

Work in the culture industries

Book review by: Richard Wallis

McRobbie, Angela. *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*. New York: Polity, 2016. 224 pages. Hardcover: ISBN 978-0745661940. \$69.95. Paperback: ISBN 978-0-7456-6195-7. \$24.95.

Until the year 2000 or so, the 'creative economy' of the UK had been paid scant attention by politicians. Theatre and the arts had long been recipients of public subsidy, and creative work was generally presumed to be of cultural, rather than economic, value (overseen by a Department of National Heritage). This changed with the arrival of New Labour (1997). By 'mapping' these various cultural and creative activities to include advertising, software and computer services, Prime Minister Tony Blair's administration identified and promoted an apparently vibrant, and economically significant, sector of industry that was to become one of the hallmark's of the New Labour vision, a Creative Britain. In *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*, Angela McRobbie charts this development by focusing on its consequences for the experience of work and employment, particularly for the predominantly young people on whom this sector has come significantly to depend.

The book's six main chapters, tied together by an introduction and conclusion, are presented more in the style of discrete essays with overlapping themes, than a single developing narrative. The first four chapters are concerned primarily with an examination of aspects of the structural changes and new 'business models' of the creative industries, and the consequent changes in the modes and styles of working that have emerged for the individuals who inhabit these mainly urban-based enterprises. The latter part of the book deals with a specific comparative case study, a reflection on broader contemporary thought about the nature of work, and a conclusion that explores whether there might be alternative future models of work within cultural industries.

McRobbie is a British cultural theorist and feminist, well known for studies of popular culture, fashion, media and the culture industries. It is a world that she has observed close up since the mid-1970s, when she began researching girls' magazines as part of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. The picture that she paints here is of an evolving industry sector in which the conditions of cultural production are shifting in such a way as to make the experience of the worker increasingly individualized, casualized, and fragmented. Young workers embarking on ostensibly creative careers generally find themselves on short-term (often freelance) project-based contracts, dependent upon their own self-entrepreneurship, networking skills, 'flexibility', and degree of success at self-branding and self-promotion. The most basic

(and hard won) expectations of worker entitlements previously associated with employer obligation and responsibility have all but gone, and this includes any prospect of job security or structured career development. Instead, what has developed within this sector is a world in which there is no shared collective consciousness within its workforce; little meaningful labour association or other means of mutual support; and no common voice. It is characterised by the self-exploitation of aspirant workers engaged in precarious and unstructured individualized 'careers', working extremely long hours, and generally being poorly paid for their effort.

Despite this seemingly bleak picture, there is no shortage of takers, as thousands of graduates emerge from UK universities each year with their sights set on just such work. McRobbie introduces her subject through the prism of her experience as a senior academic at Goldsmiths, University of London. What she witnesses in her weekly tutorials with young aspiring cultural workers ('disproportionately female and child-free', p.2) is 'something like a euphoria of imagined success, relatively untainted by a reality of impediment and obstacles in the creative labour market' (p.4). Work identified as 'creative' is seen as both pleasurable and rewarding. And the evaporation of the line between work and leisure seems seductive when compared to a desk-bound, nine-to-five, routine occupation considered to have no personal meaning. McRobbie discusses the similarities between some of these emerging ways of working, and club culture. For many of these young people, the prospect of creative labour represents a means of self-actualization, independence and personal fulfilment – 'passionate' work.

'This Government knows that culture and creativity matter' wrote Prime Minister Blair in his foreword to the policy document *Culture and Creativity: The Next Ten Years* (DCMS 2001, p.3): '...creative talent will be crucial to our individual and national economic success in the economy of the future. Above all, at their best, the arts and creativity set us free.' In examining this celebration of freedom through creativity, and its simultaneous marginalisation of labour concerns, McRobbie sees a kind of *dispositif* (to borrow from Foucault): 'an instrument of both competition and labour discipline' (p.38) not overtly through something enforced or imposed, but through what is essentially a mechanism of self-governing and self-regulation. McRobbie looks for alternative models, including a rather different approach taken to the support of creative microbusinesses in Berlin. Of particular note is Chapter 6 in which she takes up some of the ideas of Richard Sennett, and particularly his critique of the notion of exceptional creative achievement, which is so fundamental to the contemporary appetite for creative work.

Potential readers should be forewarned that this 'exciting new book' (as described by its cover blurb) contains a significant amount of material that has seen the light of day before. Four of its six main chapters contain material that has been previously published in one form or another. This is not immediately obvious, and can be disconcerting where no attempt has been made to update it since original publication. For example the first chapter, in which McRobbie discusses the Department for Culture Media and Sport's 'most recently published Green Paper' (p.18), is actually a reference

to a 2001 document. That said, the book provides a timely and much needed critical perspective on the cultural sector in Britain. It also does more than this, since the culture industries seem to be the canary in the coalmine. These trends are increasingly the direction of travel for the broader labour market in the UK (and beyond), and the experience of work in many other fields is beginning to mirror this one precisely. For both these reasons McRobbie's work is important.

Reference:

Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2001. *Culture and Creativity: The Next Ten Years*. London: DCMS.

Other information

Word count (excluding the heading information):

994 words

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