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Introduction

Coffee, as a stimulant, and the spaces in which it is has been consumed, have long played a vital role in fostering communication, creativity, and sociality. This article explores the interrelationship of café space, communication, creativity, and materialism. In developing these themes, this article is structured in two parts. The first looks back to the coffee houses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to give a historical context to the contemporary role of the café as a key site of creativity through its facilitation of social interaction, communication and information exchange. The second explores the continuation of the link between cafés, communication and creativity, through an instance from the mid-twentieth century where this process becomes individualised and is tied more intrinsically to the material surroundings of the café itself. From this, we argue that in order to understand the connection between café space and creativity, it is valuable to consider the rich polymorphic material and aesthetic composition of cafés.

The Social Life of Coffee: London's Coffee Houses

While the social consumption of coffee has a long history, here we restrict our focus to a discussion of the London coffee houses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was during the seventeenth century that the vogue of these coffee houses reached its zenith when they operated as a vibrant site of mercantile activity, as well as cultural and political exchange (Cowan; Lillywhite; Ellis).

Many of these coffee houses were situated close to the places where politicians, merchants, and other significant people congregated and did business, near government buildings such as Parliament, as well as courts, ports and other travel route hubs (Lillywhite 17). A great deal of information was shared within these spaces and, as a result, the coffee house became a key venue for communication, especially the reading and distribution of print and scribal publications (Cowan 85). At this time, "no coffee house worth its name" would be without a ready selection of newspapers for its patrons (Cowan 173). By working to twenty-four hour diurnal cycles and heightening the sense of repetition and regularity, coffee houses also played a crucial role in routinising news as a form of daily consumption alongside other forms of habitual consumption (including that of coffee drinking). In Cowan's words, "restoration coffee houses soon became known as places 'dasht with diurnals and books of news'" (172). Among these was the short-lived but nonetheless infamous social gossip publication, *The Tatler* (1709-10), which was strongly associated with the London coffee houses and, despite its short publication life, offers great insight into the social life and scandals of the time.

The coffee house became, in short, "the primary social space in which 'news' was both produced and consumed" (Cowan 172). The proprietors of coffee houses were quick to exploit this situation by dealing in "news mongering" and developing their own news publications to supplement their incomes (172). They sometimes printed news,

commentary and gossip that other publishers were not willing to print. However, as their reputation as news providers grew, so did the pressure on coffee houses to meet the high cost of continually acquiring or producing journals (Cowan 173; Ellis 185-206).

In addition to the provision of news, coffee houses were vital sites for other forms of communication. For example, coffee houses were key venues where "one might deposit and receive one's mail" (Cowan 175), and the Penny Post used coffeehouses as vital pick-up and delivery centres (Lillywhite 17). As Cowan explains, "Many correspondents [including Jonathan Swift] used a coffeehouse as a convenient place to write their letters as well as to send them" (176). This service was apparently provided gratis for regular patrons, but coffee house owners were less happy to provide this for their more infrequent customers (Cowan 176).

London's coffee houses functioned, in short, as notable sites of sociality that bundled together drinking coffee with news provision and postal and other services to attract customers (Cowan; Ellis). Key to the success of the London coffee house of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the figure of the *virtuoso habitué* (Cowan 105)—an urbane individual of the middle or upper classes who was skilled in social intercourse, skills that were honed through participation in the highly ritualised and refined forms of interpersonal communication, such as visiting the stately homes of that time. In contrast to such private visits, the coffee house provided a less formalised and more spontaneous space of sociality, but where established social skills were distinctly advantageous.

A striking example of the figure of the *virtuoso habitué* is the philosopher, architect and scientist Robert Hooke (1635-1703). Hooke, by all accounts, used the opportunities provided by his regular visits to coffee houses "to draw on the knowledge of a wide variety of individuals, from servants and skilled laborers to aristocrats, as well as to share and display novel scientific instruments" (Cowan 105) in order to explore and develop his virtuoso interests. The coffee house also served Hooke as a place to debate philosophy with cliques of "like-minded virtuosi" and thus formed the "premier locale" through which he could "fulfil his own view of himself as a virtuoso, as a man of business, [and] as a man at the centre of intellectual life in the city" (Cowan 105-06). For Hooke, the coffee house was a space for serious work, and he was known to complain when "little philosophical work" was accomplished (105-06).

Sociality operates in this example as a form of creative performance, demonstrating individual skill, and is tied to other forms of creative output. Patronage of a coffee house involved hearing and passing on gossip as news, but also entailed skill in philosophical debate and other intellectual pursuits. It should also be noted that the complex role of the coffee house as a locus of communication, sociality, and creativity was repeated elsewhere. During the 1600s in Egypt (and elsewhere in the Middle East), for example, coffee houses served as sites of intensive literary activity as well as the locations for discussions of art, sciences and literature, not to mention also of gambling and drug use (Hattox 101).

While the popularity of coffee houses had declined in London by the 1800s, café culture was flowering elsewhere in mainland Europe. In the late 1870s in Paris, Edgar Degas and Edward Manet documented the rich café life of the city in their drawings and paintings (Ellis 216). Meanwhile, in Vienna, "the kaffeehaus offered another evocative

model of urban and artistic modernity" (Ellis 217; see also Bollerey 44-81). Serving wine and dinners as well as coffee and pastries, the kaffeehaus was, like cafés elsewhere in Europe, a mecca for writers, artists and intellectuals. The Café Royal in London survived into the twentieth century, mainly through the patronage of European expatriates and local intellectuals such as Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, T. S. Elliot, and Henri Bergson (Ellis 220). This pattern of patronage within specific and more isolated cafés was repeated in famous gatherings of literary identities elsewhere in Europe throughout the twentieth century.

From this historical perspective, a picture emerges of how the social functions of the coffee house and its successors, the espresso bar and modern café, have shifted over the course of their histories (Bollerey 44-81). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the coffee house was an important location for vibrant social interaction and the consumption and distribution of various forms of communication such as gossip, news, and letters. However, in the years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the café was more commonly a site for more restricted social interaction between discrete groups. Studies of cafés and creativity during this era focus on cafés as "factories of literature, inciters to art, and breeding places for new ideas" (Fitch, *The Grand* 18). Central in these accounts are bohemian artists, their associated social circles, and their preferred *cafés de bohème* (for detailed discussion, see Wilson; Fitch, *Paris Café*; Brooker; Grafe and Bollerey 4-41).

As much of this literature on café culture details, by the early twentieth century, cafés emerge as places that enable individuals to carve out a space for sociality and creativity which was not possible elsewhere in the modern metropolis. Writing on the modern metropolis, Simmel suggests that the concentration of people and things in cities "stimulate[s] the nervous system of the individual" to such an extent that it prompts a kind of self-preservation that he terms a "blasé attitude" (415). This is a form of "reserve", he writes, which "grants to the individual a [certain] kind and an amount of personal freedom" that was hitherto unknown (416). Cafés arguably form a key site in feeding this dynamic insofar as they facilitate self-protectionism—Fitch's "pool of privacy" (*The Grand* 22)—and, at the same time, produce a sense of individual freedom in Simmel's sense of the term. That is to say, from the early-to-mid twentieth century, cafés have become complex settings in terms of the relationships they enable or constrain between living in public, privacy, intimacy, and cultural practice. (See Haine for a detailed discussion of how this plays out in relation to working class engagement with Paris cafés, and Wilson as well as White on other cultural contexts, such as Japan.) Threaded throughout this history is a clear celebration of the individual artist as a kind of *virtuoso habitué* of the contemporary café.

Café Jama Michalika

The following historical moment, drawn from a powerful point in the mid-twentieth century, illustrates this last stage in the evolution of the relationship between café space, communication, and creativity. This particular historical moment concerns the renowned Polish composer and conductor Krzysztof Penderecki, who is most well-known for his avant-garde piece *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* (1960), his *Polymorphia* (1961), and *St Luke Passion* (1963-66), all of which entailed new compositional and notation techniques.

Poland, along with other European countries devastated by the Second World War,

underwent significant rebuilding after the war, also investing heavily in the arts, musical education, new concert halls, and conservatoria (Monastra). In the immediate post-war period, Poland and Polish culture was under the strong ideological influence exerted by the Soviet Union. However, as Thomas notes, within a year of Stalin's death in 1953, "there were flickering signs of moderation in Polish culture" (83). With respect to musical creativity, a key turning point was the Warsaw Autumn Music Festival of 1956. "The driving force" behind the first festival (which was to become an annual event), was Polish "composers' overwhelming sense of cultural isolation and their wish to break the provincial nature of Polish music" at that time (Thomas 85). Penderecki was one of a younger generation of composers who participated in, and benefited from, these early festivals, making his first appearance in 1959 with his composition *Strophes*, and successive appearances with *Dimensions of Time and Silence* in 1960, and *Threnody* in 1961 (Thomas 90).

Penderecki married in the 1950s and had a child in 1955. This, in combination with the fact that his wife was a pianist and needed to practice daily, restricted Penderecki's ability to work in their small Krakow apartment. Nor could he find space at the music school which was free from the intrusion of the sound of other instruments. Instead, he frequented the café Jama Michalika off the central square of Krakow, where he worked most days between nine in the morning and noon, when he would leave as a pianist began to play. Penderecki states that because of the small space of the café table, he had to "invent [a] special kind of notation which allowed me to write the piece which was for 52 instruments, like *Threnody*, on one small piece of paper" (*Krzysztof Penderecki*, 2000). In this, Penderecki created a completely new set of notation symbols, which assisted him in graphically representing tone clustering (Robinson 6) while, in his score for *Polymorphia*, he implemented "novel graphic notation, comparable with medical temperature charts, or oscillograms" (Schwinger 29) to represent in the most compact way possible the dense layering of sounds and vocal elements that is developed in this particular piece.

This historical account is valuable because it contributes to discussions on individual creativity that both depends on, and occurs within, the material space of the café. This relationship is explored in Walter Benjamin's essay "Polyclinic", where he develops an extended analogy between the writer and the café and the surgeon and his instruments. As Cohen summarises, "Benjamin constructs the field of writerly operation both in medical terms and as a space dear to Parisian intellectuals, as an operating table that is also the marble-topped table of a café" (179). At this time, the space of the café itself thus becomes a vital site for individual cultural production, putting the artist in touch with the social life of the city, as many accounts of writers and artists in the cafés of Paris, Prague, Vienna, and elsewhere in Europe attest. "The attraction of the café for the writer", Fitch argues, "is that seeming tension between the intimate circle of privacy in a comfortable room, on the one hand, and the flow of (perhaps usable) information all around on the other" (*The Grand* 11). Penderecki talks about searching for a sound while composing in café Jama Michalika and, hearing the noise of a passing tram, subsequently incorporated it into his famous composition, *Threnody* (*Krzysztof Penderecki*, 2000). There is an indirect connection here with the attractions of the seventeenth century coffee houses in London, where news writers drew much of their gossip and news from the talk within the coffee houses. However, the shift is to a more isolated, individualistic *habitué*. Nonetheless, the aesthetic composition of the café space remains essential to the creative productivity described by Penderecki.

A concept that can be used to describe this method of composition is contained within one of Penderecki's best-known pieces, *Polymorphia* (1961). The term "polymorphia" refers not to the form of the music itself (which is actually quite conventionally structured) but rather to the multiple blending of sounds. Schwinger defines polymorphia as "many formedness [...] which applies not [...] to the form of the piece, but to the broadly deployed scale of sound, [the] exchange and simultaneous penetration of sound and noise, the contrast and interflow of soft and hard sounds" (131). This description also reflects the rich material context of the café space as Penderecki describes its role in shaping (both enabling and constraining) his creative output.

Creativity, Technology, Materialism

The materiality of the café—including the table itself for Penderecki—is crucial in understanding the relationship between the forms of creative output and the material conditions of the spaces that enable them. In Penderecki's case, to understand the origins of the score and even his innovative forms of musical notation as artefacts of communication, we need to understand the material conditions under which they were created.

As a fixture of twentieth and twenty-first century urban environments, the café mediates the private within the public in a way that offers the contemporary *virtuoso habitué* a rich, polymorphic sensory experience. In a discussion of the indivisibility of sensation and its resistance to language, writer Anna Gibbs describes these rich experiential qualities:

> sitting by the window in a café watching the busy streetscape with
> the warmth of the morning sun on my back, I smell the delicious
> aroma of coffee and simultaneously feel its warmth in my mouth,
> taste it, and can tell the choice of bean as I listen idly to the chatter
> in the café around me and all these things blend into my experience
> of "being in the café" (201).

Gibbs's point is that the world of the café is highly synaesthetic and infused with sensual interconnections. The din of the café with its white noise of conversation and overlaying sounds of often carefully chosen music illustrates the extension of taste beyond the flavour of the coffee on the palate. In this way, the café space provides the infrastructure for a type of creative output that, in Gibbs's case, facilitates her explanation of expression and affect. The individualised *virtuoso habitué*, as characterised by Penderecki's work within café Jama Michalika, simply describes one (celebrated) form of the material conditions of communication and creativity. An essential factor in creative cultural output is contained in the ways in which material conditions such as these come to be organised. As Elizabeth Grosz expresses it:

> Art is the regulation and organisation of its materials—paint, canvas,
> concrete, steel, marble, words, sounds, bodily movements, indeed
> *any* materials—according to self-imposed constraints, the creation of
> forms through which these materials come to generate and intensify
> sensation and thus directly impact living bodies, organs, nervous
> systems (4).

Materialist and medium-oriented theories of media and communication have emphasised the impact of physical constraints and enablers on the forms produced. McLuhan, for example, famously argued that the typewriter brought writing, speech, and publication into closer association, one effect of which was the tighter regulation of spelling and grammar, a pressure toward precision and uniformity that saw a jump in the sales of dictionaries (279). In the poetry of E. E. Cummings, McLuhan sees the typewriter as enabling a patterned layout of text that functions as "a musical score for choral speech" (278). In the same way, the café in Penderecki's recollections both constrains his ability to compose freely (a creative activity that normally requires ample flat surface), but also facilitates the invention of a new language for composition, one able to accommodate the small space of the café table.

Recent studies that have sought to materialise language and communication point to its physicality and the embodied forms through which communication occurs. As Packer and Crofts Wiley explain, "infrastructure, space, technology, and the body become the focus, a move that situates communication and culture within a physical, corporeal landscape" (3). The confined and often crowded space of the café and its individual tables shape the form of productive output in Penderecki's case. Targeting these material constraints and enablers in her discussion of art, creativity and territoriality, Grosz describes the "architectural force of framing" as liberating "the qualities of objects or events that come to constitute the substance, the matter, of the art-work" (11). More broadly, the design features of the café, the form and layout of the tables and the space made available for individual habitation, the din of the social encounters, and even the stimulating influences on the body of the coffee served there, can be seen to act as enablers of communication and creativity.

Conclusion

The historical examples examined above indicate a material link between cafés and communication. They also suggest a relationship between materialism and creativity, as well as the roots of the romantic association—or *mythos*—of cafés as a key source of cultural life as they offer a "shared place of composition" and an "environment for creative work" (Fitch, *The Grand* 11). We have detailed one example pertaining to European coffee consumption, cafés and creativity. While we believe Penderecki's case is valuable in terms of what it can tell us about forms of communication and creativity, clearly other cultural and historical contexts may reveal additional insights—as may be found in the cases of Middle Eastern cafés (Hattox) or the North American diner (Hurley), and in contemporary developments such as the café as a source of free WiFi and the commodification associated with global coffee chains. Penderecki's example, we suggest, also sheds light on a longer history of creativity and cultural production that intersects with contemporary work practices in city spaces as well as conceptualisations of the individual's place within complex urban spaces.

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