The art of being different: exploring diversity in the cultural industries
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CONCLUDING REMARKS
As this thesis draws to a close, we would like to reflect on its implications for research on the cultural industries and the production of culture more generally. As stated in the opening chapter, this research has been greatly influenced by theories that put forward the idea of cultural production as occurring in dense, highly networked ecologies of actors, often connected to, or orbiting around, metropolitan areas. Intermediaries play a central role in channelling the tastes and preferences towards certain products, while filtering out others. Considerable attention has been drawn to this mediation process, particularly to the individuals, places and institutions acting as gatekeepers. Yet the symbolic and aesthetic nature of cultural-industry products has been summarily investigated, with limited attention to the effect of cultural value systems on cultural production in the context of increasingly diversifying cities. We have posited that intermediaries are linchpins in highly negotiated processes of diffusion and hybridisation of cultures.

Our voyage into these aspects started by considering the participation in cultural industries of entrepreneurs with migrant backgrounds. The relevance of ethnicity as a structuring force in cultural production mattered from two angles. The ethnic repertoires that migrants may potentially draw upon can be mobilised as a competitive source of aesthetic and symbolic content. Ethnicity, as a socially structured and structuring force, can also become a lens through which we view, interpret and label a migrant cultural entrepreneur’s work, irrespective of the work’s connection to aesthetic and symbolic content pertaining to his or her ethnic background. A fashion collection presenting a contemporary take on African prints by a Cameroonian designer at a makeshift catwalk in a restaurant in Paris’s XVIII arrondissement somewhere at the beginning of the noughties has a different meaning, audience and impact in the world of global fashion from a collection based on African prints by established fashion designers, Marc Jacobs and Givenchy, in Spring 2010. What from a value chain perspective we may call original production or creativity, might well in fact be a case of diffusion and adoption of symbols and aesthetics from a different culture. In its wake, this symbolic appropriation may boost the popularity and exposure of other designers using African prints, be they part of said designer’s cultural heritage or not. Whether African prints become a staple part of a composite system of symbols is another matter entirely, yet the differential effect on the imaginary of fashionistas the world over has more to do with processes of mediation than with an objective evaluation of the apparel in question. Beyond a wider ethical question about the imitation and appropriation of cultural symbols, this example highlights the oft complex commodification trajectories of products drawing on diverse cultural symbols, and their positioning in relation to niche and mainstream markets.

Conceptualising commodification as a potential status of objects has been very helpful in refining our understanding of the situatedness of cultural production, and we are greatly indebted to Appadurai’s rich contribution to the study of the life of things (1986). The concept of ‘commodification gradient’ developed in the framework of this thesis relates this commodification potential to the object’s trajectory in time and place. It is not just that the commodification prospects of a product are highly dependent on context. How an object becomes commodified is contingent upon the negotiated access to localised opportunity structures. The case of world music in Paris highlighted
a multi-level cluster where local diversity feeds into a celebratory image of the city as capital of world music and its rich history of music migrations. Yet a closer look reveals a hierarchy of music, based on ethnocentric assessments of authenticity of other cultures’ expressions and practices and structured around parallel production chains, different sets of institutions, intermediaries and creative inputs. To cite an extreme case, popular music from Ghana would thus be unauthentic because unbound from a musical tradition frozen in time and place. The suggestion of branding world music ‘made in Paris’ fails to reflect critically on the deterritorialisation of world music and the significance of a (Western) appellation of geographical origin in sealing the value of a product. World music does not include all the world’s music, but rather a selected compilation thereof. While opportunities for ‘breaking out’ of one chain and into another exist, we found quasi-impermeable symbolic and aesthetic standards, creating artificial separations between artists based on a possibly fictitious assessment of authenticity.

From a spatial perspective, the dynamics of cultural production, valorisation and consumption call for a multi-level analysis. The Paris world music cluster’s competitiveness was shown to be tied to trans-local trajectories of knowledge diffusion, its transmission and mediation through individual and collective actions, and the mobilization of public and private actors towards a unitary response to the critical music industry conjuncture. The role of the state in shaping, directly and indirectly, the fortunes of the cluster and cultural production in general was highlighted. Paris’s function as a turntable for world sounds is clearly influenced by the country’s migration and urban policies, as indicated by collective actions in support of artists’ mobility and calls by music entrepreneurs for less restrictive visa rules. Cultural policy, albeit with a strong focus on the francophone world, has not only contributed to the development of a locally-based critical infrastructure, but also to the encouragement of audience participation. Hence the need to understand the process of creativity in the cultural industries beyond organizational and network dynamics, in wider institutional and regulatory frameworks.

World music also offers interesting insights into global processes of cultural mediation. The continued dominance of London, New York and Paris in the diffusion of world music suggests the persisting relevance of processes of cultural valorisation centred on mediators in the West. The economic mediation is apparent in the discrepancy between world music chart entries from, say, Mali, and the presence of record labels connected to that country. While an explanation connected to an availability and quality of recording infrastructure appears to be surpassed, as a more decentralised geography of world music production centres emerges, this discrepancy points to the differential capacity to draw upon and combine the multiple scales and networks of cultural production and consumption. As Connell and Gibson have posited in their research (2003), this confirms that world music is primarily a commercial venture, which has strongly relied on the construction of discourses on place and identity via the intermediary of the West.

This leads us more generally to a reflection on the connections between creativity and instances of its commercialisation in the cultural industries. There has been much interest recently in creativity as an engine of economic development and
competitiveness (Miles and Green 2008; Pratt and Jeffcutt 2009). Cultural industries tend to differ from other industries because of the (potential) tension between, on the one hand, symbolic or aesthetic considerations, and on the other, commercial or humdrum considerations (Caves 2000). This creates the necessity for room for artistic experimentation and an atmosphere conducive to creativity. The resulting innovations are thus nested in broader institutional configurations which support creativity and experimentation and channel it towards commercial outcomes.

In a sense, the concept of creativity is unhelpful in understanding the dynamics at work in the cultural industries. It suggests a limitless potential of original ideas that we can all draw from. Paired with innovation, as the application of new ideas in practice, creativity is often portrayed in a footloose manner. However, our investigation of cultural industries as producers of symbolic and aesthetic content suggests a more bounded understanding of cultural production, working within or in any case in relation to systems of symbolic and aesthetic value, which shape creativity, its innovative potential and its reception.

As a result, a general conclusion that can be drawn from this research is a critique of individual creativity as the starting point of the cultural industries value chain. What this research points to is a more balanced approach, where the focus should shift from individual creativity as the originating source of cultural products, to the wider embeddedness and destination of cultural innovations. Going back to Williams (1981), if culture is a study of relationships, the study of diversity in the cultural industries should depart from an analysis of the changing cultural interactions in space and time.

8.1 SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS

The empirical research in this dissertation attempted to build a bridge between several disciplines, notably economic geography, sociology of culture, ethnic entrepreneurship studies and cultural studies more generally. We will discuss how this research relates to these fields.

Firstly, in economic geography, the literature often takes the symbolic and aesthetic content of cultural industry products as a given, at best connecting the competitive advantage of certain places in mobilising a certain reputation or status for related products. This research has explored the significance of the dynamics of construction and valorisation of this symbolic content and their implications for the processes of valorisation of products mobilising a diversity of cultural or ethnic repertoires. An important finding relates to significance of boundaries between cultures in the valorisation of symbolic and aesthetic content of cultural products. The boundaries come to matter in two ways: structurally, in terms of potential stereotyping or pre-conceived judgement of migrant cultural entrepreneurs and their outputs; symbolically, by acting as potential caveats to the appreciation of diversity in trending preferences and consumption patterns.

Two contributions follow from the understanding and appreciation of such dynamics. The first relates to the opportunity structures facing migrant cultural entrepreneurs. We
have argued that these are shaped in parallel production chains, which are connected to the symbolic and aesthetic content mobilised. The research pointed to the fact that the categories of ‘mainstream’ and ‘ethnic niche’ are still influential in determining the positioning of products in the fields of cultural production and consumption. These terms are very much part of the organizational practices of intermediaries, though the boundaries are in a state of flux. Hence, while the content and confines of these categories may vary, our fieldwork pointed to the pertinence of these two extremes of a spectrum in shaping the positioning of products and their valorization in particular, as well as in creating opportunities to break in and out of specific market clouts.

Tied to this is a second contribution linked to the dynamics of commodification of products mobilising diverse symbolic and aesthetic contents. As the biographies of products trace complex trajectories in time and space, their relation to a commodified status can be seen as regulated by a ‘commodification gradient’. Building on Appadurai’s rich description of the lives of commodities and their pre-commodified status, the conceptualisation of a gradient helps us to understand the changing commodity potential of products in time and place and their relation to concrete opportunity structures and mediators. The case of world music in Paris highlighted a dense ecology of actors involved in the production, valorization and consumption of music originating from around the world. We have seen variations in the way ethnic and geographical differences have been selected, commodified and marketed in changing contexts. Commodification is negotiated through ‘regimes of value’ and the symbolic capital bestowed to musical outputs by mediators linked to the different production chains.

8.2 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The aim of this research has been to tease out mechanisms and dynamics at work in the commodification of diversity in the cultural industries. Due to its exploratory nature, a number of limitations arise.

Firstly, the heterogeneity of our research population and of the cultural industries in general makes generalisations problematic. While we have sought to highlight common dynamics relating to the question of diversity of aesthetic and symbolic content and its potential as creative fuel in the cultural industries, we acknowledge that the diversity of organizational practices, local rootedness, and sectoral career trajectories among others things make it difficult to consider the commonalities but from an explorative ground. Nonetheless, we found a striking similarity of concerns and experiences relating to the more primordial question of the positioning of individuals in relation to cultural and ethnic boundaries, be they perceived or actual.

Secondly, the study acknowledged the impact of ethnocentric value assessments on the opportunity structures open to migrant cultural entrepreneurs. On the one hand, cultural diversity as a system of intelligibility of diverse cultural symbols and aesthetics emerged, as a structuring element in the positioning of migrant cultural entrepreneurs. Moreover, the individual ethnicities were often a source of prejudice
8.2 CONCLUDING REMARKS

and stereotyping. A more structured study of the values against which intermediaries assess cultural products could help to tease out how and under which circumstances ethnic diversity comes to matter. Summoning authenticity and immutable tradition as a judgement criteria, as in the case of traditional world music, may apply much less in designer fashion, where, conversely, contemporary takes may be more favourably assessed, subject to short-lived trend cycles of course.

An interesting avenue for further research would be to explore the art of being different in a comparative perspective, taking the experiences of migrant cultural entrepreneurs in large, medium and small-sized cities. This would help to capture the extent to which different places have specific roles in global processes of reorganisation of culture. Moreover, this comparative approach could help shed more light into the notion of a critical mass (Zukin 1991) supporting the spread of certain trends and preferences. Do we see a level of specialisation in certain forms of diverse cultural expressions? Or is a more general process of hybridisation, reflecting global trends, apparent? Can we identify a 'tipping point' at which products cease to be linked to ethnic market clouts and become part of mainstream consumption patterns for instance? This could also lead to interesting insights as to the changing gradient of commodification of diversity, potentially identifying and mapping changes in the local opportunity structure's threshold.

Linked to this, further analysis into the dynamics of consumption would help move away from a deterministic approach to mediation and the influence of taste-makers, to a more organic process of co-constitution of preferences in time and place. Diverse resident populations, as potential proximate consumers of local cultural industry products, have gone largely unexplored in this research. Unpacking their changing preferences and their relation, if any, to their contiguity to other ethnic and cultural groups and practices would provide a fruitful avenue for research, as would an exploration of the extent of the 'local' nature of these interactions and their repercussions on wider processes of cultural globalisation.

8.3 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This research was mainly written for an academic audience, although in some cases we highlighted the practical implications for policy developments in the cultural industries. We would like to conclude with some issues for consideration in the policy field.

While the cultural industries are associated with artistic experimentation, the relevance and often constraining influence of conventions and ‘ways of doing’ on the implementation of creative ideas has been noted elsewhere (see Becker 1982 for instance). Greater awareness of these conventions at work, as well as transparency in relation to how different cultural standards and norms may impact would promote a more constructive exchange with diversity. Education and training institutions in the field of cultural industry professions play a significant role in shaping and assessing the practices of budding cultural entrepreneurs. Our research pointed to the need for openness to diverse symbolic and aesthetic standards at these early stages, not
precluding the development of different artistic voices nor steering them towards more widely accepted conventions. More generally, whether we don African prints for a summer stint or adopt them as a central component of our wardrobe on a more regular basis, a constructive dialogue on cultural boundaries and their continuing meaning and relevance in determining the value of products is called for.

Secondly, the research pointed towards the importance and impact of ‘cultural trailblazers’ in breaking down boundaries and reducing the distance between cultures and their symbols. These trailblazers may be expressing or adopting diversity for a variety of personal or professional reasons, opening up opportunities for others to follow in tow. Acknowledging emergent Black and Minority Ethnic designers through targeted initiatives and prizes can help boost visibility and promote a cultural entrepreneurs’ career in many ways. However, for some, this felt like ‘competing in a different category’ compared to other cultural entrepreneurs from non-minority backgrounds. A reflection on whether separate initiatives do not serve the purpose of maintaining and maybe even reinforcing boundaries could be usefully engaged.

Lastly, the question of diversity in production and consumption within the cultural industries raises a deeper, underlying debate about cultural heritage, and not only its preservation, but also its renewal and regeneration. In large urban areas where hybridity is at its most vibrant and dynamic, the memories, experiences, expressions of peoples become ever more shared – boundaries are indeed crossed and become blurred and shift (see Jacobs 1969; Florida 2004). This in turn raises the question of the relevance of geographical boundaries, notably in measuring tangible and intangible heritage, and the pertinence of a transversal approach to measurement which takes into account how practices evolve and are recreated by communities around the world, simultaneously accounting for their uniqueness and plurality. Intangible heritage, understood as ‘the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith’ (UNESCO 2003, p.2), is deterritorialising and being constantly reproduced, recreated and shaped through the serendipitous and deliberate encounters and exchanges of cultural knowledge, values and representations taking place (mainly) in large urban areas. In this sense, it is necessary to recognise that cultures travel and keeping them alive might also be to support them in their new environments, forms of expression and dynamic practices.
REFERENCES

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