Aesthetic labour in creative industries: the case of independent musicians in Toronto, Canada

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In this paper we examine the changing nature of aesthetic labour in creative industries. Drawing on a case study of independent musicians in Toronto, we argue that the spatiality and temporality of aesthetic labour has shifted as a result of technological change in the music industry and the decline of record labels. In particular, we demonstrate that aesthetic labour in the music industry has become more time-intensive and takes place across a growing range of spaces, including the stage, the home and online. This paper contributes to existing studies in geography that consider the spatial dynamics and precarious conditions of creative labour.

Key words: music industry, aesthetic labour, physical and virtual space, Toronto

Introduction

In recent years, there has been increased attention to the embodied capacities and attributes of workers, often referred to as aesthetic labour (Warhurst *et al*. 2000). This research explores the stylisation of workplace performances, including the way workers produce specific looks and demeanours as part of the job. These studies focus on interactive service work, foregrounding how aesthetic labour is used to develop a company's brand. Recently, the concept has also been extended to creative labour (Entwistle 2002; Dean 2005; Entwistle and Wissinger 2006).

Using the example of independent musicians in Toronto, Canada, we argue that although musicians have always had to perform aesthetic labour, the nature of this labour is changing in the current period. We examine how new digital technologies, and the rise of independent music production, have altered performances in three ways. First, with the 'MP3 Crisis' and subsequent decline in record sales, independent musicians perform more live shows to generate income. As 'standing out in the crowd' becomes difficult, musicians place greater emphasis on the visual components of their performances, increasing the amount of aesthetic labour required. Second, without the support and expertise of record labels, independent musicians assume sole responsibility for market-

ing their music and communicating with fans. This has extended the emotional and aesthetic content of the work and expanded the range of spaces where this labour is performed. Third, with the development of new internet platforms (such as YouTube, Facebook, MySpace and Twitter), musicians are performing aesthetic labour in new online spaces. This increases their workload and further erodes the division between work and leisure. These findings contribute to existing studies in geography that consider the spatial dynamics and precarious conditions of creative labour.

The analysis is based on semi-structured interviews conducted in Toronto, which is the largest music centre in Canada. The city is home to several important educational and performance institutions, all of the major Canadian record labels, and features the largest number of recording studios and performance venues in the country. Toronto supports a diverse array of genres, and has developed a strong reputation as 'the place to be' for established and aspiring musicians. In this paper, we argue that the processes of transformation affecting the music industry are similar for all cities, but they are also affected by local dynamics. In particular, we suggest that in a city like Toronto, a highly competitive market, combined with a high cost of living and a lack of government support, may exacerbate the need to perform aesthetic labour.

Of the 65 interviews conducted, 51 were with independent musicians and 14 were with key informants who work as managers, producers and executives at major and indie record labels. These individuals provided valuable information about recent changes in the music industry and the demands associated with independent music production. The interviews covered musicians working in a variety of genres, including rock, hip-hop, electronic, punk, jazz and classical. They ranged from one to two hours in length and were digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded according to theme. Verbatim quotations are used throughout the paper to demonstrate how participants expressed experiences in their own words.

Divided into two sections, we begin by reviewing the literature on aesthetic labour and its relationship to creative work. The second section examines the changing nature of aesthetic labour in the music industry, highlighting three spaces where musicians increasingly perform aesthetic labour: the stage, the city and online.

Aesthetic labour and creative industries

The notion of aesthetic labour stems from the classic work on emotional labour, which Hochschild defines as 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' (1983, 7). Emphasis is placed on how service work involves managing one's deepest feelings and emotions. The term aesthetic labour, which Warhurst *et al.* use to refer to the 'embodied capacities and attributes possessed by workers' (2000, 4), seeks to incorporate the embodied nature of service work, and the corporeal labour that goes into the production of particular dispositions (Witz *et al.* 2003, 36). In this way, distinct modes of customer interaction depend as much on performative 'styles of the flesh' as they do on manufactured feelings (Butler in Witz *et al.* 2003, 37).

Aesthetic labour is a manifestation of social and cultural capital; its attributes are related to gender, age, class, race and ethnicity (Pettinger 2004). Symbolic values are attached to bodies, leading to the development of physical capital, which is a manifestation of a particular habitus – a socially constructed system of cognitive and bodily dispositions that ensure a consistency and durability to performances (Bourdieu 1993). Embodied dispositions include ways of walking, talking, standing and feeling (Witz *et al.* 2003).

Physical capital is a collective manifestation, but it is also developed by firms (Witz *et al.* 2003). After recruiting workers with particular embodied attributes, employers develop these dispositions further – training and transforming the worker – so that they produce a particular style of service. Thus, the physical capital of employees is converted into economic capital by service employers. As

Entwistle and Wissinger argue 'workers' bodies are harnessed to sell the organisation's image, literally by embodying it' (2006, 775).

Studies on interactive service work, particularly the retail and hospitality sectors, have emphasised how firms develop aesthetic sensibilities among their employees (Pettinger 2004; McDowell 2009; Warhurst and Nickson 2007; Witz *et al.* 2003). Recently, researchers have also begun to analyse how creative workers perform aesthetic labour (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006; Entwistle 2002; Dean 2005). As Entwistle (2002, 321) suggests, in creative economies, aesthetics are not mere 'add ons', they are the products. Moreover, creative industries depend heavily on symbolic knowledge, local context and 'know who' (Asheim and Gertler 2005). Creative work is also characterised by high levels of employment insecurity and perpetual networking. These features translate into a strong need to be embedded in local cultural scenes and spend long hours socialising and exchanging knowledge (Neff *et al.* 2005).

Entwistle and Wissinger explore the nature of aesthetic labour in fashion modelling, where 'the emphasis upon the body is arguably greater than in service work, as it is the main commodity or tool of the trade' (2006, 776). Similarly, for television and theatre acting, Dean (2005) argues that attracting the audience gaze through aesthetic labour is a key requirement of the job. Dean (2005) notes a link between physical attractiveness and the ability to secure roles. Actors are required to be charming at all times and to spend long hours building relationships with directors and casting agents.

Unlike service industries, where performances are dictated by organisations, workers in creative industries are often freelance and required to become entrepreneurs of the self by taking responsibility for managing their own bodies and image (Dean 2005; Entwistle and Wissinger 2006). This freedom does not signal the absence of governance, but rather a new form of power premised on self-management (Rose 1999; McRobbie 2002). For fashion models, aesthetic labour entails an on-going commitment to body maintenance through diet and exercise. As Entwistle and Wissinger argue, the 'freelance aesthetic labourer cannot walk away from the product which is their entire embodied self' (2006, 791).

Creative work means being 'always on' (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006, 774). Work extends beyond the four walls of the office and spills into society at large (Lazzarato 1996, 137). In this situation, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish work from leisure. Workers are 'situated within a market that is constantly shifting and within networks that are changeable in time and space' (Lazzarato 1996, 135; see also Gill and Pratt 2008). In this paper, we investigate aesthetic labour in music, an occupation that shares many of these characteristics.

The changing nature of music work

As in other cities, music work has changed in Toronto over the past decade. During the corporate era (1978–1998), most musicians were either affiliated with a record label or striving to sign a record contract. Recording, promoting and distributing music were capital and skill-intensive activities that required a specialised division of labour, and the support and resources of large firms (Leyshon 2009). While record labels constructed artist images, handled marketing, promotion and public relations, musicians were largely free to focus on creative activities such as writing and recording songs.

In the late 1990s, new digital technologies, including Napster, sparked the so-called 'MP3 Crisis' in the music industry, weakening the power of record labels and ushering in a new form of digitally-driven independent music production (Leyshon 2009; Hracs 2012). Coupled with other market trends, 'downloading' resulted in billion dollar losses for the major record labels, the termination of thousands of recording contracts, and the downloading of the economic risk and responsibility of talent development directly onto individual musicians.

At the same time, digital technologies have democratised the production, promotion, distribution and consumption of music. Inexpensive computers and user-friendly software allow musicians to record in home studios, and digital formats and online retail spaces allow musicians to enter the world of marketing, fundraising and distribution for the first time (Leyshon 2009). With declining entry barriers, the traditionally niche 'Do It Yourself' (D.I.Y.) model has been transformed from a punk-inspired alternative into the dominant organisational form for up-and-coming musicians. In Canada, 95 per cent of all musicians are not affiliated record labels (Canadian Independent Recording Artists' Association 2010) and operate as entrepreneurs who are responsible for the growing range of creative and non-creative tasks, including song writing, recording, fundraising, marketing, communication and tour booking. This transition has furnished musicians with unprecedented control over their careers, but the market is fraught with uncertainty and competition is intensifying. Between 2001 and 2006, the annual incomes of musicians in Toronto declined by 25.9 per cent to $13,773 and many musicians find it difficult to earn a living (Statistics Canada 2008).

Music work has always entailed some degree of aesthetic labour, such as crafting unique identities and looks and forging emotional connections with audiences. Yet, during the corporate era, many musicians received help from labels. In the wake of industrial restructuring, competition forces all musicians to perform a broader and more time-intensive range of aesthetic tasks. Musicians spend a growing amount of time on live performances and developing and marketing unique visual styles. This shift has changed the temporality and spatiality of aesthetic labour.

On stage: the growing importance of live shows

Like acting and modelling, music work involves live performances and projecting particular images. Attention to dress, appearance, bodily comportment and motility is key, and performances are often highly gendered and sexualised (Whiteley 2000). Traditionally, live performances promoted album sales. However, as the value of recorded music has declined due to oversupply, illegal downloading and the rise of entertainment alternatives (such as DVDs, video games and the internet), live performances have become the dominant revenue stream for independent musicians (Young and Collins 2010). MP3s and CDs are now often given away to promote shows. Hyatt (2008, 23) reports that Canadian musicians in his sample earned 48.5 per cent of their income from performing live and only 3.4 per cent from selling recorded music.

This shift has increased aesthetic labour by transforming live performances from a relatively smaller and more pleasurable part of the job – the culmination of writing, rehearsing and recording – to a highly competitive and intense activity that determines survival. Musicians feel pressure to make the most of their opportunities by converting audience members into loyal and paying fans. As one musician puts it,

> You have to make sure you are better than anything people are going to see. You need them to walk away thinking 'I have to come back and see this band. I have to bring friends. I have to go to their website and download the music'. (Interview)

In addition to playing songs, musicians work hard to engage the audience by telling stories and promoting shows, recorded music and other merchandise. In the absence of firm-based managers or intermediaries (such as agents), who ensure freelancers look and behave appropriately, independent musicians are individually responsible for managing their own bodies, images and emotions.

In Toronto, the market for live music has become saturated due to a steady inflow of musicians and a static number of venues (Hracs et al. 2011). Consequently, the originality of individual songs and quality of musicianship is no longer sufficient to attract consumers. Rather, musicians must produce a complete package by combining their sonic style with a unique visual and aesthetic style. As one musician explains:

> When I see a show I want to be stimulated and excited . . . I hate to admit it, but I do think that image is 50% and the music is 50% . . . (Interview)

Another musician adds:

> People need an image . . . We accessorize every show
> with different themes and costumes so on stage you can
> look up and see six people wearing the same outfits.
> (Interview)

Respondents talked about developing a 'whole package'
for the stage, arguing that the visual and entertainment
elements are often more important to success than the
quality of the music. Thus, beyond playing instruments,
musicians must become actors in a theatrical sense. As
one musician puts it:

> We want to have a nice balance between musicianship
> and showmanship . . . On stage when people see me, that
> is not necessarily me. It is this stage persona . . . It is an
> acting thing . . . With fashion and with models too, I guess
> it is kind of an ideal . . . Backstage when a designer is
> telling the models to get ready, it is like 'okay you are a
> Park Avenue Princess and you're going on a shopping trip,
> and you have Brad Pitt on your arm, go.' And that is the
> same thing when a musician is playing a show on stage.
> (Interview)

Beyond the physical look, musicians must also develop
and perform stage personalities that project enthusiasm.
Echoing what Hochschild (1983, 127) termed the 'war of
smiles', many respondents talked about the importance of
body language, coming on stage with energy and smiling
at the audience. As one musician explains:

> I have to have a 'stage persona'. I actually have stage
> clothes now that I only wear when I am performing and it
> is a completely different personality that comes out of me
> from wearing something shiny . . . I have to up everything
> I am doing. I have to be entertaining and visually stimu-
> lating in addition to just performing. (Interview)

Although our respondents conceded that performing
aesthetic labour is essential to competing for fans and
consumption dollars, many argued that wearing certain
outfits and acting flamboyantly required emotional and
bodily management. As one musician puts it:

> I feel pressure because I am dead center stage with the
> co-lead singer and he is crazy. He is really into it and
> dramatic and exciting and I am not any of those things, so
> I have to pull from places to try to make myself that way
> . . . (Interview)

Given the pressure to win over audiences and reward
loyal fans, musicians straddle a fine emotional line. They
must engage the audience, but also protect their time.

Although venues and bars are spaces of pleasure and
escape for consumers, they are sites of work and perfor-
mance for musicians. Whereas some creative workers,
including actors, are protected from direct interaction

with the public while working, musicians are much closer
to interactive service workers (McDowell 2009). As one
musician puts it:

> We always played at bars and clubs, going on at 11:00
> pm. There is late night stuff – drinking, drugs – which
> embodies that whole lifestyle . . . When you are an enter-
> tainer, you want to go out there and you want to see
> people smile . . . and you don't want to fall short of their
> expectations . . . [The audience] might be ready to party
> on a Friday or Saturday night, but as a band touring and
> playing shows every night, you can't keep it up . . . It is
> hard to make that division between working and being
> responsible and partying with everyone else. (Interview)

In the current era, the range and intensity of performances
is increasing. Pressures to enhance the visual and aes-
thetic dimensions of shows and mingle with the audience
are mounting. Many of these practices are difficult to
sustain.

Although all independent musicians face similar pres-
sures to perform, local conditions shape the experience of
aesthetic labour. For example, respondents reveal that in
Toronto the oversupply of musicians creates cutthroat
competition to get on stage. Compared with a smaller and
more supportive city such as Halifax, musicians in Toronto
experience higher levels of competition and lower rates of
pay (Hracs *et al*. 2011). Other local conditions, such as
the cost of space (for housing and rehearsing) and gov-
ernment policies also shape the experience of aesthetic
labour. In Montreal, Cummins-Russell and Rantisi (2011)
illustrate how low rents and supportive government poli-
cies reduce financial pressures on musicians. By com-
parison, in Toronto, higher rents and fewer institutional
supports intensify the need to perform aesthetic labour
and 'stand out in the crowd'.[1]

The basin of aesthetic labour: the home, the street and other spaces

As independent entrepreneurs, musicians spend more
time constructing their image, interacting with fans and
performing aesthetic labour in a growing range of spaces.
This results in a more fluid boundary between work and
leisure (Jarvis and Pratt 2006). Like freelancers in adver-
tising and new media, who spend a significant amount of
time upgrading their skills through training and network-
ing at parties (Neff *et al*. 2005; Ross 2008), musicians
spend a greater portion of their time networking with
venue owners to secure work and performance outlets.
This emphasis on socialising and the continual production
of the body/self for an audience contributes to the feeling
of being 'always on' (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006). As
one musician puts it, 'What is typical for us, and I think it
is unfortunate, is that you never have the sense that you
are done, that you are really free' (Interview).

For musicians, this amounts to 'working all the time', and the inability to relax in public or even private spaces (see also Entwistle and Wissinger 2006). Beyond rehearsing and recording, which can be done in private, musicians spend a growing proportion of their time on more public and interactive activities, such as branding and promoting their creative content. 'It is a full-time job, but only about 10 per cent actually involves music. The rest of it is the marketing and the looking for work' (Interview). Another musician explains:

> Like any freelance work . . . I spend a lot of time making sure that I'm present in people's minds and I'm on people's phone lists. People know me and see me, and want to call me. As I say, it's not particularly in music in a lot of ways. It's just trying to be professional and be known, get my name out there. There's a ton of that and it's constant. (Interview)

Crucially though, because musicians never know when an opportunity may arise or who may make an offer, they operate in a constant state of readiness. Even when musicians are not actively promoting their work, they have to be aware of their look and be ready to perform on command:

> I find that the more I get plugged into the community, . . . the more I see people on the subway and I see people in the street who know me from being on stage. They know my name and they feel that they're able to come up and say something to me. So it wouldn't be good if every time somebody came up to me I said 'leave me alone' or 'don't bother me', or that 'I'm too busy', or that 'I don't have to talk to you'. (Interview)

Another musician similarly argues,

> I've got to be 'on' . . . and know things to say in conversation . . . I was at a restaurant last week, but I did a show around that area and a kid recognized me from there, so I've got to be 'on' there. I can't be like 'I'm eating my dinner with my girlfriend, so leave me alone.' (Interview)

The performance of aesthetic labour thus extends beyond the stage to a range of spaces, including the home, cafes and the street. Under the old model, labels took care of promoting a band, booking shows and some communication with fans, but independent musicians must now perform the role of content generator (producer) and the promoter (intermediary). The absence of firms is important because the pressure of self-management is arguably greater than for those conforming to corporate codes, which can be circumvented and challenged through collective action (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006). For independent musicians, the constructed 'self' is not donned and removed at the end of the working day, but is the product. As a result, musicians arguably find it difficult to maintain a distance between work-identity and self-identity, and they now perform aesthetic labour in a growing range of spaces.

As with the need to perform live shows, these processes are universal. Independent musicians in all cities need to maintain websites, book their own shows and interact with fans. Yet, the intensity and specific contours of these activities are shaped by local conditions, including labour market dynamics, cost of living and institutional supports. When compared with their counterparts in Halifax or Montreal, musicians in Toronto experience more pressure to be entrepreneurial, market themselves and work longer hours (Hracs *et al*. 2011; Cummins-Russell and Rantisi 2011). Together, these conditions influence the practice of aesthetic labour and the spaces where it is performed.

Aesthetic labour in online spaces
Digital technologies have allowed contemporary independent musicians to enter the world of global promotion and distribution for the first time. With MySpace Music, musicians can directly promote and sell digital audio downloads to a vast audience at a low cost. By 2007, 80 per cent of all musicians maintained a MySpace page (Antin and Earp 2010, 953) and today using online spaces such as iTunes and personal websites to sell and promote products has become a virtual necessity. Modern social media applications such as MySpace, Facebook and Twitter alter the relationship between producers and consumers and allow musicians to engage directly with their audience on increasingly personal levels. These new communication channels encourage disintermediation and allow musicians to bypass traditional middlemen, such as record labels, distributors, radio networks and independent record promoters (Young and Collins 2010).

New technologies bring opportunities and uncertainties. Cote and Pybus (2007, 96) argue that new forms of subjectivity are being constructed within social networks like MySpace, and that opening a social media account means extending oneself into cyberspace and becoming a 'digital body'. Like physical bodies, digital bodies are always in a state of becoming, and require continuous maintenance and enhancement through constant investments of time, energy and aesthetic labour.

For everyday users, social media facilitate interactions with friends and represent a space of pleasure, but for musicians, social media constitute a site of labour. As one musician explains:

> Everyone has a MySpace page and a Facebook page and who knows what else, and you work a lot in that forum. An enormous piece of my schedule is coming home from gigs at 12 or 2 am in the morning and spending an hour on the computer answering emails and messages. (Interview)

The impetus to spend time on social media stems from low entry barriers and increased competition. As musicians create websites to promote their shows and sell their products, they must work harder to attract attention in the crowded online marketplace and monetise their content by converting digital flâneurs into loyal and paying customers. As one musician explains:

> Bands are like whores . . . using MySpace, using Facebook, . . . YouTube, whatever they can get their hands on. Which is why those bands get heard so quickly, and it is a great thing, to get your music out . . . You have to use every avenue that you can, whether it be touring and computer media and networking. (Interview)

Our interviews suggest that musicians engage directly with consumers in increasingly intimate ways. This trend is evident in the growing number of advice columns that recommend 'creating conversations' with fans that make 'meaningful emotional connections' on a personal level (Ward 2011; Ehrlich 2011; MySpaceShowDown 2008). As one music blogger explains: 'You as an artist need to connect personally online with your fans, have discussions with them, ask them how they are doing . . . treat your fans like they are all VIPs' (Osborne 2010).

Maintaining these connections requires musicians to constantly update their creative and personal content and musicians spend an increasing amount of time developing online personas and answering personal questions to keep fans interested. This work spans different spaces, including the home, and with mobile devices it can take place almost anywhere. Thus, the spatiality of work has expanded and the temporality of life is now governed by work (Gill and Pratt 2008).

This work clearly involves emotional management, but interacting with fans is not limited to text. In fact, online interactions are increasingly visual, requiring aesthetic labour. Online advice columns argue that creating a 'uniform look' that fits with the music and using 'top-notch imagery' is crucial to getting noticed online (MusicRadar 2008). Thus, musicians spend time video chatting with their audience and collaborate with local fashion designers, artists, photographers and videographers to create personal videos and pictures (Interviews).

The ability of online spaces to blur the boundaries between producers and consumers and facilitate intimate interactions brings benefits. By establishing relationships with fans, musicians can build brand loyalty, crowd source creative ideas and secure funding for new projects (using sites such as 'Kickstarter'). Yet, these activities require investments of aesthetic labour, which limit the resources musicians can allocate to developing new creative content and contributes to what McRobbie calls the 'corrosion of creativity' (2002, 61).

Conclusion

This paper examines the nature of aesthetic labour in the digital age and contributes to existing studies that examine the spatial dynamics and precarious conditions of creative work. It demonstrates that in the contemporary music industry, aesthetic labour is increasingly important to standing out in the crowd and earning a living.

The findings indicate that live shows have become the dominant revenue stream and that musicians work to enhance the visual and theatrical aspects of their performances by paying more attention to image, clothes and bodily comportment. Off stage, musicians spend a growing portion of their time networking and maintaining their image. Operating in a constant state of readiness, public spaces, including restaurants and the street, are experienced by musicians as sites of work instead of pleasure or escape. Online spaces have also become sites of aesthetic labour, and musicians spend a considerable amount of time developing and updating online content that is increasingly visual, and interacting with fans in intimate ways.

Thus, while music work has always involved aesthetic labour, we argue that these performances are intensifying and that this has profound implications for workers' stress levels, emotional well-being and financial security. The boundary between work and leisure is eroding and work is encroaching into evenings, weekends and holidays (Jarvis and Pratt 2006). Moreover, without firms, risks and responsibilities are borne by individual musicians. As Banks asserts, this can 'encourage individuals to self-exploit to a level beyond that which would be imposed by the most fervent of capitalist employers' (2007, 58).

Ultimately, as the market dynamics for music and the complexities of digitally mediated interaction continue to evolve, on-going research is needed to track the impacts on aesthetic labour and precariousness in creative work. Our research indicates that while the structural transformations affecting the music industry are common to musicians everywhere, they are also impacted by local dynamics. This reinforces the work of Vinodrai (2013) whose comparison of designers in Toronto and Copenhagen illustrates that creative work is shaped and constrained by the geographic contexts where it occurs. This suggests a need for future research that pays attention to how aesthetic and creative labour are experienced in different places. More research is also needed on how local governments and institutions can better mediate some of the risks associated with creative production.

Dynamics of Economic Performance. They are also grateful to two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments. Finally, the authors thank all of the interviewees who participated in the study.

Note

1 We focus on aesthetic labour as a form of distinction. However, it is important to note that there are specific rules of display and conduct associated with particular genres and scenes. Depending on their goals and positionality, each musician must navigate a tension between 'standing out' and 'fitting in'. In genres such as pop, rock or punk, for example, musicians must develop more outlandish styles and attitudes. For classical and jazz musicians, aesthetic labour involves more subdued and refined postures and clothing. Further research is needed to explore these dynamics.

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