

# **Creative Work in the Cultural Industries**

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This conference offers a potentially excellent forum in which to discuss recent changes in the cultural and media industries. The aspect to which we would like to draw attention is creative labour, and the ways in which it is organised.

Some studies have analysed work in individual institutions or in particular cultural industries. These draw, to a greater or lesser degree, on some conception of cultural production more broadly. Until recently, however, few studies attempted an analysis of how creative work is managed and organised across different cultural industries. In critical sociology oriented towards analysis of the cultural industries as a particular form of capitalist accumulation, relatively little attention has been paid to creative work, with a couple of important exceptions which we shall discuss in due course. A recent surge of interest in the management and organisation of creative work has changed things. This has come about in part because of the increasing importance in many places of the concept of *the creative industries*. This is a very different term from the cultural industries, and while there is no space to analyse the genealogies of the two terms (see Garnham, 2005, for one important analysis), it is enough to say here that the more politically centrist connotations of the term creative industries have made it attractive to business and management studies. Analysts in those fields have turned their attention to a sector which had previously been the domain of more critical sociological approaches. The best of this management studies work is certainly not without its merits. Howard Davis and Richard Scase's *Managing Creativity* provides a detailed examination of a number of different aspects of various cultural industries, and therefore allows empirical consideration of shared features of the way that work is organised in the sector. When it comes to the analysis of creative work, there appears to be a real gap between, on the one hand, discussions of individual cultural industries, and, on the other, dynamics of creativity across the cultural industries as a whole.

## **Miège's model of cultural industries**

In this respect, Miège's identification (1989: 146-7 and elsewhere) of a number of different models or 'logics' of production characteristic of different cultural industries might be helpful. Miège provides an important bridge between, on the one hand, accounts which in effect treat the cultural and media industries as an undifferentiated category and, on the other, empiricist accounts which analyse individual industries. The latter either implicitly or explicitly reject the idea that the cultural and media industries share common features. By providing sub-categories, Miège provides the opportunity to identify shared dynamics without losing specificity. Miège's account

was intended to cover many different aspects of the cultural industries. But this includes aspects relevant to the consideration of the organisation of creative work that is our main subject here.

Miège's work is fairly well-known in Anglophone countries, but not as well-known as it might be, given the rising interest in the cultural and creative industries, and in the organisation of creative work. At the risk of boring a Francophone audience (which we assume will be more familiar with Miège's categorisation), it is worth outlining again Miège's distinction (1989: 145-8) between three models or logics of cultural production:

the **publishing** logic (based on setting failures against hits in a catalogue of repertoire, as in the book, music and film industries)

the **flow** logic (based on a continuous flow of product, and the gaining of audience loyalty, as in radio, television and new media)

the **written press** logic (regular and loyal consumption of a series of commodities, in newspapers and magazines)

In our current research, which is still at an early stage, we are analysing via interviews and secondary sources, three industries, each of which represents one of Miège's original categorisations: the recording industry for the publishing logic, television for flow logic, and the comparatively neglected industry of magazine publishing for the written press logic. Part of our purpose is to examine in more detail the scheme suggestively put forward by Miège in the 1980s, and here we report some initial reflections on this research (which still has more than a year to run). The point is neither to reify nor to critique in detail Miège's schema, which we take as a heuristic device, rather than as an attempt to provide a definitive classification. Inevitably, there are problems with a categorisation that tries to pull together so many heterogeneous elements from such a complex set of social processes. So we do not intend to analyse Miège's model systematically. We do not discuss in detail, for example, whether its sub-categories of central function, economic organization, creative professions etc still hold after twenty or more years. Rather, we use Miège's model initially here as a way of providing a baseline for consideration of historical change in the cultural and media industries, in line with the aims of this conference, but one which provides a basis for comparison across different industries. However, this paper has a second aim. This is to reflect on some of the ways in which one might theorise, on the basis of our initial empirical work and existing literature in the area, including Miège's, the similarities and differences between creative work in different cultural industries as they undergo historical transformation.

### Comparing the three industries

On the basis of our research so far, in spite of the huge amount of commentary devoted to changes that the internet will bring to the recording industry, and in spite of the expectation, in the early years of the internet, that it would have an early and significant impact on print publishing, we see real continuity in key features of all three logics. In the recording industry, of course, the big issue that has dominated much discussion over the last ten years is digital distribution, including related

‘problems’, such as piracy and file-sharing. One of the key features of the publishing model outlined by Miège in 1989 was ‘costly distribution through specialized stores’ (Miège, 1989: 147).

According to many business commentators, digital distribution offers the chance for many new entrants to take advantage of supposedly lower distribution costs (distribution costs which are in fact substantial but borne by new entrants into the music business, mostly from the software development industry, most famously Apple). The problem here is what is meant by distribution, and in particular whether marketing and publicity are included in the distribution function or stage. Or, better still, this stage needs to be labelled ‘circulation’ in order to avoid the idea that it is solely about *delivery*, when in fact it is just as much about the need to make audiences aware of the existence of products, and the particular pleasures they might offer (see Hesmondhalgh, 2002). And, when it comes to marketing and publicity, there is evidence in the music industry, as in the film industry, of increasing costs. This does not contradict the idea that niche markets have become more important in the cultural industries. The problem is to produce a hit within the particular niche market. A crossover hit that makes the music charts, for example, and that reaches audiences primarily drawn to other genres, can certainly bring short-term economic rewards. But a more reasonable goal is to have a hit in, say, the alternative rock or world music or jazz or ballad market.

If this can be done, then further moderate rewards can be achieved for musicians and labels for many years. But this involves numerous problems of co-ordination. Two can be mentioned here. One is the problem of sustaining a long-term career through changes in fashion – and through changes in the direction that musicians want to take. Take the example of the US alternative rock act Wilco, who were originally marketed as a kind of alternative country act; the term Americana was then developed by music journalists to cover their work and a number of other acts; but as Americana fell from fashion, and as the band lost interest in this style, they needed to be rebranded as an experimental act. This was done with some success, but it will have required immense work on the part of the labels to which Wilco were signed, in different countries. A second problem of co-ordination – and this is just at the meso level of success we are discussing here; problems of co-ordination will be even greater at the mega level of international pop success – is that these niche markets (which constitute most musical activity) are increasingly international and this presents enormous problems for those most responsible for the creative personnel – the musicians and their artist management team. Many music markets are increasingly internationalised and the problem this raises for any creative worker who wants to take advantage of internationalisation to establish or sustain a career is knowing how to communicate in a variety of national markets which are still, on the whole, quite distinct from each other in key respects.

In magazine journalism too, many of the key features identified by Miège still hold: the relatively high costs of editorial conception and distribution (again, including marketing and publicity, at least in competitive market segments such as men and women’s leisure and entertainment publishing); and the reliance on journalists as intellectual workers engaged in a constant battle to achieve a sense of currency and contemporaneity in what they write. The internet has had little effect on distribution

costs, as yet; it mostly provides another outlet, rather than one that replaces the need to produce physical copies. It adds an even greater emphasis on currency, as even in trade magazines, stories are put on the web version of magazines in advance of publication. It would be wrong, however, to think of this as a significant shift towards a flow model, whereby magazine journalism takes on the feature of broadcasting, with its constant need to supply new product. These are not yet major shifts which would make magazine publishing appreciably different in its structure and organisation from how it appeared to Miège in the late 1980s.

In terms of Miège's model, the most significant change has been in the flow model, at least as it is manifested in the UK television industry. In fact, it could be argued that television is taking on more and more characteristics of the publishing model or logic. Taking some of the features of Miège's model (which of course we do not have space to outline in full here): there is less loyalty to individual channels, more emphasis on publicity, and increasing consumption (if not purchase) of individualised objects. Money flows in increasingly complex ways, through rights, and rights are now a major factor in determining where power lies in the industry.

A key factor here is the increasing importance of independent production in British television. The crucial moment was the establishment of Channel 4 in 1982. Although introduced under a Conservative government, this can be seen as the last achievement of the policy era in which an extension of broadcasting's public service remit was seen as possible (rather than merely a defence of it). The idea was that independent producers would provide more diversity, allowing broadcasting to represent constituencies not being adequately catered for under the BBC/ITV public service-commercial mix. Independent production has spread. The BBC still produces many programmes, but is required by regulation to contract 25 per cent of its programming to independents.

This has led to the rise of a commissioning process which is arguably nearer to the logic which Miège calls publishing. Scheduling, named by Miège as the central function in the flow industries of television and radio, is still important; but commissioning is just as important, and there is now a considerable commissioning apparatus in British television. Genre is a major organisational feature. While this has always been important in the institutions of British television, it is now written into organisational structures. At Channel 4, for example, a small group of executives, headed by a Director of Television, oversees policy, hiring and firing of staff, budgets and scheduling. Then thirteen departments, corresponding mainly to genres, but also to the niche digital stations run by Channel 4, are presided over by figures which are usually called Heads – who are effectively co-ordinators of commissioning. At the BBC, there are executive channel controllers working on scheduling and executive genre controllers working across these channels, again with a team of commissioners beneath them. Again, there are parallels with book publishing, where commissioning editors work mainly by genre, or a couple of sometimes oddly-matched genres; and to a lesser extent in recording, where the A&R personnel in major recording companies are split according to niche musical divisions.

[In the fuller written version of this paper, to be published next year, we discuss Lacroix and Tremblay's modification to Miegé's model, using 'club logic' here].

## Historicising the model

In our view, then, Miège's model still offers a useful departure for thinking about change at a number of levels in the cultural industries. There is evidence of some stability, as well as some change in the key industry of television. But in the second part of this paper, we want to reflect briefly on how we might *theorise* the differences and similarities between the different industries in terms of creative work.

The most interesting contributions to the management studies literature referred to earlier may seem to offer some openings. As with some other management studies analysis (such as Lampel et al., 2000) there is an intelligent depiction of the way in which cultural – or creative – industries must seek to achieve contradictory goals. Davis and Scase talk, for example, of the paradox of control and creativity. 'It is a paradox', they say, 'because the problem of reconciling openness, intuition, personal networks and individual autonomy (which serve 'creative' ends) with instrumental criteria and rational business methods can never be completely resolved' (Davis and Scase, 2000: 52). This suggests, then, a comparative analytical strategy which might investigate how this paradox is negotiated differently in various cultural industries. Yet such (ultimately Weberian) paradoxes are portrayed more as problems to be solved, if only provisionally, by managers, rather than as rooted in historical *contradictions* that deeply affect the careers and lives of those who work in these industries, or, still less, that has an impact on texts that are consumed by thousands, sometimes millions of people. From our perspective, then, there is a lack of attention to some of the more problematic elements involved in work under contemporary neo-liberal conditions.

A more promising route for theorising patterns of organisation – including its effects on creative workers - across the cultural industries may come from political economy, an analytical tradition which forefronts questions of equity, social justice and exploitation considerably more than management studies. The most developed account within political economy is that of the Australian sociologist Bill Ryan (1992). Ryan's interest in questions of organisational control is more akin to Marxian Labour Process theory than to management studies, because he shows a *historical* interest in changes in the prevailing forms of cultural production. In particular, he explains the prevailing organisational forms of the cultural industries in terms of the historical contradictions between art and capital, rather than in terms of a managerial paradox.

For Ryan, capital can not make the artist completely subservient to the drive for accumulation. Because art is centred on the expressive individual artist, artistic objects 'must' appear as product of recognisable persons; the concrete and named labour of the artist is paramount and must be preserved. Artists appear to capital as the antithesis of labour power, antagonistic to incorporation as abstract labour (which, in Ryan's Marxian framing, is the capitalists' prime concern because this determines exchange-value). Capitalists lengthen the working day or intensify the work process to achieve a relative increase in the unpaid component of abstract value (surplus value). Abstract and concrete labour are therefore in contradiction. Technology generalises the concrete labour in the work process in many industries, but not in

cultural industries. For Ryan, as historically and ideologically constituted, ‘the artist represents a special case of concrete labour which is ultimately irreducible to abstract value’ (p. 44). Art must always appear as unique, and so ‘artistic workers... cannot be made to appear in the labour process as generalised, undifferentiated artists’ (p. 44). More than that, artistic labour demands an even more identifiable specificity. They must be engaged as ‘named, concrete labour’.

For Ryan, the consequence of this contradiction is a certain relative autonomy for creative workers, with stars getting considerable freedom. In his view, this also helps fuel the irrationality, or at least the arationality, of the creative process. For capitalists, artists represent an investment in variable capital in a way that consistently threatens to undermine profitability. This also leads, in Ryan’s view, to contradictions in the cultural commodity itself, whereby ‘commoditisation of cultural objects erodes the qualities and properties which constitute them as cultural objects, as use-values, in the first place’, because it undermines the quest for originality and novelty that gives the art product its aura of uniqueness. For Ryan, capital’s response is to *rationalise* cultural production, both at the creative stage and the circulation stage. Indeed, most of his book is framed as an examination of the extent to which capital has succeeded in achieving such rationalisation. This is achieved at the creative stage through ‘formatting’, and at the circulation stage through the institutionalisation of marketing within corporate production, in order to produce a more controllable sequence of stars and styles. Ryan’s account of methods of rationalisation provide a helpful way to explain certain recurring strategies of capitalists in the cultural sector, and a comparative study of creative work across cultural industries could, then, examine how these processes of rationalisation impact upon creative workers.

However, Ryan’s strong emphasis on rationalisation as a response by capitalists to the irrationality produced by the art/capital contradiction leads to some limitations in his approach. There is an implicit politics underlying this analysis which is inadequate for understanding contemporary creative work. Relatively autonomous work, permitted by the art-capital contradiction, is implicitly portrayed as the good guy against the bad guy of rationalisation. But what if creative autonomy is itself a significant control mechanism available within certain forms of work – including much creative work in the cultural industries?

This in fact is a question raised not only by the cultural industries, but by developments in a great deal of work in contemporary capitalism. While relentless, physically exhausting and highly routinised work remains a feature of a great deal of labour, an important and growing stratum of jobs offers self-realisation and good conditions for workers. Writing about work in the IT sector (a form of work sometimes unhelpfully blurred with artistic labour in the notion of the creative industries), for example, Andrew Ross has written about how, in the eyes of a new generation of business analysts in the 1980s, Silicon Valley ‘appeared to promote a humane workplace not as a grudging concession to demoralized employees but as a valued asset to production’ (Ross, 2003: 9). ‘New economy’ firms aimed to provide

work cultures that ‘embraced openness, cooperation and self-management’ (ibid). Work that aims to combine autonomy and self-realisation extends beyond IT. It includes much ‘professional’ work, including many educational jobs. Of course the prices to be paid for these benefits are considerable. They include not only casualisation and job insecurity but also an extremely strong internalised commitment to work, and often to the institutions that provide this new, more ‘humane’ form of work. This can lead on to self-exploitation in the form of long hours and a serious blurring of the line between work and leisure. Ross notes that ‘perhaps the most insidious occupational hazard of no-collar work is that it can enlist employees’ freest thoughts and impulses in the service of salaried time’ (p.19).

It could reasonably be argued that the presence of such dynamics - relatively high degrees of personal autonomy and reasonable working conditions, but also poor pay, insecurity and often very high levels of internalised commitment – could be found in artistic production before they reached other areas of modern economies. Yet there have been strikingly few analyses of the ways in which these ‘subjective’ elements of creative work might be theorised in relation to the interests of capital. This may be because the Marxian political economy tradition has shown little interest in questions of worker subjectivity in general. A major element of the post-structuralist critique of Marxian Labour Process Theory has been to accuse it of neglecting subjectivity. We believe that critical approaches need to answer this challenge in relation to the cultural industries.

How does this connect to Miège’s comparative model? Critical consideration of questions of power and subjectivity would benefit from comparison across industries, because this would throw light on the particular ways in which autonomy and power are negotiated. One way in which this might be done is suggested by Stahl (2006), who provides an analysis of the way the language of personal authenticity is used to sustain a critique of capitalist relations in popular music. But Stahl also argues that when linked up with modern systems of power and property, authenticity talk can end up enabling domination and alienation. In the end, this may be too left-functional, in that nothing seems able to evade the dialectical process by which utopian thought leads to further oppression. But by drawing attention to the way in which certain notions of personal autonomy and authenticity are put to work within certain genres of popular music, and by showing some of the contradictory effects of these discourses, Stahl suggests a strategy that might be applied to other industries. This then might produce not a rejection of Miège’s comparative model of logics, but an extension of it, to take account of a still wider set of cultural, political and economic conditions.

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