

# 144 The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction: The Significance of the Creative Industries

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## Abstract

This paper reflects on the social and political significance of the new classification of the 'creative industries'. The new aggregate expands previous classifications of the arts and cultural industries and produces figures which suggest that these sectors are increasingly vital elements of the UK economy. It is argued that these statistics on the creative industries are, to an extent, misleading. The paper considers some of the implications of the recent and continuing advances in technologies of digital reproduction and distribution. The importance of the creative industries to Arts and Design education is placed within the

context of the emphasis on vocationalism by successive UK governments. It is suggested that while the new aggregate may be useful in terms of certain kinds of promotion, the category should be recognised as arbitrary and politically motivated. Finally, the paper examines the notion that the creative industries might be harnessed to achieve social inclusion and urban re-generation and reflects on some of the social costs of such sectors.

### Background: Well-Rehearsed Statistics

There is at present, a great deal of interest in the 'creative industries'. The work of art in the age of digital reproduction has become primarily, a means of bolstering the economy. Rationales for supporting the Arts in terms of their social and spiritual importance have been replaced by economic justifications for the support and development of the Creative Industries. The Creative Industries is a relatively new aggregate established by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in 1998. It expands previous classifications of the cultural industries [1] to include commercial arts such as advertising and interactive and leisure software. [2] The new aggregate of sectors has produced some startling and well rehearsed figures: the creative industries are growing at twice the rate of the economy as a whole, they contribute to more than four percent of the domestic economy, they employ around one and a half million people and generate over sixty billion pounds a year. [3] While manufacturing industries are in decline, the creative industries are presented as the great hope of the British economy:

The UK's distinctive capacities are not raw materials, or cheap labour, they must be our knowledge, skills and creativity. [4]

No longer the workshop of the world, Britain is 'rebranded' as a knowledge nation, a creative country. There are, then, high hopes attached to the development of these sectors.

### Defining the Creative Industries

The DCMS mapping document defines the creative industries as: Advertising, Architecture, Art and Antiques Market, Crafts, Design, Designer Fashion, Film, Interactive and leisure software, Music, Performing Arts, Publishing, Software, Television and Radio. [6] This breakdown includes industries 'which have their origin in individual creativity'. [7] The sectors are so diverse as to have little in common except this abstract and fluid concept of 'creativity'. The broadest conceptions of creativity could, and have, included the work of scientists, doctors, teachers and even

statisticians. [8] It is not creativity, then, which brings these sectors together.

The sectors vary enormously in terms of revenue and growth. The Interactive and Leisure Software industry has expanded exponentially in recent years but the same cannot be said of sectors such as the Performing Arts. High turn-overs cluster around sectors like Advertising far more than sectors such as Crafts. There are also wide differences in terms of culture. Craft makers, for example, are unlikely to be as commercially driven as, say, Designers. Although there are some similarities between the sectors in terms of size and structure (most are micro enterprises and heavily dependent on freelancers) there are also important exceptions (for example large media and broadcasting companies).

The DCMS acknowledges that the sectors are not homogenous and do not form an integrated sector, but argue that there is 'a sound case for encouraging them to appear so' [9] for the purpose of promotion. Any government must face the problem of how to fund the arts and how to legitimate that funding. By bracketing 'high' and 'commercial' art together, promotional opportunities arise in terms of increasing the perceived cultural importance of the commercial arts and increasing the perceived economic importance of high art. Sectors generating low incomes can be presented as more economically significant than they actually are when grouped together with high income generating sectors. Likewise commercially driven enterprises may benefit in terms of cultural capital [10] from their association with more 'artistic' enterprises such as the Performing Arts. In this sense the aggregate is political and the statistics are rhetorical.

The aggregate collapses distinctions between low, middle and high brow culture but this strategy can highlight as well as disguise difference. There is a far greater market for mass cultural products such as video games than for elite arts such as opera and ballet. However, public funding is weighted towards these elite minority pursuits. It has then been argued that this imbal-

ance must be addressed if the creative industries are really to become the bedrock of the economy.[11] In order to counter such attacks the arts must fall back on earlier validations of funding in terms of social or public service benefits. The defence of the arts as a public service is, of course, politically contingent. The purist cry of *l'art pour l'art* only became necessary with the advent of mechanical reproduction, when art had lost its ritual and symbolic uses. [12] Post war Arts funding policies have been characterised by three major stages: 'the mission to civilise' of the fifties, 'the mission to socialise' of the seventies and 'the mission to commercialise' of the eighties. [13] The DCMS aggregate statistics have been cited in recent Arts Council publications to highlight the importance of the arts to the UK economy. [14] But claims of economic significance by association do not bear close scrutiny and recourse must be made to earlier validations of the arts.

### **Standardised Products in the Creative Industries**

The term 'cultural industries' was coined by Adorno and Horkheimer in the nineteen fifties. It was, originally, a pejorative term intended to replace phrases like 'show business' or 'the entertainment industry', which even then were losing their ironic connotations. [15] The term 'industry' Adorno warned was not to be taken too seriously. It did not refer to production processes but to the standardisation of products and the rationalisation of distribution mechanisms. [16] Following Walter Benjamin, he recognised that cultural artefacts such as film have no original which is reproduced, rather, the reproduction is the product itself. [17] These standardised products were seen as determining the market rather than being determined by it. In this sense, Adorno saw similarities in structure between the various sectors of the cultural industries. Lash and Urry argue that:

*If we begin not from the metaphor of the cultural economy, but from the real economy, then what is commonly called reproduction is in reality*

*production. And what is called production is in fact, design, product development or R&D. [18]*

However, there is a fundamental difference between the products of the cultural economy and those of the 'real' economy and that is reproducibility. The products of the cultural industries can easily be digitally reproduced; the products of the real economy e.g. – cars, cartons of milk, video recorders – cannot. Intellectual copyright is a complex and crucial issue for the creative industries precisely because its products are reproductions, not productions. As Lash and Urry note, where a product manufacturer's copyright may be infringed by a rival manufacturer those most likely to infringe the copyright of the cultural industries are their own customers. It is relatively easy for consumers to obtain illegal reproductions of music, film, games and even books, but no-one has yet successfully downloaded a motor car from the internet. In classical Marxist terminology, the cultural industries do not retain control of the means of production, because they produce reproductions. Furthermore the means of reproduction are not concentrated in the hands of capital, but are widely available. This is perhaps, one argument for considering the creative industries as a distinct sector.

Again, there are exceptions, the Performing Arts and Crafts for instance do not conform to the 'production of reproductions' formulae. Neither of the products of these sectors are easily reproducible and this is, in part, their selling point. The uniqueness of the pot and the un-repeatability of the theatrical event are part of their value. Although a theatre company is re-producing Hamlet, most directors will attempt to offer a unique interpretation of the text. In this sense, advancement in technologies of reproduction are less of a problem for these sectors in terms of intellectual copyright but, also less of an advantage in terms of reducing overheads.

### **The Creation of Markets in the Creative Industries**

Adorno saw the consumers of cultural products

as essentially complacent, passively accepting the hegemonic messages of the dominant classes. This view of consumption has become deeply unfashionable and is criticised as elitist and reductive. Empirical studies of the ways in which cultural products are consumed have since demonstrated that audiences are not passive. Private, individual meanings and interpretations are attached to cultural artefacts which run counter to hegemonic intent. [19] Although Adorno recognised this possibility and stressed the importance of empirical studies of consumption, his work is now largely dismissed. It is not necessary to see the users of cultural products as passive to recognise that consumers do not determine markets in the creative industries. Although Adorno's cultural industries made very different products they were the same in that people had to be persuaded that they wanted them.

In some sectors of the creative industries the products have no physical existence: they are images, or sounds, or networks of users. The continually declining costs of software for the production (as well as reproduction) of these commodities means that consumers of cultural product are now also potential producers. Again, in classical Marxist terms, capital no longer retains exclusive control over the means of production. It is possible then that the proliferation of media and communication technologies may allow for new kinds of capitalism. Information technologies have revolutionised access not only to the means of production but also to the means of distribution.

### **The Creative Industries and the Art and Design Higher Education Sector**

The focus of attention on the creative industries is of major benefit to Higher Education Institutions of Art and Design. These specialist colleges and universities may now justify public funding in terms of the likely contribution that their graduates will make to the Creative Industries. [20] Of course, there is some debate on the extent to which an education, for example, in fashion design is likely to result in a career as a fashion

designer and many institutions have spent a great deal of time and money on longitudinal studies of graduate employment to demonstrate that the sometimes dismal first destination figures improve over time. [21] While for many graduates courses in Art and Design are entirely vocational leading to directly related employment, some go on to work in non-related areas and some to periods of unemployment. [22] Institutions of Art and Design education then find themselves in a paradoxical position with regard to higher education policy. The successive Conservative governments at the close of the last century insisted that all higher education provision should have vocational and measurable outputs. Courses in Arts and Design are, superficially at least, entirely vocational but they prepare students for work in some of the most volatile and insecure employment markets in the economy.

Art and Design colleges, like all institutions geared towards the creative industries, occupy a contradictory position. On the one hand they are vocational and offer careers in highly profitable and economically vital sectors, on the other hand these sectors are chaotic, insecure, constantly changing, youth and technology driven areas where employment and even professional identity is unstable. [23] Courses that prepare graduates for the creative industries, then, might be considered as non-vocational vocational education. Creative Industry education and training may be validated with reference to global, macro economics and courses can be presented as fulfilling the utilitarian aims of Thatcherite educational policy. However, unemployment rates are high in many creative industry sectors and at an individual level there are many failures.

### **The Creative Industries and Social Inclusion**

The March 2000 DCMS report *Creative Industries: The Regional Dimension* argues that the creative industries should be harnessed for urban regeneration and social inclusion. [24] However, respondents to a recent survey on the training needs of creative industry professionals were least

interested in professional development in environmental policy, equal opportunities and health and safety, in short all of the areas of the questionnaire which related to social responsibility. [25]

The creative industries are highly networked areas where hiring is not a question of 'pure markets'. Most, if not all, of the sectors are 'transaction rich networks of individuals'. [26] The cultivation of networks advantages those already in the relatively privileged position of making contacts in the first place. It has been argued that racism in British theatre is deeply entrenched and institutional despite the anti-racist intentions of many involved. [27] In sectors where networking is so vital to finding employment it should be no surprise that minority groups are excluded from mainstream enterprises.

If social inclusion is to be achieved through the creative industries as the DCMS hopes, then this will not be accomplished merely by giving the creative industries what they want. It is perhaps in this area then, that publicly funded institutions of higher education might contribute most to the development of the sectors.

### **The Social Cost of the Commercial Arts**

If the various sectors within the creative industries have anything in common it is that they are all concerned with the production and manipulation of signs, the play of images, the organisation of desire. In the commercial arts the priorities are economic, in non-commercial work, artistic or social. The new aggregate makes no distinction between the two activities and celebrates the resulting sector for its economic achievements. But it is not the contributions of ballerinas to GDP that make the well-rehearsed statistics. Advertisers, photographers, fashion designers, interior designers, games manufacturers, film makers, pop stars, docu-soap stars: these are the great hopes and heroes of our economy.

Bourdieu's 'new cultural intermediaries' are the taste makers for the petite bourgeoisie, they situate us in our class and cultural environment or 'habitus', and promise advancement. [28] The

economically significant creative industries are those of the cultural intermediary, the purveyors of dreams of consumption. Retail turnover rates are increasingly high, not through changes in the nature of products but in stylistic transformations of fashion and design. [29] It has been argued that increasingly, product changes are superficial and trivial and that the economy is now driven not by market forces but marketing. [30] If the new cultural intermediaries are to become even more important to the economy than they already are then this may have profound implications for individuals.

Ulrick Beck argues that the social bonds of the nineteenth century such as class and the family are breaking down. At the same time such 'group specific sources of meaning' as religion or faith in progress are disintegrating, resulting in what Beck terms 'individualisation'. Individuals must now make up new certainties and face alone the threats that would previously have been dealt with by recourse to kin or village groups. [31] In these conditions the construction of identity through consumption flourishes. Although this phenomenon may be good for the economy in general and the creative industries in particular, it is not necessarily good for the individual. A spate of national surveys have outlined the widespread dissatisfaction with consumer culture and these confirm the findings of numerous international studies. [32] While economic estimates on the contribution of the creative industries may suggest further investment, they do not reflect their cost to us as individuals and a society. In this sense the development of these sectors may not be sustainable if the priorities of the creative industries are to be entirely fiscal. Although government interest in the sectors is primarily economic the arts and design higher education sector must continue to take a wider view of the social and political significance of the creative industries.

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