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Mainstreaming French rap music. Commodification and artistic legitimization of othered cultural goods[☆]



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ABSTRACT

By analysing the changes in the commodification of French rap music in the 1990s and 2000s, this paper presents artistic legitimization as a conflict-ridden social process in which for-profit companies plays a crucial role. In the first section, I describe how French rap music is commodified through various paths of commodification (aesthetic, oppositional and mainstream) and their interplay over time. Some of these paths rely on the framing of rap music as a cultural good associated with minority groups, and are key in the first steps toward a legitimization of French rap music as an art form. In the second section, I show how resource mobilisation is an active driver for the artistic delegitimation of French rap music. In the context of market competition, the status of rap music as an “othered” cultural good offers significant opportunities for devaluation. This case study helps to pinpoint how cultural goods may achieve an ambivalent artistic legitimization based on false consensus, which I distinguish from both full-fledged artistic legitimacy and utter artistic illegitimacy.

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1. Introduction

Several empirical studies suggest a convergent framework to account for artistic legitimization as a social process (Baumann, 2001; Boltanski, 1975; DiMaggio, 1982; Levine, 1988; Regev, 1994). Baumann further suggests a theoretical model for the legitimization of art worlds. He defines legitimization as “a process whereby the new and unaccepted is rendered valid and accepted” (Baumann, 2007, p.48), and artistic legitimization as a repositioning of cultural productions as art. As with social movements, he argues, such repositioning is achieved through external opportunity structures, internal mobilisation of resources, and discourses of justification. Opportunity structures refers to the fact that “context matters” (Baumann, 2007, 52): a successful artistic legitimization depends on the social conditions which encourage or discourage collective action. Resources concerns the “materials” (Becker, 1982, p.71) as well as the “personnel” (Becker, 1982, p.77) pulled together to sustain and expand an art world. Their amount and their nature affect the works artists do and how these works are recognized. A discourse of justification “normalizes unexpected, untoward acts” (Zelditch, 2001, p.7) by referring these acts to an accepted “pre-given social framework of norms, values, beliefs, practices and procedures” (Zelditch, 2001). I wish to deepen this discussion by taking both the contested nature of cultural hierarchies and the role of commodification in these processes more fully into account.

Baumann refers to resource mobilisation mainly as an endogenous process occurring within cultural spaces, while he suggests that opportunity structures are exogenous factors facilitating artistic legitimization: “the core of the concept [of

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opportunity structures] is that context matters” (Baumann, 2007, p.52). Yet, in some cases, external resource mobilisation also plays a critical role in the legitimisation of a cultural art form. Thornton (1996) shows for instance how the British Musicians’ Union has fought against the public broadcasting of records in dance clubs, actively resisting the artistic legitimisation of club cultures since the 1950s by formulating an ideology of “live” music. Such a situation shows that the repositioning of cultural productions as art can involve exogenous collective action and resource mobilisation. It is especially true when the status of a cultural form process is highly disputed, as was the case of recorded music. Hence, the mobilisation of resources for artistic legitimisation should be studied as much from within the art world as from without.

Rap music, both in France and in the US, experiences strong dissent over its artistic legitimacy. Many initiatives have successfully posited rap music as one of the main popular art forms in the late 20th century, whether in the academic world (Krim, 2000; Shusterman, 1992), cultural institutions (Shaw, 2014) or in the marketplace (Charnas, 2009). Nevertheless, its artistic status remains highly contested (Hammou, 2012; Rose, 2008). In France, contemporary influential philosopher Alain Finkielkraut assumes that French rap music is “a veritable verbal regurgitation of extreme violence,¹ while the journalist and polemicist Eric Zemmour describes rap music as a “subculture of illiterates.² While some justification discourses “explain how the unaccepted is in fact acceptable” (Baumann, 2007, p.49), these examples suggest that an accepted art form may be proven to be unacceptable, a predicament that may inevitably lead to its artistic devaluation, for instance, through moral panics (Lena, 2012, p.44–45; Thornton, 1996, p.122). The analysis of artistic legitimisation thus requires giving explicit attention to the delegitimation processes it faces in certain circumstances (Berger et al., 1998), which also involve opportunity structures, mobilisation of resources, and discourses of justification.

Yet, most empirical studies and theories focus on “the success stories” (Scardaville, 2009, p.369), that is, those cases where a successful repositioning from the unaccepted to the accepted occurs. They tend to overlook the mobilisation of resources, the production of justifications and the opportunity structures involved in the opposition to the artistic legitimisation of a cultural good. Through the case of French rap music, this paper argues that antagonistic contentions and power struggles over the artistic legitimacy of a cultural form may be neither incidental nor provisional. They may lead to the artistic status of some cultural forms remaining in a state of limbo for decades (Bryson, 1996; Regev, 1994).

1.1. The commodification of cultural goods as art

Commodification is the very condition for the birth and life of most contemporary cultural forms of popular culture (Hall, 1993; Peterson, 1997; Thornton, 1996), and for-profit companies play a crucial role in valorising art forms. In the broad sense, commodity represents anything “produced for exchange rather than for immediate use” (Frow, 1997, p.132). Hence, commodification is the transformation of objects and services into commodities: something is commodified when it is introduced in exchange circuits involving money as a medium for value exchange (Hesmondhalgh, 2012, p.69). Commodification plays a crucial role in several aspects of artistic legitimisation, such as preservation over time, the production of discourses justifying the greatness of works, and the valuation of peer esteem over the market verdict.

First, the artistic legitimisation of a cultural form partly depends on it “lasting” (Becker, 1982, p.365). Lena and Pachucki (2013) identify several aspects of artistic legitimacy involved in the process of commodification. Among them, there is the institutionalisation of standards and practices, which often depends on the longstanding engagement of for-profit companies in art worlds (Becker, 1982, p.250). The commercial practices of cataloguing also contribute to the storage-system designed for the preservation of art works (Becker, 1982, 220). Artistic legitimisation further requires “a set of spaces dedicated to the production and consumption of work” (Lena & Pachucki, 2013, p.239). For-profit companies support such spaces through recording studios, pressing plant, venues, retailers, etc.

Artistic legitimisation also entails justification discourses, usually formulated by aestheticians and critics (Baumann, 2007; Becker, 1982). They define the social value of cultural goods and draws distinctions between art and non-art (Heinich & Shapiro, 2012; Pedroni & Volonté, 2014), and between low forms or high forms of art (Bourdieu, 1984a; Varriale, 2015). These assessments are disseminated by marketing teams through advertisement (Lena, 2012; Taylor, 2007) in media networks. In several cases, they have even been devised for commercial purposes. Maisonneuve (2009, p.54) shows for instance how the music publishing companies advertised the legitimisation of gramophone as an artistic medium, and the authenticity of its recorded repertoire (see also Thornton, 1996).

Lastly, artistic legitimisation is typically associated with a discrepancy between peer evaluation and the market verdict. According to Lena and Pachucki (2013), “the signature quality of field legitimacy is the emergence and relative independence of a status order built from peer esteem from one built purely upon sales” (Lena & Patchuki, 2013). While the role of for-profit companies is less straightforward here, they are indeed prominent actors when we take into account market competition. The competition between companies within a sector may encourage product differentiation. These strategies formulate unique selling points that serve to strengthen the singularity of their cultural goods (Karpik, 2010), which is a key feature of artistic ideology (Heinich, 1991).

Bourdieu’s analysis of the French publishing industry shows for instance how the avant-garde publishers confronted the major publishers in 1970s France, financing the risky investments in contemporary avant-garde literature with the profits

¹ Alain Finkielkraut, “L’esprit de l’escalier”, *RCJ*, 4 Jan. 2015

² Eric Zemmour, “L’Hebdo”, *France O*, 8 Dec. 2007.

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