The art of being different: exploring diversity in the cultural industries
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SUMMARY
Diversity in the cultural industries is a complex matter. It raises questions about the (expected or actual) positioning of the other in relation to cultural repertoires and symbols. It evokes distant geographies and places, and their articulation in the here and now. It leads to valuations of authenticity and exoticism, at the interface of diverse regimes of value. It opens discussions about one’s creative zeal and inspiration and related chances and opportunities in a business environment. It highlights the potential discrepancy between the process of expressing one’s identity through her or his work, and the reception of the outcome by others. While humble to the claim of offering an exhaustive theoretical and empirical analysis of these questions, this dissertation offers a contribution to our understanding of diversity in the cultural industries from a variety of vantage points, particularly the dynamics of production and valorisation of diverse cultural content in the cultural industries, and the embeddedness of these processes and industries in institutional dynamics and place.

The thesis is structured around five articles, offering a variety of vantage points into cultural production, the dynamics of production and valorisation of diverse cultural content, and the embeddedness of these processes in place. Cultural production within the cultural industries is examined from the perspective of the market-structuring power of symbolic and aesthetic content, as in the exploratory research of migrant cultural entrepreneurs and the definition of the opportunity structures in the cultural industries. The analysis of the world music cluster in Paris and the development of product niches with parallel production, valorisation and consumption chains also shed light on the shifting boundary between mainstream and niche products.

Chapter 3 explores the extent to which cultural industries can be considered vectors of diversity, taking the perspective of the participation and contribution of migrant cultural entrepreneurs to the production of commodified cultural goods and services. By combining three strands of thought, notably literature on cultural industries, ethnicity and culture, and migrant entrepreneurship, the chapter sheds light on the dynamic interaction between the cultural industries’ typically localised production processes and the global reach of the cultural identities and references on which migrants can draw. The result is a framework for analysis of: 1) the dynamics and opportunity structures through which ethnic diversity is potentially activated as symbolic and aesthetic fuel to drive innovation in processes of commodification of culture; 2) the extent to which the mediation of tastes and trends within the cultural industries come to shape the (perception of) boundaries between ethnic/non-ethnic cultural products.

Chapter 4 applies the framework developed in the previous chapter to the case of world music production and the commodification of cultural diversity therein. The cultural or “ethnic” capital of migrants from less-developed countries may bestow a competitive edge in creating cultural products such as textiles, dance, and music. Converting these unique resources into commodities is, however, a complex process. To analyse this process, we introduce a new concept, namely that of the commodification gradient, as a socially embedded negotiated passage, albeit not an irreversible one, between creativity in posse and its commodity status. After unpacking this concept,
we explore an interactionist approach to the world music opportunity structure and the dynamics of commodification of culture therein based on interviews and fieldwork in the Paris world music scene. We show the importance of parallel value chains, exemplified in the presence of three market ‘clouts’: notably community, traditional, and contemporary world music markets and we emphasise the role of intermediaries and tastemakers in these distinct processes of commodification.

Chapter 5 further explores the dynamics of world music production, valorisation and consumption within the Parisian world music cluster, and highlights the spatially multi-scalar and historically, socially and economically-embedded dimensions of its creative field. Taking a long-term and multi-level perspective, our study reveals that the world music scene in Paris cannot simply be explained by its dense network of producers. The cluster’s competitiveness is 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 scene’s historical roots and the role of key individual and collective actors, combining entrepreneurship with an understanding of the societal significance of world music in a diversifying society, are evident, creating a strong, shared social context. Moreover, world music should be understood in the framework of wider processes of cultural globalization, drawing upon multiple spatial dynamics of production and scales of cultural valorisation. In conclusion, our study calls for further analysis in the (formal and informal) collective actions within cultural industry clusters, beyond the temporary project-based pooling of resources.

Chapter 6 looks more globally at the production of world music, offering an in-depth analysis into the clustered and transnational dynamics therein. Taking the European world music charts since 1991 as a surrogate measure of the salience of global economic and geographical linkages in world music production, we substantiate the claim that the valorisation of commodified musical content has traditionally been removed from its place of origin and centred on metropolitan areas in Western Europe and the USA. However, the paper suggests a growing diversification in the geography of production, with the emergence of secondary centres with an international and national orientation. It also offers promising avenues for further research into the positionality of cultural mediation and the increasing prominence of hybrid musical output.

Chapter 7 focuses on the dynamics of creativity and innovation in the cultural industries more generally. The emergence of cultural industries as engines of economic growth reflects an economic and cultural conjuncture where commodity production has become tied in with artistic experimentation. Research on cultural industries, however, has revealed a latent tension between artistic/l’art pour l’art and commercial or so-called humdrum considerations (Caves 2000; Cowen and Tabarrok 2000; Kloosterman 2010a) As many cultural industries can only survive in the long run through constant product differentiation and innovation, ways have to be found to shield off creative workers – at least temporarily – from direct market pressures to be able to come up with new ideas and innovations. We theorise that sector-specific capital requirements, the nature of the production process and markets, and the aesthetic and functional
value of the object impact on how experimentation can be organised. Notwithstanding the basic similarities in the organisational and spatial format of cultural industries, we anticipate that there are various institutional configurations which can shield off market pressures and allow creative workers to pursue new roads. To illustrate our point, we briefly present findings from the Amsterdam case.

Chapter 8 brings together the key contributions made in this thesis, and offers elements of conclusion and fruitful avenues for further research. 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.