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Tuuli Lähdesmäki
Ph.D. Researcher
Art History
University of Jyväskylä
Finland
e-mail: tuuli.lahdesmaki@jyu.fi
tel. +358 44 7418174

Strategies of representing cultural diversity in three European Capitals of Culture

Celebrating cultures in Europe

Since 1985, the European Union has nominated cities as European Cities of Culture in order to “highlight the richness and diversity of European cultures and the features they share, as well as to promote greater mutual acquaintance between European citizens”.¹ Since 1999, the chosen cities have been called European Capitals of Culture. The European Capital of Culture program enables the cities to present and promote the originality and special features of certain cultural unities. Additionally, it enables the cities to propose how the different cultural unities and their features meet, flourish side-by-side, and influence each other. The latter possibility can be explored and discussed with the concept of multiculturalism. This discourse is fostered in the EU’s decisions, instructions and evaluation criteria of the European Capitals of Culture program. Thus, the discourse is also followed in the language, visualizations and practices of the cities applying for and obtaining the title.

The empirical focus of the paper is on three cities which were chosen as European Capitals of Culture for 2010 (Pécs in Hungary), and 2011 (Tallinn in Estonia and Turku in Finland). The driving question in my paper is: How is the concept of multiculturalism adapted and applied to the programs of the three forthcoming European Capitals of Culture? I will answer this question by analysing the application books, plans, promotion material and programs of the cities. The analysis of the material is done with critical discourse analysis, which embodies the analysis of texts and visual imagery.

Multiculturalism as a discourse

The concept of multiculturalism has been defined in several ways in academic literature. The concept is also frequently used in everyday discussions in society, culture and media. Additionally, it has strong political and ideological content and is frequently used in

political discussions and decision-making processes. Moreover, the concept has contradictory meanings, and the phenomena attached to it have raised considerable confrontation. In general, the concept refers to a variety of strategies for dealing with the cultural diversity and social heterogeneity of modern societies, as Stuart Hall proposes.² Hall has approached multiculturalism as a plural concept, which acquires various presuppositions and aims at different contexts and discourses.³

The discussions on multiculturalism have spread over several areas of social life in contemporary societies. Further, they have strongly influenced the art field and aesthetics. However, in the art field and aesthetics, these discussions already have a long tradition. Bhikhu Parekh has outlined different perspectives to explain varieties of cultures within a society. He observes how already Herder, Schiller and other romantic liberals advanced an aesthetic case for cultural diversity, arguing that it creates a rich, varied, as well as aesthetically pleasing and stimulating world.⁴ This kind of perspective often still characterises the discussions on multiculturalism in the art field and aesthetics. In addition to the tradition of a multicultural perspective, multiculturalism has been brought to the discussions in the contemporary art field through the emphasis of postmodern ideas. Since the concept of multiculturalism has multiple and contradictory contents it seems reasonable to approach the concept as a discourse. The discourse of multiculturalism embodies a variety of discussions and meaning-making processes which stress cultural diversity and heterogeneous cultural interaction. The discourse forms its object every time the discourse is used and produces positions between the users of the discourse and those who are being discussed and represented in the discourse.

Strategies of multiculturalism in the three forthcoming European Capitals of Culture

Next, I will outline four different strategies of producing the discourse of multiculturalism in the three European Capitals of Culture. These strategies are being used and repeated in the application books in addition to the promotion and advertising material of Pécs, Tallinn and Turku. Some of the cities place more emphasis on certain strategies in the production of discourse. However, all the outlined strategies exist and overlap in some way in the material of all cities.

Multicultural layers of history

In the all of the cities, the most common strategy in the production of the discourse of multiculturalism is to stress location of the city as a historical meeting place of different ethnicities, nationalities and religious communities. Additionally, in all the application books multicultural characteristics of the cities are verbalized with the metaphor of the city as a gateway. Cities are described as locations, through which people have shifted and still transit from one cultural area to another.

Stressing the historical layers of (positive) multicultural interaction in the past centuries obscures power mechanisms which control present day multiculturalism. The multicultural past is represented in books and promotion material as a creative, stimulating and unproblematic condition. Past as well as current conflicts and confrontation related to multiculturalism are turned into a peaceful dialogue, which fades away the hierarchies of dominance and suppression related to confrontations, conflicts or 'dialogue'.

When urban architecture is stressed as an expression of the multicultural layers of the cities, multiculturalism is being aestheticized as visual diversity. The same mechanism is used when multiculturalism is being celebrated in particular festivals, temporary bazaars or cultural events focused on presenting cultures of particular groups or communities. Multiculturalism turns into experiences of the audience in the folk dance festivals or in the tasting of minority cultures' cuisines.

Multicultural global street culture and contemporary art

In all case cities, the application books and promotion material utilizes more or less the global imagery of popular culture, youth culture, street culture and contemporary art. Cultural variety is understood in the global frame, where globalised cultural phenomena form a common starting point for cultural dialogue and communication. Stressing globalised cultural phenomena is a strategy for producing the discourse of multiculturalism which does not seek the origins or authenticity of cultural products, but underlines the production of urbanness, urban culture and creativity in addition to experiences within the culturally mixed urban community of the city.

This kind of the global condition of culture is seen in this discourse as a positive state, which encourages cultural participation and enables creativity, which utilizes diversity of cultural influences. This kind of emphasis in the discourse of multiculturalism stresses a 'melting pot' type of communality, which is seen as being formed by people coming from a variety of ethnic, national, cultural and sub-cultural backgrounds.

A communality of the inhabitants can also be fostered without referring to any particular ethnicity, nationality or cultural group. Local community and communality can be seen to be formed through people being and living together in addition to a joint consumption and production of the city's cultural variety. Particularly, the global youth and street cultures can be seen in terms of participation and creation of imaginative and innovative art and cultural products. The strategy of stressing communality, formed through being and living together, is somewhat ideological and political — it avoids emphasizing any particular group of people based on more or less static characteristics.

Multicultural canon of high art

The western canon of art embodies the history of the so-called masterpieces made by the greatest artists of all time. These well-known and internationally famous and appreciated artists represent different nationalities as well as regional and cultural groups, though many of them have been profoundly cosmopolitan during their lifetime. Because the canon of art has an international dimension, it can be taken as a point of departure for the production of the discourse of multiculturalism. The international canon of art, and particularly its Eurocentric interpretation, is produced in the application books and promotion material of the cities as a consequence of intense cultural and artistic exchange in addition to influences between European nations, styles, art schools and artists. Exhibiting the great masters relates the city to the international discourse of art, which is being placed above the particularist discussions.

Relying on the western canon of art means that art and cultural phenomena are often seen in a profoundly official sense and in the frames of high culture. Emphasis on the canon underlines also the meaning and power position of several art and cultural institutions. Moreover, canon and institutions often represent the majority while minorities and minority cultures are seen as 'others'.

Representations of Others in the productions of multicultural imagery

One essential strategy of multiculturalism is to represent different minorities and their visual culture as signs of multiculturalism of the cities in question. However, the representations of minorities may underline the stereotypical imagery, in which the difference is turned into exoticism or tourist attraction. The otherness in the discourse is being produced with the images which underline the distinguished ethnic originality of cultural traditions and distinct cultural features and utilize the distinguished ethnicity of people as a base of representing diversity.

The question of power

Multiculturalism is a profoundly political concept and its definitions and representations involve inevitably the power structures and production of cultural and political hierarchies. In the discourse of multiculturalism some groups or cultures seem to be more important than others: only some cultures and groups are promoted in the discourse. Moreover, the discourse itself is often produced from the power position of some majority group or culture.

Can the discourse of multiculturalism ever be produced without the problematics of dominance and oppression? It seems that power hierarchies and political tension are bound to the concept of multiculturalism even though it is often introduced as equal and anti-racist discourse.⁵ A central feature of the discourse of multiculturalism is that it tends to obscure its power mechanisms. Supporting and celebrating cultural diversity and cultural heterogeneity of the community may aim to eliminate inequality, however, dominance and subordination may be founded on the structures of the discourse itself.

¹Decision 1419/1999/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 May 1999. EUR-Lex, viewed on 19 September 2008, <<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CONSLEG:1999D1419:20040501:EN:PDF>>.

² S Hall, 'The Multicultural Question', *Pavis Papers in Social and Cultural Research*, vol 4, 2001, p.4. viewed 2 June 2009, <<http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/pavis/papers.php>>.

³ S Hall, 'The Multicultural Question', in *Un/settled Multiculturalism: Diasporas, Entanglements, Transruptions*, B Hesse (ed), Zed Books, London, 2000, pp. 210-211.

⁴ B Parekh, *Rethinking multiculturalism. Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, Palgrave, Houndmills, 2000, p. 166.

⁵ N Yuval-Davis, 'Ethnicity, Gender Relations and Multiculturalism', in *Debating Cultural Hybridity. Multi-cultural Identities and Politics of Anti-Racism*, P Werbner & T Modood (eds), Zed Books, London, 1997.

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