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Happiness, Fashion and Creativity

In an article about his influential book *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) wrote “for many people, happiness comes from creating new things and making discoveries. Enhancing ones creativity may therefore also enhance well-being” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997: 8). However, as Csikszentmihalyi also points out, the quality of creative experience often “involves painful, risky or difficult efforts that stretch the person’s capacity, as well as an element of novelty and discovery” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997: 9). It is the significance of this duality in the affective dimensions of creativity that I will explore in this paper. How is it that happiness and well-being can co-exist with the kinds of risky, precarious employment that is common in creative enterprises?

From the start of the so-called ‘Creative Age’ in the late 1990s (Seltzer and Bentley: 1999), policy-makers have tried to ‘incubate’ and ‘network’ creativity to promote individual, social and economic well-being. Over the last 6 years I have investigated the “new vistas for creativity and self-actualisation” (Flew, 2004: 163) generated by creative industry discourse in New Zealand and whether this is related to a rapid growth of enrolments in creative arts and

design in tertiary education. I began my research with a question concerning the increasing numbers of young women who wanted to do a fashion design degree, even though they know that fashion is a hard business to get into, that they need to go global to be successful, and that this requires a large investment in their selves. Critical cultural theorists are concerned about this new 'creative proletariat' (Arvidsson, 2007), 'young, multi-skilled, flexible, psychologically resilient, independent, single, unattached to a particular location (Ellmeier, 2003: 3), who jump at every opportunity there is to be had in the field of fashion, art, music or the media. The creative worker is thought to be programmed with a new work ethic, needing to realize their passions, uncover personal talent, take risks and spend long hours networking. How are these persons made subject to or prone to take up the goals of a creative economy?

Angela McRobbie has recently written about 'top girls' who are imagined as the ideal subjects of female success, exemplars of the new competitive meritocracy, endlessly working on a perfectible self (McRobbie, 2007: 718). "Armed with good qualifications and having been encouraged to display enthusiasm and willingness to pursue careers as a mark of new and independent sexual identities, this female participation becomes an important feature of the success of the new economy" (McRobbie, 2007: 730). Building on McRobbie's insight, I wanted to understand how fashion design students became 'creative girls'. In the beginning then, my project aimed to identify what 'being creative' meant to students enrolled in New Zealand tertiary courses in fashion design. These courses are presumed to feed workers into

a fashion industry that is receiving unprecedented publicity as a symbol of New Zealand's re-branded economy (Lewis et al., 2008). Media hype about fashion designers in New Zealand reproduces popular cultural myths about individual genius, creativity and freedom of expression, combined with messages about patriotism, enterprise and entrepreneurial endeavour. A primary aim of the research was to investigate the possibility of an alignment between these historically unprecedented messages about New Zealand fashion and students' aspirations to become a designer. I was fascinated by the process of interpellation and wanted to understand how fashion design had captivated these students. Had the growth and innovation strategies for a knowledge-based economy influenced their perspectives on talent and creativity? How did students understand their creative selves?

Understood within a broadly Marxist framework, designer fashion functions as an ideological fiction through which wannabe fashion designer subjects 'misrecognise' the reality of their situation (Althusser, 2001). They seem to be victims of a vampire-like fashion apparatus that, like all creative industries, "ingest[s] youngsters at low prices from a large pool provided by the education system, working newcomers and established hands remorselessly, and discarding the older and less accommodating at will" (Ursell, 2000: 816). Gillian Ursell is telling a story about television production here, but the idea that all types of cultural work have exploitative tendencies masked by a 'charismatic ideology' (Bourdieu, 1993) is prevalent in critiques of all cultural industries. Cultural workers are "not merely volunteering to co-operate with the vampire but are actively constituting its life processes" (Ursell, 2000: 816).

Thus fashion graduates expect, indeed desire, to have their surplus value expropriated and inserted into global surplus flows, whether this distribution is done by employers or by the students themselves, in the role of the cultural entrepreneur. Appropriating their own surplus labour and distributing it is part of their performance of creative identity. As Althusser says,

“...the subjects ‘work’, they ‘work by themselves’ in the vast majority of cases, with the exception of the ‘bad subjects’ who on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (Repressive) State Apparatus. But the vast majority of (good) subjects work all right ‘all by themselves’, i.e. by ideology (whose concrete forms are realized in the Ideological State Apparatuses). They are inserted into practices governed by the rituals of the ISAs” (Althusser, 2001: 323).

This is the upshot of McRobbie’s argument about the commitment of young British fashion designers to notions of personal creativity. For her, creativity is part of a new mode of neoliberal regulation that encourages freelance or self-employed entrepreneurship. As a mode of regulation, creativity negates the idea of a politics of work and equal opportunity, obscures the way some ethnicities are being under-represented as ‘talented’ cultural entrepreneurs and forces women to decide between having children and having work. McRobbie accentuates the ‘self-exploitation’ in the desire to put in long hours that are alienating and that weaken social bonds (McRobbie, 2002: 104). The new ideology of creativity enables fashion designers to break down “the distinction between dull work and enjoyable leisure” (McRobbie, 1999: 27).

For McRobbie, this is a continuation of the 20th century discourse of 'pleasure in work'; the process of autonomization of the worker elaborated by Jacques Donzelot as a form of 'governmentality', in which the practice of government is seen in the wide sense as the 'conduct of conduct' (Gordon, 1991), encompassing "the whole range of practices that constitute, define, organise and instrumentalise the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in their dealing with each other..." (Foucault, 2003: 41). According to Donzelot, the idea of pleasure in work broke down the feeling that "work defines the individual and stamps his place on him like a destiny, robbing him of his identity if he loses his job and making any change in the place or content of his work into a potential threat to him." (Donzelot, 1991: 251). Instead of defining the individual, work became the site of deployment of personal skills. "Whereas the individual's freedom hitherto basically meant the possibility of either accepting or refusing his assigned status, it is now seen as meaning the possibility of permanently redeploying one's capacities according to the satisfaction one obtains in one's work...and its capacities thoroughly to fulfill one's potentialities" (Donzelot, 1991: 252). Pleasure and work were conjoined "in the interests of their greater efficiency and lesser cost...divert[ing] people from individual egoism as much as from nationalist hysteria, putting before them instead a model of happiness in an updated, corrected social domain" (Donzelot, 1991: 252). McRobbie's concern however, is that instead of *diverting* people from individual egoism, new, neoliberalised modes of governance are *reorganising* labour around egoism – producing an ideal of self-expressive work in which individual effort, talent and luck contribute more to success than social class, gender or ethnicity. Governments endorse this

new work ethic as an ideological means of combating social exclusion - making people want to develop their own capacities to create their own jobs, and hopefully employ others (McRobbie, 2002: 100).

It doesn't seem like work to me

It doesn't seem like work to me. It's like an artist. An artist just does whatever he wants to, and can just sit around all day and paint when you feel like it (Fashion student interview).

Marxian 'culturalist' critique also suggests that art is being seduced by the capitalist economy. This perspective shows a particular creative subjectivity becoming an integral part of a new regulatory regime. 'Creativity' and 'flexibility', which were once attributes of the artist, are now valorised as universally desirable (Vishmidt, 2005). The young 'commercial creatives' of the urban arts design, music and fashion scene are happy to live in precarious straits and no longer recognise the fordist distinction between free time and working time. These creative subjects desire a new style of living in which the "instrumental action that used to be work, something performed by workers, literally is freed up in order to become something that is no longer work, something that feels more like Art" (Terranova, 2006: 33). Patrik Aspers (2006) argues in his ethnographies of European and American fashion photographers and garment workers that this 'creative aesthetic work' occupies a place somewhere on the continuum between economic work and free artistic creation.

“By talking about work, I see it as an economic activity, i.e. something for which you are paid. That is, the activities I refer to are separate from art because they are part of the capitalistic economy; hence evaluated in terms of profit. Design of garments, for example, must be related to the activities of these firms in economic markets, where profit is the ultimate goal. Pure art revolves around values of uniqueness, innovation and creativity (without money as an end goal). This represents creative aesthetic activity, though not work. Creative aesthetic work, thus, can be seen as a mixture of these two ‘pure types’ of activities, artistic and economic” (Aspers and Skov, 2006: 749).

It is this type of work that fashion students aspire to, as I was told in student interviews.

I’ve only really thought of fashion design probably starting like, seriously, just last year, because it’s a scary thing to get yourself into, I think, with the whole stuff my parents had said about it being [hard] and not much jobs and things, and then, just getting into the design last year, and talking to my lecturer, and my opinions changed. And it was like, “Mm... that would be so cool, it’d be so cool to do”, but it was like it couldn’t happen, you know? And then it was kind of like “Nope, I can do it!”

Work in fashion might be precarious, but what matters to these students is that it is ‘cool’ (Neff et al., 2005). Marxist theories about these new types of aesthetic work draw on the concept of ‘immaterial labour’ in which value increasingly comes from a “general productivity of the social body – dispersed

through technologies and human bodies, connected in new, shifting assemblages” (Terranova, 2006: 29). This is what Marx foresaw as an evolution of the ‘general intellect’, “in which abstract knowledge (primarily but not only scientific knowledge) is in the process of becoming nothing less than the main force of production and will soon relegate the repetitious and segmented labour of the assembly-line to a residual position” (Virno, 2007: 3). Paolo Virno (2007) has updated Marx’s concept as ‘mass intellectuality’, which he describes as a “real abstraction with an operational materiality” that organises production processes and life-worlds in post-Fordist, post-industrial or network societies. “From the point of view of the evolution of the general intellect, it is the whole of social life – from childrearing to new forms of sexuality, from making music or videos on one’s home computer to watching TV, from inventing new ways of dressing to making up a new way of speaking – that produces wealth” (Terranova, 2006: 29).

“In Fashion: Fun, Fame, Fortune!” (Stone, 2007)

This is a new, affective type of labour, “a kind of fun that takes a lot of effort” (Himanen, 2001: 19) like the ‘hacker ethic’, with which it shares many ideological points of contact (Wark, 2006). This new mode of production strains the analytical categories that used to apply to an industrial economy, as noted by the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* in a call for a forthcoming special issue on *co-creative* labour (Issue 12(2) of 2009). As one of the journal editors, Mark Deuze, asks in his blog “Are these emerging phenomena best understood as a form of labor?” “Can this phenomenon be explained as the exploitative extraction of surplus value from the work of [...]

consumers, or is something else potentially more profound and challenging playing out here?"

Recent work by McRobbie speculates on 'four technologies of young womanhood' (McRobbie, 2006): the fashion and beauty complex, the working girl, the phallic girl and the global girl. The first of these technologies, the fashion and beauty complex, supplies the context for the emergence of "a post-feminist masquerade as a distinctive modality of feminine agency" (McRobbie, 2006: unpagged). The second technology intersects with this space of post-feminist masquerade, producing the figure of the well-educated working girl, where the young woman is understood to be "the bearer of qualifications" that will help her achieve lifelong employability. The third technology operates through the "hypervisible space of sexuality, fertility and reproduction from which emerges the phallic girl". The phallic girl is the 'ladette', for whom the freedoms associated with masculine sexual pleasures are encouraged and celebrated, resulting in an impression of equality with her male counterparts. Finally, McRobbie describes how the new sexual contract operates on the global stage "in the world editions of young women's fashion magazines like Elle, Marie Claire, Grazia and Vogue from whose pages there emerges the friendly, but unthreatening, beautiful and somehow pliable, eager-to-please and bearing-no-grudges global girl" (McRobbie, 2006: unpagged). All of these are discursive formations or 'spaces of attention', that according to McRobbie re-stabilise gender relations and form a highly efficient assemblage for female productivity. This, as she comments, is significant in that government attention to young women is no longer limited to their

reproductive capacities. I argue that creativity forms a similar 'space of attention' and that fashion design education is one of the technologies of young womanhood through which the category of creative girl arises. However, it is insufficient to merely claim that the creative girl occupies a subject position that fits new social and economic arrangements because she is subjectified by neoliberal government ideologies, as McRobbie suggests. The question for me is *how* do these students become 'creative girls' and can they be said to be in a mutually constitutive relationship with a creative economy?

As a 'space of attention', creativity puts the spotlight on a new style of living, in which instrumental work becomes more like art and a visceral sense of well-being can be achieved through entrepreneurial effort and creative self-expression. But in my interviews with first year students it became clear that the majority had not enrolled in a fashion degree because they wanted to do something creative. Only 5 of the 17 I interviewed took up a creative subject position, and in these cases, creativity was always described in relation to other educational experiences that they found had not been a good fit, so that this experience had effectively constituted an 'outside' – a symbolic boundary or a frontier – to their knowledge of creativity. For example, here are quotes from the students who independently talked about enrolling in a fashion degree because they desired to do something creative.

Yeah, well I was never academic, and I'm not sporty, at all! (laughs)

So I've always just taken up creativity as just my thing. (Justine)

[H]alf way through 2002 I was actually at [...] doing a BA in anthropology and criminology ... but I left there because I just decided that if I finished the degree I'm probably not going to use it, after I finished, and needed to do something creative, so yeah. (Alex)

Mum and Dad were fine with accounting, because there's a definite future – it's hard work, its stress, but there's a definite future in it and you can make lots of money. But I wanted to do something creative as well, just have a creative outlet, somehow. (Courtney)

Actually, last year...I did a bachelor of technology and product development....but it was just, like, too much maths and science. So I flagged that idea [...] I love maths and science, but only... because I like the challenge of it. But um, I like to balance it out with other things that are completely not that. You know what I mean? And I went there, and it was all calculus, computers and physics and ooooh... like stuff I'd done before, pretty much, but it's sooo... I found it really boring, it's like, not creative. There's nothing creative in it, it's all just logic and that way, kinda thing, so yeah. (Sarah)

I'm a very creative person, not like a bookwork sort of person. (Sue)

The basic paradox of creative work that I began with, that creativity can be painfully risky and difficult and at the same time enhance happiness and well-

being, becomes evident in these quotes and can be addressed at the ontological level by a Lacanian logic of fantasy.

“Fantasy is understood as a narrative that covers over or conceals the subject’s lack by providing an image of fullness, wholeness or harmony, on the one hand, while conjuring up threats and obstacles to its realisation on the other. When successfully installed, a fantasmatic narrative hooks the subject – via the enjoyment it procures – to a given practice or order, thus conferring identity” (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, 130).

The enjoyment of creativity (*jouissance*) however, is not to be understood as a synonym for pleasure, if only because such enjoyment is often experienced as suffering. Creativity as a fantasmatic logic can only exist as long as its specific enjoyment continues to be materialized in a set of social practices (i.e. art) and transmitted through the myths that structure these practices. The paradox exists in the way that creativity must remain conceived as inaccessible to the other, and at the same time be threatened by the presence of that other. As Žižek points out, “... reality is never directly ‘itself’, it presents itself only via its incomplete-failed symbolization, and spectral apparitions emerge in this very gap that forever separates reality from the real, and on account of which reality has the character of a symbolic fiction: the spectre gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality” (Žižek, 1994: 21).

In this way, creativity can only be 'known' as a social representation; it is understood through difference, constructed across a lack and constantly destabilised by what it has to leave out. In the examples given by the students above for instance, being creative meant some thing 'other' to bookwork, logic, money, hard work and stress, sport, boredom, and abstract academia. Apart from these five students, however, most of those I interviewed did not seem to have been interpellated by creativity, for reasons that are consistent with the criticisms of Althusser's theory. That is, interpellation as a 'summoning into place' of the subject cannot work, because the subject of ideology must always-already be a subject, i.e. the subject would have to be already a subject to recognise the subjectifying call. Students need to have worked out the symbolic boundaries of creativity *before* being able to become creative subjects.

Fashion sociologist Yuniya Kawamura argues from a study of how Japanese designers entered the French fashion system that "creativity is a legitimation and a labeling process. One is not born creative but one becomes, that is, one is identified as, creative" (Kawamura, 2005: 60). If the fantasmatic role of creativity is not sufficient to explain why students initially choose a fashion degree, it does however point to a more embodied theorisation of 'becoming creative'. In this view, derived from the work of Butler and Derrida (Zerilli, 2005), one becomes creative through a repetitive series of acts over time, so that it is the sedimentation of conventions that have been inserted into performances in different contexts, which constitute what we know as creativity.

For example, the paradigm for contemporary creative practice in universities is a process that involves “a grappling deep within the self and within one's relations with others” (Pope, 2005:11). Monitoring the ‘fibres of the self’ has been one of the main technologies of creative pedagogy throughout the 20th century. Learning to become creative has involved this intense hermeneutical processing of the self, through a variety of techniques all designed to encourage representations of the student’s own thought about anything and everything. In design schools, these techniques have included the ‘sitting-by-Nellie’ studio mode of teaching and the one-to-one tutorial under the pastoral ears and eyes of the tutor. Work-in-progress is required to be discussed, oral presentations required to be made, workbooks with original drawings required to be presented for critique. Creativity is thus performed by attending to oneself, by analysing and diagnosing one’s stories of inspiration, all of which are technologies of the self that produce a specific configuration of creative subjectivity. Few of these practices had been part of New Zealand fashion education before 1996 when the newly formed New Zealand Qualifications Authority accredited the first fashion degrees. These new degrees extended existing vocational programmes to include critical thinking and reflection. They required new individualising teaching and assessment procedures that were closer to those used in university arts and humanities programmes than to the earlier teaching of fashion as a polytechnic course. Although it has taken a decade for these changes to bed in, fashion education in New Zealand is now becoming the kind of instituted setting in which individuals are more likely to become creative subjects: “...to effect, by their own means or the help of

others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality” (Foucault, 1988, 18).

However the method by which technologies of the self are acquired in institutions that teach fashion no longer resemble the liberal model of the university, which instilled *bildung* by creating a space for self-formation. For school leavers enrolling in the new creative degrees, learning to become creative must happen within the educational structures generated by neo-liberal reforms. Tertiary institutions are now highly managerialised and marketised, but students and staff must still work within cultural expectations of creativity. Thus, for students, the ‘hermeneutic of the self’ is still required, but must be performed through modularised programmes, and meagre institutional resources of time, space, equipment and personnel. Nevertheless, students have to dredge up something ‘individual’ from somewhere, ‘just-in-time’ for each new deadline. This is not psychically easy and the performance takes its toll; student counsellors at my university see many more design students than students from other faculties, to the point where they wrote to management with “...grave concerns over the ‘blood, sweat and tears’ that are sending students in alarming numbers to visit the counsellors...at the Health Clinic”. The “blood sweat and tears” comment came from a newspaper headline reporting a fashion student’s experience of her final degree show. While concerned about the stress experienced by design students, counsellors also thought the high number of visits from

design students could be a positive thing, because it meant they were learning coping strategies, instead of simply giving up and withdrawing from the course. One counsellor had even set up a white board and drawing materials in her office so that fashion students could talk about and show her their design ideas, because of the limited time for discussion in class. It could be argued that through these visits students learn to outsource the individualising inputs that are needed in order for students to 'become creative'. As the "labour intensive individualising focus" (Fraser, 2003: 166) drops out of creative pedagogy, we begin to see how subjects might acquire the form of 'flexibilised' discipline that represents creativity in a neo-liberal regime. The people who learn the technologies of self that enable them to survive in these institutions are also learning to become competitive, actively responsible, self-regulating "entrepreneurs of themselves" (Gordon, 1991: 44).

While this is a compelling argument for how creative identification might take place *within* fashion programmes, it only scratches the surface of creative subjectification in the wider culture. For instance, in other work I have described how political projects that re-visioned New Zealand fashion as a creative industry, in conjunction with new ways of managing tertiary education contributed to increase of creative enrolments in tertiary institutions (Bill 2004; 2008b). From the governmentality perspective these projects provoke questions about how the self disciplines the self and how creativity is related to "the government of ourselves, the government of others and the government of the state" (Dean, 1999:2). Similarly, the notion of *co-creation* (Sanders and Stappers, 2008), which refers to the way consumers

increasingly participate in the production of products, media content and experiences, can be viewed as a new form of rule by which persons are 'trained-up' to be affectively bound to the practice of being creative (Thrift, 2006; Bill, 2008). In this paper I have suggested that fashion design graduates as 'creative girls' are highly productive performers in the new categories of cultural economy. Indeed the pursuit of happiness through creative work helps to maintain the possibility of a creative economy that relies on risky, precarious types of work. However, contrary to many critical accounts I have aimed to demonstrate the mutual constitution of 'creative economy' and 'creative girls' and also to underline the fact that despite political ambitions for managing education provision, there is no simple cause and effect relation between higher education and economic performance.

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