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Add Value to Contents: the Valorisation of Culture Today

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Culture and Value

In Britain today, as elsewhere, culture is the wonder stuff that gives more away than it takes. Like some fantastical oil in a Grimm fairytale, this magical substance gives and gives, generating and enhancing value, for state and private men alike. Culture is posited as a mode of value-production: for its economy-boosting and wealth-generating effects; its talent for regeneration, through raising house prices and introducing new business, which is largely service based; and its benefits as a type of moral rearmament or emotional trainer, a perspective that lies behind the 'social inclusion' model, whereby culture *must* speak to – or down to – disenfranchised groups. Culture is instrumentalised for its 'value-generating' spin-offs. To exploit maximum benefits the value-producing output, culture, needs to be produced industrially. Hence, the 'culture industry', about which Adorno wrote scathingly, has been promoted with redoubled force as 'cultural and creative industries', affirmed as such by various bodies, from governments to supra-governmental forms, NGOs and private initiatives. The discourse of 'creative and cultural industries' penetrates at both national and supranational levels.

Supranationally, UNESCO, which describes itself as 'a laboratory of ideas and a standard-setter to forge universal agreements on emerging ethical issues', insists that 'cultural industries', which include publishing, music, audiovisual technology, electronics, video games and the Internet, 'create employment and wealth', 'foster innovation in production and commercialisation processes' and 'are central in promoting and maintaining cultural diversity and in ensuring democratic access to culture'.[1] UNESCO pushes the industrial analogy further in the insistence that cultural industries 'nurture creativity – the "raw material" they are made from'. In short, they 'add value to contents and generate values for individuals and societies'. Contents are apparently without inherent value, or enough value, before the magic wand of industry touches them. In addition, creative industries mysteriously make values – out of nothing, out of themselves. Value is a gift of industry, not a quality of artifacts themselves.

Many policy documents reference 'cultural value'. In such documents value has become a debased term, conceivable only from the perspective of quantification, as in, for example, visitor numbers with statistical breakdowns of type, in order to monitor social inclusion and provide data for advertisers or sponsors. As such value is easily subsumed into economic value. The value that is more valuable than all others, is monetary. Tate Modern's fifth anniversary report from 2005 is one of many thousand examples.[2] Here the former government Culture Secretary Chris Smith crows about culture's magical powers of wealth generation, asserting that 'Creative industries amount to well over 100 billion pounds of economic value a year, employ over a million people and are growing at twice the rate of growth of the economy as a whole.' Culture's marketability must be assured: culture is valuable only *if* it contributes to 'the economy'. Culture is quantified – witness the

graphs on the UNESCO site of world imports and exports of cultural goods. This point is banal. Of course an industry, in a capitalist world, produces commodities. This particular industry produces art as commodity variously. Art-buying is commodified for broader layers by the encouragement of well sponsored and marketed 'affordable art' fairs, which generalise ownership of small art objects. Art experience is commodified through exhibition sponsorship by corporations and in policy-makers' quantification of social benefits derived from exposure to culture. And the art institution markets itself as commodity. Art galleries are reinvented as 'for profit' space, where the expertise of art workers is leased out to business and education; and merchandise is offered at every opportunity, including gift shops and digital reproductions for download. Tate is innovative here, licensing its strategically developed 'brand' Tate Modern to household paint and home improvements retailer B&Q. Another joint venture is with telecommunications provider BT. Specially commissioned artworks emblazoned on 'limited edition' BT vans support BT and Tate's joint rationale to bring "art to all" by 'literally taking art out on to the streets'.[3] Art is conceived as an abstract quantity, another product, like baked beans, but the language of limited editions emulates the exclusivity inherent to art. This is art as commodity, another option on the supermarket shelf, conveniently delivered to your door or at least past it. It wants art to be a special, bonus-providing, life-enhancing substance, and, at the same time, it wants it to be on 'the streets', utterly accessible, completely everyday, so that its benefits might be widely distributed, along with those purported to stem from BT's private phone network.

Corporate partnership in culture – like the Public-Private Partnership in health, education and transport sectors – is part of *désétatisation*, a French term situated between 'privatisation' and the

public sector in the world of cultural provision. Crucial aspects of *désétatisation* include 'divestiture', free transfer of property rights, the change from state to independent organization, contracting-out of cleaning and catering, use of volunteers, private funding, individual patronage and corporate sponsorship. As in other state sectors (for example health and utilities), the shift in cultural policy sunders cultural institutions from the state and pushes them to attract private money. Artworld privatisation (where economic rationale is central) is combined with a devolution of power that offers some autonomy as well as accountability to local managers.

In a paradox typical of neo-liberalism, the rise of privatisation and the inclusion of private industry as sponsors in the art sector has been accompanied by the subjection of culture to government and state intervention, under the name of cultural policy. The corollary of 'creative industries' in the private and especially the state sector is 'cultural policy'. Culture-making is a crucial industry in today's global battle for tourist cash. As such, like any other industry, it is subject to government policy. Cultural policy bears the same relationship to cultural *criticism* that the culture industry bears to culture. It is its commodification without counter-measure. The rhetoric of much cultural policy is, at best, propagandistic hot air or consolatory compensation, and, at worst, partner to the economic remodelling of the cultural front, akin to neo-liberal IMF restructuring of economies. What is remarkable is that cultural policy has been pushed by the very same forces that once engaged in cultural criticism, in the guise of cultural studies and theory. If the ideology of privatisation needed to promote the industrialization of culture and its annexing to the production of values, monetary and other, various cultural theorists were willing ideologues for this refunctioning.

Value added: theory as policy

Cultural policy has a broad remit, from the banal to the fatal. Such scope did not prevent Tony Bennett, the leading Australian proponent of Cultural Studies, insisting, back in 1992, that Cultural Studies turn practical, engaging in policy, advising managers and governments rather than moaning on about ideological effects. Cultural Studies' long-standing promotion of cultural populism segued into the rhetoric of choice, which presents itself as anti-elitist. The irony is that theorists who once professed to adhere to some type of Marxism now promote culture as the benevolent and ameliorating face of capitalism. How did this happen? Cultural Studies observed a lack in the Marxist theories of culture that first impelled them. Marxism – according to cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall, 'did not talk about or seem to understand [...] our privileged object of study: culture, ideology, language, the symbolic'.[4] Note here that culture is subsumed into the intangible, non-material or simply 'cognitive'. Labour, the role of production, slips away as theorisable component of practice. This animus against production is reinforced with the focus on audiences and consumption. The labour of cultural production disappears.

After getting to just 'within shouting distance' of Marxism, as Hall termed it, Cultural Studies bifurcated. One wing headed for a sociology of culture that traffics in popular cultural practices. The other opted for style, surface, textuality and the allure of 'theory'. Precipitate of both was a shift in the understanding of ideology. Initially an Althusser-influenced delineation of ideology, and ideological state apparatuses conceived the state and its organs as producing contexts for thinking that serve class interests and the market as a force of control, an ideological justification of class

oppression. This is replaced by an embrace of culture – or ideology – as authentic or post-authentic expression of subjectivity. Ideology is no longer a problematically inescapable effluent, but rather the very locus of pleasure, resistance, power and counter-power. Ideology is culture, and so culture is immaterial, purely *Geist*. This conceptualization made possible the remoulding of Cultural Studies as Cultural Policy. It is culture's presumed immateriality, its symbolic accent that forwards the fixation on the consumer, who receives culture as adjunct to his or her identities, a marker of taste. Numerous cultural theorists reinvent themselves as wannabe policy makers in the 'cultural industries'. Still echoing terms from the cultural theory they absorbed, they marshal the language of market research and niche marketing, capitalism's tools for product placement in competitive industries.[5] John Holden, Head of Development at the think-tank Demos and a former investment banker with Masters Degrees in law and art history, tells us in his essay 'The Cultural Value of Tate Modern'[6], people attending Tate Modern, are not 'spectators' but 'actors'. Here he adopts a version of Walter Benjamin's idea of the cultural auditor as producer. But the meaning is twisted into its contemporary parody. He goes on to claim: 'This [appearance of museum goers as actors] can be accounted for in marketing terms – people reinforcing their own coolness through their alliance with one of Britain's Coolest Brands, or it can be thought of as something loftier – forming identity and stretching the self through an interaction with what Tessa Jowell, the Secretary of State for Culture, has called "complex culture".'

Adorno against industry

Art is not only part of 'business as usual'. It is the universal grease relied upon to make the cogs of business turn better and the joints

of society mesh smoother. Adorno's 'Culture Industry' concept – a yoking of the unyokeable – assumed that industry was anathema to culture. Industry signifies business, endless production. For Adorno, art is a placeholder for utopia, but this did not mean it had anything in common with technological utopias that imagined busy ways through and out of capitalism. Adorno posited utopia as a place for indolence, non-productivity, uselessness. Art likewise is not about ceaseless production, an industrial manufacturing of artefacts, values, by-products, outputs, outcomes and objectives – all necessary for grant applications and monitoring reports. Art is not even a place for manufacturing concrete alternatives: 'Like theory, art cannot concretize Utopia, not even negatively.'[7] Adorno states:

> 'It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men's heads.' [8]

In its *form* art proposes something other than business as usual. Art holds a place for utopia, its form marking utopia's outlines. But it cannot represent it, instead figuring this future time negatively:

> 'We may not know what the human is or what the correct shape of human things is, but what it is not and what form of human things is wrong, that we do know, and only in this specific and concrete knowledge is something else, something positive, open to us.'[9]

It is this negative imagining that impels art. But still it is possible to imagine – without concretising – futures for and in art, as Adorno did when he wrote the following in *Aesthetic Theory*:

> 'While firmly rejecting the appearance of reconciliation, art none the less holds fast to the idea of reconciliation in an antagonistic world. Thus, art is the true consciousness of an epoch in which Utopia ... is as real a possibility as total catastrophic destruction.' [10]

Art might, because of its precarious, anomalous situation within commodity society, bear a non-concrete relation to Utopia. It marks the place of the 'idea' of utopia. In the face of cultural industry Adorno cleaves to art as utopia's only refuge, and our chance for another life. Adorno's clinging to art is correct enough, in that without the thought of art, just as without the thought of utopia, there would be no alternative to industry. But it goes only so far.

After Adorno: cultural policy as aestheticisation of politics

Art cannot in itself recover from a situation intrinsic to industrial capitalism, whereby it has been made an adjunct of the political, for which read economic. It cannot separate itself off again into 'the aesthetic'. To deny its embroilment would only reinforce pre-critical ideas, as if Walter Benjamin, TW Adorno and Guy Debord had never existed. Art movements have fused with the business of politics in a number of ways. Politics has become an art of display. Walter Benjamin's closing statements to his Artwork essay, on 'the aestheticisation of politics' and the 'politicisation of art', have taken on a new validity. It is easy to observe an aestheticisation of politics everywhere today. We live in a world of mediated political spectacle that enforces passivity and knee-jerk reactions. Politics is a show that we are compelled to watch and where the 'sides' on offer are simply divisions within the essentially identical. Benjamin's phrase indicates that beyond the aestheticisation of political systems,

figures and events is a more fundamental aestheticisation (or alienation): the aestheticisation of human practice. This amounts to an alienation from species-being, to the extent that we accept and enjoy viewing our own destruction. Benjamin discusses the issue of art's politicisation in the context of human annihilation. War has become the ultimate artistic event, because it satisfies the new needs of the human sensorium, which have been remoulded technologically. This was the completion of l'art pour l'art, or aestheticism, as seen in 1936, which means that everything is an aesthetic experience, even war. Humanity watches a techno-display of 'shock and awe' proportions, which amounts to its own torture. It revels in it. Genuine politics – the rational management of technologies, the democratic incorporation of the users of those technologies, revelations about the property-stakes that drive the system – require self-activity: authors as producers, audiences as critics, as Benjamin put it.[11] Likewise the art that communism politicises is not art as known and inherited (and reified for passive consumption), but rather, yet again, an opportunity for self-activity. This is a dialectical reversal not a negation. It might on the surface appear as if the politicisation of art has been adopted in a widespread manner within the 'artistic community'. Exhibitions frequently draw attention to 'political' questions of poverty, gender, ethnicity, globalisation, war. But this is not the victory of the Benjaminian idea of art's politicisation. In fact, it is a further symptom of the aestheticisation of politics. For what is produced by the real politicisation of art is not that which we have become accustomed to in galleries – politically correct art that largely satisfies itself with and within the gallery and grant system, competing within the terms of the creative and cultural industries. Rather the politicisation of art means a thorough rejection of systems of display, production, and consumption, monitoring and inclusion as well as elitism and exclusion, as art disperses into

everyday practice and becomes political, that is, democratically available to all as practice and matter for critique.

Karl Marx notes that human activity constitutes reality through praxis, and truth is gained through the process of self-development. As he put it famously: the rounded individual of mature communism is a hunter in the morning, a fisherman in the afternoon, and a critical critic at night, without being defined socially as hunter, fisherman or critic. It is an unfreedom characteristic of class society that some people are charged with the task of being an artist, and bear that social role, while others are excluded from it. Conversely, marred by commodification, artistic practice today is a deformation of the sensuous unfolding of the self that indicates real human community. The reification of human activity into the separate realms of work and play, aesthetics and politics damages all and must be overcome. The aesthetic must be rescued from the ghetto of art and set at the centre of life.

What I mean finally to say is this: none of the critique of cultural and creative industries makes sense unless you are prepared to criticise the capitalist industrial model as a whole, wherever it appears, for the manufacture of whatever ends. While Adorno may be right that art is a special type of labour, which reveals the critical pressure points of the system, in as much as it is industrialised, it has become effectively like all labour – shit to do, alienated and boring. This is where we should start – with the conditions of labour wherever they occur, not just the specific woes of artists. This means asking why 'social inclusion' is necessary in the first place, and why class society both needs and doesn't need art.

[1] All quotations from UNESCO are taken from the UNESCO website, specifically the section on "Culture, trade and globalisation". See http://www.unesco.org/culture/industries/trade/.

[2] *Tate Modern: The First Five Years* (2005) is online at http://tate.org.uk/modern/tm_5yearspublication.pdf.

[3] The language of 'the streets' is used by BT's Head of Sponsorship on the BTPLC website and reproduced elsewhere in promotional competitions and the like.

[4] Hall, Stuart (1992). "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies". In Lawrence Grossberg et al. (Eds.), *Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge, 279.

[5] See McGuigan, Jim (2004). *Rethinking Cultural Policy*. Maidenhead: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill Education, 139.

[6] See *Tate Modern: The First Five Years*, op. cit.

[7] Adorno, Theodor W. (1984). *Aesthetic Theory*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 48.

[8] Adorno, Theodor W. (1977). "Commitment". In R. Taylor (Ed.), *Aesthetics and Politics*. London: NLB, 180.

[9] Adorno, Theodor W. (1986). "Individual and Organisation" [1953]. In Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. VIII, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 456.

[10] Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*, op. cit., 48.

[11] See Benjamin, Walter (2005). "The Author as Producer" [1934]. In Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.