

'Theory', 'Practice' and Imagination in the Creative Industries

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In this brief paper, I would like to discuss new forms of the imagination and the relation between intellectual practices and other forms of practice, particularly those in the artistic and creative arena and how these might operate within the new setting of the Creative Industries project at QUT. I might emphasise that rather than offering any directly practical nuts and bolts suggestions, I simply want to offer a few frameworks and ideas for reflection.

I will begin by noting a change in the way we currently structure relations between imagination, rational knowledge and other social activity. I will then go on to explain what exactly I mean by 'practice' and the capacity of this definition to do away with traditional hierarchical distinctions between theory and practice. Thirdly, I will like Stuart Cunningham in the second session in this series draw a distinction between the cultural industries and the creative industries - but from quite a different angle. Fourthly, I shall detail the emergence of new forms of imagination in the Western industrialised world and make some general suggestions about how the creative industries, operating within a specifically university environment, might interact with these. I will be illustrating this point with references to cult and genre film and television and references to Michel Foucault's work. Finally, I would like to provide an example of how intellectual and artistic/imaginative practices might work together. I will be referring here to Alain Resnais' 1980 film *Mon Oncle d'Amérique* (My American Uncle).

In his work *The Order of Things* Foucault refers to the sixteenth century naturalist Aldrovandi. Aldrovandi's scientific description of snakes includes a list of the different meanings of the word snake, the history of the work and its synonyms, a description of the snake's anatomy, habits and habitat, citations relating to snakes, legends, myths and dreams about snakes, its medical and magical uses, its heraldic uses, historical facts about snakes, hieroglyphics, snake gods, the way snakes can be eaten and so on. (Foucault 1970:39) Foucault originally used this example in 1966 to demonstrate that the relation between words and things has not always been the same in Western civilisation. He notes that the naturalists of the sixteenth century were not worse observers, more credulous or less concerned with the 'rationality of

things' than we are. They simply observed things according to a different pattern of order. As he remarks:

The division, so evident to us, between what we see, what others have observed and handed down, and what others imagine or naively believe, the great tripartition, apparently so simple and so immediate, into *Observation, Document and Fable*, did not exist. (1970:129)

Foucault's readers in 1966 would certainly have regarded Aldrovandi's description as outrageously unscientific. But I would like to take things a step further and suggest that this description of a snake is far less shocking in the year 2000 than it was in 1966. Indeed, there are some who might even regard the description as fairly reasonable. In fact, Aldrovandi would probably have felt quite at home with some of the snake websites out there on the net. So what has changed since 1966? There appears to have been a significant shift not only in the way we relate words and things but in the relative values we attach to categories such as the imagination, rational and scientific knowledge as well as to other social practices. It is these changes that have helped make the idea of funding a Creative Industries Project possible and it is within this context that I wish to examine changes in the way two particular notions are defined and valued - namely culture and imagination.

Let us begin with culture. Since the end of World War II at least and until recently, the concept of Cultural Industries has been based on a certain 'traditional' understanding of culture - an understanding quite different from the one that grounds the Creative Industries project in the new millennium. Traditional notions of 'culture' see it as a kind of icing on the cake of the more fundamental levels of the economic and social. This perception is still widespread and cultural studies analysts are often perceived as dilettante purveyors of the frivolous in comparison to the 'serious' disciplines of economics, sociology or history. This, of course, is a Marxist or a materialist schema which perceives the economic as the fundamental infrastructure and culture and ideology as superstructures floating above this. Culture in these terms is often divided into 'high' and 'low' forms. At the 'high' end, it becomes a national heritage or treasure to be carefully preserved and kept intact in museums, art galleries, libraries and universities usually with the help of rich benefactors and governments. This kind of culture needs to be transmitted to the citizens of the nation via various programs of education which are made as boring as possible, so as to maintain its elite status.¹ At the

¹ Ivan Illich (1970) comments about the schooling system: 'No society is history has been able to survive without myth, but ours is the first which has needed such a dull, protracted, destructive and expensive initiation into its myth'.

'low' end, culture becomes a form of entertainment, a glorified tranquilliser or anti-depressant, something to while away the empty leisure hours when one is not at work or on holidays. At the very best, it forms a set of thinly disguised morality tales for the masses.

Although these views still remain in force, they are beginning to face serious challenges and both models have been showing marked signs of disintegration over just the last few years. At the 'high' end, there has been a merging of the national treasure model of culture with the mass entertainment model. Museums, art galleries and libraries have all become funfairs for the masses employing all the techniques used by the entertainment and leisure industries. This process has been strongly criticised by Marc Fumaroli in his interesting and controversial 1992 offering *The Cultural State. Essay on a Modern Religion*. Fumaroli also draws attention to the notion of a world divided into owners and proletarians of culture and the idea that is the duty of the democratic and socialist state to force the privileged 'owners' of culture to share their treasures with the masses. The state according, to this model, then exercises a kind of 'social welfare' program in relation to culture, doling it out to the underprivileged in return for a small percentage of our taxes. (1992:67). Culture as national treasure can only survive if it can be a source of mass entertainment and leisure activity. Those forms of culture which cannot be transformed in this manner are simply not worth spending money on - hence some of the difficulties that the university and some sectors in the arts have found themselves facing in the last few years.

At the 'low' end, the notion of culture as 'entertainment' is also being undermined. So-called 'entertainment' is taking on a role that is far wider than just time filling or diversion from the rigours of the factory. 'Entertainment' and 'leisure' are a way of life for many people both in the sense of being their livelihood - the film and television industry is currently one of the largest sectors in the world economy - and also in terms of how consumers make use of it. People use their imaginative interaction with film and television to order aspects of their everyday existence, the way they live in the world and imagine it. Hugh Jackman who plays the part of Wolverine in the films based on the popular *X-Men* comics notes dryly: 'There's a responsibility playing Wolverine. There's guys out there, umpteen guys who've got tattoos of Wolverine. If I don't deliver I'm afraid they're gonna come and sort me out'. (Cochrane 2000:75) It is clear that those who sport these tattoos regard the *X-Men* as something far more than merely an activity to fill in the empty moments of their leisure time. I might also refer in passing to the political and social impact of television soap operas in South America. Culture can no longer simply be treated as a national treasure to be preserved and carefully doled out to the masses nor as something to fill in the empty moments of one's spare time.

The current challenges to these restrictive models of culture owe much to a general redefinition of the notion of culture over the last three decades. I will offer one definition proposed by Michel Foucault in 1967 which many other cultural theorists might make their own. He describes the task of the intellectual as being to analyse the present 'culture conjuncture'. 'Culture being understood here', he says 'in the widest sense, not only of the production of works of art, but also of political institutions, forms of social life, prohibitions and diverse constraints' (1994:582). Thus culture, in this sense, could be defined as the general way a society both constructs and orders its internal relations, its relations with the physical environment and with that vague area variously described as the imaginative, poetic or spiritual domain. It can be seen in the most mundane practices and material objects as well as in the products of high art and high culture. Most branches of contemporary cultural studies are now premised on the recognition of the strangeness, the non-naturalness of human cultural expression in all its forms. Nothing produced or perceived by humans at any level – conceptual, social or material is 'natural' or self-evident - everything is fodder for analysis.

This new view of culture has a number of implications for the way the 'cultural industries' are defined and also for traditional hierarchies of 'theory' and 'practice'. The immediate problem is that if every human activity is redefined as a cultural practice, then the term 'cultural industries' becomes hopelessly vague. This is where the notion of 'creative industries' comes to the rescue and indicates that we are operating within new parameters which leave old ideas of what culture is behind. One could offer a definition of the 'creative industries' as those which are specifically preoccupied with the category of the 'imagination'. And like culture, the notion of imagination is currently undergoing a process of restructuring. With the breakdown in the exclusive relationship of 'Truth' and 'Reason', pre-Enlightenment categories of the imagination are gradually beginning to re-emerge and establish themselves as valued parts of everyday life and experience and, as a consequence, economically viable forms of social activity.

But before I talk more about what I mean by 'imaginative practices', I would like to backtrack a bit and make some comments about the theory/practice divide. If every human practice is a cultural practice - that is a way of ordering one's relation to one's social or physical environment - then this has implications for the way theory and practice have been traditionally divided. Taking the broad view of culture, there is no such thing as a human activity that does not contain a view of how things should be ordered and there is no such thing as a 'theory' that does not express itself in a physical and historical form. A 'theory' needs to use the forms at hand - language, technologies such as the book and various institutional structures such as the university or R&D think tanks in order to be visible. 'Theory', or as I will call it from now on 'intellectual practice', is but a subset of all human practices

which attempt to order and therefore make manageable our interaction with the world, whether those practices manifest themselves as art, economic exchange, the design and construction of buildings, bridges and roads, tax forms or traffic rules. What defines and is specific about intellectual practice is that it involves a process of rational analysis. It is about discerning, analysing and describing the systems of order human produce at every level. Such reflection can be of assistance to other social practitioners and forms one part - which is neither more nor less valuable than others - of a general human project of ordering our interaction with the world. The university has traditionally been designated in the Western world as the institution where these practices of reflection can occur, a place where society can rationally assess its own mechanisms. The university also has other functions, such as providing training for the professions and conducting advanced research in areas which are not of immediate short term interest to the business and government sectors. At present, the university is still performing all these functions - the current crisis it is experiencing is perhaps most to do with the relative valuing of all these things in relation to other social practices.

The next question is why 'theory' has come to occupy the position that it has - either regarded on the one hand as immensely superior to all other forms of human practice or on the other (a view which has been in the ascendancy in recent times) as - an irrelevant and elitist waste of time. One can of course begin by mentioning Plato's elevation of Logos or Reason at the expense of gross perishable matter and the gnostic traditions which have perpetuated this view, but I would like to concentrate more on the theory/practice divide as a legacy of the Enlightenment.

Very briefly, Enlightenment thinkers argued that it was human reason and rationality that was going to save the world. Old forms of superstition and religion were to be jettisoned in favour of Reason which could lead people to the Truth. The only way of gaining access to the Truth was not through spiritual techniques of self-improvement but through the unaided use of human reason. Science then became the pinnacle of rational activity, a form of knowledge which all others should emulate. The idea was that science, through the rational accumulation of 'true' and 'neutral' facts, could lead to the truth. This view of science and rationality reached its apotheosis during the post War period in the 1950s and 60s - a period which also marked the heyday of those institutions which specialised in intellectual and rational activity namely the universities. But it was also during the 1960s that various thinkers, in particular the so-called French structuralists and later postmodernists, began to question the truth claims of science and rationality. Millions of dead, two world wars, a damaged eco system, excessively regulated societies, and the threat of nuclear or biological annihilation seemed a rather high price to pay for the glorious advance of Reason. Thus gradually

from an undue adulation of intellectual activity, the pendulum has swung the other way to an equally extreme vilification.

But if these arguments in relation to the historical fortunes of Reason are reasonably widespread, far less attention has been paid to the fate of the imagination. One might indeed argue that the imaginary realm is currently still one of the last bastions of the structures and orders set in place by the Enlightenment and that it is only now that this bastion is starting to crumble. The Enlightenment view holds that imagination is only acceptable if it is tied to a particular scientific, political or sociological rationality. Foucault notes that 'for centuries Western literature sought to ground itself on the natural, the plausible, on sincerity, on science as well – in short on 'true' discourse' (trans. mod.) (1981: 55). In other words, imagination must be subordinated to the currently accepted rules and logics of material, social and political existence and must ultimately express and refer back to those rules. Only 'applied' imagination is of interest: socially and politically 'useful' works - these are the serious works of art. One of the best descriptions of this modern incarnation of the imagination is offered by C. Wright Mills in his famous 1959 book *The Sociological Imagination*. His views are worth citing in full.

This sociological imagination is becoming, I believe, the major common denominator of our cultural life and its signal feature... Popular categories of criticism – high, middle and low-brow, for example – are now at least as much sociological as aesthetic... the sociological imagination is not merely a fashion. It is a quality of mind that seems most dramatically to promise an understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities. It is not merely one quality of mind among the contemporary range of cultural sensibilities – it is *the* quality whose wider and more adroit use offers the promise that all such sensibilities – and in fact, human reason itself – will come to play a greater role in human affairs... What fiction, what journalism, what artistic endeavour can compete with the historical reality and political facts of our time? What dramatic vision of hell can compete with the events of twentieth century war? ... the serious artist is himself in much trouble and could well do with some intellectual and cultural aid from a social science made sprightly by the sociological imagination. (Mills 1959:14-15, 17-18)

And, according to Mills, 'other styles of reflection seem mere vehicles of escape and obscurity' (1959:14).

The modern version of a 'useful' and 'truthful' imagination requires that it must somehow mirror and reflect back on an existing physical and social reality, not radically challenge, recreate and reform those rules and certainly not refer to a dimension which appears different from those realities.

But this sociological imagination is now being called into question. Increasingly, in recent years, there has been a reactivation of an older poetic and spiritual imagination, free of the dreary necessities of restricting itself to 'improving our social lot', free of the idea of art as completely bound by the dictates of 'social work' and political reform, in other words an imagination of the fantastic, of other worlds, of non material existences. It is also an imagination, which as the historian Jacques Le Goff suggests in his fascinating book *The Medieval Imagination*, is not simply limited to the world of books and literature. It weaves itself into the very fabric of the everyday.

This experience of the fantastic in everyday life was ruthlessly relegated to literature and to childhood by Enlightenment thought. Foucault in his article on Flaubert's *La tentation de Saint Antoine* remarks that if Flaubert described his experience of the composition of this novel as an experience of madness and delirium, the book is actually a 'monument to meticulous erudition'. (1998:105) All the dreams, heresies, visions and temptations he describes can be found in old manuscripts and engravings. Foucault notes that it is strange that Flaubert seems to experience delirium in relation to what is so manifestly a detailed piece of research. He suggests that perhaps this is because Flaubert's experience of the fantastic is a modern one. A certain imaginative structure has become equivalent to madness - excluded by Reason. As Foucault remarks.

The domain of phantasms is no longer the night, the sleep of reason, or the uncertain void that stands before desire, but, on the contrary wakefulness, untiring attention, zealous erudition ... The imaginary now resides between the book and the lamp. The fantastic is no longer a property of the heart nor is it found among the incongruities of nature ... Dreams are no longer summoned with closed eyes, but in reading ... The imaginary ... is a phenomenon of the library. (1998:105-6)

At the same time the fantastic imagination is banished to the realm of childhood: children are allowed a few short years of experimentation with the imaginary as part of their 'development', but they must also learn to grow out of such things as quickly as possible if they are to become 'normal' rational functioning adults in the 'real' world.

In the post Enlightenment world, the fantastic imagination only exists frozen and neutralised in books, art, childhood and 'entertainment'. To take imagination out of the safe zones of art, literature and childhood and to weave it into everyday life as did the medievals is nothing short of lunacy according to the puritan proponents of the sociological imagination. It is also a form of imagination discounted by those engaged in intellectual practice in

universities. It is not generally supposed that this kind of imagination is able to reveal any kind of genuine, difficult or 'truthful' insight into existence.

This mainstream view of the fantastic imagination is nowhere better encapsulated than in a 1996 address (in Latin no less!) by the Chancellor of Oxford on the occasion of the award of an honorary degree to Doris Lessing whose later work has drifted into the realms of science fiction. He says 'she even took on the immense task of inventing a whole world, a genre of writing in which we expect to find nothing serious, which hardly accedes to the truths of ordinary life'. (Cited in Parry 1996:4) Those who do mix the imagination with everyday existence, for instance science fiction fans who dress up to attend conventions or who engage in role playing games or who speak imaginary languages such as klingon or elvish are usually regarded as merely fodder for sociologists, who treat them as the exotic and unbalanced members of bizarre subcultures to be studied carefully from a safe distance.

Outside the Academy, however, there are signs that the fantastic imagination is once again re-entering everyday life on a major scale and that the medieval view of a fantastic imagination interwoven with everyday life is once again slowly gaining mainstream social acceptance. One of the indications of this is the enormous economic success of the film, television and other new media industries. Another, one might argue, is the willingness of the Queensland government to actually fund a Creative Industries Project. Yet another sign is the transformation of film and television fandom from a marginal practice, that people could only indulge in the secrecy of their own homes or in specialised clubs, to something that is almost, but not quite, publicly acceptable. This fandom is by no means the kind of passive consumption so roundly condemned by the Frankfurt School and its followers. If couch potatoes and credulous *60 minutes* addicts do indeed abound, increasing numbers of viewers are using film and television as a basis for the creation of wide and diverse social networks, a process aided and abetted by the expansion of the internet. Such viewers also use television as an opportunity to create new fictions and ideas and as a springboard to discuss social and political issues and the human condition in general. This consumption is by no means uncritical: 'fans' are some of the film and television industries most trenchant critics.

There is also now considerable interaction between those producing film and television and the consumers of those products. Ian McKellan coming from a background in the 'high culture' of Shakespearian actor training and with a starring role in that popular icon *X-men*, notes that he received lots of wonderful advice from people on the web which he was able to feed back into the film. (Cochrane 2000:72) This kind of communication was made possible by the fact that McKellan has his own website where he posted updates about the film as it was being made. Most producers and writers of popular television series these days keep a close eye on the internet

and will modify their series in relation to fan discussions. Notable examples of this include *Babylon 5*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *The X Files*. The writers of *The X Files* also use the net as a rich source of research for the latest in conspiracy theories.

Other good examples of a changed interaction between the everyday and the imaginary are the success of films such as *The Matrix* which plays fast and loose with notions of reality and which incidentally features a copy of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations* (1985). A more recent film *Galaxy Quest* is of particular interest on a number of scores although I don't have time to engage in any detailed analysis here. Suffice it to say that it is a spoof on the Star Trek phenomenon and very cleverly explores the boundaries between the everyday, the imagination and performance. I would like to briefly draw attention however, to its treatment of fans. Traditionally fans have been characterised in mainstream culture as sad and socially disabled individuals. In this film it is the awesome erudition and dedication of the fans which save the bacon of the actor/performers cum heroes. In a similar vein people who speak fluent elvish have also been employed on the set of the current production of *Lord of the Rings* to coach the actors.

I would like to finish with an example of how the imaginative or artistic and intellectual domains might work together harmoniously. I will look at some scenes from the 1980 film *Mon Oncle d'Amerique* directed by Alain Resnais one of the leading lights of the French 'New Wave' cinema movement which emerged in the late 1950s. This film is particularly interesting as it takes a series of intellectual practices or 'theories' and 'applies' and transforms them within the imaginative artistic domain. An intellectual practitioner can then gain further insights into how the original intellectual practices operate by analysing what Resnais has done in his film.

The film consists of a sequence of interwoven stories based on the behaviourist theories of well-known biologist Dr Henri Laborit. The latter is introduced in a documentary style manner in the same way as the fictional characters. The camera work in the film also tends towards a flat 'documentary' style. This creates the curious effect of fictionalising the real scientist and at the same time rendering the fictional characters less fictional. Each character forms a case study who embodies on the screen the theories of Dr. Laborit. But at the same time their status as 'case study' is undermined by the characters' attempts to give their own lives heroic meaning by identifying with actors in old films whom we see in brief flashes at dramatic points in the characters' lives. These complex and subtle tactics succeed in focussing attention on the constructed nature of the intellectual and scientific enterprises and of theoretical representation in general.

Even bodies become deformed as the lines between theory and events blur. One particular sequence opens in a laboratory where experiments are being conducted on rats. Dr. Laborit explains in voice over that rats which are

subjected to electric shocks in one compartment but are able to escape to the adjacent one remain in a perfect physical and psychological condition. As Laborit's didactic exposé continues, the scene switches to the fictional characters. A man in a suit with a white rat's head and a briefcase in one of his white paws walks out the door of his apartment to go to work leaving his discontented wife. The besuited rat returns in the evening and embraces his wife. Back to the lab: the health of the rat who cannot escape the electric shock deteriorates, explains Laborit, but when two rats are placed in the same cage, they fight each other when subjected to the shocks. These rats remain healthy. But human socialisation prevents people from resorting to fight or flight strategies. Returning to the fictional characters, we see one in conflict with his boss in the office. He cannot resort to the option of violence as his boss would call the police (we see a brief scene with two ratmen in suits struggling emitting loud squeaks on a desktop) and he cannot leave, as he would face unemployment.² These brief surreal sequences transforming humans into rats also suggest in a manner that could only be performed in film that when it comes to theory not only are 'fact' and 'fiction' interchangeable but concrete bodies are similarly interchangeable. There is no difference in Dr. Laborit's theoretical framework between the bodies of rats and the bodies of people. All bodies are reduced to an identical abstraction by the universality of 'science'. The intense social inhibitions to which humans subject themselves merely make their bodies less efficient. Briefly, Resnais' film forms in my view a particularly clear example of how a productive dialogue between intellectual and artistic practices might take place.

In summary, the point I am trying to make here is that with the Creative Industries Project we have the opportunity to locate ourselves at the heart of major changes in how imagination, rational knowledge and other social practices connect with each other. Certain forms of the imagination after being disqualified for so long by the repressive reign of the Hegelian dictum the 'Rational is Real' are once again being taken up by people in their quest to order their existence. It is essential for those engaged in both artistic and intellectual practices to be involved in this process. Intellectual practitioners in particular, need to discard old ideas of intellectual activity as being the privileged and only means of access to the Truth, with intellectuals as its chosen prophets. Instead they might do better to see themselves as equal contributors and partners in a wider social project of ordering and making sense of our interactions with each other and our environment, a project which does not set up hierarchies between so-called 'theory' and 'practice'. If intellectual practitioners still have a tendency to regard their chosen activity as vastly superior to those engaged in by other sectors of the social body, this

² I have simplified the description of the action here to only include scenes which include rat transformations.

opinion is by no means widely shared - indeed quite the reverse. Much work still needs to be done across the whole social body to create a more balanced view of the role intellectual, artistic and imaginative practices can play in general.

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