INTERCOM
Revista Brasileira de Ciências da Comunicação

Articles

Sound violence in bus trips

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1590/1809-58442023127en

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Abstract
The article focuses on the recurring and conflicting case of musical performance on public transport, analyzing the forced musical experience as an act of violence entangled with several other forms of violence. It discusses how fear conditions the listening of musical experience in urban environments, shaped by shared values, ideas, and prejudices about music that is spread in public transport. The imposition of a certain musical repertoire on other passengers is configured as a political action that claims to be heard by individuals who suffer different types of oppression. However, at the same time, it contributes to the sedimentation of stigmatization reinforced by forced listening. Informed by interviews in Rio de Janeiro, the text seeks to deepen the debate on the uses of music in public spaces, incorporating the complexities and contradictions that permeate sound and musical control in public transport in Latin American metropolises.
Keywords: Music. Public transport. Violence. Public space. Youth.

Daily life in large cities is crossed by tensions resulting from several factors, among which social inequality may be pointed out as the most important. As a founding feature of the so-called Global South, constituted through a violent process of colonization, the asymmetries between an impoverished population majority and a minority surrounded by privileges and distinctions form a contextual framework from which all social relations and institutional bonds

are experienced. In this tangle of conflicts and contradictions, controlling sounds in public and private spaces becomes a sensitive element of everyday encounters and disagreements.

Among a significant multiplicity of sounds and situations that articulate, negotiate, and process these tensions, I aim to frame the dynamics surrounding sound reproduction in public transport, especially in urban buses. Population movements in cities are marked by feelings of loneliness, boredom, irritation, and discouragement, at the same time as they are crossed by small conflicts caused by the tiredness of bodies and minds, the intense rhythm of coming and going from work, aggressive traffic and vehicles and the dead time waiting for buses, trams, and trains. Part of these conflicts is experienced and negotiated through sounds and, especially, through music that allows, at the same time, the neutralization of the confusing noise that characterizes the sound of these routes (through the use of headphones) and intensification of confrontations and differences between individuals trapped in the physical space of public transport. The manipulation of musical devices is a tool of power that produces a spatial occupation, manifests the presence, and processes the political tension of social hierarchies. Having control over the music that occupies a public environment is an action that enacts a position of provisional superiority in the social negotiations of territories, establishing a symbolic and ideological universe with which everyone who circulates through such a space is forced to interact. The individual or group that holds such control manifests belonging to a set of ideas and values triggered by music and simultaneously spreads this content beyond their individual acoustic space in a political action of power.

The debate about music and cities has increased significantly in recent years, articulating several variables and approaches (FERNANDES and HERSCHMANN, 2018; BIELETTO-BUENO, 2020). In this article, I interpret the uses of music on urban buses from the categories of fear and violence, joining authors who have researched the sound and musical occupation of public spaces as negotiations and exercises of power and, therefore, as political actions (ARAÚJO and GRUPO MUSICULTURA, 2006; DOMÍNGUEZ RUIZ, 2015; OCHOA, 2014; GARCIA and MARRA, 2016; MENDÍVIL, 2016, among many others). Additionally, the music that erupts without choice in the narrow space of public transport exposes tensions that also reveal social hierarchies, prejudices, and stereotypes, triggering the extensive debate regarding “peripheral” cultures (TROTTA, 2013; PEREIRA DE SÁ, 2021), “hybrid” (GARCÍA CANCLINI, 1997), “subaltern” (ALABARCES and TROTTA, 2017) or “bastards” (RINCÓN, 2016).

Methodologically, the article is fed by interviews carried out in Rio de Janeiro as part of a broader research on music and discomfort, in which people from different social strata were asked about unpleasant musical experiences they had in their daily lives and from a very extensive set of situations and narratives reported, most interviewees mentioned bus, train, and subway trips as unpleasant moments of sound and musical experiences. Some excerpts from these reports are reproduced here to deepen the debate and trigger situations and descriptions based on the feelings provoked by the forced musical experience. Let us, therefore, begin by analyzing and describing the typical situation.

The bus case

In an article about the use of cell phones by young people in the city of Buenos Aires, Norberto Murolo (2015, p. 87-88) describes a very familiar situation for those who move around Latin American cities using public transport:

> A young man gets on a bus (...), pays his fare, sits in the last seat, takes a mobile phone out of his pocket, and plays music. The music is cumbia or reggaetón. As a postcard, it does not have much that is new; the technologies of Communication and Entertainment break into the public space in various ways. There are so many others on the bus who are also using technologies, some noticeable such as telephones and MP3 players; in other cases, only headphones and cables are visible coming out of pockets or backpacks and placed in their ears. This is the difference with the young man we were talking about. Unlike the rest, he does not use headphones but shares his music with the rest of the passengers.

Several questions arise in this ideal case presented by Murolo (2015). First is the particular choice of words to describe the situation, emphasizing the notion that the music is "shared." I believe there is little doubt that this young man's primary intention in performing music on the bus is to produce an accompaniment for his trip. Music is played to alleviate his boredom with the time inside the bus. As Tia DeNora (2000) points out, music is an agent for modulating affective states, bodily dispositions, and temporal organizations, processing changes in our being in space-time and our forms of relationship with the surrounding context. However, simultaneously, the protagonist of this scene is aware that the sound occupies the entire environment of the bus, reaching the other passengers. It is also unlikely that he does not imagine that his music might not please everyone who shares the same bus. In this sense, "sharing" acquires a second dimension, acting as an affirmation of personal taste, reinforcing belonging to certain repertoires and social values, and imposing such values on other passengers. In this listening game, being heard and imposing listening, many passengers will evaluate young people's music as highly uncomfortable and invasive. As Ana Lidia Domínguez Ruiz points out, "Sound is an intruder by nature since its behavior does not obey the spatial organization that we are used to" (2015, p. 34).

The sound presence of a certain musical repertoire in a shared space produces changes in how people interact with each other and with the space itself. In an influential article on the uses of music as a torture device, Suzanne Cusick describes her personal experience on the dance floor as an example of the binding force of musical vibrations on people's bodies, which caused not only psychological or sensual changes but "a rise in adrenaline, the increase in blood pressure and heart rate, the bin that remained in my ears for hours" (CUSICK, 2006, s/p). Obviously, the author refers to a high-volume musical experience. However, it is possible

to extend some of these bodily changes to contexts in which it is not exactly the number of decibels that causes behavioral and somatic changes but the situation of inadequacy or sound invasion. In an interview given for the research, student Luane, 17 years old, resident of a middle-class neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro, reports that she occasionally feels uncomfortable with the sound in her daily commute around the city.

> I always take the bus everywhere, and most of the time, I get on the bus and see someone listening to music. I hear the *buzz buzz buzz*, like that. Then I sit in a chair, and sometimes the person is at the back of the bus, and I can hear them. They often have a speaker, portable ones, or sometimes they have headphones, and you can still hear them. Alternatively, sometimes, they have their cell phones on, as if everyone on the bus is obliged or likes to listen to the same type of music. I do not think that is cool because as I like MPB, my friend might like funk, and another might like classical music. It is very variable. There is a sign on the bus that says you cannot listen to music without headphones, and people insist on going against this rule.

Interesting in Luane's statement is the way she associates discomfort with musical taste. Taste results from a complex set of belongings and social identifications, which demarcate the subject's position concerning the world (cf. BOURDIEU, 2007). The role of these demarcations of territories of taste in musical clashes on public transport will be discussed later in this text, but we are now interested in pointing out that the teenager claims respect for the tastes *of* others. According to her, this respect would be obtained through headphones played at an appropriate volume (which does not leak), a gesture understood as a manifestation of good social coexistence. Anthropologist Janice Caiafa, when analyzing subway trips in the city of Rio de Janeiro, observes that the "silence of loners" in that space is a norm of "etiquette," configuring itself as an agreement of "politeness" (CAIAFA, 2006, p. 59). Luane certainly claims the same standard and behavior of other passengers for the space of his bus trip. The next step in his rhetoric is the demand that the individual, even if he does not have tolerance and goodwill towards others, at least respect the "law."

Several other Brazilian cities have municipal laws forbidding the use of sound devices. According to these laws (which vary from city to city), the public transport driver or agent can request the removal of the individual from the transport with police assistance if the offender refuses to silence his device[1]. It turns out that, in everyday urban travel, interference from the driver or a passenger in these situations is rare. There are several reasons for this, from the

1 Municipal Law of the city of Rio de Janeiro No. 5,728 of April 10, 2014. The full law can be accessed at: http://mail.camara.rj.gov.br/APL/Legislativos/contlei.nsf/e9589b9aabd9cac8032564fe0065abb4/aac4bd77e-2175db703257cb6005a08a1?OpenDocument. Accessed on: May. 24, 2018.

perception that an interruption in the journey will be more unpleasant than the annoying sound to the reduction in the importance of such an annoyance in the general picture of discomforts caused by public transport. In a context in which passengers are forced to endure a series of daily discomforts, music would be understood as an element of minor importance.

In Rio de Janeiro, the public transport network is controlled by private companies, which, based on a complex (and corrupt) relationship with public authorities, have a concession to exploit the bus lines economically. As an activity that aims to profit, the price of tickets is quite high and notably disproportionate to the quality of the service, which operates at irregular intervals, scrapped vehicles (especially those serving areas with lower income residents) that travel crowded and with little comfort for the passengers[2]. Sonically, the consequence of this private administration of the public service is that bus trips tend to be extremely noisy experiences, in which the resulting sound is a mix of internal sounds from the bus itself (engines, braking, badly fixed windows) with the noise of passengers, (talks, shouting at the driver, body noises) and with various noises external to the bus, characteristic of large cities (horns, car sounds, diffuse conversations, children's games, music from bars, street sellers, passing cars, etc.). In this dissonant polyphony, it is ironic that regulation limits the use of music since, in theory, its presence could ease the unpleasant sound environments of buses. However, the perception of many people interviewed is that music becomes an additional element of disturbance, compulsorily inducing values, rhythms, and ideas into the closed environment of vehicles and increasing the feeling of discomfort. Cultural producer Carolina Luz, 39 years old, also living in Rio, reports the same feeling of impotence in the face of the music that invades her trips. Although her irritation is quite intense, including violent thoughts and impulses, she reports that she usually avoids any direct intervention when she feels uncomfortable with the sound.

> Another irritating thing is these guys who listen to music on the subway, on the bus, without headphones. I do not know how I have not gone crazy until today. I want to hit the cell phone like that, throw it on the floor, and step on it. Ah, what a lack of respect! I do not [complain] because I will easily lose my temper. I will lose my head in such a way that the person will come at me, and I will go at them. I know I will not have a limit. I stand and look several times. I wanted to create a strategy of charging some headphones and giving them a little phone for you.

2 The increase in the price of bus tickets by 20 cents was the trigger for a series of political demonstrations in the country in 2013, which intensified the wear and tear on President Dilma Rousseff's government and, widely disseminated by the national corporate media, opened political and symbolic space for the consolidation of the coup d'état that removed her from power two years later. A series of diffuse dissatisfactions found a consensual and everyday backdrop across the country: the poor service offered by bus companies in the main national cities. (cf. SINGER, 2013).

> Moreover, some people put on headphones but play the music so loud you can still hear it. You know? That is fucked up!

Two things are interesting about his narrative. First, the idea that her level of irritation could make her cross the border of "civility" or "sanity," provoking a "crazy" reaction. By confessing her desire to destroy the device of the individual whose music bothers her, Carolina imagines herself crossing a line of respectful and harmonious civic coexistence, which blocks her. The notion of civility is informed by the idea of controlling physical impulses associated with irrationality or unwanted animality. Self-control imposed by a recognized socially assimilated norm is fundamental to desirable "civilized" behavior (ELIAS, 1994).

At the same time, the hopelessness of a "civilized" solution to the conflict leads their thoughts to a "violent" solution, imagining possible physical aggression as a consequence of a possible complaint. In their perception, music invades their tranquillity, journey, and body and becomes an agent of discomfort that damages their mental and physical health (hence the opposition between being quiet or "acting crazy," moving away from a state of sanity). It, therefore, functions as an artifact of violence, even if it is only imagined. Other interviewees described impulses to destroy the sound system and even hyperbolically used the verb "kill" to refer to the individuals responsible for the music that bothers them (TROTTA, 2020). This approximation of musical discomfort with violence is not random. In many ways, music functions as an artifact of violence, articulating varied reactions and feelings, also experienced in close connection with feelings of aggression, insecurity, or various forms of violation.

Music, public space, and violence

Literature on music, sound, and violence has grown exponentially in the last ten or fifteen years, especially in the English-speaking world. In general, we start from the (somewhat obvious) postulation that music is sound and, *as sound*, it produces bodily changes that can be taken as aggression (JOHNSON and CLOONAN, 2009; CUSICK, 2006). Interpretations about the uses of music in wars (DAUGHTRY, 2015), in protests (LEBRUN, 2009), or in torture sessions (CUSICK, 2006; CHORNIK, 2014) allow a more direct approach to the violent dimension of sound and music, nuanced the idea that sound materiality works as a power device. Music can, therefore, be understood as an "attempt to exercise power over another person and the sound environment" (JOHNSON and CLOONAN, 2009, p. 147).

The classification of music as an act of violence is related to the degree of control an individual or group can have over the sound environment. According to Domínguez Ruiz (2015), the expectation of a personal space free from sound intrusions is a structuring part of the feeling of individual and collective security, and its subjective component means that the perception of discomfort can vary according to the moment. The author establishes an opposition between the dimension of private life and the intrusive sounds that disturb this domain, going

beyond the idea of "home" as a private domain and extending it to other spaces of transit and permanence in cities. In his words, "We eat on the street, sleep on public transport, study on the subway, we transform restaurants into temporary work offices" (DOMINGUEZ RUIZ, 2011, p. 33). This extension of private space to public environments helps us think about a provisional acoustic intimacy built and rebuilt at every moment, corner, and bus someone enters. From this perspective, music and sound's intrusive and violent aspect manifests as an intentional invasion of (acoustic) privacy modulated and controlled by an external agent. It does not matter if we share the physical space of a bus or train with other people; we build with our bodies a personal spatial occupation within the public transport, which involves a physical dimension (the seat we occupy, the leg space in front of us, care or lack of care when handling bags and backpacks in such spaces, etc.) and sound (more or less predisposition to conversations and comments, use of headphones, restriction of tone of voice, cell phone ringtones, music, and so on). When mentioning the conflicts over musical performances on buses in Rio de Janeiro, educator Fredson, 38 years old, reinforces the idea of invasion.

> I live in Taquara and come by bus. Sometimes, at 8 a.m., the bus is full, and then someone decides to put on some funk music, which I like, but I do not think that is the time to share. Because I keep thinking about other people. Alternatively, a country song, or a gospel or a samba, I think you hurt other people's privacy a little at that moment. It is a time when you do not want to listen to music. If you want to listen, put on your headphones!

Note that his report does not differentiate between the musical repertoire (despite specifically mentioning the most popular musical genres in the Brazilian market) and the situation of imposition that the music establishes. It is "an exercise of power that reveals itself as acoustic power, but also as an imposition of desires that is exercised through various practices of domination that affect private space" (DOMÍNGUEZ RUIZ, 2016, p. 138). Conceived as an intruder, the sound is always a violent referent whose forced listening in public space alters coexistence and influences individuals' behaviors, bodies, and affections. The feeling of violence intensifies due to the restrictions imposed by this unwanted listening, which also implies a restriction of "speaking." One silences others by imposing a personal sound, intimidating them from complaining. In another excerpt from her statement for the research, Luane (quoted above) describes her feeling of helplessness in the face of the sound that bothers her when traveling around the city.

> It is very boring. I want to go there and talk to the person: "Hey, you can put on headphones and just listen in your house alone." However, I do not know the person. Society is very violent, and I am afraid of what people can do. It is not very easy.

Fear is a fundamental aspect of this sound negotiation on buses. In a game of intermittent violence, Luane feels invaded in her sonic privacy and silenced in her right to intervene, as she fears some aggressive reaction from the person whose music causes her discomfort. The calculation of personal risk management is simple. The person spreading their sound throughout the bus is negotiating their power to command the sound space of the trip. They are, therefore, exercising a non-consensual occupation of collective space, motivated by a posture of presumption of physical or symbolic superiority. Hearing the loud sound is an intimidating attitude, which appears to Luane as a reminder that "society is very violent."

In the large metropolises of Latin America, where low-income neighborhoods and populations are segregated and subjected to repressive actions by the violent police force that often invades streets, alleys, towns, and homes, terrorizing everyone, the threat of violence is a constant. Furthermore, this is more intense in such cities' "popular" areas. In response, physical and symbolic restrictions are imposed and self-imposed on all inhabitants (even in the richest and most noble areas of cities) through a generalized feeling of fear. On a surface "based on inequalities, domination, and exploitation," life in large cities is entrenched between "walls, bars, and shields, betraying feelings of distrust, prejudice and fear" (ARAÚJO, 2013, p. 3). The grids that characterize our cities' urban landscapes are a visible and oppressive element of fear management that is a constant element of contemporary dangers. In an interpretation of establishments around Avenida Caseros in Buenos Aires, Beatriz Sarlo (2014, p. 78) observes the presence of bars/fences in *all* houses.

> At night, this fortified line seems to suit the region's dangers, but on a bright and carefree Sunday afternoon, the beams are an announcement of what could happen or what the owners of the warehouses, supermarkets, and kiosks fear will happen if not working behind bars. The street is the gallery of a prison, with people who distrust each other on both sides and whose movements are limited by the double closure.

The widespread fear of outbreaks of violence that seem to be able to emerge from any corner is an articulator of diffuse violence, which is not restricted to the act of musical performance but spills over into the entire collective existence in metropolises. In a very influential definition of peace studies, Johan A. Galtung (1969, p. 168) states that violence is present "when human beings are influenced in such a way that their somatic and mental achievements are below their potential". The main development of this definition is the formulation of the notion of "structural violence," a term that refers to a complex set of conditions in society capable of blocking personal achievements "used to subordinate and threaten people" (GALTUNG, 1969, p. 172). With this conceptual shift, violence is no longer thought of exclusively as an "act" carried out by an "agent" or is associated with the physical dimension of such acts (murder, beating, rape). Poverty and asymmetry of social opportunities can, therefore, be understood as

forms of violence, even though, in these cases, there is no clear agent of violence, and it is not possible to exactly determine a violent "act." Galtung's definition resonates with Slavoj Zizek's (2008, p. 23) concept of "objective violence" "which would not be attributed to individuals and their evil intentions, but is purely 'objective', systemic, anonymous."

Ethnomusicologist Samuel Araújo and his research group Musicultura (2006) have been working with the notion of violence associated with musical practice for more than a decade. In an ongoing participatory research project with residents of Favela da Maré (one of the areas of Rio with the highest rate of violence), the group develops a series of reflections on musical practices in contexts of violence. According to the authors, the category "violence" is normally approached in ethnomusicological studies as "a social or personal disturbance of an implicit social order, or as an eventual denial of a given order that produces effects on those who produce music and the music they produce" (ARAÚJO and MUSICULTURA, 2006, p. 289). Going in the opposite direction, his approach suggests that violence be considered a central condition of knowledge production, "which includes the production of musical knowledge and cultural analysis of music and music-making" (idem). Additionally, the group's debates set in a favela with high levels of physical violence point to "symbolic violence through music and non-verbal sound communication as a constant in the lives of concrete subjects, as a crucial dimension of their experience in the world" (*ibidem*, 2006, p. 6).

The idea of structural violence that guides the lives of inhabitants of large cities (especially those in areas in which the State acts with violence through the police) has relevant implications for thinking about the uses of music in different public contexts. The imposition of a musical repertoire on public transport would, therefore, be a violent act of sound occupation related to several other forms of violence experienced by individuals who have control of the sound system and other passengers forced to interact with their musical predilections. In this process, the violent context of cities and bus trips is articulated with certain expectations of individualization imagined for these moments and the fear of any position or action that could trigger aggressive reactions. In other words, forced listening is also forced silence, maintained by an apparatus of fear that permeates every human interaction in Latin American cities.

Getting to the point: youth, music, and violence

I want to end this text with a brief comment on the idea of youth that emerges in many of the sound and musical conflicts in public transport. Although not exclusively performed by young people, the typical case of naughty music imposed on buses is mostly performed by individuals and groups in this age category. In this sense, the structural (GALTUNG, 1969) and direct violence that crosses the sound space of bus trips is primarily informed by certain shared notions that connect youth, music, and poverty. As Reguillo Cruz (2007, p. 156) points out, media narratives about young people highlight negative aspects of classification, in which very often

> being young is equivalent to being "dangerous," "addicted to marijuana," or "violent"; the description of certain racial or appearance traits is also used to construct ratings [in the media]. So, being a young person from a peripheral neighborhood or marginal sector translates into being "violent," "loiter," "thief," "drug addict," and "murderer" in potential or fact.

When discussing the media coverage of funk in the 1990s in Brazil, Herschmann and Freire Filho (2003) point to the notion of "moral panic," constructing the "funk player" as a dangerous individual based on a recurring and "hysterical" association with crimes. On the other hand, the intense mediatization of the musical genre contributed to the construction of a fascination and curiosity about this music and its parties in a double process of "demonization" and "glamorization" of funk and *funkeiros* (HERSCHMANN and FREIRE FILHO, 2003, p. 62). This negative and ambiguous stereotype remains active to this day when young black people on buses are primarily approached in police raids as "suspicious," in an institutionalized prejudice that is intensified when associated with funk.

In this sense, thinking about the act of playing loud music on public transport by young people stigmatized as potentially "violent" and "dangerous" implies articulating its various political variables and their ethical consequences. It is relatively safe to say that the action has an affirmative component of claiming "voice" and power. Marginalized in thousands of situations in his daily life, by controlling the sound of the bus, the young man processes an inversion in society's power relations and hierarchies. There, he holds the power of acoustic control and invades the privacy of other passengers with disdain and aggression. At least at this moment, he will be heard. However, without denying the political and strategic relevance of musical performance as a vector for tensioning social conflicts, with possible fruitful developments towards a coexistence less permeated by stereotypes and prejudices, it may be opportune to adopt a "cautious optimism" (REGUILLO CRUZ, 2007, p. 161) concerning the true transformative potential of such acts of confrontation and occupation of space.

Forced listening involves triggering constructed shared imaginaries and complex combinations of judgments about the adequacy, value, and condition of the musical experience. The imposed musical experience on bus trips can also reinforce negative stereotypes surrounding such music and those who play it. It is a fact that in the context of violence that this young man is subjected to, the sideways glances on the bus precede the musical performance. In the case, for example, of an eventual police approach during the trip, this young boy will always be the preferential target of institutional violence regardless of whether he is listening to music (with or without headphones) or in silence.

On the other hand, in the shared discomfort of the "poor people's" music that sounds on the bus, a trap is simultaneously reproduced in which the inferior agent imposes himself sonically in the public space and, by doing so, feeds his own stigmatization. In a context dominated by violence, forced listening helps to channel the fear and disqualification of the young person and

his music based on the discomfort that becomes shared by the sonic occupation. The discomfort experienced by the middle-class white liberal engineer who recognizes in music marks of dangerous and inferior individuals in a clear class tension, but also by the humble black evangelical lady, who feels attacked by the explicit narratives of the lyrics and performances of funk or cumbia. Sharing the discomfort with other passengers, who in turn are also victims of a social environment that regularly attacks them, is a component that makes the case of loud music more complex and contradictory.

In this conflicting sound space, the transformative potential of the sound act tends to be precarious, often summing up to an occupation of space that generates discomfort and extracts from this discomfort a provisional pleasure of identity affirmation, invading an oppressive system through the cracks. Nevertheless, the system remains unchanged. Other times, however, the sonic invasion is the manifestation of a "possible citizenship" (REGUILLO CRUZ, 2007, p. 158), built through the force that challenges processes of inclusion and exclusion. Imposing sound means imposing listening, making voices and narratives continually silenced by state oppression and various symbolic violence sounds.

Recognizing the political component of this game of discomfort and violence in music on the bus means moving toward a more in-depth and complex understanding of the social functions of music in society. Our musical environment is permeated by contradictions and concrete acts that negotiate human relationships in metropolises' confusing, noisy, and exclusionary spaces.

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Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting the results of this study are available in the article.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Editorial data

Received on: 12/19/2022
Accepted on: 25/10/2023
Editor: Maria Ataide Malcher
Editorial assistant: Aluzimara Nogueira Diniz, Julia Quemel Matta, Suelen Miyuki A. Guedes and Weverton Raiol