

The region as performance space: A distinctive take on the creative industries

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Abstract

The emergence of creative industries as a productive sector marks a significant transformation in economic life in contemporary Western societies. On the one hand, the opportunities such a development affords in providing career pathways and lucrative opportunities for creative workers in areas like computer games and film might seem like cause for celebration, also enabling humanities disciplines to rebadge themselves in order to attract students within the competitive higher education market. On the other hand, the ways in which creativity is alienated to the capitalist market as an economic commodity does raise particular concerns, particularly in the context of regional communities lacking the scale, resources and critical mass to be successful in this market. This is a speculative (and indeed playful) paper that canvasses ways in which the regions might respond to the emerging economy of the creative industries. It draws on the concept of fields of resonance to suggest how the region might be configured as a creative performance space, open to the world, and ecologically attuned, thereby offering a distinctive response to this emerging cultural and economic force.

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Introduction

One of the significant transformations in contemporary culture has been the way in which creative practice has come to be seen as a significant economic force. Areas as diverse as fashion, cultural event organisation, web design and creative writing are being promoted as potentially lucrative career pathways welded to the new business environment that will drive economic production this century. An emerging literature (see for example Florida, 2002; Hesmondhalgh, 2002; Hartley, 2005a; and Walker-Gibbs, 2006) has used various terms—creative industries, cultural industries and creative enterprises, among them—to make sense of this transformation.

This paper is interested in exploring the impact of this rise of creative practice as an economic force upon regional communities. It begins by addressing the emergence of the creative industries, including their impact on academia. It sets the creative industries within the context of the increasing alienation of lifestyle values and practices to the capitalist market. It considers the challenges this trend offers to regional communities, which might be comparatively disadvantaged for a range of

reasons. By drawing on the work of cultural theorists such as Gilles Deleuze, and working through concepts such as fields of resonance and performance space, this paper suggests ways in which a regional creative practice can respond distinctively and resistively to the alienating properties of the creative industries.

Background

The seeds for this paper were planted in August, 2005, when I attended a seminar at Central Queensland University presented by John Hartley (2005b), Dean of the Creative Industries Faculty, Queensland University of Technology. The seminar was largely aimed at members of an emerging CQU faculty that linked people who taught in such fields as education, music, multimedia, public relations, cultural studies and the humanities. The seminar canvassed the idea that, as the creative industries were an important emerging area of the economy in the 21st century and that in order to remain relevant and attract students as well as research income, the faculty ought to embrace this area within its curriculum design and research focus. That subsequently one of the schools in this new faculty has been named Arts & Creative Enterprise, and has advertised for a chair in Creative Industries, demonstrates the extent to which this agenda has been accepted.

As an interested observer of this move but working within another area of CQU, I had certain concerns about its implications for the university and the communities it served. While it made sense to appeal to a social and economic trend that might sustain the humanities and related disciplines in a context in which attracting students and related income streams was increasingly important, the assumptions that it made about creativity, on the one hand, and regional practice, on the other, seemed to be worth exploring.

Creativity can be defined in various ways. The focus on novelty, as measured by originality, surprise and distinctiveness, does seem to be significant. Creativity also entails a capacity for synthesising diverse elements, something captured in Einstein's description of his work as "combinatory play" (Florida, 2002, p. 31). This definition leads to a consideration of the extent to which such creative capacity is present in all of us, compared with the idea that genuine creativity is the preserve of certain artistic geniuses such as Beethoven, Picasso and Shakespeare. Within educational circles, the "creativity for all" position seems to be gaining prevalence. According to Haring-Smith (2006, p. 23ff), creativity "is something anyone can display, but some individuals are shaped both by nature and nurture to be more successful in that domain". And economic shifts within Western culture have provided unprecedented economic opportunities for successful creative practitioners.

One of the features of a shift to consumption-driven economies in advanced Western countries has been the emergence of creative-content industries as significant economic generators. Hence, Hartley (2005a, p. 1) confidently asserts that creativity will be the driver of social and economic change during the 21st century. He finds that, although differently defined, the creative industries within advanced economies in Australia, the US and the UK already significantly contribute to GDP, export earning and employment (p. 2). Precisely which areas come under this umbrella of creative industries is contested within the literature, as is the naming of this broad area of economic activity. For example, Hesmondhalph (2002, p. 12) identified an economic force that he called the cultural industries on the basis that it is centrally concerned with industrial production and dissemination of texts; core cultural industries, according to this criterion, are: advertising,

broadcasting, film industries, the Internet industries, the music industries, print and electronic publishing and computer games. Caves (2000, p. 1), on the other hand, identifies the creative industries as embracing non-textual areas of creative practices as well, such as the visual and performing arts, fashion and toys. There are also references to content industries, emphasising the way in which communication forms such as television and the Internet are empty media which need to be filled with content, and, in the American context, copyright industries, placing the focus on the economic returns generated by the producers of creative content (Hartley, 2005a, p. 30, 115). For Hartley, (2005b, p. 5), the concept of the creative industries seeks to describe the convergence of individual talent (that embraced by the idea of creative art) with the cultural industries in the context of such transformations as the emergence of new media technologies and the idea of the knowledge economy. The rise of creative industries, then, can be related to technological, cultural and economic changes within contemporary Western societies.

There are some especially significant factors driving such changes. One is the supplanting of an economy based on the production and distribution of tangible goods by one in which the creation and circulation of images and lifestyle experiences assumes greater importance. Indeed, these two economic forces intersect and collude in the way in which tangible goods such as furniture and cars are circulated as images associated with lifestyle experiences. In part this change has come about through transformations in capital itself, where the focus on customisation of products such as mobile phones and iPods, as opposed to the standardisation of earlier forms of industrial production, accommodates creativity's tendencies towards novelty and distinctiveness. Another characteristic of the economic shift has been the change in emphasis from a focus on saving and thrift to one based on consumption and accumulation of debt (Brett, 2003). Concomitant with this change has been an accelerating and proliferating incursion of the capital market into previously inalienable areas of life, such that these areas become commodified and subject to the laws of supply and demand. John Frow sums up this tendency thus:

[T]he history of the capitalist mode of production is, on this account, a history of the progressive extension of the commodity form to new spheres. The most succinct formulation I know of this historical logic is Walkerstein's statement that capitalism's endless drive to accumulate capital "pushes towards the commoditisation of everything". (1997, p. 134)

This process informs almost every aspect of creative industries and the ways in which people make sense of their identity. As an example, the dramatic increase of cosmetic surgery demonstrates how bodies are coming to be seen as commodities not so much in terms of their worth as manual labour, at least in prosperous Western economies, but rather in their value as images that are articulated with desirable characteristics such as glamour, sexual attractiveness and beauty.

In one sense, the idea of creative practice as a marketable commodity is nothing new. Shakespeare's drama, for example, was produced within a context where different theatrical companies were competing feverishly to increase market share. And the creative economy has evident benefits in providing opportunities for creative workers across a range of fields and media to cultivate a lucrative business. However, the dominance of market logic within creative industries does create significant concerns. The capacity of creative practice, through its novelty and distinctiveness, to resist and provide alternative ways of operating to the

dominant power interests within society is significantly compromised. Creativity risks being appropriated by these interests as expressed in capital, knowledge and institutional practice, so that it simply becomes complicit in the push towards the commoditisation of everything, leaving no space for alternative values to emerge and flourish.

Academic implications

As mentioned above, this economic valuing of creativity has produced significant shifts within the university sector, not least because it has coincided with an increasing corporate ethic within higher education. Just as universities increasingly rely on private income to supplement their funding base, the massification of higher education has meant that students increasingly view university study in terms of vocational outcomes rather than the traditional virtues of character formation and knowledge acquisition. This move has signalled the greater emphasis on teaching and fostering creative capacities in higher education:

If all individuals have the potential to be creative and if creativity is a process that can be dissected and therefore taught, then colleges and universities can work to create curricula, pedagogies, cocurricular programming, and a general institutional environment to support creative development. (Haring-Smith, 2006, p. 23ff)

This shift in focus can come at the expense of more traditional Humanities disciplines. Rosemary Neill (2006) has explored how the study of Australian literature has significantly declined over the last decade within Australian universities, while classes in creative writing have expanded exponentially. The question is how effective a writer can be when removed from the study of the literature of the country and cultural context in which they are writing, particularly when that writer is being produced within the context of creativity being shaped as a marketable commodity. As Gilles Deleuze (1995, p. 131) comments on the possible death of literature: “Different modes of expression may have different creative possibilities, but they’re all related insofar as they must counter the introduction of a cultural space of markets and conformity—that is, a space of ‘producing the market’—together.” Thus, while the valuing of creativity as a marketable commodity does certainly offer opportunities and pathways for creative practitioners, it can have negative consequences in privileging the economic above cultural value of such practice. Creative practice that has no great economic value, such as scrap-booking or small-scale local theatre and art, is rendered marginal and insignificant according to this logic.

Metro-centrism

This focus on creativity as an alienable commodity generates particular challenges for creative practice within regional and rural settings. There is a tendency towards metro-centrism in this alienated view of creative practice: the idea that metropolitan centres form hubs containing the critical mass of practitioners, resources, knowledge and skills for creative practice on a scale and level of technical complexity that renders it economically viable. This bias is evident in the literature. The recently published edited collection, *Creative industries* (Hartley, 2005a), includes a section of chapters on the theme of “Creative Cities”, but none on rural and regional communities. And Richard Florida, famous for positing *The rise of the creative class* (2002) as a significant contemporary cultural and

economic phenomenon, entitled a subsequent book *Cities and the creative class* (2005), indicating where he thought such an entity might most readily be found.

From this perspective, as in other markers of civilised living, regional and rural areas can only be poor relations: inadequately seeking to replicate the conditions that enable creative practice to flourish in the cities. While non-metropolitan communities can be significant economic generators at the level of primary production in the form of agriculture and mining, in terms of creative practice they lack the critical mass or resource provision to be effective players. Connected to this idea is the perception that creative practice in the regions tends towards the local, small-scale and amateur. This perception leads to such practice being configured in deficit terms in relation to the globalised, large-scale and professional creative industry generated within metropolitan centres.

One possible response to this deficit notion is to point out the great array of creative talent produced from rural and regional communities in areas like film, television, theatre, visual arts, music and dance. One reason invoked for such success is a lack of alternative diversions to distract the focus of aspiring creative artists: the idea that in relatively small and isolated regional and rural communities there is not that much to do, so any opportunity for creative expression and cultural development tends to be grasped with enthusiasm. There is a rich tradition of creative practitioners emerging in these communities and going on to enjoy international careers in the metropolitan centres of art and performance. For example, the regional city of Rockhampton in Australia has produced dancers who are currently performing with the English ballet and at the Moulin Rouge nightclub in Paris. Such achievements provide inspiration for others. The limitation of this response, of course, is that it replicates the metro-centrism, viewing any artistic success emanating within a regional location as compensation, or consolation, for its relative paucity of cultural activity.

A second reason to believe in the fertility of creative production in the regions relates to demographic changes in these communities over the last decade. The so-called sea-change and tree-change movements that have involved people relocating from large cities to desirable coastal and hinterland locations have been driven in part by a rejection of the competitive, corporate culture of these cities, where the impulse to succeed can seem to come at the expense of communal concern for others. Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss capture a sense of this malaise in their book, *Affluenza: When too much is never enough* (2005). The sea-change and tree-change movements, then, offer the possibility for regional creative practice that challenges the ways in which such practice is driven by the logic and forces of the market.

We might go further, however, and suggest that the distance (both physical and phenomenological) from metropolitan centres and the controlling forces of the market and society creates spaces where creativity can be pursued according to different logics. The ideas of Gilles Deleuze help to develop this argument. Deleuze feels that we have “lost the world” (1995, p. 176) due to emergence of a society of control that he connects with contemporary forms of commodity capitalism. Yet in his explorations of cinema and particular auteurs, Deleuze believes it is possible to escape from this social realm and access dimensions relating to time and psychical or spiritual experience. It is from such encounters with these virtual dimensions that new forms of becoming might emerge. For example, Deleuze comments of the work of Alfred Hitchcock:

The frame for him is like a tapestry frame: it holds within it the network of relations, while the action is just a thread moving in and out of the network. What Hitchcock thus brings into cinema is, then, the mental image. It's not a matter of the look, and if the camera's an eye, it's the mind's eye. So Hitchcock has a special place in cinema: he goes beyond the action-image to something deeper, mental relations, a kind of vision. (1995, pp. 54–5)

Such a vision seems to resonate with the ideas of British physicist, David Bohm, who distinguishes between two levels of reality: the explicate level, which relates to our lived experience, and the implicate level, which gives birth to all objects and appearances in our physical world (Central Queensland University, 2006, pp. 164–5). By connecting with the implicate level through consciousness, thoughts become manifest on the explicate level. In other words, what we focus strongly on through our imagination and the constructive power of our ideas, we create. What emerges here is an idea of creativity based on accessing different dimensions of reality and channelling them into thoughts and practices in our everyday lives, in so doing creating zones of liberation removed from almost all-encompassing social control exerted by market forces.

If we accept the point that the social realm has been thoroughly saturated by the forces of market capitalism and commoditisation, then it is through an apprehension of sites of experience removed from this realm, and which might be variously configured (as imagination, as a virtual, spiritual or psychic dimension, as the sub or extra-conscious, or as implicate level), that some alternative way of living might be suggested. Deleuze (1995) associates philosophy with the invention of concepts that enable a sense of the virtual to be conveyed. It can be suggested that artists, writers and other creative practitioners are engaged in the invention and manipulation of images, signs, forms of notation, movements and other techniques that likewise engage a resonant connection with other dimensions of the world. In this sense both philosophy and creative practice are engaged not merely in representing or reflecting our experience of life but are actively constructing that experience. What we focus strongly on, we create, using a combinatory play of concepts, images, thoughts and artistic techniques. So the world that has been alienated can be remade through constructive and creative practice.

Fields of resonance and performance pace

In response to the ideas of Deleuze and Bohm, this paper proposes the concepts of fields of resonance and performance space as regional sites within which creative expression is produced. The concept of “fields of resonance” is derived from the interdisciplinary approach that seeks to promote connections between the humanities and sciences. The idea of studying fields as sites of interconnection is a notion that resonates across contemporary science and cultural studies. Within the scientific paradigm, biochemist Rupert Sheldrake developed the concept of morphic fields. Within particular physical environments when a transition occurring in one site repeats itself, it forms a morphic field, and resonance with this morphic field increases the likelihood that the event will happen again (Emoto, 2004, p. 92). For example when glycerin crystals suddenly appeared for the first time since glycerin's discovery in one site, shortly thereafter such crystallisation began to spread to other sites (Emoto, 2004, p. 93). This idea has its own resonances with Deleuze's comment about human subjectivity in response to the philosophy of Michel Foucault:

I think subjectification has little to do with any subject. It's to do, rather, with an electric or magnetic field, an individualisation taking place through intensities (weak as well as strong ones), it's to do with individuated fields, not persons or identities. It's what Foucault, elsewhere, calls "passion". (1995, p. 93)

So transformations within human subjects (for Deleuze) and other physical organisms (for Sheldrake) emerge from the energies, intensities and passions, which might be understood more broadly as resonances, which emerge within particular fields.

Fields of resonance seeks to apprehend this idea that, within both biological and cultural fields, resonances emerge that enable contingent connections to be made and new understandings to occur. As information systems theorist Margaret Wheatley comments of Sheldrake's idea, "After part of the species has learned a behaviour, such as bicycle riding, others will find it easier to learn that skill" (1992, 51). Similarly, one of the reasons why the "passion" of contemporary philosophers such as Deleuze and Foucault has been so resonant within artistic practice and academic disciplines like cultural studies has been because it has inspired many readers and performers to explore different ways of creating themselves as subjects: making the self into a work of art. Fields of resonance stresses the contingency of these processes and connections, recognising that the field is always in a state of emergence within which different relationships might be forged. As such, it qualifies what might otherwise seem an overly deterministic model of structural relations, opening it up to, in the language of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the possibility of new forms of becoming and lines of flight.

Performance space is a related concept to fields of resonance that seeks to explore what takes place in the particular sites within the field in which creative expression takes place. That is, performance spaces are sites inscribed upon fields of resonance and act as mediating devices. A painter's canvas is a performance space within an artistic field; a writer's notebook a performance space within a literary field; a stage is a performance space within a theatrical field, and so forth. The distinction that is made here provides a perspective for exploring the ways in which the resonances that emerge within the field are then articulated into creative forms of expression. That is, a range of performance techniques are deployed to interact with the resonant emergent forces and give them expressive form. These techniques might include image construction in film and photography, cultivating a particular style of writing, developing distinctive vocal inflections in opera or a stylistics of movement in dance, and so forth. Without these performance techniques such resonances are latent, virtual rather than actual, implicit rather than explicit. So the role of the performance space is to connect these resonances with the social field, by giving them form. To return to the words of Deleuze cited above, work done within the performance space, if it genuinely resonates, holds out the possibility of reconnecting us to the world.

Region as performance space

Accordingly, I would propose the idea of the region as a performance space that offers a distinctive relationship to the fields of resonance on which it is inscribed. In speculating such a claim, it is helpful to consider the etymology of the word "region". Etymology explores the historical emergence of words and their transformation across time and social contexts. As such, it is a discipline attentive to regionalising of words: their movement across different cultural regions marked

by geography and historical development. The etymology of “region” itself is significant in this context. It arrived in English in early 14th century from the Latin words “*regionem*—direction, boundary, district” and “*regere*—to direct or to rule” (Williams 1983, p. 264). As Raymond Williams (1983, p. 264) notes, this has created a tension within the word, as between a distinct area, on the one hand, and a definite part, on the other. In relation to the latter meaning, everything depends on the term of relation: the region is a part of what? Perhaps it is this very uncertainty over its particularity that gives the region a distinctive edge in terms of its creativity. It emphasises that while it is geographically distinct and distinctive in terms of its place in the world, the region is open in terms of its part, available to be articulated or remade in various ways.

The region, thus configured, is both an actual and imaginary location. Actual regions within and beyond Australia, such as the Riverina, Gippsland, Capricornia, Tuscany and Galway, provide distinctive combinations of sensory experiences, ecological elements and cultural forms. This is to return to Einstein’s definition of creativity as “combinatory play”, and suggest that the regions, in the way in which they operate as sites of mediation of disparate elements, can be understood as performance spaces in themselves. The felt experience of life in a regional setting, removed from yet a part of the global flow of forms of knowledge, technological instruments and creative techniques, provides a means of inflecting and expressing this flow in distinctive ways. The particular quality of light of a regional setting, its mix of native and introduced vegetation, its feel of wind and heat, the tensions between the built environment and the forces of nature, tidal patterns, the embodied memories etched in animals or marks in landscapes: all of these shifting pieces of information that mark that place as distinctive become features in the way in which creative practice here is articulated. And such half-apprehended traces, which slip away from consciousness even as they are grasped, which are both virtual and actual, implicate and explicate, ultimately mark a site of resistance to the forces of social control. As such, they offer rich possibilities for the combinatory play of the creative practitioner open to the world and located within the region.

Creativity, understood in this way, is an ecological practice, attuned to the distinctive ecology of the region within which it emerges. As such, it can be distinguished from what might be called the “backyard blitz” approach to creativity. *Backyard blitz* (Burke, 2002) is an Australian television program belonging to the lifestyle genre that adopts an instant makeover approach to landscaping, such that within the space of a weekend a backyard can be transformed to satisfy the owners’ aspirations. Here, any sense of the region’s ecology, seasonal variations and natural evolution is edited out: *Backyard blitz* is rather embedded within the property and lifestyle aspirations of an artificial environment alienated to the market and attuned to product rather than process, instant gratification rather than natural evolution. *Backyard blitz*, then, according to the terms that have been explored in this article, is an articulation of a version of the social that has been thoroughly alienated to the market, authorising values that, in cultural theorist Michel de Certeau’s resonant words, “no longer correspond to the real geography of meaning” (1997, p. 9). A regional performance space, in comparison, is informed by ecological interconnectedness that is embedded in a real geography of meaning.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to offer a vision of the region as providing a distinctive context for creative practice, and indeed constituting a particular performance

space within which such practice might be articulated. While the emergence of the creative industries as a cultural and academic force has been shaped by economic changes that have seen the incursion of market values into more and more areas of life, it is important to consider the impact of such incursion and possible responses to it. If we are to apprehend creativity as being more than just its market value, or only possible in contexts conducive to its marketability, then we need to consider the possibility of alternative spaces and logics for creative practice. The regions, marked by physical and phenomenological distance from metropolitan centres, characterised by different scales of creative practice, and attractive to those who are seeking, in part at least, to remove themselves from the aspirations towards affluence driving much of metropolitan life, would seem to offer such alternative spaces.

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