City, Culture and Society 4 (2013) 2–11

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

City, Culture and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ccs

The geography of celebrity and glamour: Reflections on economy, culture, and desire in the city ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 30 September 2012
Received in revised form date 16 January 2013
Accepted 17 January 2013
Available online 1 March 2013

Keywords:
Celebrity
Cities
Cultural economy
Glamour
Star system
Urbanization

ABSTRACT

Our goal in this paper is to trace out the main lines of symbiosis that link the cultural economy with celebrity and glamour. We observe two trends emerging with great force in the 21st century: The commodification of celebrity and its trappings, and the democratization of celebrity across the globe. These phenomena emerge in the context of the modern city, and they constitute a dynamic nexus of developmental effects. We proceed by deriving celebrity and glamour out of the logic of commercialized cultural production in association with localized scenes, fandom, and a specific kind of economic and cultural infrastructure. We show that this logic is most intense in major world centers of contemporary capitalism. Celebrity and glamour have major economic impacts on these centers both through their integration into localized systems of agglomeration economies and their effects on the marketing and commercialization of culturally inflected outputs, producing winner-take-all geographies responsible for the individuals and scenes that maintain the celebrity ecosystem. We conclude the paper with a critical examination of the wider social and political meaning of celebrity and glamour and their relations to commodified culture generally.

Thesis and context

Preamble

Our objective in this paper is to examine the phenomena of celebrity and glamour and the ways in which they provide insights into the economic and cultural geography of cities, and, in particular, large global cities. We maintain that celebrity and glamour are socially-constructed within the machinery of contemporary commercial culture and its ever-increasing generation of a type of fame that is expressed in highly mediatized images and popular recognition. In the 21st century, stardom in these senses is something that is constantly and intimately present in our everyday lives yet simultaneously remote, and it proliferates ever more insistently in the international sphere. At the same time, celebrity and glamour do not represent merely cultural capital, but are also basic components of the economic system with significant ramifications on both the supply side and the demand side. Stars, in short, are emanations of a wider production system rooted in contemporary capitalism. We might ask, why are these phenomena so pervasive today? Why is there a constant circulation of new celebrities through the media? How is it that individuals of quite modest talent can – like Kafka's Josephine – rise to the pinnacle of renown? What is the cultural and economic logic of celebrity and glamour? What role does geography play in these issues? And most especially, how can our answers to these questions illuminate the dynamics of urbanization in the modern world? In what now follows we attempt to develop answers to these questions by moving through a series of analytical stages that take us from issues of the basic meaning of celebrity and glamour, through their genesis in the modern economy, to their role in helping to sustain the competitive advantages of cities – a role that has taken on special importance in the context of globalization.

Capitalism, celebrity, glamour

Our point of departure for addressing these tasks resides in the claim that capitalism has now entered a new phase

☆ We wish to thank two anonymous referees for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ccs.2013.01.003

of development characterized in major ways by a great qualitative shift in the system of production and consumption. This involves a far-reaching intensification of cerebral and affective labor in the modern economy, as expressed in part in the increasing injection of aesthetic, semiotic, and libidinal values into the goods and services that circulate through the economic system (Lash & Urry, 1994; Molotch, 2002; Zukin, 1995). This turn of events signals the advent of a new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999) corresponding to a new kind of economic order variously identified in the literature by reference to terms such as the "knowledge economy", (Etkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1997), the "creative economy" (Florida, 2002; Markusen and Schrock, 2006), the "third capitalism" (Peters, Britez, & Bulut, 2009), "cognitive capitalism" (Moulier, 2007), and the "cognitive-cultural economy" (Scott, 2007).

By comparison with the older fordist version of capitalism that flourished over much of the 20th century, the cognitive-cultural economy, and especially those segments of it that are explicitly geared to cultural production,[1] is posited on radically new forms of technology and productive organization with a strong focus on flexible labor processes. In addition, the digital technologies that underlie this new economy make possible, and indeed encourage the formation of a stratum of workers who are increasingly called upon to apply their cognitive capacities and their cultural sensibilities in very much more open-ended and personalized forms of productive activity than was the case in fordism (cf. Levy & Murnane, 2004). Reich (1992) alludes to the same phenomenon with his concept of "symbolic analysts," and in a similar vein, Florida (2002) has put forward the idea of the "creative class" as a major new stratum in contemporary society. The recent expansion of culturally-oriented segments of the new economy is amplified on the demand side by the play of Engels' Law, that is, by the growth of discretionary income in the hands of consumers and its increasing proportional disbursement on non-necessities. A large proportion of these non-necessities comprises experiential goods and services such as film, television programs, music, electronic games, magazines, fashion clothing and accessories, beauty products, gastronomy, and tourism.

The industries that produce these types of goods and services are typically (but not exclusively) located in large metropolitan areas (Aoyama, 2009; Markusen & Schrock, 2009; Scott, 2000), and from these sites their outputs are then distributed across the globe. With this emerging economic order come distinctively new urban outcomes and life forms, especially in major metropolitan areas of the Global North (e.g. New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris, and Tokyo), though to an increasing degree, cities of the Global South (e.g. Shanghai, Hong Kong, Seoul, Singapore, Mexico City, and São Paulo) also participate in the expanding global cultural economy (Scott, 2011; Shahid & Nabeshima, 2005; Zukin, 1998). These cities are locations where much of the demand for cultural products is concentrated, not only because they represent major accumulations of wealth but because they are privileged sites of immobile infrastructures of cultural consumption, such as theaters, concert halls, and art museums.

The point of intersection between production and consumption in this new cultural economy is a critical moment in the genesis of celebrity and glamour. This is the point where the stars of the cultural economy (in sectors like music, film, fashion, the plastic arts, and sports) emerge as both peak performers and as objects of desire. The stars are the primary vehicles of celebrity and glamour, and these ascribed qualities, intensified through insistent mediatization (cf. Marshall, 2006), bathe associated goods and services in a sort of radiance. As such, the star or celebrity functions in the symbolic order as a kind of fetish, and in the economic order as a type of brand. The branding effect is of major importance, because (in an increasingly unstable and competitive economic environment) it helps to stabilize and consolidate demand for specific products. Moreover, celebrity earned in one segment of the cultural economy can be transferred via product endorsements to other segments of the economy at large. These intertwined orders make it possible to earn significant rents, appropriated by both the celebrities themselves and the firms that make use of their services (Currid-Halkett & Ravid 2012; Marshall, 1997; Power & Hallencreutz, 2002; Rein, Kotler, & Stoller, 1997; Rojek, 2001). This feature is captured in part by the notions of the winner-take-all economy (Frank & Cook, 1995) and the superstar economy (Rosen, 1981).

There is, to be sure, nothing new about the existence of elites (or celebrities) in society, though we need to distinguish between different fractions of the elite and their changing social functions over time and space (Mills, 1956). Gundle (1999) locates the emergence of celebrity as a social phenomenon in the Paris of the *Belle Epoque*, while Mills (1956) identifies celebrities as a distinctive social type in urban life (in contrast to the old upper class world of *The Social Register*) in late 19th century America (see also Veblen, 1899, and Galbraith, 1958). However, the modern star system, in our sense of a group of individuals functioning as both fetish and brand, was essentially invented in Hollywood in the years around 1915 (Scott, 2005). With the growth of mass entertainment and the mass media over the 20th century, this system with its expression in celebrity and glamour has continued to flourish (Boorstin, 1961; McLuhan, 1964). Today, in addition, "reality TV stars", "football stars" and of course "pop stars," among others, have all been accepted into the pantheon. This very special elite group of individuals forms a distinctive cadre of high-level aesthetic and symbolic labor (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006) whose privileged status is consolidated in large degree by its command of the top tier of employment and production in the cultural economy. Mediatized events and endless news cycles have further intensified the social significance of celebrities by publicizing their personal narratives in what Thrift (2008) has called "technologies of intimacy."

In short, celebrities and the glamour that they radiate are now essential components of the commodity system of capitalism. The stars themselves are often quite ephemeral but the system of stardom is maintained through the continual social reproduction of cultural and symbolic capital and the physical settings, or scenes, in which the system takes shape. The aim of this paper is to trace out the

[1] Other major segments of the cognitive-cultural economy include technology-intensive production, business and financial services, and many different kinds of personal services.