

ALL CITIES ARE DIFFERENT:

Moving creative workforce research forward to a new specificity

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ABSTRACT

The cultural sector and its workforce are often positioned as economic drivers, and important themes within this discourse have included relationships between the cultural sector and human capital, urban regeneration, community engagement, branding, and image. Little of the research underpinning these arguments has documented the work practices, orientations, attitudes, career trajectories and skill requirements of individual creative workers, and even less has considered the spatially specific nature of labour conditions and career trajectories to produce a differentiated analysis of work and career. What happens within any locality over time will partially result from the changing roles it plays within the broader spatial divisions of labour within which it is emplaced. However, we argue that it is insufficient to claim that all cities are different; rather, there is a need to examine the specificity of work in each location. In this paper, the second in a series that examine specific elements of creative work, we consider spatiality with specific reference to the use of networks. Drawing on a case study of the film and television industries in Perth we raise the possibility of approaching such research by combining the global production network approach, labour process analysis, and research that looks within individual practice.

INTRODUCTION

Creative and cultural industries and the “creative workers” employed within them are assigned roles of ever-increasing importance on a regional, national and international level. Despite definitional confusion as to exactly what constitutes these industries, their workers are regularly positioned as “national champions” in their own right (McKinlay and Smith, 2009) and as a key metaphor for successful mainstream organisations in general (Smith and McKinlay, 2009b). Indeed, Throsby (2008) describes the creative industries as an essential component in any respectable economic policy maker’s development strategy. Despite the growing attention paid to these sectors and the people who work within them, there is little detailed research on the work practices, orientations, attitudes, career trajectories, skills and training needs of creative workers, and ‘little insight into how [creative] workers gain access to or develop resources or how agency operates in dynamic and complex contexts’ (Smith and McKinlay, 2009a, p. 18). This has led to widespread agreement about the need for a detailed picture of the characteristics and dynamics of work and employment of creative workers in different industries and groups (Thompson, Jones and Warhurst, 2009; McGuigan, 2010).

In this paper, the second of a series that examine specific elements of creative work, we begin by outlining our theoretical approach and then highlight the definitions used to define particular industries and workers as cultural or creative. We then raise the possibility of approaching creative workforce research by combining the global production network approach, labour process analysis, and research that looks within individual practice. Drawing on case studies of creative work within Western Australia we consider spatiality with specific reference to the use of networks, and we conclude with suggestions as to how a new approach might advance creative workforce research.

A RESEARCH AGENDA

In an attempt to construct an approach that engages with the dynamics of work and employment we have developed a theoretical framework based on labour process analysis but which draws on Global Production Network (GPN) theory and incorporates a territorial/relational view of the analysis of place and locality (Rainnie et al., 2007, 2010a, 2010b; McGrath-Champ et al., 2010; Herod et al., 2007). We have purposefully moved away from simplistic notions of either creative workers or creative/cultural industries because both concepts threaten to become ‘chaotic’: politically loaded, and yet analytically so noisy as to be almost useless. Instead we have adopted an approach that starts with the working lives, locales and art form/s of

individual creative workers. This has enabled us to consider the specificity of cultural work as posited by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) and by Smith and McKinlay (2009a). In practice this has meant five foci: 1) the links and power relations between organisations (both large and small) within the region and within the production network; 2) the importance of the relationship between commercial, non-profit and community work at all scalar levels; 3) the contested nature of place and locality; 4) links between workplace, the domestic sphere and community; and 5) work and employment characteristics within and between workplaces.

The importance of place and locality has been acknowledged as vital to the creative industries from a variety of points of view (Florida, 2002; Rainnie et al., 2007; Pratt, 2011). Smith and McKinlay (2009a) acknowledge that the creative industries are differentiated economically and spatially, and by drawing on a framework that builds on Harvey's notions of the "spatial fix", "socio spatial dialectic" and the "politics of place" (in McGrath-Champ et al., 2010) we suggest a more grounded approach to the analysis of work and employment within the creative industries than has been developed hitherto. Following Hudson (2001), and drawing on a mixture of territorial and relational views of places, we view places as the intersection of local and non-local systems of rules, norms, customs, legal structures and regulatory mechanisms that shape and institutionalise the behaviour of workers and employers. Blair (2009) points to the importance of "active networking" for initiating, developing and maintaining a career. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu, Blair reminds us that network boundaries are constantly shifting and that the process is conscious, informal, instrumental and ongoing. Individual actions within these networks are a complex interaction between subjective understandings of the individual's position and the constraints and opportunities presented by their objective social position. For individual creative workers, and drawing on both Labour Process theory and Strangleman's (2001) work on networks, we therefore consider four networks that affect the character of labour relations: 1) occupation/work; 2) connections to particular places; 3) class background and experience; and 4) family and kinship ties. The interrelationship and overlap of these ties is significant in shaping the peculiarities of place and how place is experienced by individuals and organisations.

Pivotal to our thinking in the development of this approach was the call from Thompson et al. (2009a) for a synthesis of Global Value Chain (GVC) analysis with Labour Process theory. We had for some time argued for a Global Production Networks (GPN) approach on the basis that it takes the issue of value more seriously than GVC analysis and has a deeper spatial awareness necessary in analysing the position of creative workers. The call made by Thompson et al. prompted us to rethink how these theoretical approaches might come together to provide a fluid model for the sorts of analysis required. It was our hope that the combination of approaches would enable work and employment patterns to be located within dynamic value chains that are themselves embedded with specific networks operating in and across different localities.

DEFINITIONAL CONFUSION

Accurate representation of the industries and work environments that we want to examine requires consideration of the definitional confusion that can hamper analysis (Hartley, 2005). We draw heavily on Throsby's (2001) functional definition of cultural goods and services as activities that involve some form of creativity in their production; are concerned with the generation and communication of symbolic meaning; and from which any output at least potentially embodies some form of intellectual property. Throsby's definition aligns with other leading models (Schimpf and Sereda, 2007; Higgs and Cunningham, 2008; Markusen, 2006) and as such provides a broad basis for discussion. Throsby's concentric circles model (2001) provides the basis on which to examine different trajectories of development that are in part explained by an increasing emphasis on commercial value, reproducibility and scale of production. However, we move beyond the usefully simple concentric circle model's assumptions of "creativity" flowing outwards from an artistic centre to examine how distinct industries are structured, governed and commodified. For example, Throsby's model places recorded music and film in separate fields; yet they share similarities in terms of their organisational structure and logic of commodification that align them with elements of print and publishing, but which set them apart from other cultural industries (Fitzgerald, 2011; Miège, 2011).

Although we have adopted Throsby's concentric circles model as a heuristic device to distinguish between sectors within the creative industries as a whole, Throsby acknowledges that this is a static picture rather than a dynamic analysis. Thompson et al. (2009b) explain that a strength of value chain analysis within this context is that creative work can be dealt with at multiple points within the value chain. This is crucial given that each sector will have its own organisational and developmental logic, and because many creative workers work across multiple creative sectors (Bennett, 2008). Therefore, GPN offers important insights from both the ecology and chain frameworks (Coe and Johns, 2004; Johns, 2006, 2010; Thompson et al., 2009b; Yoon and Malecki, 2010; Weller, 2008). Advancing this further, Hearn, Roodhouse and Blakey (2007)

developed the concept of a value creating ecology: namely a dynamic constellation of firms within which value flow is multidirectional and works through clusters of networks.

The problem of definitions premised on creativity or cultural content extends to the notion of creative workers themselves. Drawing on labour process analysis we see all work as containing some degree of creativity (Thompson and Smith, 2010), and we argue that the use of creativity alone as a defining characteristic tells us little about the nature of work (Smith and McKinlay, 2009a; McGuigan, 2010; Miller, 2009). For Thompson et al. (2009b) it is what is done by, with and to creative labour that counts. Caves (2000) similarly argues that there is a greater totality in the productive process for creative workers involved in both conceptual and operative processes. It follows that in both the organisation and character of creative industries work there will exist the inspired and the mundane, and that not all creative industries workers will undertake work that is recognised as equally creative. Here, a critical yet often overlooked factor is the balance between recognised artistic labour and skilled artisanal practitioners (Banks, 2010a).

The experience of workers in the creative industries is such that the stresses between creative purpose and economic purpose take a complex form (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). Whilst stressing the difficulties of defining work by creative content, we argue that for certain sectors where the market is volatile and unpredictable, the product ephemeral and the act of creativity in production difficult to standardise and routinise, the originality in creative labour may be accentuated and may come to define a whole sector of work. The way in which distinctions are made between different types of workers thus reflects not only patterns of self-identification and work/industry practice but also shifts within wider social evaluation, funding and cultural policy.

THE FILM AND TELEVISION INDUSTRIES IN PERTH

The film and television industries in Perth, Western Australia (WA) provide an excellent example of complex chains of network and value operating within dynamic global production networks. While the distinct segments of these networks (finance, pre-production, production, post-production, distribution and exhibition) may be globally dispersed, they have been strongly influenced by dominant international and national firms who have maintained high levels of control over finance and distribution operations. The firms in the so-called "creation section" of the value chain—production and post-production firms—typically remain small in comparison, their risk is to some extent offset by links established through spatial agglomeration. Although the filmed entertainment industry in Australia has been growing more rapidly than the global industry, in terms of revenue the Australian industry was estimated by PriceWaterhouseCooper (2008) to account for just 2.2% of an AUD\$110 billion global industry in 2006.

Facilitated by developments in digital technologies, the scope of the production networks that specialist workers must navigate has been expanded by a more pronounced international division of cultural labour marked by a process of segmentation, which has in turn strengthened the profitability of dominant financiers and/or distributors. In the case of firms and workers employed in production and post-production within relatively small centres such as WA, there may be advantages and new opportunities in being a "bit-player" with internationally integrated multi-channel environments. Despite processes of disintegration and decentralisation in the value chain, the production and especially post-production functions remain primarily located in a limited number of primary and satellite production centres. In WA, therefore, these industries remain relatively small in scale and are overshadowed by operations in New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and Queensland. Notwithstanding its market size, WA maintains a visible presence, predominantly in documentary and children's series production, with firms such as Artemis International, Electric Pictures, Prospero, Great Western Entertainment, Taylor Media, and Media World Pictures attracting national and international finance and distribution deals. Indeed the present industry is marked by recognition of its position as a regional film centre that specialises in internationally focused productions. Despite (or perhaps because of) the relatively small number of firms and income generated in the sector, Harry Bardwell, ScreenWest's director of production development, notes 'a market orientation here that is not really seen as much in the other states' (Galvin, 2009, paragraph 15).

The production phases of the film industry have much in common with those of television, and international practice is for employers to draw on a common pool of labour and production services for the two industries (Randle, 2011); yet the WA television broadcasting industry comprises just five percent of the national television workforce. To put this in context, operations in the eastern states of Australia account for four-fifths of the television workforce, and operations in NSW alone account for almost half. The WA television workforce expanded in absolute and relative size between the 1970s and the mid-1980s; unlike NSW and Victorian commercial television operations, which contracted out to independent production companies from the 1960s onwards, production in WA was largely kept "in-house". In more recent decades the state's

workforce has been affected by productivity gains associated with new technical capacity, which has seen a significant decline in the national television workforce as a whole; and by a shift in the centres of production to the eastern states. Changes in ownership regulation and technical capabilities associated with satellite drove a process of national networking from Sydney or Melbourne that, by the late 1980s, had largely eradicated local live and recorded production. The WA broadcasting sector now operates on a broadcasting relay model with minimal production capacity. When local production expands due to news or sporting events, freelance workers are brought in to undertake the additional work, or in the case of some sporting events the entire programme is outsourced. In line with international patterns, this greater reliance on project-based production and semi-permanent “work groups” in WA has undermined the once distinct modal forms of employment operating within the film and television industries.

NETWORKING

As with other creative industries, informal networks in film and television emerge as key labour market mechanisms for workers who must forge a portfolio career featuring multiple and shifting concurrent roles. The networks produce a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) acquired as a result of socio-economic circumstances, supportive peers and family, exposure to cultural activities and visibility as a result of industry involvement. This capital plays a crucial and continual role in securing work, and the importance of networks has been heightened by the emergence of technologies that enable creative workers to take greater control (albeit with greater risk) over the management of their business and product (Bennett, 2008). Cultural capital can also be thought of as an additional “value-web” of grass-roots people and businesses that create value through creative entrepreneurship. The effects on occupational categories and individual workers has been highly uneven in the film and television sector; while some have noted the profound uncertainty this has created, especially for young casualised workers hoping to establish a reputation and break into the industry (cf Caves, 2002), others argue that it is associated with an opportunity for increased creativity and autonomy (cf Renshaw, 2010).

The nature of active networking has of course been shaped by the size and relative isolation of the WA film and television industry. One outcome has been a heightened need to migrate in order to establish a career, often driven by the need to become visible within a new market. As one Perth-born but Melbourne-based director noted, ‘As soon as people reached a certain professional maturity they left. ... In fact, if you were to survey film industry professionals in all the states you would find a disproportionate amount of West Australians among them!’ (Galvin, 2009, paragraph 14). Creative migration is particularly common for workers and aspirants living in smaller centres of activity and in more isolated centres such as WA. On the other hand, a sense of distance and a strong community feeling has, according to some established film producers, strengthened sentiments of trust and mutual support within the formal and informal networks of the state's film and TV production industry. The same was noted in a Launceston study that found people to be attracted to, rather than wishing to escape, a sense of community (Verdich, 2010). It is important to note here that the migration of creative workers is commonly generalised within discussions of the creative class. These discussions fail to take into account the loss of networks often encountered in what is for many creative workers ‘an unstable migration involving financial risk’ (Bennett, 2010, p. 125). Given their tenuous nature, the loss of localised artistic or creative networks due to migration is a considerable risk. Even when migration does not occur it is clear that while industry practitioners must forge and remake local, national and international connections, subjective understandings of individual position and identity are affected by being “locked” in or out of production networks.

The construction and maintenance of networks, and the sensibilities they contain, is inevitably shaped by governance structures within the region. As well as support through the Federal funding agency Screen Australia, the WA film industry receives support from the state agency ScreenWest, which funds projects aimed at general cinema release or national television transmission. Because of this, while developing projects with a “sense of place” has been a central motivation for both local screen producers and, importantly, for state government support, the location and size of the industry has impelled a strategic focus on behalf of ScreenWest and local production firms. As noted, the core documentary and children's series have traditionally been market oriented and internationally focused. Although a small but increasing number of feature films are being produced, ScreenWest's strategy for production development is not premised on attracting large “runaway” productions but on establishing a sustainable creative community.

Here the focus on documentary and children's series is central to ScreenWest's funding strategies. The different production timeframes of these types of production as compared to feature film production, where production time can be six weeks rather than six months, affect both the stability of employment and the form of production networks in which local workers are engaged. Interestingly, while some freelance workers have argued that a focus on larger productions (that is, feature films) would ensure more consistent work, others

have noted that the sector's present scarcity of specialist workers represents a major reversal of fortune for both below- and above-the-line talent, and that it has partially reversed the pattern of migration for professionally mature workers in film, TV and TV commercials.

CLOSING COMMENTS

There is an increasing body of research focusing on the creative workforce, including people whose creativity is embedded in the activities of other industry sectors; however the reliance on inadequate statistical data has resulted in calls for research that will also seek to understand the often-chaotic working lives of specialist creative workers. In reality, creative labour is opaque and messy. This makes it difficult to monitor and observe or to codify and control. Production is marked by a tension between the need to forge an independent nexus of creativity, labour freedoms and skilled artisanal production while meeting market demands and, in the opposite direction, the necessity to ensure that artistic freedoms are fostered, harnessed and managed to ensure the flow of new and original cultural commodities (Banks, 2010b). Added to this is a surplus of skilled over unskilled labour coupled with a productivity dilemma and a surplus of aspiring individuals wishing to join the industry. With these characteristics of uncertainty dominating, the need for a fresh approach to creative workforce research is clear.

We have not tried to examine the labour process of workers in the film and television industry in any detail in this short article. Rather we have drawn on the example of this industry to outline an approach by which we can begin to analyse the contrasting and contradictory experience of creative workers. We hope that this approach will enable us to begin answering the question posed by Thompson et al. (2009a) as to what exactly is done, by, with and to creative workers, and their individual or collective reactions to this. We hope to locate the tensions between creativity, competition and profit within specific labour processes and in specific places. Equally, we hope to uncover and explore strategies for managing and supporting creative workers. Our proposed approach is not new; it simply draws together a number of existing approaches in a new way. Ironically, this reflects the very nature of the work and workers in question.

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