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## **AUTONOMY GUARANTEED? CULTURAL WORK AND THE 'ART-COMMERCE RELATION': A SYNTHESIS AND REVIEW**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to examine synthetically the concept of 'autonomy' in cultural and creative industries work. Following brief discussion regarding the definition(s) of autonomy, and its historical linkages to discourses of art, I then rehearse three prominent social science critiques which suggest the possibilities for autonomy in cultural work have been seriously diminished or compromised. Against these readings, utilizing Bill Ryan's work on the 'art-commerce relation', I then discuss how autonomous cultural work is, in fact, impossible to destroy since ensuring its survival is a prerequisite for the production of value in cultural and creative industry production. Finally I consider how this provision of freedom may then serve to underwrite autonomous cultural work of a more varied (critical, aesthetically-driven, socially-embedded or practice-led) character that that conventionally conceived of in the orthodox critiques.

Word Count 8100

## Introduction

This article considers the extent to which work in the cultural or creative industries<sup>1</sup> can be thought of as creatively or artistically 'autonomous'. In most policy and positive academic assessments, employment in these industries is understood as intrinsically autonomous in terms of its banal perception as more self-expressive, creative and fulfilling than conventional work (see Smith 1998; Howkins 2001; Florida 2002; DCMS 2001; Hartley 2005; Deuze, 2007). There is, however, some disquiet amongst critical social scientists regarding the extent to which cultural work<sup>2</sup> provides the freedoms so vigorously promoted by its arbiters and enthusiasts. While this article is sympathetic to these critical inquiries, it also argues that cultural work is intrinsically autonomous to the extent that labour autonomy not only serves as (i) a foundational normative principle for the artistic, creative or aesthetic practices that underpin cultural work, but is also (ii) a structural precondition for effective capitalist cultural production. That is, not only is autonomy understood by cultural workers as necessary for the unfettered expression of their (apparently) ineffable creativity, but managers and firms also recognise the provision of autonomy for cultural and artistic workers as essential for the profitable commodification of culture. However, amongst the empirical questions outstanding are, what are the qualities of this autonomy? How is it made manifest, given meaning and experienced by different workers and groups? In this article I seek to explore these questions, first by exploring synthetically (and critically) the orthodox social science literature on autonomy in cultural industry production and, secondly, by outlining some of the recent (and more empirically grounded) studies detailing how intrinsic autonomy is being managed and negotiated by workers in the routine contexts of commodity production in the cultural industries.

## Art, Autonomy and Market

In broad terms, autonomy can be defined as the capacity of individuals (but also institutions and organizations) to exercise discretion or apply freedom of choice; the autonomous subject is one that has the ability to determine the pattern and shape of their own lives. Historically, autonomy in cultural production has been associated with freedom from the particular demands and constraints of the commercial world

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<sup>1</sup> Two terms that tend to be used somewhat interchangeably but also, often, with locally specific meanings; here I use them to refer to advertising, art, television, radio and film, fashion, graphic design, music, software production, gaming and leisure – commercial activities that involve the production of 'aesthetic' or 'symbolic' goods and services; that is, commodities whose core value is derived from their function as carriers of *meaning* in the form of images, symbols, signs and sounds. Here, the production of meaning is seen to be deliberate and self-conscious, designed to appeal to aesthetic preferences, or related to existing or emergent economies of taste, style and distinction. While creative industries is now a more popular term, not least with governments, policy-makers and advocates of the 'new' economy, the latter is preferred (at least by me) to retain the sense that the activities in question also remain rooted in discourses and practices of art, culture and politics, rather than divorced from them.

<sup>2</sup> 'Cultural work' I define as artistically-inclined labour geared to the production of original or distinctive cultural commodities. Of course cultural industries involve other kinds of labour too – notably manufacturing, service and technical labour. However it is artistic/creative work that I am most concerned with here, since it lies at the centre of the cultural industry labour process and is the primary source of the distinctive value produced by the specific industries in question.

– and while self-determination can clearly be exercised by workers freely applying themselves to commercial activity and the accumulation of wealth – to speak of ‘creative’ or ‘artistic autonomy’ is to index a particular notion of freedom actively developed amidst the emergence of modern (Western) industrial societies. Here, the idea of autonomy was especially closely linked to the artist; that special, self-regulating being and ‘free spirit’ possessed of rare and precious gifts. In Romanticism, which sought to separate art from the rational and instrumental demands of the new commercial society, but also, its incipient bourgeois morality, artists’ innate expressivity appeared to serve as a bulwark against the creeping incursions of the market, and quickly became a binding signifier of individual autonomy<sup>3</sup>.

The artist was defined and became recognised as the antithesis to the rational and calculative subject of the modern age – and was thus, in a significant sense, a product of the very commercial society from which it claimed to stand apart. Indeed, it soon became clear that the apparently separated worlds of art and commerce shared an intimate relationship. Not only did commercial growth lead to an increase in the production and commodification of art, but the emergence of art markets provided a means of liberating (rather than constraining) artists by exposing them to willing buyers, and for enabling the dissemination and popularisation of art works that would challenge the tastes and demands of erstwhile patrons and feudal elites. The subsequent rise of a mass public further expanded demand for artistic and cultural goods, as did the consolidation of various critical and avant-garde movements at the ‘higher’ levels of taste. In reality, then, commercial society may have monetised art and exploited artists, but artists needed the market to circulate their otherwise invisible forms, to provide a means of subsistence, and to act as an instrument for cultivating rewards and prestige sufficient to de-necessitate patronage. As Slater and Tonkiss have observed, in the development of modern societies ‘marketization involve[d] a cultural dialectic; at once the autonomization of culture and its commercialization’ (2001, p.155). As I will later discuss, autonomy for artists (and its ambivalent consequences) has since become institutionalized as a binding and necessary feature of the industrialised production of commodities in the contemporary cultural industries.

Yet, despite the evident correspondence between artist and commercial society, as Slater and Tonkiss further comment, the belief in the possibility of a ‘pure’ self-creation through art, and the desire for culture free from commercial taint, has endured:

‘Autonomy of culture here means at least two things: first, autonomy from economic values, the creation of art in relation to its own inner gods rather than the idols of the marketplace; and second, autonomy from the false and inauthentic ‘culture’ that arises in and through the marketplace, the seedy demon born when the ignorant tastes of the people mate with the fiscal lust of the capitalist’ (2001, p. 152-3).

The faith in the ‘inner gods’ of art has long been contrasted with the ‘false’ god of the market. The effect of the modern societies (as idealists have lamented) has been the ‘ruination’ of culture, as the colonization of the aesthetic by instrumental

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<sup>3</sup> as Negus and Pickering (2004, p. 9) put it; ‘[s]ince the days of Herder and Hegel and the European Romantics (...) the artist has been heroised as the agent *par excellence* of original self-creation’

rationality has proceeded apace. The belief that modern societies drain the beauty and uniqueness from art as it is brought under the purview of calculative rationality, and that the finest arts are only degraded by their commercial popularisation, has proved resilient - and many continue to defend the necessity of an autonomous art. Just as once William Blake lamented that 'where any view of money exists, art cannot be carried on', modern observers such as the celebrated critic Robert Hughes (2008) continue to rail against the damaging and indeed 'absurd' commercialisation of art, and the encroachment of market values into creative production.

Such a utopian vision of artistic freedom has also remained prominent amongst academic critics, and modern industrial societies (even if they purport to provide such freedoms) have often been criticised by intellectuals for failing to meet idealised requirements for the provision of an authentic autonomy. Indeed, as I discuss in the following section, for many prominent critics, in the contemporary cultural and creative industries workplace (our concern here), the consequences of the commodification of art and the absorption of cultural and artistic labour into the industrial, marketised system have been to render futile the desire for genuine creative or artistic freedom in cultural work.

### **Critiques of Autonomy in Cultural Work**

A range of critical perspectives have been developed sceptical to claims that the cultural worker possesses creative autonomy, artistic free will or independence from the demands and constraints of capital. Since accounting for all perspectives is beyond the scope of this article, I want to select and summarise three distinctive approaches that appear to most strongly inspire contemporary social science critiques; these are derived, in turn, from the work of Adorno, Foucault and Bourdieu.

#### *a) Autonomy denied*

As is well-known, the 'culture industry' critique, famously first advanced by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944/1992), identified the pervasive industrialization of art and culture in modern societies, a process that involved both commodity standardisation and the transferral of 'the profit motive naked onto cultural forms' (Adorno 1991, p. 99). While Adorno, and other Frankfurt School theorists such as Marcuse, had relatively little to say about the *specific* nature of cultural labour (see Held 1980 and Dant 2000 on this issue), it was generally assumed that, while autonomy provided a foundational principle for action, artists and cultural workers were likely to be compromised in their efforts to obtain freedom by virtue of the coercive and instrumental demands of an industrial system geared to making cultural goods 'more or less according to plan' (Adorno 1991, p. 98). So, for Adorno, while it was quite possible that 'individual forms of production are maintained' (2000, p. 233) amidst the fields of film and music, it was also assumed that the autonomy of works produced, as well as the freedom of those who produced and consumed them, would, over time, be 'tendentally eliminated by the culture industry' (*ibid.*, p. 99).

While Adorno has long been derided for his alleged cultural pessimism, he retains a significant influence on contemporary critique, not least for theorists of cultural work. For example, McGuigan (2004) suggests that the forms and conditions of cultural production are now more strongly determined by the logic of economic calculation and that the capacity for autonomous reflective judgment, and disinterested creativity on the part of artists, has become seriously eroded by an advanced neo-liberalism. Angela McRobbie (2002) has offered a similar lament for the decline of autonomous cultural production, arguing that, since the mid-1990s, cultural industry firms (of all sizes and across all sectors) have become increasingly driven by a more aggressive market philosophy, further diminishing the opportunity for genuinely creative, independent cultural work. She claims there has been a regressive 'decline in creativity' (2002, p. 524) in cultural work and so - just as Adorno argued in the 1940s that 'rugged individualists have been outlawed' (1990, p. 306) - McRobbie surmises that '[t]here is nothing like the vibrancy and collective (and competitive) spirit which characterized the earlier period' (McRobbie 2002, p. 524). The views of Adorno are also strongly echoed in Scherzinger (2005, p. 28) who, using the example of the music industry, posits that for cultural workers (in this case musicians) 'the apparent erratic turbulence of [their] musical production is, in reality, subordinated and contained by awesomely consolidated corporate structures'.

In such a perspective, the consequence of the industrialization of art and cultural production is the gradual domination and de-autonomization of the cultural worker. The artist or creative is reduced to the status of a cog in the machine; mere 'detail' labour, bound by the dictates of employers, contracts and reductive demands to tailor their creativity to pre-given schemes and formats. Autonomy is denied as even the most creative and independent-minded of workers are eventually reduced to mere 'personifications of labour', or simple 'bearers of class relations' (see Marx 1990; also Willmott 1990), rather than conceptualised, either as inherently (or aspirationally) creative or critical human subjects, or as subjects structurally endowed with autonomous powers.

#### *b) Autonomy as false freedom*

A contrasting approach emphasises how autonomy has less been denied by corporations and the machinations of managers, but actively promoted as the regulative principle through which workers might be more subtly encouraged to accept the necessity of capitalist forms of cultural production. To offer a simple distinction, we might say that while 'culture industry' critiques suggest that cultural workers are forced to accept capitalist relations of production as a consequence of their powerlessness in the face of corporate management, then 'governmentality' or neo-Foucauldian approaches argue that workers are trained to accept and reproduce for themselves the precise conditions of their subordination.

The promotion of cultural industries as particularly conducive to worker autonomy and self-determination has been a clear feature of recent economic policy and commentary (DCMS, 2001, 2008; see also McRobbie 2002; Osborne 2004). Central to this project has been the manipulation of workers' desires, interests and aspirations through discourses that have promoted the virtues of creativity and the naturalness of enterprise values in artistic and cultural labour. Indeed, while work in

the cultural and creative industries has long appeared glamorous and attractive in comparison to most other industry sectors, the intensified promotion and often uncritical celebration of such work as wholly creative, rewarding and fun, has provided an important means of enticing populations into this emerging sector, as this typical piece of PR puff attests:

'Just imagine how good it feels to wake up every morning and really look forward to work. Imagine how good it feels to use your creativity, your skills, your talent to produce a film [...] or to edit a magazine. [...] Are you there? Does it feel good?' (from *Your Creative Future* a Design Council/Arts Council of England Internet resource, cited in Nixon and Crewe 2004, p. 129).

Indeed, for its enthusiasts, the cultural industries seem to have finally broken the bureaucratic shackles of work, offering individuals a new relationship to labour that emphasises its intrinsic freedoms and opportunities for personal growth and constant creativity (see for example Smith 1998; Howkins 2001; Florida 2002). In qualitative terms, this has largely been realised in the provision of a kind of compulsory individualism through freelance and/or 'flexible' modes of creative work, where employees are charged with managing their own labour inputs, either singly, or in dedicated and putatively 'autonomous' project teams (Ryan 1992).

Arguably, as critics have shown, the promotion of flexibility and freelancing as intrinsically positive (and autonomy enhancing) provides camouflage for its real intentions and effects – to reduce costs, to de-differentiate work and non-work environments and to attenuate the boundaries between the work and non-work self (Ursell 2000; Ross 2003; Stahl 2005). Yet, simultaneously, it seems that to be (or to appear to be) in control of ones 'creative destiny' encourages workers to actively endorse the systems put in place to expedite creative production. Here, the 'seduction of autonomy' (Knights and McCabe 2003, p. 1613) is sufficiently powerful to override any misgivings, constraints or disadvantages that might emerge in the workplace. The pay-off for enhanced uncertainty and employment risk is the freedom to work more flexibly, informally and in accordance with ones' own biographical preferences and ambitions – however degraded or compromised these may be, or may become (Ursell 2000).

For critics, such developments may serve to underline how, as Foucault (1982) argued, the application of power proceeds only through the provision of freedom. Yet, the freedoms available in cultural work can often appear limited illusory – potentials divested of any substantive possibility for challenging the structures and iniquitous effects of the capitalist labour process. Indeed, while government is routinely acknowledged as a 'congenitally failing operation' (Rose and Miller 1992, p.190), it is telling that many Foucauldian studies of cultural work, while acknowledging the latent possibility of 'resistance', have often struggled to identify any significant reversal of power relations in work environments, nor identified how non-work subjectivities are brought into play to offset the nefarious impacts and demands of labour (see for example Ursell 2000; Pritchard 2002; McRobbie 2002, Nixon 2003). Autonomy might well be foundational to cultural work – but it is a mask that conceals an underlying oppression. Thus, the ambivalence of autonomous cultural work, in terms of its freedom-enhancing potential, tends to be under-discussed relative to its regressive and constraining powers. In this respect such

literature tends towards a somewhat attenuated view of human agency and (ironically) a limited conception of autonomy.

### c) *Autonomy as Pose*

A further critique of the idea of creative/artistic autonomy is developed by Bourdieu (1980, 1993) who suggests that it is cultural workers' own status-seeking behaviours that will tend to compromise or undermine the possibility of artistic freedom. For Bourdieu, the world of art and cultural production is characterised by the search for various kinds of capital – principally, economic, in the form of incomes and profits, but also symbolic, in the form of prestige, legitimacy and consecration. Conventionally, the true artist seeks to disavow the former and accumulate the latter, since in the field of cultural production, an 'authentic' artistic standing can only be established in reputation and not in profits. Yet, for Bourdieu, this refusal of the economic world and the public pursuit of *art gratia artis*, is, in itself, a commercial strategy:

'Producers and vendors of cultural goods who 'go commercial' condemn themselves, and not only from an ethical or aesthetic point of view, because they deprive themselves of the opportunities open to those who can *recognize* the specific demands of this universe and who, by concealing from themselves and others the interests at stake in their practice, obtain the means of deriving profits from disinterestedness' (Bourdieu 1980, p. 262).

For Bourdieu, the artistic stance of 'disinterestedness' provides precisely the means to obtain that which it appears to discredit – economic rewards. Such rewards are obtained through the eventual consecration that is obtained as the various avant-gardes, interlopers and arrivistes become integrated into the market as critically-avowed originals. Thus, while radicals may appear to disavow the economic and external goods acquired by their more established and apparently conservative peers, radicals' efforts to disrupt the field (those periodic denunciations, declamations and demands for the destruction/reconstruction of art) are constrained by the underlying paradox that the preservation of cultural field is entirely necessary in order to, firstly, recognize and, secondly, accept any new challenge to orthodoxy. It is only the preservation of the 'belief' in art that ensures those endowed with symbolic capital will find chances to convert it into its economic variant. As Bourdieu pithily puts it:

'...it is all too obvious that these ritual acts of sacrilege, profanations which only ever scandalize the believers, are bound to become sacred in their turn and provide the basis for a new belief (...) Paradoxically, nothing more clearly reveals the logic of the functioning of the artistic field than the fate of these apparently radical attempts at subversion' (Bourdieu 1980, p. 266).

Bourdieu questions the idea that artistic autonomy exists outside of commercial interest by identifying radical disinterestedness as a structural necessity of the economic functioning of the field. For Bourdieu, '[art] revolutions are only ever partial ones, which displace the censorships and transgress the conventions but do so in the name of the same underlying principles' (ibid., p. 83-4), thus identifying the foundational role of autonomy in masking (and so reinforcing) economic interest and the stability of the field.



Faulkner *et al* (2008) in a study of UK independent television companies offer support for Bourdieu's reading when they reveal the strongly pecuniary motives that now underpin the activities of independent producers in what is publicly promoted (not least by producers themselves) as a vibrant, creative and artistically-driven sector. As they suggest, not only are independents actively seeking to 'sell-up' to agglomerated 'super-indies' and larger broadcasters once they have established a stable of commercially viable rights and formats, they often do so while continuing to present themselves as 'artists' operating outside of the dictates of commercial interest. In such readings, autonomy is understood as a means to monetary ends, a necessary pose for the eventual accumulation of those rewards it appears to disavow. Therefore here, as in Bourdieu's analysis, it is artists themselves who betray the radical possibility of autonomy through their own camouflaged actions. Autonomy and agency are geared only (or in most significant part) to the individualistic pursuit of status, prestige and other 'external' rewards.

To summarise; these varied critiques are useful in so far as they offer insights into the ways in which autonomy, while a foundational normative principle of cultural work, can, through the market, be systemically abrogated, used as a mechanism of rule through the promotion of compulsory individualism, or employed by artists themselves as a means to instrumental ends. Further, in presenting the cultural industry (or field) as potentially damaging to artistic autonomy they offer an alternative to more contemporary, populist analyses of the creative industries that foundationalise autonomy, yet tend to gloss over any possibility of contradiction between artistic and commercial motives. In the following section I want to argue that these critiques, collectively, also tend to over-emphasise the capacity of capital to determine the conditions of cultural production, and underestimate the extent to which autonomy is shaped by the somewhat more open dialectic of creativity and constraint that underpins what Bill Ryan (1992) has termed the 'art-commerce' relation. Here, the emphasis shifts to a consideration of the ways in which capitalism, through its own internal logic, may be opening up (rather than merely diminishing or manipulating) opportunities for more varied (and critical) forms of autonomy in the contexts of cultural and creative industries.

### **Autonomy Guaranteed? The 'Art-Commerce Relation'.**

In *Making Capital from Culture*, Ryan (1992) is concerned with what he terms a 'specific contradiction' (p. 5) at the heart of the culture industry – namely that while cultural production is increasingly organised in accordance with capitalist demands, it is never reducible to those demands since, by necessity, it must encompass other antithetical forms of value derived from the practices and procedures of art. Specifically, the widespread belief in the intrinsic value of free, unfettered creativity and the necessary autonomy of the artist vitiates against the rational closures and commercial standards commonly demanded by capital, where, conventionally, workers are incorporated as abstract labour and subject to standardized and regulated work routines. However in the case of cultural and creative industries, as Ryan avers, such standards cannot be fully applied:

'Creation requires the labour of artists, the work of individuals with unalienable and irreplaceable talents and skills, who conjure up exciting and novel works. By definition,

it cannot easily be reduced to a system of rules, or the personalised labour of particular artists substituted by abstract labour power' (1992, p. 121).

The crucial point here is that the demand from the public for original products generated by concrete and named individuals and collectives impairs the ability of capital to depersonalise and standardise labour inputs. The idea that cultural value is intrinsic to the works of individual creators tends to prevent the full abstraction of the labourer from the context and conditions of work.

Furthermore, the conditions of artistic production have tended to be based on a relatively autonomous artisanal or 'craft-based' mode (Caldwell 2008; Sennett 2007, Stahl 2005; Toynbee 2000; Williams 1980) because this is widely idealised as the condition necessary for the genesis of original works. Indeed, the history of cultural and creative industry production is marked by the tension between the need for artists to create an independent nexus of creativity, labour freedoms and skilled, artisanal production while serving commercial masters, and, in the opposite direction, the necessity for managers of ensuring that those artistic freedoms are not destroyed, but appropriately harnessed and managed, sufficient to ensure the free flow of new and original cultural commodities. Thus, Ryan notes, one contradiction of cultural production is precisely the fact that ordinarily conservative, regulated and rational capitalism must seek to embrace contingency, capriciousness and uncertainty in order to extract the required surplus values from cultural labour. The consequences of closing down creativity are, as Ryan comments, undesirable since '[a]ny attempt by employers to reduce the necessary component by demanding less time and devotion by the artist, runs the risk of a shoddy or mediocre and hence unsaleable artwork' (1992, p. 114). The widespread belief that the value of artistic and cultural goods derives from their special, unique and irreducible qualities cannot be disregarded. Thus capital has no particular interest in fully divesting cultural workers of their autonomy, for to do so would undermine the very basis of the value generated in cultural production.

This does not mean however that artistic labour operates beyond management or outside of commercial constraint – far from it – nor does it disavow the fact that through formatting, advertising, branding and innovative marketing capital can present essentially similar goods as different and 'new', but it does suggest that there are *limits* to how far cultural workers can be divested of autonomy and recast as ordinary 'detail' labour; for to do so fully would compromise the potential for future profits. As Witkin (2000, p. 165) has commented in relation to advertising and formatting, '[s]ooner or later...the possibilities of invention are exhausted and the culture industry must return to the sources of authentic aesthetic creation that lie beyond the compass of its design initiative'. The (relatively) autonomous artist therefore remains central to the capitalist production initiative.

Of course this provision of autonomy can be understood, to some significant extent, as 'a resource, [and] not a concession' (Stahl 2005, p. 104) – that is, an integral element in the formal calculus of production of authentic cultural commodities. As Foucauldians have attested, the provision of autonomy may merely provide the means of ensuring workers suitably orient themselves to commercial priority. However, I also suggest that this 'permission to rebel' has a double-edged character that tends to be under-estimated in the orthodox critical views outlined previously,

in so far as the closures anticipated by Adorno, the Foucault-derived notion of compulsory freedom and Bourdieu's claim that artists are most commonly motivated by status and self-interest, fail to fully acknowledge the unstable and transgressive potential of a labour process underpinned by autonomy as its normative principle. Indeed it is important to acknowledge that the market, while containing the potential to arrogate creative freedom through the imposition of the commercial imperative, also offers the possibility of extending such freedom, in both formal and substantive terms, since the necessary unfettering of the work process (primarily to satisfy the demand for new commodities) can also lead to *unintended consequences* in the form of a radical decoupling of autonomy from the instrumental imperatives it was originally provided to serve. This is the terrain that may be occupied by aesthetes, bohemians, radicals, social critics, and other 'unruly' free-thinking agents equipped with a less degraded and more expansive notion of autonomy prescribed by orthodox critiques. The cultural worker, then, is not simply a bearer of established structures, or a relay for sovereign or governmental power, but also a productive subject capable of deviating from, or adopting a critical stance towards, these apparently binding social relations, fuelled - in no small part - by their own normative commitments to autonomy and their inevitable embeddedness in other, non-market, social structures.

### **The Possibilities of Autonomy**

What are the potentials and possibilities of this intrinsic 'permission to rebel'? For some radical critics, the inherent tension in the art-commerce dialectic gives hope that some seismic political transformations will one day 'break free' from within capitalism's confines:

'...if capital is not to totally destroy the uniqueness that is the basis for the appropriation of monopoly rents....then it must support a form of differentiation and allow of divergent and to some degree uncontrollable local cultural developments that can be antagonistic to its own smooth functioning. It can even support (though cautiously and often nervously) all manner of 'transgressive' cultural practices precisely because this is one way in which to be original, creative and authentic as well as unique. It is within such spaces that all manner of oppositional movements can form even presupposing, as is often the case, that oppositional movements are not already firmly entrenched there' (Harvey 2001, p. 409-410).

While, as we have seen, support for transgressive practices is necessary for the production of new cultural commodities, for Harvey, this opportunity also contains the seeds of a more militant possibility – a potential for social transformation that might prove seriously damaging (or even fatal) to capitalist culture. Such utopian possibilities have been similarly conceived elsewhere as exploitable 'cracks in the mirror' (Swyngedouw and Kaika 2003), or as the incipient revolution of the digitally-integrated and networked multitudes of precarious labour (see Hardt and Negri 2001; Ray 2004). While the prospect of cultural workers throwing off the shackles of capital currently appears fanciful (even the most prominent supporters of new, digitally-integrated and untameable networks of the 'precariat' now have their doubts, see Neilsen and Rossiter 2008), such visions may prove not to be entirely misplaced (see Holmes 2004; Ray 2004), and certainly remain crucial for reminding us that

'thinking the unthinkable' and positing alternatives to prevailing structures remains an important job of critical social science, however far-fetched or unrealistic such visions appear to be (see Levitas 2001). The belief that cultural and artistic labour can serve to effect radical social transformation remains vital and enduring. Indeed, it is precisely the belief in the utopian possibilities of artistic and cultural labour, in its capacity to act as an incubator of revolutionary and transgressive action, that has underwritten some of the more significant social shifts and reversals of power in modern societies (for example see the accounts offered in Blazwick, 2001).

However, just as vital, but often overlooked, are the more routine conditions of cultural production where workers find themselves engaged in a quotidian 'struggle within' to try mediate, manage or reconcile the varied opportunities and constraints of the art-commerce relation. The concern here is less with usurping capitalism and more with seeking opportunities for meaningful self-expression within its limits; more prosaically it is concerned with subsistence, survival and 'making the best' of the conditions under which one is employed as a creative worker. This is not to disclaim the importance of the 'disinterested' political or aesthetic motive, but rather to recognise its compromised and negotiated character in the context of a capitalist system that most people have come to accept (either willingly or unwillingly) as a relatively enduring (even immutable) feature of the working life. Yet, here, autonomy can play a more multipart (and liberating) role than that conventionally ascribed by orthodox critics, acting as a resource for underpinning a variety of different practices and courses of action. Recent empirically-focussed work that examines the ways cultural workers attempt to develop a more autonomous and authentic relation to their work reveals the possibility that even amidst highly proscribed, commercially-facing cultural work, the necessary provision of freedom and the generative ownership of the creative and artistic commodity by named, authentic creators provides a key source of identity and agency for the putatively de-autonomized or deluded cultural worker. It is this 'struggle within' that I want to highlight and, in doing so, hope to encourage further biographical study<sup>4</sup> and in-depth reflection on its constitution and characteristics.

For example, in their work on fine arts graduates and nascent cultural professionals, Taylor and Littleton (2008) utilise what they term a 'fine-grained' biographical approach to expose the complex 'identity work' being undertaken by workers; here the discursive resources and repertoires being drawn upon, and the personal and social ends which are being pursued, demonstrate that a cultural worker is often a more complex and contradictory subject than that described by the orthodox social science critiques. Commitments to art and commercial necessity, as well as to

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<sup>4</sup> By this I mean an approach that emphasises the situated, lived experience of workers themselves in their everyday contexts. The concern is with developing analyses sensitive to the temporal-spatial environments in which autonomous work is undertaken and the full range of social, political and economic influences and motivations that help shape the course of such work. This (clearly utopian) ambition, marked by a commitment to holistic retrieval of meanings and motivations, is offered in contrast to the conventional social science critiques of cultural labour outlined here, ones marked significantly by an insensitivity to context and a disavowal of the contingency and subjectivity of the labour process.

personal health and well-being, and social obligations of family, kinship and community, work in combination to significantly influence how the practice of being an 'autonomous artist' is actually lived, over time. In this regard, the idea of autonomy, and the work of self-creation and self-actualization, is recast as mutable psychosocial drama, marked by a constant 'striving for coherence' (2008, p. 289) amidst shifting patterns of stability and change. Yet such a condition is notable in being marked by both opportunities and threats, progressive and regressive possibilities, and it is this unstable and oscillating potential that challenges both one-sided upbeat notions of cultural or creative industry employment as *always* liberating and abject notions of creative work as comprised *only* of alienation, compulsory individualism and/or camouflaged self-interest.

Kate Oakley's (forthcoming) work on freelance artistic labourers similarly reveals neither the inevitable de-autonomization and alienation imagined by Adorno, nor the straightforward denial of economy that Bourdieu identifies, but more of an attempt by workers to balance the impacts and necessity of economic motives while attempting to devise and apply some means of retaining ones' autonomous artistic ambitions. Interestingly, in this regard, she identifies the struggle for artistic autonomy as both an ethical and a social practice, whereby '[t]he importance of 'being an artist' lies not in its anti-commercialism, but in its assertion of meaning beyond the commercial', suggesting that the value of the autonomy striven for and expressed in the context of producing art and cultural goods is not necessarily about denying commercial necessity but about working around or through it to establish a means of creating 'my own work' that has a personal meaning and in some cases a social impact:

'This manifests itself, not only in particular forms of socially-engaged practice, artists working in urban regeneration or in education projects, but perhaps most strongly in the search for meaningful work. This, it seems to me, is the consistent thread behind the concern about 'selling out', or the assertion about the importance of 'my own work', which is not only to defend the artistic against the commercial, indeed sometimes no defence is required, but to assert the importance of meaning above the commercial to experiences one's work as a refuge from lack of meaning, from the dominance of the utilitarian, elsewhere' (Oakley, forthcoming).

In creative work, the ethical imperative to act autonomously, as a self-directed individual, and to obtain meaning (be it 'purely' aesthetic, personal or social<sup>5</sup>) is too easily dismissed as an expression of organized and compulsory individualism, and less often seen as a means for self-aware human subjects to try and influence art and culture, the workplace or the wider social world in ways that might be viewed as self-realising, radical, socially progressive or politically challenging. And while, as Oakley further comments, amongst her research subjects, 'scepticism about the possibility of external change for the better is deep, the notion of political/ethical

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<sup>5</sup> Such terms provide only schematic approximations of the varied *possibilities* for alternative or progressive practices under conditions of enhanced individualization in cultural work – not clarified or immutable categories. Cultural workers may be driven by varied combinations of what I have crudely understood as 'artistic', 'practice-led' or 'social' motivations – as well as by external rewards conjunctively or alone.

responsibility on the individual remains, and is seen to be connected to being an artist' (Oakley, forthcoming), suggesting that autonomy as a normative principle retains significant currency amongst cultural workers, even as it is challenged and compromised by commercial demands.

Toynbee's (2000) analyses of the working practices of musicians, similarly identifies the foundational nature of autonomy, and its ambivalent relation to the market and its instrumental demands. Citing a broad range of examples, from struggling and anonymous musicians operating in emergent 'proto-markets' (largely comprising amateur and enthusiast communities that operate either beyond or in barely commodified terms), through to case studies of established stars and *auteurs* such as Charles Mingus and the Velvet Underground, to more contemporary purveyors of dance music, Toynbee argues for the radical possibilities encoded in an industrial system that has always provided, to a greater or lesser extent, some form of 'institutional autonomy' for musicians. Indeed, as he notes, institutional autonomy for cultural labour is seen as a necessary feature for the valorization of capital in the cultural industries. In terms similar to Ryan, Toynbee avers that while capitalization and industrial control remain prime objectives for managers, there is the necessary provision of autonomy for creatives in order to ensure new goods are produced, compatible with audience demands for novelty and innovation. Yet, Toynbee insists that while the market is itself the guarantor of autonomy, it is never in full control of the freedom it endows, since in amidst the 'anthropological morass' (ibid, p. 26) of music-makers, operating in varied temporal-spatial contexts, harbouring myriad motives and ambitions, there exist non-conformists, radical actors and ready opportunities for principled divergences from accumulation, and the potential for cultivation of socio-political critique. In such instances, he argues, 'the drive to accumulation has actually helped to undermine the system imperative of capital' (ibid, p.33) – since it is clear that otherness flourishes where the market has itself 'insisted on the amelioration of market relations' (ibid, xvi).

What links such studies is the idea that the principle of autonomy - whether underpinning the desire to produce cultural goods untrammelled by commercial demands, or generate art in an authentic and unaffected way - is foundational, but exists in a constant flux state; that is, it is subject to endless negotiation and affected by complex and unstable exigencies of personal and social origin. Further research in this vein has suggested that beyond the image of the atomized, governed or self-interested creative, there exists a mixed economy of cultural production where workers operate as socially-embedded actors that pursue varied motives and ends in the pluralistic context of cultural work (Banks 2006 and 2007). Such a view is based on a more liberal-progressive understanding of power that recognises the direction, control and management of creative autonomy is crucial, but never fully prescribed, and thus potentially prone to unstable outcomes and contradictory effects – ones made possible not simply by the structural provision of autonomy but also by the capacity of workers to exercise the necessity of choice in explicit defiance of agents and structures of power. This is a complex politics of refusal, not (just) realised in low-key 'resistance' within the execution of work tasks, but may encompass (for example) creative workers becoming consciously and self-reflexively involved in more evidently projective 'political' activity such as social and community projects, forms of non-capitalist economizing, ethical trading and socio-political activism, and/or may mean a more routine participation in the development of socially and

personally meaningful 'practice'-based communities in the sense suggested by MacIntyre (1981) and latterly by Keat (2000). Here, socially-embedded labour is marked by a commitment not just to the cultivation of 'external' rewards (money, power, status) but 'internal' rewards such as good work for its own sake, and contributing to the standards of quality and ethical frameworks of the practice in question – be it painting, web-design, jazz, punk-rock or any other established creative activity (see Banks 2007 for further discussion). In this regard, the compulsion or desire to choose one's life, to act as an autonomous cultural worker does not take place only within the panoptical confines of the firm, but is perhaps better conceptualised as a constantly shifting terrain of inter-relationships that encompass the logics of art, commerce, the internal demands of the practice and other exterior demands of the social.

Based on these (merely indicative) examples, I want to suggest, by way of conclusion, that the cultural industries, rather than only engendering alienation, promoting compulsory individualism, or fostering status-seeking and instrumentality, contain a much more open and ambiguous sense of autonomous subjectivity. In the empirical studies indicated, the subject of cultural labour is manifestly a more complex entity than conventionally portrayed in conventional social science critiques – they occupy varied institutional settings, differentiated subject positions and may explore possibilities for the cultivation of variegated (and potentially critical) forms of autonomy. We might argue that in an ostensibly detraditionalized economy, characterized by a diffuse range of internally complex institutions, the prospects for an expansion of autonomous practices may have been enhanced by the fact that the prevailing compulsion/ aspiration to act autonomously can in itself lead to critical self-reflection on the credibility and credence of established social structures and arrangements (see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Keat 2000). In this regard acting autonomously is simply a further indicator of the ongoing 'struggle for coherence' identified by Taylor and Littleton and others (see for example Becker 1984) in cultural work, and indicative of what Oakley identifies as the ongoing search for ethical practices and existential meanings amidst the varied demands and confines of modern cultural and artistic labour. Cultural industries therefore should be understood, not as sites of a standardised and general exploitation, but as foci for a contestable and transformable political economy of labour. It is crucial to our further understanding that academics pay more attention to the mutable conditions of cultural labour, both in terms of its biographical and structural dimensions, and the foundational role of autonomy within these intersecting realms.

Of course, given the ongoing pre-eminence and power of 'integrated', 'late' or 'culturalized' capitalism, such work might appear misguided or futile. Yet, whether we concern ourselves with apparently individual acts of amelioration and reformist actions from 'within' (balancing artistic and commercial values, attempting to act as a social and ethical as well as economic being, subsisting and making-do), or adopt an ostensibly more radical position where we theorise the (currently unlikely) possibility of a collective or (dis)integrated rhizomatic network of cultural production that breaks the shackles of capitalism, the following principle holds; as long as autonomy serves as a foundational normative principle for creative and cultural production, and a structural precondition for cultural commodity production, then it will remain a significant catalyst for variegated forms of 'identity work' and social action. It is therefore incumbent on critics to reveal this and to assess its consequence and

potentials. Such work is imperative since, while the modern market can be argued to be intrinsically hostile to judgments and values that lie beyond commercial self-interest, as we have seen, capitalism not only requires those 'external' sources of value (embodied here in the notion of autonomous creativity and artistic freedom) in order for new commodities to be produced, but by encouraging and nurturing those judgements and values is also, simultaneously, cultivating the terrain for a critique of its own operations – and this is where autonomy as normative principle for social action may come into its own to progressively transform the local and common experience. While the likes of Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) have most persuasively argued that capital has become extremely adept at absorbing *any* autonomous critiques into its own spirit and compass, the extent to which it is able to do this (and so the extent to which artists and cultural workers are able to offer an alternative vision of life or a politically-challenging world view) remains, to my mind, an open question; one that must be subject to ongoing theoretical and empirical inquiry in different social and spatial contexts. In the cultural and creative industries the study of routine and ongoing 'struggles for coherence' within the existing confines of capitalism and the art-commerce relation remains a necessary and vital task.



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