Theorizing Cultural Work
Labour, continuity and change in the cultural and creative industries

Edited by Mark Banks, Rosalind Gill and Stephanie Taylor
‘Cultural work has been a lively area of study for some years now, but even the best contributions have tended to lack historical engagement. This excellent collection, expertly edited by three leading figures, fills that gap with aplomb. By doing so, it hugely advances debate and understanding.’

Professor David Hesmondhalgh, University of Leeds
Theorizing Cultural Work

In recent years, cultural work has engaged the interest of scholars from a broad range of social science and humanities disciplines. The debate in this ‘turn to cultural work’ has largely been based around evaluating its advantages and disadvantages: its freedoms and its constraints, its informal but precarious nature, the inequalities within its global workforce, and the blurring of work–life boundaries leading to ‘self-exploitation’.

While academic critics have persuasively challenged more optimistic accounts of ‘converged’ worlds of creative production, the critical debate on cultural work has itself leant heavily towards suggesting a profoundly new confluence of forces and effects. *Theorizing Cultural Work* instead views cultural work through a specifically historicized and temporal lens, to ask: what novelty can we actually attach to current conditions, and precisely what relation does cultural work have to social precedent? The contributors to this volume also explore current transformations and future(s) of work within the cultural and creative industries as they move into an uncertain future.

This book challenges more affirmative and proselytizing industry and academic perspectives, and the pervasive cult of novelty that surrounds them, to locate cultural work as an historically and geographically situated process. It will be of interest to students and scholars of sociology, cultural studies, human geography, urban studies and industrial relations, as well as management and business studies, cultural and economic policy and development, government and planning.

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1 Introduction

Cultural work, time and trajectory

Mark Banks, Rosalind Gill and Stephanie Taylor

The turn to cultural work

After decades of being displaced in media and communication studies by a focus on texts and audiences, and in sociological research on work by the study of industrial and service sector labour, the labouring lives of people working in the cultural and creative industries are now firmly on the research agenda. This recent upsurge of interest – which amounts to something of a turn to cultural work – can be attributed to at least three factors.

First, it can be traced back to the mid-1990s and the wave of enthusiasm that greeted the alleged rise of a ‘creative’ or ‘cultural’ economy, seen, for example, in the hyperbole about ‘Cool Britannia’ in the UK, or in the ‘Creative Nation’ cultural policy of Australia. The cultural and creative industries, once regarded as peripheral to the ‘real’ economy, took centre stage in a seemingly unstoppable celebration in which they were hailed as engines of economic growth, motors of urban regeneration, and promoters of social cohesion and inclusivity. Across Europe, regional and national governments sought to rebrand deprived neighbourhoods as ‘cultural quarters’, or entire metropolises as ‘creative cities’, and there was fierce competition for the coveted title of ‘European Capital of Culture’, seen as a means of attracting inward investment, and transforming economic and social fortunes. Similarly, across North America, Australasia and Asia, national and regional governments sought to identify those places and peoples that could contribute most effectively to establishing an economic advantage in the new creative stakes.

The growing interest in the cultural and creative industries prompted explorations of the nature and organization of work in fields such as fashion, design, music, television or new media. These fields were rapidly expanding in the wake of accelerated public demands for more symbolic leisure or entertainment and goods, an enhanced commercial focus on cultivating effective images, brands and marketing, and the rapid technological changes underpinned by the Internet, which began to transform working practices and give rise to entirely new occupations, such as web designer and digital animator. Political and industry changes, most notably a trend towards media deregulation, also contributed to a rapid expansion of the creative and
cultural economy, for example spawning a multiplicity of small, independent TV production companies alongside the few ‘giant’ transnational operations. Broader deregulation and patterns of disintegration, fragmentation and dispersal within large firms and bureaucracies across all creative sectors brought the freelance, ‘portfolio’ or independent creative worker to the fore. Although today the ‘hype’ about the creative industries in the UK might be said to be waning from the dizzy heights achieved during the New Labour administrations, the creative industries are nevertheless still regarded as exceptionally important and as a sector that is ‘vital to national economic recovery’ which can ‘get people back to work’ (Arts Council England 2009) during a time of financial crisis. Indeed, during the 2012 Olympic Games in London, the Conservative (coalition) Prime Minister David Cameron reiterated his faith in the ‘extraordinary’ talent of UK creatives whose work had been showcased in the opening ceremony, and called for renewed rounds of investment in creative endeavour.

Second, parallel to these shifts, there were also optimistic voices from the academy backing the turn to cultural work and studies of workers. Richard Florida’s (2002) influential ‘creative class’ thesis, while focusing on a broad set of industrial sectors, nonetheless gave prominence to cultural workers and those engaged in creative occupations as vanguard workers in post-industrial transformation. Flores and Gray (1999) saw the emergence of new, entrepreneurial, DIY (do-it-yourself) biographies – emblematic of media workers – as offering potential for flexibility, autonomy and self-reinvention: liberations as much as cages. Writers such as Charles Landry (2000) and John Howkins (2001, 2010) repeatedly drew attention to the economic and socially progressive potential embedded in the cultural and creative industries, and the kinds of work and social relationships they promised.

A third factor contributing to the turn to cultural work was the arguments of a significant body of critical social theory centred on transformations in the nature and experience of work in late modernity. This scholarship, from writers like Ulrich Beck (2000), Zygmunt Bauman (2005), Manuel Castells (1996) and Richard Sennett (2006), took as its focus the way in which work was changing in conditions variously described as ‘risk society’, ‘liquid modernity’, ‘network society’, and ‘cultural’, ‘new’ or ‘late’ capitalism. Despite important differences, these writers and others together highlighted the speeding up and intensification of processes of individualization that left a large number of increasingly ‘liberated’ workers alone – without job security or the safety net of state or social welfare protections – to bear the risks of fragmented, precarious and discontinuous working lives. These lives, it was argued, were no longer amenable to narration through the story of a linear career or biography (notwithstanding that this was a narrative that had mostly been restricted to a minority of well-educated, first-world men). In today’s ‘political economy of insecurity’, Sennett lamented, jobs have been replaced by short-term projects, with a withering of organizational ties and loyalties, and with them the valuing of persons, as well as the very possibility
of telling a meaningful story of one’s life. Manuel Castells drew on metaphors from information technology to capture the way in which work was transforming: in the network society, he argued, people had to become ‘reprogrammable’, constantly updating their skills in order to meet new challenges, staying agile and mobile, and always ‘upgrading the self’ (Ashton 2011). Cultural workers have been widely identified at the centre of many of these mooted transformations, or as peculiarly subject to their myriad influences and effects.

From a different critical position, autonomist Marxist writers such as Maurizio Lazzarato (1996), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2005) helped to position cultural labour centre stage in their views of the growth of ‘immaterial labour’ in a rapidly transforming ‘cognitive capitalism’ where the production of immaterial and symbolic – rather than material – goods appears to be taking precedence. Hardt and Negri (2001) identified the qualities of labour conditional to an economy now populated by workers subjected to a stringent regime of ‘immaterial production’ where the ceaseless creation and circulation of ever more complex ranges of symbolic, cultural and informational goods corral workers into oppressively standardized, ‘computerized’ and homogenized labour processes – a far cry from the self-liberation that others have associated with cultural work.

Despite the very real divergences between the positions outlined above, much of this social science has consistently positioned cultural workers at the centre of an ongoing transformation of work. For good or ill, workers in media, design and the arts are routinely held to exemplify the working lives and generalized practices of the ‘worker of the future’. Perhaps most significantly, artists and ‘creatives’ more broadly are said to embody the new form of constantly labouring subjectivity required for contemporary capitalism, in which the requirements for people fully to embrace risk, entrepreneurialism and to adopt a ‘sacrificial ethos’ are often linked to an artistic or creative vocation.

A fourth and final factor that contributed to the coming to prominence of cultural work as a topic of research is the idea and belief that ‘we are all cultural workers now’ (Coté and Neilson 2014). Although Mark Coté and Brett Neilson present this idea as an interrogative, to raise questions about the extent to which the precariousness that characterizes work in the cultural field has now dispersed across the economy, the notion has a more widespread currency. At its most general, this claim points simply to the ‘culturalization’ of the economy, in which culture is ‘put to work’ across a variety of spheres of production (Du Gay and Pryke 2002). In this broader sense, it refers also to the thoroughgoing penetration of all facets of social and economic life by cultural signs, meanings and values, and the apparent indivisibility of the cultural and the economic at moments of production and consumption.

Somewhat differently, the notion of all-pervasive cultural working has been used to account for the allegedly progressive ‘convergence’ of media technology, producers and consumers (Jenkins 2004). Particularly popularized since the advent of Web 2.0 technologies is the idea that large swaths of the population are now involved in cultural production (and relations of
co-production and consumption) in a variety of different and complex ways. People appear routinely to tweet, blog, post videos to YouTube, have websites, update social networking sites, and contribute to debates and threads on various different electronic forums. They may work as ‘modders’, seeing themselves as co-creators in a liminal space that is both outside and inside the computer games industry. Even those who self-consciously ‘opt out’ of active ‘content creation’ on the web may nevertheless ‘like’ certain webpages, leave feedback on eBay or rate Amazon marketplace transactions. Those who eschew even these newly mundane activities will – unless they disavow technology entirely – nevertheless leave sediments and trails of digital data that can then be mined by media companies, keywords in emails that will be picked up by Google for auto-tailored advertising, and Internet browsing histories that will be bought and sold as commodities. There is, today, in affluent societies, no ‘outside’ to media and cultural production, giving rise to the idea that – whether or not people are aware of their contribution – particular forms of cultural work have now become generalized across populations.

It is perhaps paradoxical then, that this awareness of the dispersed, networked quality of media and cultural production has helped to animate interest in cultural producers as a relatively distinctive group: to raise questions about the privileged autonomy of the artist (Banks 2010a), the ‘professional’ versus ‘amateur’ practitioner in journalism (Keen 2008), the particular qualities demanded and afforded by media work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011), and to interrogate whether the ‘free labour’ (Terranova 2004) routinely given to media and games companies (amongst others) is always and necessarily exploited. If ‘we are all cultural workers now’, then what makes people who work in the cultural and creative industries – from advertising, to the arts, to film production – different and worthy of study? Is cultural work actually able to be distinguished from other types of work, and, if so, how and in what ways?

**Contemporary debates about cultural work**

It is clear that cultural work – broadly defined as symbolic, aesthetic or creative labour in the arts, media and other creative or cultural industries – has now engaged the interest of scholars from a broad range of social science and humanities disciplines, sustained by ongoing dialogue with policy makers, educationalists and trainers, and by interactions with cultural workers themselves. The diversity of both the scholarship and dialogue must be acknowledged, but more benign or upbeat readings of the coming to prominence of cultural work in Westernized, post-industrial capitalism have been consistently challenged by critical discussions which converge around four discrete, but interrelated, problems. These are:

- the precariousness of cultural work, including its contested availability and the uneven distribution of its internal and external rewards (among them, pay, working conditions, prospects and status);
• the inequalities within the global cultural workforce and, in the Western cities that are the industries’ hubs, the persistent over-representation of the already privileged (white, highly educated, male);
• the celebrated associations of cultural work with the aesthetic and a supposed life–work synthesis of personalization, playfulness, informality and sociality which, it is argued, attracts but also disadvantages many cultural workers;
• the accelerated invasion of cultural work into the previously separate or protected territories of leisure, and personal and intimate life.

These issues have all been well rehearsed, but there is, we contend, something missing from the extended debates. While academic critics have persuasively challenged more optimistic accounts of ‘converged’ worlds of creative production, seldom have they sought to do so through an explicitly historical lens. Despite some cautionary voices (e.g. Ross 2008), the emerging critical language that couches the problems of cultural work in terms of post-industrial ‘individualization’, ‘precarity’, ‘immateriality’ and ‘self-exploitation’ has leant heavily towards suggesting a profoundly new confluence of forces and effects. However, this book asks, to what extent is such an unanchored, ahistorical focus appropriate? What novelty can we actually attach to current conditions, and – the corollary – precisely what relation does cultural work have to social precedent?

The necessity of (re)theorizing cultural work

The first aim of this book is therefore to challenge what we perceive as an historical lack in the critical literature. Our contributors were invited to reflect more fully on cultural work in terms of its (arguably) more complex and variegated social pasts, and the degree to which these impress discernibly upon contemporary conditions. The perceived deficit is not simply historical, however, but more broadly temporal, in all of its dimensions. A further aim, then, is to explore more closely the precise trajectories, or patterns of continuity and change that might be discernible in work in the cultural and creative industries as they move into an uncertain future. We have invited situated projections of the cultural work of tomorrow – a world that draws from, but also extends, the work histories of today.

Our further intention is to elaborate the sometimes over-simplified objects and contexts that prevail in many discussions of the cultural and creative industries, countering the tendency for critical understandings of ‘new’ forms of cultural work – somewhat echoing the fixation of its arbiters and industry advocates – to be restricted in focus to the empirical case in hand and primarily evaluated within a context of prevailing trends, or immediate political concerns. To this end, our contributors have been asked not only to identify and explore some of the more consistent and durable elements that appear to recur in the historically composited cultural and creative work process, but
also to consider the specificities of socio-historic locations. In doing so, they bring into question the often-assumed neat boundaries and interchangeable referentialities of ‘cultural work’ as an object of inquiry, opening the possibility of multiple presents and a plethora of possible futures for both the work and the workers.

By reflecting both on the salience of history in the present, and its consequence for potential work futures, the critical gaze ideally extends beyond the apparent immediacy and novelty of current events. The consequence, we hope, is a more thoroughly temporalized set of theorizations that locate cultural work as an historically and geographically situated process, or processes, that can challenge more affirmative and proselytizing industry and academic perspectives, and the pervasive cult of novelty that surrounds them.

Why is this necessary? First, the time seems (economically) right. As we write, the prevailing and persistent global financial crisis and subsequent economic recessions have not fully muted the optimistic discourse of cultural and creative industries expansion but have perhaps brought to a close an initial ‘golden era’. This was characterized by the energetic promotion of various aspects of the allegedly ‘new’ knowledge and innovation economy, supported by growth of the new (and ‘old’) media and creative, copyright and intellectual property industries, which, at least in the UK context, roughly coincided with the regime of the New Labour government (1997–2010) and its influential policy proclamations and naming of new sites of cultural work, including the ‘creative industries’ (DCMS 2001). The current shrinking in employment and revenues in those industries, and the diminution of much of the commercial investment and state subsidy that made them happen in the first place, suggest that cultural work may have reached a moment of pause and reappraisal. Projective talk about the creative economy is now considerably quieter, although still audible (e.g. Arts Council England 2009; GLA 2012).

In particular, if the cultural and creative industries were acclaimed as part of a post-millennial economy that had apparently ended cycles of boom and bust, that had transcended capitalist history in fact, then the rude awakenings of the 2007 crisis offered forceful disabuse. Consequently, if there is a need to accept that the cultural and creative industries have proved suspect in purely economic terms, vulnerable to ‘old’ economic cycles, then they must, too, be discredited as providers of putatively new models of flexible and responsive work and employment, as they were so frequently portrayed in the years of relative growth. Certainly, they have not (yet?) been able to provide individuals with the resources necessary to ride out the downturn or sidestep exogenous infrastructural shocks. While, of course, we must accept that to some degree all boats are lowered when the economic tide goes out, this failure is further reason to question the novelty of cultural work as part of a re-evaluation of the grounds on which the cultural and creative industries are understood. As the latest political project becomes to (re)consider the role cultural work might play in any anticipated recovery, we must also ask...
whether such activity is much less than a new form of time-defying, transcendental super-sector, and rather more a set of activities fully embedded within and shaped by history, politics and economy and their characteristic cycles, rhythms and patterns of internal transformation – in short, embedded in a past (or pasts) that, despite all the celebratory rhetoric of novelty, it has failed to escape or transcend.

Second, it seems timely to enquire what has happened to those social futures that the cultural and creative industries promised so volubly to usher in. What became of those egalitarian, meritocratic worlds where lack of application was the only barrier to success, and where tradition – especially in its classed, gendered or ethnicized forms – was meant to evaporate in the ardent heat of innovation and personal creative expression? What we know now is that the cultural and creative industries are actually less inclusive, equal and egalitarian than many of the traditional industries they purported to supplant and surpass (Adkins 2005; Gill 2002, 2013; Holgate and McKay 2009; Randle et al. 2007; Skillset 2010). Not only have they failed to de-traditionalize progressively by, say, challenging the conventional gender division of labour, or ethnic minority exclusion in the workplace, but they have apparently even helped to ossify and intensify the prevalence of inequality in those social relations.

Moreover, a shift of focus from the industries to their workers has, inevitably, enabled some more nuanced explorations of the experience of cultural working. As accounts of a field are supplemented by accounts from its workers, it is necessary to abandon the hyperbole of either brave new careers or sacrificial labouring driven by the blind and single-minded pursuit of self-actualization. Empirical work shows, for example, that the aesthetic satisfactions of cultural and creative work cannot be dismissed as entirely illusory, and also that many creative workers are as aware of precarity as any discerning academic or policy maker. Research with novices who enter creative fields through the study of art and design, as just one set of specialisms, suggests that they are well aware of the difficult experiences of their predecessors and of the uncertain employment and poor financial rewards associated with their chosen professions. There is therefore a need to avoid the various caricatures of either the cultural dupe or the rational maximizer of information or (economic) benefits, in order to develop a fuller notion of the creative worker as a subtly responsive and interpreting situated subject. History operates in the carried-over affective associations and myths of cultural and creative working, as much as in the practical strategies noted by Ross. For example, to understand why cultural work has been embraced as ‘good’, it is necessary also to consider why other kinds of work appear worse. The valuing of the personalized nature of cultural work that has been noted by many researchers is linked to the imbuing of ‘ordinary’ work with Orwellian horrors of mundaneness and constriction and, further, to the perceived need to become ‘not ordinary’ as a condition of success. This potentially opens up a new project in which career development and self-improvement blur
together and, for those aspiring workers who are less than entirely confident, set an idealized and endlessly deferred endpoint of the perfected creative self (Taylor and Littleton 2012).

This book therefore argues that to understand cultural work outside of the complex endowments of history and the social divisions of the present is fundamentally to misunderstand its form and character. We invited contributors to question the status of the cultural and creative industries as exemplars of post-industrial work, to reconsider the roles played by shared and different pasts, presents and possible futures in economic organization and, in particular, to address those forms of work that appear to remain strongly vested with traditional social relations, despite being associated with the possibility of more socially integrated, and personally liberating ‘creative’ or ‘innovation’-led work. The final collection utilizes a range of theoretical resources and supporting case studies to provide a plural and varied analysis of the patterns of trajectory, continuity and change in social worlds of cultural and creative industries work. We do not rule out the possibility that changing patterns of cultural work are leading us into some new and uncharted waters where the temporal and spatial domains of labouring significantly break with previous arrangements. However, on the basis of our contributors’ chapters, we suggest that, as well as being reliant on the unstable promise of futurity, the accelerated creation and colonization of a variety of real/virtual social and spatial environments, and the expanded use of ‘co-creative’ and ‘free’ labour based on the extension of work and careers into (hitherto) discrete social domains, cultural work might also offer experiences somewhat less revolutionary or transformative.

Conversations …

The idea for this book arose from open-ended conversations about cultural work, temporality, value and organization, which began at recent interdisciplinary conferences about cultural work organized or co-organized in the UK by The Open University2 and King’s College London.3 The questions that animated these occasions, and the disparate, interdisciplinary responses we received in response to our various calls for papers, furnished us with a sense of an already existent field that is both exciting and vibrant, and contains multiple, unfolding conversations, some seemingly proceeding in parallel, so fated never to converge. The aims of the book are to pull some diverse voices into dialogue, to take stock, and to prompt new thoughts about what ‘the field’ is and, of course, to make an intervention into it.

Through example and juxtaposition, the collected chapters raise some well-recognized quandaries as well as new questions for future research. One recurring issue, already mentioned, is the nature of work more broadly and what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘bad’ work (Ross 2009; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; Kennedy 2012). However, like any attribution of value, even one deemed personal and subjective, what is ‘good’ in relation to cultural work is
potentially multifaceted and inevitably dependent on the historicized context. Contributions to this volume show how even such indubitable positives as ‘self-actualization’ or ‘democratic cultural participation’ must be understood in terms of what has gone before (Brouillette, this volume; Oakley, this volume). Such background is also relevant to the range of affects attached both to the work and whatever ‘culture’ it invokes – for example, illuminating the historical processes that contribute to an understanding of the particular potency of ‘personalization’ and the ‘aesthetic’ as intrinsic ‘goods’ that are routinely presented as givens for contemporary cultural workers.

Finally, the collection not only illustrates conversations about the many other cultures encompassed by the reference of cultural work – historical, national, professional, artistic and more – but also, in this diversity, raises the classic questions of whose interpretation and whose work is under discussion, what evidence is relevant and who is selecting it. As just one example, if the informal work on the (social and geographic) edge of a recognized industry is to be included (Neilson, this volume; Maxwell and Miller, this volume), then both the definition of cultural work and the delineation of its boundaries are, quite properly, called into question. These and other longstanding issues around both research and definition acquire a new salience in relation to cultural work.

**Temporalizing and locating cultural work**

The contributors to the book explore the patterned trajectories of cultural work from several different theoretical, temporal and geographical starting points. The chapters are grouped into three broad sections, which look in turn at Histories, Specificities/transformations and Futures.

**Part 1** of the book considers histories of cultural work, challenging the claims to newness that saturate discourse in this field. Susan Luckman begins by arguing that both the contemporary celebration of the virtues of creative labour and accounts of meaningful cultural work have antecedents in the Victorian period, particularly with the great thinkers of the Arts and Crafts Movement and Victorian socialism John Ruskin and William Morris. Against the modern tendency to dismiss Arts and Crafts thinking as hopelessly romantic and utopian, the chapter demonstrates that the pillar principle of striving for meaningful labour, marked by what Morris once termed the ‘impress of pleasure’, has obvious analogues with contemporary discourses around the proper constitution of post-industrial work in the cultural and creative industries. Furthermore, in Western contexts, the contemporary renaissance of small-scale craft and local or indigenous production, and the more extended dispersal of creative and cultural industries beyond ‘creative cities’ and into rural peripheries, suggest that the affordances of this Victorian utopianism are still evident and widespread today. Whether one views this tradition in terms of a conservative or radical purpose, Luckman shows how its influences impact significantly on the contemporary practices of cultural...
work, as well as on the way that work is evaluated by practitioners and observers alike.

It may be ironic or unsurprising, or perhaps both, to argue that the idea and ideals of cultural work had their genesis in the same society, that of England in the 19th century, in which the soul-deadening labour of early capitalist industry prompted Marx’s original theorizations of capitalism and its associated alienation. A less ambiguous historical irony is exposed by Sarah Brouillette, who proposes that many aspects of the image of the artist as the exemplary creative worker – a self-motivating, self-actualizing non-conformist – despite being commonly associated with a vague pre-modern period (for the Arts and Crafts Movement, a fictionalized medievalism), in fact (re-)originated in mid-20th century US society. She examines the work of a number of psychologists who, ‘influenced by their research on World War II military personnel, began in earnest to specify the attributes of the kind of creative individual who would help secure the nation’s future prosperity’. Brouillette’s analysis reminds us that the mid-20th-century period saw many others seeking ways to identify and cultivate conditions for new cultural workers. By the time of *White Collar* (1951), C. Wright Mills had heralded the arrival of the ‘new entrepreneurs’ of the American middle class, which included an emergent cadre of proto-cultural workers operating in the bureaucratic contexts of new industries selling ‘intangible services’ (Mills 1951: 95), such as advertising, public relations (PR), mass communications and entertainment. Here dealing predominantly with ‘symbols and other people’, such workers sought to impose and manifest their own creative personalities, appropriate to the new economic circumstance of post-war USA. Brouillette recalls a time when the creative personality was being further forged in the heat of new demands for self-actualizing, creative thinkers that would become normal – rather than an exceptional – requirement for the capitalism of the future: the capitalism of today, in fact.

This image of the ‘creative’ has long been cited as part of the attraction of contemporary cultural work, supposedly holding out a promise of self-actualization which becomes a further inducement to self-exploitation (McRobbie 1998). Some contributors to the book also suggest that historical continuities are relevant, though less as cautionary tales than as organizing guides to action. Bridget Conor explores how well-honed accounts of the past have become part of the functional mythology of a particular occupation, screenwriting. Her chapter therefore draws attention to the relevance of the past for cultural workers themselves. Even the celebration of novelty requires a corresponding awareness of whatever past is supposedly being superseded, and, given that so many forms of cultural work centre on communication and image, it is inevitable that the workers will be highly sensitive to their own self-presentation and the depictions foreshadowed by well-rehearsed stories of the past. Conor shows how the self-identification of contemporary screenwriters is intricately tied to their claims to a collective history. She argues that stories around the denigration of earlier writers as ‘hired hands’,
‘liars’ and ‘schmucks’ are functional for contemporary workers, for example, as a rationalization for the difficulties of their profession and a justification for some practical strategies for managing those difficulties.

Kate Oakley also discusses the status of work and labour more generally, but focuses on how this has changed within the history of labour movements and the Left in the UK. She notes that for many of those supporting the development of the cultural industries, as part of regional or urban development schemes or in practice-based settings, the idea of cultural work as ‘good work’ is held dear. Their concern has often been with securing representation within these labour markets for women, ethnic minorities and working-class people. Oakley argues that this may have been informed in part by an idealized notion of cultural work but it was also animated, in a way peculiar to this work, by the importance of ‘voice’, the idea that involvement in cultural production cannot be confined to the elite. Yet, in the decades since the first cultural industry initiatives, the marginalization of women, ethnic minorities and the working class from participation in cultural labour markets has grown, not declined. Alongside that marginalization, the virtual exclusion of the politics of labour from the policy-making process allowed the development of a discourse of ‘representation’ in the workforce that paid no attention to questions of working conditions. This has resulted in the UK’s highly unrepresentative cultural sector, with often poor working conditions. Oakley traces this process in the case of the UK, looking at the neglect of both labour and class issues in the debate and considers the political implications of this exclusion.

The work of these writers suggests that contemporary cultural work is ‘haunted’ by older questions and images, including those of the artist and the factory, and by a labour movement that has always been ambivalently located for artists, writers, crafts people and other cultural labourers.

In the second part of the book, the contributions turn to questions of both specificity and transformation – the extent to which cultural work is distinct from other kinds of work, what marks its distinctiveness, and where its limits or boundaries might lie, particularly in the context of rapid and ongoing transformations that are simultaneously technological, social, global and perhaps even logistical.

 Principally at stake in theorizing cultural work is the ontological status of the category itself: how might it be regarded as distinctive or special? Contributors wrestling with this conundrum include Matt Stahl, who identifies cultural work as a ‘limit case’ of work in general. As the template for an exemplary kind of meaningful and autonomized labour, cultural work is the ideal model that exists at the frontier of possibility for all kinds of work – the kind of good work to which mass populations might conceivably aspire. Thus, in contrast to most recent analyses, Stahl argues that the specialness of cultural work lies less in its absolute distinctiveness from other kinds of work, and rather more in its relative propensity to bring into sharpened focus the kinds of conflict that pervade work in toto, though usually much less visibly.
These include not only struggles over creative freedom, meaningfulness, or the avoidance of disaffection and alienation, but also fundamental attributes of modern work such as the exchange of property rights and the transfer of control rights. The ‘interpretive usefulness’ of cultural work therefore lies in its amplified capacity to provoke critical reflection on the qualities and character of work that are often underplayed or disregarded in other kinds of work context. In the second part of his chapter, Stahl shows how struggles over the distinctiveness of cultural work, and the extent to which it is able to expose some of the fundamental problematics of work in general, may vary considerably across different national or systemic contexts. By comparing the Anglo-American and German histories of work and labour, and their distinctively forged ‘epistemological maps’, Stahl suggests how conceptions of cultural (and non-cultural) work might be more eloquently specified and untangled.

Similarly challenging the idea that work in the cultural and creative industries is somehow qualitatively unique or special, Jason Toynbee’s chapter also proposes an end to the separation of cultural work from work in general. Yet here, the foundation of this challenge is first rooted in an unease and political objection to the elevation of cultural work above ‘ordinary’ work – a charge levelled at a diverse array of thinkers including Hannah Arendt, Alasdair MacIntyre and, in more recent interventions, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Toynbee retains some sense that as a focus for dissent and critique there remains some essential ‘promise’ in cultural work, but he suggests that such a potential ought to be regarded as constitutive and foundational to all forms of work. Drawing on recent work by Mike Wayne, Toynbee identifies a notion of the ‘essential creativeness of [all] work’ at the heart of Marx’s theory of labour, one that has faded from view in mainstream workplace study, but has become prominent in those accounts that attribute special quality to the cultural work process. Like Stahl, Toynbee wants to bring cultural work back into the fold of work in general, and debunk its privileged status, while retaining the possibility that cultural work is able to disclose something fundamental that other forms of work might not so singularly or promiscuously reveal.

A different set of questions is probed by Brett Neilson. His chapter makes an original contribution by locating cultural work within the wider networks and chains of supply, demand, production and consumption, and specifically tracking how cultural work relates to other labour processes and experiences. Set within an account of logistics as central to the social form of contemporary capitalism, the chapter is less interested in cultural work as the labour of symbolic expression, and more concerned with patterns of exploitation and dispossession that link differently positioned cultural workforces. The focus comes from his involvement in a ‘transit labour’ project which looks at a variety of Chinese and Indian cities/workforces. Politically, the chapter takes us to a new place: rather than posing the problem of the precariat or the capacity of cultural workers to unite as a class, it places the political moment of precarity
within a wider network of relations in order to think about the potentialities of linking these through questions about dispossession. It argues that a labour politics for cultural workers must look beyond the cultural and creative industries and generate new liquid solidarities. It requires that we ask new questions, such as how accumulation by exploitation relates and articulates to accumulation by dispossession.

Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller’s chapter also pushes at questions about the specificity of cultural work, in a polemical critique of the focus of scholars on a small over-privileged ‘creative cognitariat’. Maxwell and Miller charge that this preoccupation comes at the expense of forgetting the murderous toil and exploitation of the people who manufacture and dispose of some of the very gadgets that are central to the lives of ‘creatives’, like mobile phones and iPads. Documenting the situation of Apple subcontractors in Chinese compounds and coltan miners in the Congo, Maxwell and Miller contest the invisibility of this work to scholarship on the cultural industries. When, they ask, did cultural labour become synonymous with ‘immaterial labour’ amongst those relatively privileged? Their chapter highlights the all-too-brutal material reality of the lives of those who are essential to cultural work, but unable to enjoy its ‘creative’ benefits.

Finally in this section, Melissa Gregg interrogates cultural work from another direction, questioning its apparent distinctiveness from (other) forms of less glamorous white-collar work, the way it is seen as ‘special’ and, moreover, contesting the very boundaries of work itself at a moment when the idea of work and non-work as ‘separate spheres’ is breaking down. Focusing in particular on work done outside the office, the chapter considers the extensification of work across time and space and the psychological and affective dispositions it engenders. It also looks at how new notions of professionalism are developing in which workers learn to embody responsibility for their work at all hours, and take part in extensive regimes of preparation (before work) and recovery (after time spent in the office). In this way, the chapter questions the usefulness of notions such as ‘work–life balance’, suggesting rather that work is expanding across time and space to colonize pervasively the sphere of intimate life.

The third part of the book takes off from Gregg’s contribution to ask about the futures of cultural work. In a field in which inequalities are getting worse rather than better, Sarah B. Proctor-Thomson’s chapter takes a critical look at discourses of gender diversity in the cultural industries. Using a feminist poststructuralist approach that draws on the work of Judith Butler, she explores the ways in which rhetoric about creativity and cultural work is performative of realities of inequality and exclusion. Her chapter identifies a strong tendency in government and development agency rhetoric to link creativity and diversity with positive economic performance, despite the continuing under-representation of women and black and minority ethnic workers in the cultural and creative industries in comparison with the rest of the economy. By analysing a combination of academic and policy discourses and interviews
with digital media workers, the chapter shows how a norm of ‘difference’ is promoted as necessary for creative work. However, this difference is variously interpreted within the boundaries of conformity to norms of the conventional workplace (such as whiteness, maleness and able-bodiedness), or in a simplistic contrast that reinforces the value of women’s difference in deeply sexist terms, such as the supposedly ‘civilizing’ influence they bring to the (male) workplace. The chapter unpacks the idea that women ‘bring diversity’, arguing that even progressive or positive-sounding statements may actually entrench inequalities. In this sense, it offers a bleak assessment of the possibilities of a more egalitarian future for cultural work.

A contrasting note of caution is sounded by Lisa Adkins who examines the utility of dominant methods for studying cultural work, and finds them unable to grasp the uncertain, precarious and DIY biographies of the new media workers she studies. In particular, her target is the use of biographical methods, organized around the life history interview as a dominant form of data collection. If we take seriously claims about the impossibility – or at the very least difficulty – for contemporary cultural workers to narrate a meaningful story of their lives, because of the radical uncertainties they inhabit and the breakdown of ‘clock time’, then, Adkins claims, new and different methodological tools will be necessary to apprehend and capture the interrupted and discontinuous biographies of cultural workers.

Contrasted with Stahl and Toynbee’s chapters earlier in the book, Mark Deuze and Nicky Lewis’s chapter is a testament to the specialness (of cultural work) thesis. They suggest, echoing writers such as Henry Jenkins and John Hartley that patterns of work in the cultural and creative industries do mark a distinctive epochal break with previous formations. Their argument is that systems of labour, technology and production have been revolutionized in the context of a new and hybrid ‘media ecology’ and era of ‘convergence culture’ marked by the progressive dissolution of historically established social relationships and temporal and spatial boundaries. The political consequences of such a shift are outlined. The cultural worker is identified as an exemplary actor at the vanguard of a new work world – and Deuze and Lewis suggest that with progressive individualization comes the opportunity for workers to ‘determine their own destiny’ as systems erupt into decentralized, dispersed regimes that offer neither a comfortable security nor a constraining tradition. In offering the strongest statement against the endowments of history and inherited patterns of opportunity and constraint, Deuze and Lewis offer an affirmative counterpoint to the majority of other perspectives in this book.

Finally, in an interview with Andrew Ross, the cultural analyst who has perhaps done most to open up and popularize this academic field, we return to some of the core questions that animate this book. We asked to what extent cultural and creative labour is marked out as distinctive from other forms of work; whether the ‘troubles’ of creative biographies are new; and what kinds of political engagements are appropriate for intervening in the current moment. Ross reflects at length on the impact of the current
recession, arguing that it has been so long and so deep that it may have enacted a seemingly permanent transformation in work mentalities. One area where this is vividly evident is in relation to the normalization of the unpaid internship – a situation which, as Ross points out, not only re-entrenches class privilege and inequality, but also may come to constitute a ‘terminal limbo’ for people attempting to make a living in the cultural and creative sector. Alongside this, and potentially offering access to individuals from a wider range of backgrounds, is the growing significance of the talent show/reality TV model in which young people are exhorted to believe they can ‘make it’ in the affective attention economy, as the traditional ‘casting call’ is ‘industrialized’ to form a more extensive mode of cultural production.

Ross’s reflections on the cultural and creativity ‘hype’ of the late 1990s and beyond are insightful. Whilst highlighting battles over intellectual property and the cynical use of ‘creatives’ to push up rents and gentrify neighbourhoods, he also argues that one unintended consequence of the dominance of the cultural and creative industries rhetoric is precisely that cultural workers are ‘more conscious of their labour conditions and their serviceability to corporate and political elites than they were 10 or 15 years ago’. In this, as well as in the flourishing of new forms of labour organization and activism around debt, which he regards as a key political issue of our time, Ross sees grounds for hope. His ideas offer a means of (re)connecting the cultural and creative industries to the wider social and political relations in which we are all embedded, theorizing cultural work in terms of both continuity and change.

Notes

1 In academic and non-academic discourse, these terms are often used interchangeably, usually as shorthand to describe various forms of artistic labour, media work or activity that involve the production of symbolic or expressive goods and intellectual property. In different national and regional contexts, each may carry some specific meaning, though this is often contested. Institutional definitions and measures similarly vary. Throughout this book, contributors use both of these terms, often in different ways. It is not our intention therefore to specify or police this distinction too carefully – though we would suggest that the idea of cultural industries carries a deeper connection and value to issues of politics and culture not always present in creative industries thinking, policy and practice – and that our personal preference is to think of creative industries as a particularly modern object and form of praxis emergent from a much longer history of cultural industry thinking and endeavour.


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*Episodes* (2011–present) created by David Crane and Jeffrey Klarik, directed by James Griffths and Jim Field Smith, UK and USA: Hat Trick Productions.