider trends they articulate. Montreal's cultural scenes must also be seen as inherently limited, for example in light of the non-white, non-male expressions which they exclude almost by definition. The dynamics of these circuits and stoppages must be addressed if the field is to change socially as well as technological and aesthetically.

In spite of this reservation, we find in general that digitalisation is associated with disrupted canons, disciplines, practices and modes of political engagement in contemporary music and sound art. We note, moreover, that these interventions are open to future reinterpretation, especially as digital technologies of storage and association make more and more remnants of the past available and manipulable to musicians and artists of the present. Here digitalisation loops back to influence and shape our study of its own progress, making it more and more difficult to predict outcomes, if also crucial to sustain our attention to how it continues to transform our lives.

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