

Diversity in the cultural industries

Amanda Brandellero So far, few studies deal specifically with innovation in the cultural industries. To overcome this omission, a framework is presented which can be used to compare the organizational, institutional and procedural conditions of innovation in cultural industries. Processes of production and consumption in the cultural industry should not be considered as diametrically opposed. Rather they should be seen as part of a ‘cultural circuit’.

‘Nowadays, people travel, the world is on the move, things change. And I believe that tomorrow’s world will be about mixing people and the acceptance of the other. I think these processes occur through material things: clothes, the way we talk, hairstyles, not forgetting our identity, where we come from.’

‘I still enjoy cultural ties with three countries of origin (Tanzania, Kenya and Ghana) and love to infuse that influence within my design, whilst also embracing a distinctly British style sensibility.’

Diversity in the cultural industries is a complex matter, as these brief quotations from a fashion designer, based in London and Paris, whom I interviewed, show. They raise questions about the positioning of the other in relation to cultural repertoires and symbols. They evoke distant geographies and places, and their articulation in the here and now. They lead to valuations of authenticity and

exoticism, at the interface of diverse regimes of value. They highlight the potential discrepancy between the process of expressing your identity through your work, and the reception of the outcome by others. They open discussions about creative zeal and inspiration and related chances and opportunities in the wider business environment of the cultural industries.

Interest in the cultural industries has flourished in recent years, partly in connection with an emerging perspective on the economy which seeks to capture its embeddedness in culture and in forms of artistic experimentation. Creative and artistic skills are increasingly applied to improving the form and quality of primarily functional products (as is the case in industrial design or software for instance), pointing towards a process of growing ‘aestheticization’ of the economy. In parallel, transformations to the context and conditions in which artists work and the social relations between symbol creators and

the wider society have engendered changes to the way culture is produced.

Cultural industries encompass those activities that create and provide marketable outputs which are generally speaking considered to serve an expressive function, as opposed to a strictly utilitarian one. (Hirsch 1972) Definitions vary across countries and research institutes, primarily in terms of defining the boundaries between core artistic sectors, industrial mass production, and affiliated services. From crafts to fashion, music and books to design services and video games, these outputs distinguish themselves by their aesthetic and semiotic content (Scott 2000), referring to shared understandings of taste, beauty and symbolic meaning. Insofar as these outputs exert an influence on our understanding of the world, they contribute to the constitution of 'our inner, private lives and our public selves'. (Hesmondhalgh 2007, 3) They therefore take on a particular meaning as bearers and markers of identity.

Beyond their contribution to the dynamics of shared identity construction, cultural industries have attracted attention within academic and policy circles alike on account of their contribution to economic growth and job creation, particularly in

advanced urban economies. The policy discourse on the cultural industries has centred increasingly on innovation, leading to calls for caution about turning these industries into the 'snake oil' of the knowledge economy. (Pratt 2009) The identifier 'cultural' is also subject to challenge, particularly since the rise of the more popular 'creative industries' terminology, which provides a more encompassing definition based on the notion of the key input of creativity.

The policy discourse on the cultural industries has centred increasingly on innovation

Elusive dynamics

The dynamics of creativity and innovation within the cultural industries are highly elusive. We understand creativity as a process through which fresh or disruptive ideas are generated and evolve, and through which symbolic and aesthetic changes to existing products occur. Taking the vantage point of creativity from the perspective of cultural entrepreneurs from a migrant background (see Brandellero 2011), finding your creative voice and identity can be about exploring your vision of the world, provoking an imperative dialogue with your origins. It can also be about finding a communication channel for cultural encounters, exchanges and synergies, through the understanding that a subjective perspective is just one of a variety of possibilities. Encountering different perspectives is often confrontational, as the experience of an Amsterdam-based fashion designer from Curaçao, whom I

interviewed, highlights. During his design training in the Netherlands, he was dismayed by how his design teacher would challenge his notions of beauty and impose a different aesthetic judgement. Matching the highly subjective nature of the creation of aesthetic and semiotic content on the one hand (be it individual or collective) with its equally subjective appreciation by audiences and consumers on the other, cultural industry outputs are part of a wider system of aesthetic judgment and social significance, yet constantly fine-tuned to the *zeitgeist*. The quality of cultural industry products is difficult to define, as we are in the situation where judgement of a product's qualities is both subjective and volatile. Taking the example of art, Bourdieu (1993) noted that our ability to grasp it competently is tied to the cultural resources and opportunities available to us, which enhance our proficiency in 'interpretative schemes'. The logical consequence of this observation is that aesthetics are historically specific rather than specific to the object of art itself (Bourdieu 1993). As a result, we are called to understand cultural outputs as embedded in a temporal, spatial and sector-specific web of meanings and understandings.

The de-territorialization of people, cultures and commodities and the resultant increasing interconnectivities across space shape consumer tastes in large metropolitan areas, the arenas where such flows are primarily played out, are transformed. (Appadurai 1990) *Métissage* (from French, meaning crossbreeding, mixing), as a Paris-based fashion designer of African origin put it, is alive in our big cities. 'People come from the world over. You can witness the mixing of elements. Different trends are part of the environment of big cities. Some say, "African prints! They don't belong to European culture!" But in large cities, people can be more open; they live side by side with people

from different cultures.' The city is a sounding board for hybrid forms, a testing ground, a site of exchanges, encounters and synergies, where receptive producers and audiences take their places side by side at the inspiration banquet.

The intrinsic inspiration of creative work, particularly in the supposed trade-off between artistic and commercial motivations, is difficult to disentangle. Cultural entrepreneurs and artists may disavow or rebut any economic motivation, as a strategy to position themselves in the wider field of cultural production and in relation to their counterparts, thus gaining aesthetic capital, credibility and authority. (see Bourdieu 1980) In any event, commercial motivations might be more easily defined (in terms of efficiency goals, sales figures and profit for instance), while motivations based on art for art's sake, preserve an air of reverence and romanticism. (Hesmondhalgh 2007)

Innovation on the other hand is considered as the implementation of new ideas, putting them to practical use. As the outputs of cultural industries have generally speaking a global vocation and circulation, innovation can constitute a radical departure from existing symbolic and aesthetic conventions at the local or transnational level, extending the symbolic elements, rules and procedures which constitute the domain of creativity. We should note here the complexity of defining innovation from an aesthetic perspective, insofar as competitiveness in the cultural industries can be linked to the horizontal differentiation of existing products, as almost identical replacements are developed to fulfil the same need. (Caves 2000) Along this line of reasoning, innovations might be trivial rather than significant and may reflect a case of 'aesthetic exhaustion', tied to the short cycles of fashion trends and the derivative and imitative nature of most products. (see Peterson 1994) It is thus advisable to

conceptualize innovation in the creative industries in relation to the idiosyncrasies of the sector, taking into account the presence of 'soft innovations', linked to changes of an aesthetic nature, contrasting with more widespread understandings of innovation which refer to changes in the functionality of products and processes. (Stoneman 2009)

To summarize, innovation in the cultural industries can occur at three stages, notably at the concept and product development; at the level of the means and process of production and distribution; and in the experience or user-interface of outputs by consumers. (Stoneman 2009) The market performance of cultural industries' outputs remains largely a mystery, as the impossibility of predicting fluctuating consumer demands and tastes has led to the conclusion that 'nobody knows' how the said outputs will perform. (Caves 2000) Strictly speaking, this uncertainty is not unique to cultural industry outputs, but applies more generally to the diffusion of innovation among the members of a social system where a risk in adoption is perceived.

Innovation along the value chain of the cultural industries

To date, very few studies deal specifically with innovation in the cultural industries. Research on innovation in the arts has flourished, however. From the mid-1990s, we find several studies exploring the origin of 'artistic innovation' in arts organizations, generally speaking associated with the programming of contemporary works. (Heilbrun 2001) Innovation in the arts has been measured in terms of levels of non-conformity, that is to say in terms of the divergence of programming of an art institution, for instance, from others in the field. Large metropolitan areas display higher levels of innovation in the arts than in other fields of cultural activity, relative to the rest

of the country. DiMaggio and Stenberg (1985) observed this when they found higher levels of experimentation in theatres in New York compared to the rest of the United States. Making abstraction of global markets, we can assume that organizations located in large metropolitan areas will be faced with competition within and across the field, given the assumption that there will be a multiplicity of suppliers, combined with a high level of substitutability between the various art forms on offer.

In collaboration with Robert Kloosterman, I developed a heuristic framework which can be used to compare the organizational, institutional and procedural conditions of innovation in cultural industries. The framework associates innovation in each sector with concrete configurations encompassing national, regional and local regulatory and contextual factors, the market characteristics of the final products and the role of, for example, intermediaries. (see Brandellero 2010)

Zooming in, we are called to explore the organizational determinants of production, in addition to the wider networked 'world' in which art and culture are produced, socially constructed and controlled, rather than solely focusing on the individual creator or genius. (Becker 1982) Processes of production and consumption in the cultural industry should not be considered as diametrically opposed, but rather as part of a 'cultural circuit' where products are understood as reflecting and shaping consumers' behaviour (Zukin 2004, 178) while being embedded in processes of mediation and valorization. Critics, intermediaries and so-called taste makers (Currid 2007) take part in these processes, helping to inform innovation in design through a better knowledge of market evolution and consumer preferences, for example, and fulfilling a role in introducing consumers to new trends and fads. In so doing,

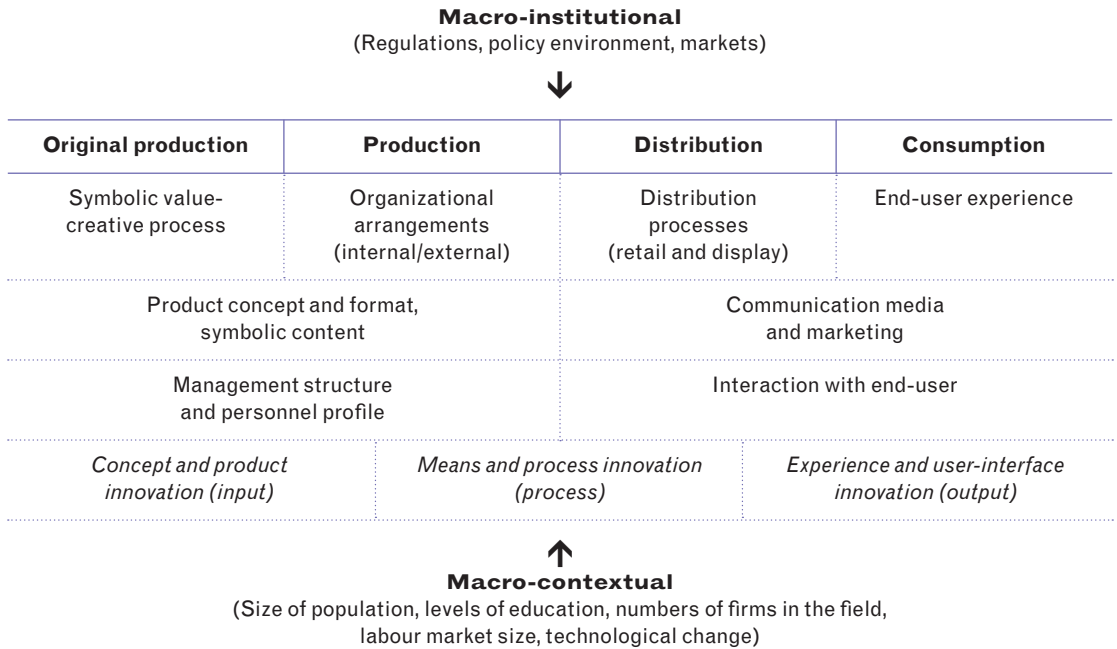


Table 1: Innovation along the value chain of the cultural industries

Source: Brandellero 2010, p. 67.

they become co-producers of meaning and interpretation. The analysis of cultural industries, their creative inputs and their innovative outputs should thus concern itself with the embeddedness of their specific means of production in social relations, and with processes of social and cultural reproduction and transformation. This has been summarized by the perspective of ‘co-construction’, which seeks a less normative distinction between production and consumption and between products and their effects. (Pratt 2009)

The role of social interaction in the career trajectories of artists and designers

Beyond the sectoral organization of production, cultural industries are embedded in loci of creativity and experimentation, constituted by non-sector-specific, formal or informal, artistic experimentation and practices in immaterial or physical spaces.

Arguably, cultural industries illustrate the strong interconnectedness of place, and particularly of urban milieus, and culture more than other sectors of economic activity. Local activities become imbued with the social and cultural character of the surrounding urban area, while urban areas themselves appear to offer congenial conditions for creativity and cultural development. (see Hall 1998 for a historical perspective on the synergies between culture and cities) With loci of creativity, the sectoral analysis broadens its scope to take into account the multidisciplinary spill-over processes, as demonstrated by the cross-fertilization between cultural industry sectors. Currid’s research illustrates such a process vividly, looking at how art and fashion ‘happen’ in New York, and how social interaction forms an integral part of the economic functioning of these cultural sectors, by playing an important role in the career trajectories of artists and designers. (Currid 2007)

The development of a world music production and consumption cluster in Paris provides a case in point. World music is interesting because this genre is by nature ‘transnational’ and ‘translational’ (Guilbault 1993), implying a sense of border and physical distance from the music’s place of origin, as well as a form of decodification and symbolic diversity. In my dissertation, I explored the Paris’s dense cluster of musicians, record-label managers and venue programmers among others highlighting the historic contingency renewal and adaptation, embedded in networked processes of production and consumption. 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. The Paris world-music cluster’s competitiveness is tied to trans-local trajectories of knowledge diffusion, where the expertise of musicologists and music entrepreneurs converge in preserving the world’s musical heritage and stimulating new hybrid sounds through the encounter with remote and more popular sounds. The city becomes an actor

in the transmission and mediation of music through individual and collective actions, channelling public and private actors towards a unitary response to the global conjuncture of the critical music industry and its repercussions for locally based organizations. Cultural policy, albeit with a strong focus on the francophone world, has contributed to the development of a locally-based critical music infrastructure, which draws upon the creativity and talent of artists from across

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the globe. It has also, often in conjunction with social policies aimed at inclusion, encouraged greater audience responsiveness and participation.

The case of world music illustrates how cultural production should be examined from the perspective of the market-structuring power of symbolic and aesthetic content. While the cultural industries are associated with artistic experimentation, the relevance and often constraining influence of conventions and ‘ways of doing’ on artistic and cultural practices has been noted elsewhere (see Becker 1982 for instance). Suddenly the seemingly inconsequential remark of an influential music critic, recounting an episode when she walked out of a concert by a Malian band because according to her, ‘there should not be electric guitar in African music’, resonates more widely. Global cultural trends are pitted against cultural gatekeepers’ stylistic preferences and expectations of ‘authenticity’. It reveals the diverse metropolis

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as a contested site of homogenization and heterogenization, demanding further understanding of the social context in which creativity and innovation in cultural production and consumption are embedded.

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