

Mediating the Cosmo-polis: Close Encounters in Cities of Difference

Myria Georgiou

The western global city is an intensely cosmopolitan location. Possibly more than any other location, the global city brings people, technologies, economic relations, and communication practices into unforeseen constellations and intense juxtapositions of difference (Benjamin, 1997). The intense urban juxtapositions of difference in the unglamorous, and often marginalised and deprived, quarters of the global cities are usually invisible in tourist brochures; they are however locations where the potential of communication technologies to connect people in the locale and across boundaries, in shared attempts to seek citizenship, to find a location in the city and the world, and to shape identity in the global cosmopolis are revealed in intensity rarely observed elsewhere. These are also locations that reveal the limitations of communication in solving problems of inequality, cultural and geographical divides and lack of representation in the national political scene. In this brief paper, I would like to touch upon three themes where the meeting of the cosmo-polis and communication becomes culturally and politically important. I can only introduce these three areas as headings which will hopefully be relevant to the workshop discussions. The first theme addresses **cultural citizenship** in the city vis-à-vis the restrictive and excluding political citizenship of the nation. The second theme focuses on **urban mediated imagination** as a tool that individuals and groups use to locate themselves in the city and in the world. The third theme explores **cosmopolitan identities** and urban dwellers' attempt to root themselves in urban and transnational locations, often through appropriations of media and communications.

Cultural citizenship Nation-states' focus on a specific set of political rights and obligations defined by territoriality and exclusivity have failed to recognise the significance of migrant and diasporic hybridity and transnationalism as elements of a cosmopolitan citizenship. In this context, *the cultural* (diversity) has become an area of contestation rather than of recognition. Many western nation-states now see creativity and media production by groups characterised by intense transnationality as threats rather than as potentials for democratic representation. Next to the nation-state's scepticism -or even hostility in many cases- towards recognition of cultural

citizenship, comes the celebration of a consumerist cultural citizenship by corporate ideologies. The corporate approach to cultural citizenship tends to strip it from its political significance and celebrates it as a synonym of the unprincipled, classless, ageless and raceless consumer (Miller, 2007).

Outside -and often in contrast- to the national and corporate reactions to cultural citizenship, the city becomes a space where creativity and media production turn into cultural and political strategies for seeking recognition, especially among those excluded from other forms of representation in political and cultural life. Some of the tensions observed in the relations between the culturally diverse urban dwellers are the outcome of the conflict between cultural belonging in transnational worlds and the demands to comply with exclusive regimes of citizenship. In acknowledging the limitations of the political (and nationally-defined) citizenship and its distinction from stronger variants of cultural citizenship, we need to locate the role of both communication and the city as frames, tools and agents in shaping cultural citizenship. Urban creativity becomes particularly interesting in this case. Often attached to the tactics of seeking representation outside the restrictive national framework, urban (mediated) cultural production includes various forms of expression on city walls, in local radio stations, in urban music and nightlife cultures. Excluded from citizenship rights, education and Eurocentric and corporate cultures, migrants and members of diasporic groups (especially young people) often engage in alternative forms of (mediated) expression and self-representation. Some of these creative practices are initiated as political acts of opposition to the state or to excluding politics of representation. For example, as graffiti, software piracy and radio piracy are illegal acts, the meanings of such practices are shaped in the context of illegality, opposition or rejection of the politics of the state. The cultural and social locations of such acts and the enactment of these practices by young, usually disenfranchised and minority youth, reflects -if not singularly, at least partly- processes of active opposition to state and corporate cultures that provide them no space for representation or respect. Such creative practices sometimes allow urban dwellers to develop a common (plebeian) cosmopolitan language of communication in the locale and across global spaces.

Urban imaginaries in 'other' media The city is a location of difference and a host of 'media imaginings which activate and boost the imagination but also channel and

limit it, precisely through the spread and utilization of the media in everyday life' (Amin and Thrift, 2002, p. 116). The cosmopolitan city takes a privileged position in global media culture, as it hosts large numbers of media and even larger numbers of media consumers. There is an element of the media industry, which tends to be less celebrated and less welcome -this is the area of media production (and consumption) by urban diasporic and migrant dwellers. Such production is extensive and usually rooted in the same urban hubs as the major national and transnational commercial media. Even more so, these *other* media gain ground in terms of their consumption in those urban locations and among consumers who are also consumers of national and transnational mainstream media. The diversification of urban mediascapes is dealt with unease and concern by politicians and policy makers on local, national and transnational level as there are many misunderstandings about their role as mechanism for promoting imagined belonging and loyalties to distant *homelands*.

Unlike the fears of authorities as regards the diversity of urban media production and consumption that gives rise to a threatening imagination locked into *another* exclusive and foreign imagined community, research shows that urban communication practices increasingly shift imagination away from exclusive national communities and reveal qualities of multiple and multipositioned imaginings (Aksoy and Robins, 2000; Georgiou, 2006).

Cosmopolitan identities In the culturally diverse locations of the city, loud and contesting musical themes coming out of cars, multilingual signs on high streets, competing religious symbols in neighbouring places of worship, and exchanges of products, including music, film, and computer programmes, all reveal the multiplicity of possibilities for belonging *here* (and as a consequence *there* as well). The top-down ideologies that dominate the locations of the city representing the centres of power (e.g. around Parliament houses and tourist sights) promote a shared and common identity, resting upon similar aesthetics and practices that respect privacy, national liberal democracy and global consumer culture. But culturally diverse neighbourhoods challenge this national imagination on a daily basis. Urban pockets become spaces for performative identities, which take their shape around struggles for representation of various cultures, cacophonous aesthetics and diverse interpretations and practices of global popular culture, democracy, law and order (even in their direct violation). Such performative identities are often excluded from the mainstream

media and the imaginary of national cohesion; they are often treated by the state with uncomfortable inability to understand or as potential threats to the ideology of the nation and western modernity.

Performative urban identities increasingly move away from the national imaginary and media and communications become experimental tools in this process. This does not mean that urban appropriations of media and technologies are always safe, democratic and dialogic. The cases when media are used as effective systems to compete with and to contest other cultures, to spread political and religious propaganda and to undermine dialogical communication that takes place in the street exist next to emancipating and democratic media projects. What all projects have in common is that they reflect elements of a dissident cosmopolitanism outside exclusive national zones. Importantly, what we increasingly observe among the newest forms of urban media production is a contestation of national frameworks of belonging, not only in relation to the country of settlement, but also in relation to the country of origin. Projects such as multicultural radio stations, urban art production and experimentations with technologies outside ethnically exclusive spaces reveal new forms of identities that have more to do with cosmopolitan life than with exclusive ethnic and national spheres of belonging.