

Sound Systems and the Bending of Space: Funambulism from Fanon to Albert Einstein

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“It is absolutely possible that beyond what our senses perceive, hide unsuspected worlds.”

Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

I volunteered to be part of the planning team of the Sound System Outernational events held at Goldsmiths University of London. Little did I know that my first encounter with the mysterious world of Sound Systems would impact me to this extent. Until that point, Sound Systems were a commodity for me as a jazz singer. An equipment necessary to hold a concert or a reception, nothing more. I couldn't be more mistaken. On the first conference day, I spent a considerable amount of my time observing the “conversation” between people and the Sound System. I have always been fascinated by the way individuals approach objects and in that event, my attention was drawn, for the first time, to how individuals and objects affect space and are affected by it.

One of the patterns I picked up on during the three days of the conference, was a pattern of people's motion in space. When someone enters a space, they are usually most eager to reproduce some common patterns of motion in that space, and being familiar with the hall we were in, I knew the usual pattern of movement inside it. But in the Sound System conference I was surprised to observe a new pattern being born. People who entered that space and would usually be heading towards their destination (theatres, resting area, computers) were following a distorted path and were almost always driven towards the Sound System (even before it was wired). They would walk around it, study its details, ask questions about it. And when the music was on, they would gravitate towards it, as if feeding on its invisible energy. Like sunflowers seek the sun almost everyone would seek that speaking wooden box, even from a distance, you would see them from above, heads turned to the holy structure. I call that spectacle of awe and natural attraction “pilgrimage to the Sound System”.

Although I had little tangible proof of it except my own observations, it was evident to me that this attraction had more to it than simple curiosity. What if beyond the tangible measurable spatial dimension we evolve in, there was an equivalent dimension of “affect”, made of affective/emotional energy. Let's call it the Affective field. If we suppose that this field has an organized systematic behaviour around “affective objects”, as does the spacetime field around massive objects, the natural attraction towards the Sound System I observed would be equivalent to gravity.

Have you ever wondered what gravity is?

Isaac Newton described gravity as a force that drives objects towards each other (making them orbit each other) and he quantified that force with his three laws of motion. Although revolutionary, Newton's laws of motion explained the behaviour of gravity as a force but gave little insight into its nature or provenance. We had to wait until 1916 to have a more accurate definition on the nature of gravity. Albert Einstein's general theory of relativity (drawn from his theory of special relativity, 1905) established that the mass of an object (planet Earth for example) bends the fabric of spacetime causing all the surrounding (sufficiently close) objects to gravitate towards it.

Thus, for Einstein, gravity is not a force; instead, it is inextricably linked with distortions of the geometry of space and time. In other terms, the gravitational objects are not attracted by a force, they are simply following or falling into the natural curving of spacetime.

To visualise this phenomenon (impossible to represent fully in 2D as it is multi-dimensional) imagine a perfectly flat, smooth and even fabric: spacetime. Now imagine how this fabric would be bent by the pressure of a massive object placed on it; how any nearby spherical object placed in motion on that same fabric would be naturally driven towards this massive object, or if it is of greater mass attract it. The second ball will naturally fall into the curvature created on the fabric by the first ball. That is how gravity works in Einstein's theory. Therefore, when we fall from a height, we

are actually falling in the curvature of spacetime, and when planets orbit a sun, they are simply rolling on the edge of that curve.

Applying Einstein's understanding of gravity to the affective force or the affective attraction between (affectively charged) objects, we can consider that people and objects' affective energy has a similar impact on the affective field as mass on spacetime. The greater that energetical charge, the bigger the bending of the fabric of that "affective field" and the stronger the attraction (the fall) in the curve created by the object. Therefore, in the case of the Sound System Event, the attraction observed can thus be explained as such: people's trajectory in the observed space was diverted by the curve, created by the Sound System in the affective field. Their own affect was "falling" in this now deformed space, as the Moon falls endlessly in the curve of spacetime made by Earth. And that invisible dynamic of energies interacting seems to the uninformed eye as an unusual behaviour of the visitors. Ironically, it ends up affecting the physical space as it changes the motion of people inside it and affects the energy they produce.

A question then arises from this analogy: what gives six wooden boxes, stacked on top of each other and fed with electric circuits and wires, the power (the necessary affective energy) to curve the affective field, and create a gravitational force around it? To answer that question, I need to first explain something else I learned about Sound Systems in that conference: they are living creatures.

First, the Sound System has a body; it has a shape, a colour, and a texture. It sits on its subwoofer or bass speaker, which is there to hold the beat and give you the anchor that will hold you to the ground, while the centre speakers will tell you a story of melody, words, and silences, lifting you a few centimetres from Earth. Then the top, the dreamer head of the Sound System, takes it from there, giving you high pitched notes and melodies that will talk to your subconscious, as most of the time you will forget it is there, and make you go even further up, head in the clouds. When it is done with you, you will open your eyes to your feet sinking a few inches into the ground and your head touching the sky.

Second, the Sound System has a soul. You can see its soul in its voice. And I do not mean the sound of the music you plug in, I mean its own true voice that some sound artists spend years looking for. Every Sound System has its own set of perfect frequencies, and

to reach the exact "texture", the exact configuration of that "inner self" of the Sound System, the owner invests time, money and energy into talking to that wooden box and making it talk. When that true voice is reached, it is priceless, it takes the experience of the encounter with the Sound System to another level. The same happens when we meet or read or listen to someone who has found their inner self (and there are very few of them), we walk out of that encounter changed, deeply impacted.

You can also see the Sound System's soul in its character, its temperament. It can be docile and make its owner's task as easy as a calmly flowing river, it can get capricious the next day and refuse to work for no apparent reason making everyone panic and try the most unlikely configurations (it actually happened to us once and we had to try a very strange cable switch that made no sense but solved the problem). It can take ages. It can get tired and show signs of surrender. Some of its pieces can give up and it needs "surgery" and some "implants", some new organs.

Therefore, Sound Systems are living beings, made alive by the "musicking" process. The hands, time, emotions, intentions, paths, and souls of all the people who are involved in their creation, use or consumption create a flow of energy that goes through them and blows life into their wooden structure. The more aged and experienced a sound system gets, the more "affectively charged" it becomes, as do people. And then, whenever it is displayed in a space, itself affectively charged, they react to each other. Then people join that cosmic dance and they are themselves affected by the Sound System. It is a healing dance. A ritual of recovery.

Through the four days of the conference, I watched them walking to that holy wooden structure as one walks to the altar of a deity, carrying their "cross", as if in a pilgrimage of grace. When they reached that affective curve it created all around, they started to orbit.

An image comes to my mind: that of a godlike potter and his turntable. People come and sit on its wooden spinning wheel with their messy fabric and heavy weight. Then the sound system makes them spin, it puts its hands (its frequencies, its vibrations) on their tired clay and makes them whole again.

I am no exception to this journey of recovery. Something happened to me in that experience. A part of me started healing when encountering the Sound System. I witnessed that strong, highly charged,

presence, changing a normally neutral space - that I cross several times a week without any mutual impact - into a warm healing bubble.

While watching the Sound System “containing” people that came to it for redemption, I couldn’t help but recall Frantz Fanon’s circle of dance.

In the *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon exposes an extremely violent and hostile space where the colonized people are dispossessed to the bone. They were subjugated, stripped of everything necessary to their unity, sanity and progression. Essentially, they had no proper space where they could be themselves, practice their culture and social dynamic, heal, or even feel safe and out of reach from the smashing hand of the invader. The only safe space where the natives were free, was the circle of dance. A traditional African gathering around artistic expression, free dance and movement, music and cathartic theatre. This mobile,

occasional space, in which walls were the bodies of the wretched of the earth, was bigger than its observable surface as the affective mass (energy) of the bodies that form it is great enough to bend the affective field (same phenomenon observed with the Sound System) creating a curve that generates an “affective space” greater than the physical apparent space.

That circle of dance Fanon talks about was akin to the potter’s wheel for the wretched, a place they would march to, in order to put their pieces back together. As I sat on the stairs in the hall and observed people marching to the Sound System, I could almost see Frantz Fanon sitting and from a distance watching the dancing bodies gravitate towards that magic space and thinking: “there is more to this than it seems”.



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