



MENU

Aesthetic ecologies: how place shapes cultural production

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Abstract:

In this paper, I outline a new approach within the sociology of art and cultural production that I label 'aesthetic ecologies'. While this approach is driven by recent concerns about the geographies of creativity (for e.g., why certain types of creativity cluster in time and place) and the economic significance to cities and regions of knowledge/cultural production, there are important predecessors. These include John Dewey's (1936) *Art as Experience*; Robert Park's *The City*; Gregory Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*; James J. Gibson's *Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*; and more recently Tim Ingold's espousal of a 'poetics of dwelling' in *Perceptions of Environment*. There is also an ecological sensitivity at work in Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*; and, indeed, the field of California studies has produced interesting analyses of everything from the 'Palm Springs style of modernism' through to how the personal computer embodies a regional (and also very glocal) ethos. But how to conceptualize the dynamics of place without resorting to a new type of determinism? There is the problem that some of the writing on creativity and place tends to take the global metropolis as its model; and, in addition to glamourizing certain modes of spatial existence, adopts a one-size-fits-all set of policy prescriptions. My argument is that an emphasis on ranking cities or regions according to their occupational structure or the density of their creative networks does not necessarily capture the qualitative distinctiveness or 'genius' of place. In conclusion, I ponder the question: might it be that, in addition to terms such as 'art worlds' (Becker) and 'fields of cultural production' (Bourdieu), the sociology of art and cultural production need a theoretical concept comparable to the wine-making notion of *terroir*? Or, at the very least, an ability to explain how material and symbolic 'landscapes' shape creativity and the production of aesthetic goods?

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