Multimodal spaces, atmospheres, modulations. Experiencing the independent electronic music scene of Sao Paulo

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Abstract
The article explores the Sao Paulo independent music scene in the form of a collaborative evocation and multimedia experimentation of the relationship between spaces of music listening their scenography and architextural elements, and the movement of their inhabitants in relationship with the aural elements that stay at the core of an electronic music “festa”. The article assumes the agency of the researcher as an integral element of the collaborative endeavor and uses tools such as video, photography and sound as a research language. Therefore, the experience I propose is a multilayered experimental way of talking about local music participation in the Sao Paulo electronic music scene by introducing multimodal accounts that vary from fieldnotes poetry, photography, collaborative videos, collaborative stories of participation at parties, sound recordings etc. The technological mediation of the embodied experiences in electronic music participation must be addressed multimodally. Together with producers and participants, the experience I propose will share part of our participation and technological entanglements in the field.
Introduction
The two bodies of text (the poetry and the video) are different evocations of my fieldwork about the electronic music parties in Sao Paulo, one is a post-party fieldnote that came in the form of a poem and the other a collaborative video (made together with the producer of the Blum party, Nicolli Penteado) created for promotional reasons. Both texts speak about the same world, both have the quality of an ethnographic account or an art piece (indulgently), and both functions together and separately alike, describing a lived experience of my fieldwork. In this case, the context becomes less important, what matters is the feeling that it generates.

Poetry, as well as film, belongs to the environment of arts, but in a multimodal act of anthropological communication, texts or multimedias, that bring the viewer/reader closer to the lived experience of the field have become not only permissible, but necessary. The poetry as well as the film, put in the context of ethnography evoke an embodied participation in the field. My fieldnote, the poem is a reflexive account that is at the same time personal and exploratory. Its relevance, - I am not going to talk about its significances (as they are already there) -, rely on its thin, rather than thick ethnographic description. It is in fact an inscription of feelings, an emulation of a personal perception, being honest rather than telling the truth. Although this means “being true to our feelings”, as Mynaard and Cahnmann-Taylor mention when talking about the challenges of becoming an Ethnographic Poet (2010, p 12).

The video, on the other hand, although appealing to the same emotional, visual, and sensible part of the viewers, is a result of a collaboration in the field. It is a technologically mediated product that modulates an atmosphere of the party which is re-

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Sonido

My neon red body is carried away in waves and lines across the aural of the urban space.
The city marks its textures under the wheel of the car drawing my lived trajectory into the night.
When I arrived, it was the middle of the party, stripes of blue were covering the entrance.
It became louder as I was walking towards the felt peak guided by a strange movement of the crowd.
Rhythms of us, walls, lights, bodily smells and feelings of broken textures formed the reality of being there!
Just us into the night, covering ourselves with magnetic dust moving into the rhythm of the loudspeakers, together with the whole room.
Far away from any music of any city.

(Fieldnote after the party Sonido Tropico)

Figure 1: See HTML version for accompanying video content
Video also available at: https://vimeo.com/279503156

Mihai Andrei Leaha
created by the video in order to fulfill promotional purposes. The collaboration with Nicolli Penteado (D.J. Nikatze) the producer of the Blum Party (festa) took the form of an intention to create a "sensorial" feel of being on a "Pista" (dance floor) in a "Festa". As Nicolli proposed the background music that she found to be best for representing the event, I, as a visual ethnographer, was careful regarding the co-presence of elements: how lights, colors and bodies mingle together into the SuparaSauna (the place of the party). This created a non-textual, more sensitive way of looking at the what one is experiencing in the field.

The multi-sensorial qualities of film, together with the ability to depict and creatively replicate rhythm and movement, are among the necessary qualities for expressing modal anthropological knowledge. Indeed cinema (as language) proposes a different form of anthropological knowledge than text. "There is something non-linguistic and not even language-based in bodily conduct and the images of the body as it is possible to show, edit and work upon them in cinema" (Laplantine 2016, p.117). Laplantine gives a privileged place to cinema in the expressing of what he calls “modal knowledge", a knowledge that transcends the limits of the written/spoken language. Focusing on rhythm rather than the static, on the Energeia (energy in motion) rather than the Ergon (the accomplished thing); on multiplicity and mixtures rather than specificity, on sensory modulations rather than the “reifying language”, Laplantine argues for a modal anthropology as an alternative to structural anthropology (system of signs) or Durkheimian anthropology (a social fact).

Film and cinema as language, as a media is just one of the medias and forms of expression that can evoke our ethnographic practice in an era of complex media ecologies. This multimodal text proposes a complementary, yet non-linear mixing of medias. I will use video, photography and 360 videos as well as various types of texts (academic writing, poetry, essay, etc.) in order to express the multimodal evocation of my fieldwork.

It is not the case here to make an extensive review of literature about the subject of multimodality, although these kinds of texts are much needed in a still unclear debate about multimodality in anthropology and visual anthropology alike. I would rather prefer to briefly sketch my understanding of multimodality and then state some the principles that I am using to develop my experimental multimodal account of my recent fieldwork in Sao Paulo.

I read the multimodal paradigm in two ways. The first is rooted in the communication theories (Kress and Leuween 2001) and tends to look at the act of communication as a multisensorial act that involves all possible verbal and nonverbal modes of communication. As a consequence, to this approach issues of reflexivity and politics concerning the production of anthropology are being over-extended. The second meaning of the term has more to do with the praxis of multimodal/sensory anthropology. Drawing on a twenty-year-old trend in anthropology that is reconsidering the role of the body, observation and experience in anthropology and coming from recent developments in sensory (MacDougall 2006; Howes 2003; Pink 2009), digi-
tal and graphic anthropology (Pink 2015; Ingold 2010, 2016), multimodal or modal anthropology, try to explore various ways in which multimedia languages of anthropology can create an altogether different discourse for expressing anthropological knowledge. As MacDougall puts it, this is to “form of anthropological knowledge that does not depend on the principle of scientific method for their validity”(MacDougall 2006, p.207).

In the following experimental multimodal evocation about my field experience of the independent electronic music scene of Sao Paulo, I will follow some principles that will guide the reader/viewer though my curatorial practice of using mixed media in the creation of my multimodal ethnography. First of all, I adhere to the principle of reflexivity, plurivocality and collaboration that is necessary to decenter the authority of classic anthropology. In the field of visual anthropology, Jay Ruby (2009) advocated for reflexivity as an ethical necessity for anthropology proposing a shortening of the distance between the producer the message and the receiver of messages in the communicational act. In practice multimodality takes into account and plays with all the elements of the communicational act being more sensitive to the context in which the message is produced. I see multimodality as a return of reflexivity and collaboration practices. Moreover, I believe that the most important aspect of the idea is the political implications of our modes of doing ethnography. In the new and complex media environments, the voice of the anthropologist cannot remain solitary, nor politically unaware.

On the other hand, I will use auto-ethnography as an important element of the multimodal and multisensorial account. Indeed, the idea of sensorially and the theorizing of the body have been a popular theme in recent anthropology. Sensory studies laboratories and schools have been opening up toward the importance of agency and embodied knowledge in ethnographic practice. Ethnographic film, played an important role in opening up the corporeal in visual anthropology (MacDougall 2006). Many conferences and meetings of anthropology around the world began to adopt the idea of the film exhibit or installation spaces into their more traditional academic conferences structure. Nevertheless, experimental practices introduce other types of media and places of exhibit to express this ethnographic embodiment of knowledge. Moreover, the idea of doing sensory research with the body or as Laplantine puts it, the need for attending the sensible, is a personal and collective experience at the same time. “The experience of the fieldwork is an experience of sharing in the sensible. We observe we listen, we speak with others, we partake their cuisine, we try to feel along with them what them experience.” (Laplantine 2016, p.2) Therefore, in multimodal practice, I don’t see auto-ethnography as self-indulgent, but an attempt to feel along the shared experiences of the others. It is an awareness that our bodies are a research instrument and sensorial embodied knowledge that is an integral part of the research.

Our experience of others, or our intention to feel along others does not involve only our consciousness nor only our bodies. As post-phenomenology states, all of our modern human experiences are technologically mediated: “Human beings can interact with technologies, incorporate them, read them. All of these relations organize how human beings experience their environment, and how they are practically engaged
with it. Technologies, to be short, are not opposed to human existence; they are its very medium.” (Rosenberger and Verbeek 2015, p.13). Our “feeling along” state of consciousness does not only imply our observations and reflections it also implies mediating and sharing of medias and technologies that we read and live collectively. It implies multimedia messages and literacy that are commonly shared and felt by many of us (differently). The feeling of the experiences is therefore at the same time individual, collectively shared and technologically mediated.

The challenge of publishing a multimodal ethnographic account (or experience) in an online multimedia journal must be treated as canvas of experimentation that assumes this plurality of medias (text, videos, photos, sounds, 360 videos) as part of a technologically mediated proposal for the reader. Manifesting himself on the new canvas, the anthropologist, adds the hat of a curator, an artist, a digital creator, a reflexive stance, a literature reviewer, a fieldnote practitioner, a poet, an essayist, or a mediator of experiences through the use of multiple technologies and digital environments. In this case, the medias become complementary to each other assuming the non-linearity as well as the indeterminacy of the multimodal discourse.

Therefore, the following will be an attempt to create a multimodal evocation that takes into account the principles of reflexivity and collaboration, sensory auto-ethnography and indetermination. The multimodal account will use textual and non-textual elements in a complementary way, not necessarily referring to or explicating one another. It is a non-linear, multimedia narrative that proposes an experience that the reader/viewer can fill out according to his or her own coordinates.

**Spaces in motion**

*Figure 2: bodies mingling together in dance in the morning of the Blum party - five years anniversary at Rua Diocletiana.*
When the dancing bodies of the participants actually connect with the space of the party through the aesthetic elements that the producer prepared in the given space (music, light, colors, facilities, video art, architectural interventions and decorations), there is a perceived entanglement of human and non-human elements that could lead to the question of how atmospheres are formed. It is an exercise of observing the ways in which spaces, people and sensory elements connect and create the dynamics of the feeling of being there.

In the first 10 months of research in Sao Paulo, I have been to more than 60 electronic music events. Some of them were afternoon, Sunday parties that happen in public spaces but most of them were durational (between 12 and 30 hours) independent parties starting at midnight that take place in various spaces that aren’t normally used as such. From old parking lots to deserted factories, occupation buildings, saunas or places in the center of the city that mimic periphery, the places of the DIY, electronic music gatherings make the Sao Paulo scene unique. There are many parties in Sao Paulo. Some of them find their characteristics in the type of music they promote, Sonido Tropico and Zaragata is tropical low BPM (beats per minute) mixes, Blum and Voodohop downtempo/techno, while ORGANU a new party at the Trackers Club, exhibits DJ newcomers in the same kind of low BPM tradition. Other parties exhibit their identity in sexual freedoms or activism such as PopPorn (gay sex party) or Batekoo (black twerkivism), Revolta da Lampada (supporting sexual freedom and trans activism) while others exhibit a specific ideology and support, besides techno music, a specific gender ideology like Mamba Negra (feminism, gay), Caps Lock (hetero and LGBT open), Polengata (Gay), Dando (Gay). While others are known for their more intense techno style: Vampire house or ODD. The scene is quite big in terms of numbers of parties but also in terms of participants. Most of the parties have a monthly representation and some can gather up to 3000 people. The participants are

Figure 3: In the morning, the sun came to greet the sweaty faces of the inhabitants of that burraco (the hole). We began to be yellow. Covered in smoke the only thing that connected us was the steel mesh that was floating on the rooftop. Nicolli had a crazy set and it seemed like the party had just begun. It was already 7 am!

(fieldnote about the Blum 5 years party)
mostly white middle-class, but most of the parties create facilities for integrating lower classes and discriminated sexual minorities. The street parties on the other hand, although having the same kind of political militancy attitude towards gender ideology and social activism, tend to make themselves visible by intervening in public spaces. As Nicoli Penteado, producer of Blum Party, told me – the parties started with a kind of occupation of the public spaces and engaged with them for almost ten years now. Shortly, Thomash, a German DJ and producer came to Sao Paulo 10 years ago and started a real revolution with regards to the electronic music parties and their involvement with the public space and it basically reformulated their relationship with what is now called Festas da Rua. The role of the Voodoo hop party (a party constructed by Tomash and other local DJ’s) was to bring together many people that eventually created their own parties and found their own identity and public. One could say that the vibrant electronic music scene in Sao Paulo is what it is today because of this engagement with the public space and the more “visible” daily life of the city.

During the leftist governance of Sao Paulo, the initiatives of the electronic music party producers found a greater opening and support from the city council. Parties were held on the streets, on the Minhocao highway, in abandoned places or occupations meeting almost no restrictions. However, as the right-wing government came to power, the city council began to systematically impose “safety regulations” as a form of censorship.

![Image of a party scene](image)

Figure 4: “The MBR party that day – took place in a former textile factory complex with a lot of big brick halls and many possibilities of arrangement for multiple dancefloors. The scenography and lights arrangement at the MBR party were simple yet impactful. The red covering the margins of the arcade style windows gave a full delimitation to the somehow fully dark environment. Green flowers decorated the DJ desk giving a tropical feel to it. The party was on the first level and one should climb the stairs and walk all the way through just to observe the surreal evangelist temple (Temple of Solomon) made out of white marble that was standing right beside the factory in a foggy shining light.” (fieldnote from the MBR festa)
As C.F., a clubber and lawyer of one of Sao Paulo’s biggest parties told me, the Doria administration, created a “bureaucratic hell” if one wants to get the necessary approvals for the organization of a party. During the *Virada Cultural* 2018, a music truck of the Mamba Negra festa was stopped from going out on the streets of Sao Paulo on the grounds that the city hall had no guards to accompany the rave. In the end, the organizers had to fit around 2000 people in a place that could accommodate half. Now, most of the parties use more or less the same old factories, or buildings around the center of the city.

Drawing from human geography and the writings of Doreen Massey, I look at a place of music-listening not as a static geographical point but a spatial-temporal event containing a “constellation of processes” rather than a just a fixed geographical, physical area (2005, pp.130-140). Massey’s ideas develop the concept of place as an entity in movement opposed to fixed, static or inert constructions. Moreover, she conceptualizes the idea of a “throwntogheterness of place” (p.140), which involves not only material but also human elements. In short, these ideas become very useful and in researching the independent electronic parties in Sao Paulo - because in all the parties that I participate in, the producers build everything from scratch and transform the usual places into something else - into a dynamic meaningful social space of human and non-human entanglements.

![Figure 5](image-url) "The second Blum party I’ve attended was Blum in Trance held at a place near Dom Pedro II, a central point in the city. The place, although in the heart of the city mimics a favela. The place had two dancefloors one right the entrance and a seemingly improvised one in the back of the property. In the middle there was a place for buying food and alcohol, opened all night, so people wouldn’t feel the need to leave the place. In the interior yard you felt like in a periphery and everything was decorated as such. Construction materials and cement was laying on top of the first level so people can see it and feel the improvised look as real. The only thing that betrayed the placement of the building was the big blocks surrounding the space." (fieldnotes from Blum in Transe party)
Another important idea coming from Ingold draws attention to the concept of place as movement. Referring to his idea of life lived among lines, for Ingold, places are like knots caught up in meshwork (2015). They are delineated by movement, not by the outer limits to movement. For this reason, Ingold calls the people who frequent places “inhabitants” and not “locals”. In his view, it would be quite wrong to assume that the lived life of such people can be circumscribed by place – as a restricted horizon. (2011, p.149). Moreover, in his talk about Creative Entanglements in a World of Materials (2010), Ingold stresses the qualities of places as “archi-textural” rather than architectural. In short, for Ingold, places are full of life, they are temporary environments where “inhabitants” and “things” entangle for a while in order to move on to the next place. All this movement is what he calls meshwork and indeed it represents the lived experience. He draws on the sensory architecture reflections of Juahni Pallasmaa who observes that our most fundamental architectural experiences are verbal rather than nominal in form: “They consist not of encounters with objects – the façade, door-frame, window and fireplace – but of acts of approaching and entering, looking in or out, and soaking up the warmth of the hearth” (Pallasmaa 1996, p. 45, quoted in Ingold 2010, p. 5). As inhabitants, continues Ingold, we do not experience the house as an “object” but as a “thing”. Following Heidegger, Ingold concludes that in reality things are not just things, things are “thinging” (2010, p. 7). In short, for Ingold, places are full of life, they are temporary environments where “inhabitants” and “things” entangle for a while in order to move on to the next place. All this movement is what he calls meshwork. These ways of perceiving a place can be very inspiring for studying the local DIY electronic music scenes as multi-sensory interactions between “inhabitants” and “things”.

Figure 6: See HTML version for accompanying video content
Video also available at: https://vimeo.com/313458647

Figure 6: Although not fitted for a 2D presentation the 360 video that I recorded and edited for this format suits the purpose of this insertion. As deformed images of spaces and bodies appear in the video, one could get a glimpse of the meshwork of humans and spaces when participating at a party. The video was recorded at Nos Trilhos (place of a former train station).

Affective atmospheres
What brings together local subjects involved in these kinds of scenes? In their recent book Popular Music Scenes and Cultural Memory, Bennett and Rogers claim, inspired by “emotional geography” (Davidson 2007), that membership of a music scene is encapsulated in “affected” dimension (2016, p. 93). The authors observe that local subjects adhere to music scenes by involving themselves in a certain kind of local “knowingness”. Bennet shows that “knowingness” is an awareness of the fact that other separate individuals are listening to the same music, reading the same music literature, watching the same films; and making a similar sort of sense of what they
are hearing, reading and watching, based on their shared generational memories and cultural experience of that music (Bennett 2013, p.60). I would add that there are also certain moral and political values that are shared by the participants, such as, in the case of electronic music scene, the consumption of recreational drugs.

Moreover, to achieve this kind of knowingness local subjects have to make two types of *investments*. One that is visible, involves taking part at local gigs regularly while another, more invisible attachment, extended across a range of spaces, having a “trans/temporal quality” (Bennet and Rogers 2016, p. 93). By studying these two types of involvements the anthropological inquiry must go further and ask what actually ties these investments together? Some recent studies point out “affect” as one of the main coagulators for scene participants. In her book about the extreme music scenes in Australia and Japan, Rosemary Overell found out that the feeling of being “brutal” is what creates the idea of belonging to the grindcore scene in Melbourne: “Listening to and playing extreme metal is an intensely embodied experience. That is, it is an affective experience” (Overell 2014, p. 23). Driver and Bennett (2015) reach a similar conclusion in studying the everyday life attachments of the local hardcore scene in Southeast Queensland.

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*Figure 7: See HTML version for accompanying video content
Video also available at: [https://vimeo.com/313455305](https://vimeo.com/313455305)*

*Figure 7: I invited D, a clubber, to choose a video from her phone and then describe one of her experiences of being at a party. Video and text by D*

D: “And then, on the dance floor, in the middle of the blue amorphous crowd you find yourself extremely alone. Fluidity and incoherence, blindness and clairvoyance, identity and alterity. The raw matter introduced in the mixer of imagination, becoming projection. What am I doing here? Is this a dream? All these pieces of sensations come together invading my cells. The music plays loud and the never-ending loops of the rhythm occupy the disk space of my mind, catalysing my deepest thoughts. I begin to see concentric circles everywhere. My circle embracing your circle, the energy wheels of the electrons in my cells and all these circles embraced by the huge galactic loops. A force brings me right in front of the sound system. Nervously I embrace the speaker. I mix my skin with the porous membrane of the machine. Then I feel all the repeating circles going one into another and all of them running very fast straight into a point. Death? I think I am afraid of this non-place where I’ve just arrived. How long am I supposed to remain in this blind point? “Hey D! Let’s have a line!” I hear a voice very close to me. Then I manage to get out of one circle and from another and from all of them... Finally I unfold my thoughts and I can see silhouettes again. So back on the dance-floor... “Yes, sure, let’s have! coke or k?”
Going out: Sounds and music of Sonido Tropico

“Going out” describes a trajectory a dynamic feel and a continuum in the sense that no one has a time of return in their minds. It is way different than “going to” somewhere – which involves a more linear point A to point B and possibly back again. Going out is sinuous and purposely unpredictable. It is a suspension of a real decision except the “going out” idea. Sometimes, one knows where but it does not matter in terms of spatial characteristics. Geography is symbolic anyway. Going out – describes a desire of being unclear about what is yet to come – it is a way of plunging into and out of order temporality. One knows when he goes out but never thinks about how long it is going to stay out – the “go outer” goes with the flow. And that’s why the go outer has his senses more loose than normal – he is an open disposition and desires to be sensorially surprised.

The aural at a party is not music. It is an entanglement between the participants the space/s of listening and the manipulation of the sound by the DJ. It is a live and an alive entanglement that takes place in time. Although, obviously one can track the duration of the time spent at a party that wasn’t my intention and also, I believe it has little if no relevance at all for the multimodal entanglement that takes place in the given time of the party. It is rather movement – that takes place in a different time altogether has the role to alter our separate rhythm of the everyday life.

Movement – is always corporeal and in time. But when movement happens in a “going out” mood at a party, all of it is predetermined first of all by the aural. The aural – becomes the dominant sense that reorganizes them all. It becomes a force that leads the motor of action of all the senses and not only. It changes the place itself and gives vibration to walls and alters the colors, suspends time and gives direction to movement.

This account of my experience tries to experiment with the aural as multimodal “musiking” involvement. It is a story of aural connections rather than music-listening. It is also a story of random and individual choices, a particular schizophrenic account of a participator at a local music events and an anthropologist at work. I would like to end my multimodal ethnographic evocation with a photo/audio essay about Going
out at a party. The photos accompanied by the sounds are pieces of a participation of a party in time. From the moment of entering the former parking lot until morning came. The audio files represent recordings of different peaks of the party or moments of recordings that were guided by my ear and conditioned about the particular positioning in the place I was recording the sound. The pictures are made with the mobile phone while for the sound I used a digital audio recorder.

A photo video essay of the Sonido Tropico party.

*Figure 8 (above): At the entrance the DJ was mixing a Romanian band.*

*Figure 9: See HTML version for accompanying audio content*

*Figure 10 (below): Pista*
Figure 11 (above): Oriental change of mood and DJ.
Figure 12 See HTML version for accompanying audio content
Figure 13 (below): Uncanny appearances from the Namibia Collective.
Figure 14 See HTML version for accompanying audio content
Figure 15 (above): The first peek of the party.
Figure 16 See HTML version for accompanying audio content
Figure 17 (below): The second peek of the Party
Figure 18 (above): In the backyard
Figure 19 See HTML version for accompanying audio content
Figure 20 (below): Climax with DJ NU
Figure 21 See HTML version for accompanying audio content
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References


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