



REVIEW:

The Cultural Intermediaries Reader (Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews, eds.: Sage, 2014)

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In *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader*, Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews aim to offer the first comprehensive introduction to the contemporary conceptualisation of cultural intermediaries. In the introduction, the editors offer an initial definition of cultural intermediaries as

the taste makers defining what counts as good taste and cool culture in today's marketplace. Working at the intersection of culture and economy, they perform critical operations in the production and promotion of consumption, constructing legitimacy and adding value through the qualification of goods. (p.1)

The editors propose that by identifying and recognising the functions of those professionals deemed as cultural intermediaries – for example artists, food and wine experts, fashion gurus and so forth – contemporary cultural production can be more closely analysed and situated within current capitalist economies. According to the editors the rise of cultural intermediaries is linked to the expansion of a new middle class, stemming from education changes fostered by the new cultural economy. Such shifts are also symptomatic of wider global changes that have occurred since Pierre Bourdieu first published *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Harvard University Press, 1984), which sought to analyse the effects, primarily in the west, of a post-Fordist society.

Although Mathews and Smith Maguire make a convincing argument for their working definition, determining what (or who) constitutes a cultural intermediary remains conceptually woolly throughout the text. The causes and effects of the plethora of cultural workers who can be labelled new cultural intermediaries within the global economy are discussed comprehensively in the second section, but this is indeed 'a broad church' (p.2), and the analysis is rather selective in the cultural areas included as examples. However, these conceptual challenges also render this collection of essays discursively interesting, particularly in terms of scrutinizing the power relations within cultural and economic hierarchical interchanges, and identifying those 'actors' who consciously work against, as well as with, the new cultural economy.

The seventeen selected essays cast a wide interdisciplinary net, including sociology, cultural studies, media studies, fashion, and art history. These provide the reader with an excellent introduction to the field and further indicate the expansion of the cultural and creative industries that have mushroomed in the last two decades. Both editors (Smith Maguire as a sociologist of consumption, and Mathews, who specializes in the cultural work of journalists) have assembled a fine and timely array of essays from this ever-growing field of research. In addition, they provide an excellent introductory chapter which historicizes the area and outlines their aims coherently. These ambitions are to furnish readers with a practical guide to the central features and challenges of conducting research on cultural intermediaries; propose theoretical and methodological approaches; incorporate case studies from eminent writers; and suggest new directions and possibilities for future research to develop. Both editors also provide

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insightful contributing essays that focus on their own specialist areas.

The book is divided into two separate sections. Part one ('Conceptual and Methodological Foundations') is mainly theoretical, exploring the conceptual and methodological foundations for study, whereas part two ('Cultural Intermediary Case Studies') covers specific areas such as advertising, branding, public relations practitioners, arts promotion, fashion, popular music, lifestyle, media, fitness, clothing, book retail, food and drink. This collection appears to be a more thorough exploration of ideas that the editors published two years previously in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, in an article entitled 'Are we all cultural intermediaries now? An introduction to cultural intermediaries in context' (Sage, 2012). Here, the editors broached the need to give greater empirical attention to the stratification and differentiation of cultural intermediaries as market actors. Refocusing attention on cultural intermediaries, they argued, may help in analysing and understanding cultural policy as well as helping formulate future new directions for policy makers.

According to the editors, previous research in the field has mainly followed two directions. The first extended Bourdieu's seminal study on taste and class by viewing cultural intermediaries as exemplars of the role of the petit bourgeoisie in the mediation of production and consumption. The second research trajectory has concentrated on social intermediaries as market actors involved in the qualification of goods, thus mediating between the economy and culture. As both these approaches appear to be dated in the contemporary world, the authors advocate a more thorough, novel contemporary examination. Within this new approach they propose to reconsider the conceptual definition of who could be deemed as cultural intermediaries, and the relationship between these two traditional areas of research. It is this 'third way' of research which they have sought to pioneer within this new edited collection.

Turning to the essays contained within the volume, a very good account of the inherent problems of definition is included in Liz McFalls' contribution 'The Problem of Cultural Intermediaries in the Economy of Qualities' (p. 42- 51). In this eloquently written essay McFalls quotes Karl Marx's famous critique of political economy, which highlighted the contingent links between production and consumption, noting that Marx 'neatly introduces intermediation without labouring the theoretical problem raised by its status as a necessary movement between spheres that are simultaneous, unified and identical' (p. 43). Like many of the authors in the book, she acknowledges the importance of Bourdieu's analysis of the petit bourgeoisie and cites his work as a good foundation from which to identify and conceptualise the new cultural intermediaries. Furthermore, she is aware that the roles of intermediaries are fluid, as workers in the cultural field are often employed in flexible roles, whilst acknowledging many scholars still prioritize a 'narrow and reductionist aesthetic definition of culture' (p 43). However, she warns that 'as soon as cultural intermediary work is described, the list of occupations that can reasonably claimed to be engaged in it grows' (p. 44), a recurring theme and problematic throughout the volume which is perhaps not ultimately resolved.

Victoria Durrer and Dave O'Brien's essay 'Arts Promotion' was of particular interest for this reviewer as an art historian. In this probing essay the research focuses on arts promotion, examining public participation in art galleries and museums to investigate how cultural intermediaries negotiate the boundaries between the public and the 'art world'. Although the intricacies of what defines the 'art world' could have been developed more extensively, their observations offer a useful exploration of how government policy impacts on artistic production and audience reception. The researchers conducted interviews based on the delivery of 22 arts programmes by 10 different organisations in Liverpool, which at the time of research were targeting 'socially excluded' groups in order to follow the direction of the New Labour Govern-

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ment's cultural policy in the UK. Their research included mainstream and traditional-style art galleries or museums in Liverpool, as well as contemporary art centres and festivals. In their analysis, Durrer and O'Brien acknowledge the difficulties experienced by arts professionals in following government policies that fund projects based on social policy objectives, rather than focusing on artistic freedom or creativity. As they observe:

While cultural intermediaries may be offering new audiences the freedom and flexibility to reach and value their own interpretations and even creation of art, above or equal to professional artists, critics, and historians, in doing so they risk simultaneously devaluing the institutions in which they themselves are situated. (p.109)

Those interviewed in Durrer and O'Brien's study evidence awareness of the complex relationship between taste, consumption, class position, and social mobility. In an especially revealing quote one undisclosed interviewee stated that 'A lot of people do not want to see the (art) democratized. They do not want to see what they would regard as the great-unwashed turning up in large numbers' (p.110). Negative perceptions of the art world as a closed network of elites, including curators, dealers, art schools, government agencies, and artists themselves, emerge repeatedly, and invoke the paradoxical position faced by cultural workers:

It is the cultural intermediary who must negotiate the terms of inclusions, but who is also simultaneously limited in their ability to do so. This situation places them in a constant state of negotiation between audience and institutions: personal beliefs and structural beliefs, quality and democracy. (p.110)

Durrer and O'Brien's essay further seeks to challenge the view of arts policy as mere 'instrumentalism' or a re-imposition of Victorian social values. Primarily interested in assessing how government cultural policy has affected arts production and vice versa, they observe, for example, the growth of relational art practice (and its funding) as indicative of government cultural policies that sought more public engagement with the arts. This is a particularly interesting insight into a form of art practice that has experienced significant recent growth across Europe. Although the authors' study is explicitly centred on English examples, such commentary provides a useful touchpoint from which subsequent cross-cultural analyses might be extended. As the authors note, many of those labelled as new cultural intermediaries have held the potential to either perpetuate government policy or be critical of it, depending on the individuals involved. Durrer and O'Brien's method of analysis, which probes the rationale and processes by which cultural actors engage with the wider field of policy and practice, would thereby find intriguing application to parallel Irish phenomena.

Some particularly probing essays serve particularly well as methodological orientations to the field. Smith Maguire's essay 'Bourdieu on Cultural Intermediaries', for example, offers a comprehensive historical account of theoretical developments since Bourdieu's seminal work, and expands upon why his work continues to be a useful starting point for scholars. In a related vein, Lise Skove's essay focusing on fashion takes issue with Bourdieu's notion that cultural intermediaries always have a pedagogical agenda, although her case studies remain heavily inflected by readings of his work. Her examination of the fashion clothing industry, one of the most market-driven areas amongst the creative industries, offers a refreshing alternative view of cultural intermediaries as detached observers of consumer markets, who refrain from imposing their own cultural values to a greater extent than many of the other intermediaries discussed in the volume. Indeed, the collection might have benefited from more essays that considered further the potential oppositional effect of cultural intermediaries, and their ability to disrupt the new cultural economy rather than merely bolstering the status quo.

One additional flaw of the collection is that several essays appear to plough the same furrow, albeit from different perspectives. For example, there are two case studies dedicated to fashion and clothing, yet no essays extensively address the growing role of cultural intermediaries within social media networks. The volume therefore sidesteps an in-depth scrutiny of the

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proliferation of 'market actors' with 'expert orientation' (the two key components the editors argue are required to qualify as a new cultural intermediary) that have mushroomed due to new forms of online engagement. Another weakness in the collection is that the case studies, although purporting to offer a wide ethnographic perspective, tend to be heavily weighted in favour of British cultural examples, although this is acknowledged to some extent within the introduction.

These points of critique notwithstanding, as the volume's key intention is to lay the foundations for future research, it certainly meets such aims and is a welcome introduction to this widening area of academic research, and will be especially valuable to researchers new to the study of production and exchange in cultural and creative industries.

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