

The myth of creativity at work

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This paper explores concerns arising from a doctoral project on the vicissitudes of creative practice in design teams. While the project has been carried out in the context of architectural practice in particular, some insights may be generalized to organizational settings.

I will start by telling you a story.

— ‘Rosie’, asked the teacher, ‘how much does two-times-two make?’

Rosie frowned, thought, and answered:

— ‘75’.

— ‘Rosie’, the teacher repeated slowly, ‘two-times-two’.

— ‘347!’

— ‘Rosie... two-times-two ...’

— ‘8,529!’

— ‘Rosie! ... two-times-two!’

— ‘125,423!’

— ‘Rosie! Two-times-two!’

— ‘43,591,819!’

— ‘Rosie! Two-times-two makes FOUR!’

— ‘Oh ... is that *all*?’

I shall propose that the conception of creativity at work in western culture may be as problematic as the motivation for Rosie’s response, and shall be considering the way in which creativity is first reified – that is, made into a ‘thing’ – and then exalted as extraordinary.

I intend to pay particular attention to the vicissitudes of discourse in the construction of creativity, examining the connections between notions of inspiration, risk, excitement, art and madness. I shall explain and illustrate a number of relevant concepts, will provide examples from different contexts, and will then reflect on the implications of the phenomenon on our working practices.

1 Language and thinking

Creativity is associated with innovation – both terms refer to bringing something into existence – but innovation points to making changes to something established and therefore producing something new. There are many competing definitions of creativity and I propose to settle on ‘the use of imagination in the production of new things (whether

ideas or objects)'. And will consider imagination itself as 'the capacity to form new ideas, images, or concepts of objects not present to the senses'.

During pilot studies in the project I interviewed a number of graphic designers and asked them whether and how did they stimulate their creativity, that is, how did they *fuel* or *feed* their imagination.

Only later I realized that my question implied models of the mind. 'Fuel the imagination' – imagination as a mechanical contraption. 'Feed the imagination' – as an organic model of the mind. Using a model may be inevitable, and one may remember Wilfred Bion's comments on the usefulness of a model of thinking derived from the emotional experience of the digestive system, to assist speaking of 'undigested facts' ¹.

The human capacity to translate (re-present) concepts into symbols and to articulate thoughts in language is what gives humans the ability to think. We do not think and then translate our thoughts into speech and writing – thinking itself is structured through language ². This led me to observe and record discussions of design decisions within groups of architects, analyzing the verbal exchanges where creativity is said to occur, paying attention to the vicissitudes of discourse and talk-in-action in the construction of reality ³, trying to ascertain any linguistic determinants of the creative moment, that is, when a new formulation takes place. Is there, I wondered, a discourse of creativity?

The term discourse is not just the manner in which we speak. It refers to the fact that the way we speak constructs what we perceive ⁴. In the traditional discourse about creativity, the creative act has been described as the moment in which the practitioner finds himself or herself taken over by *inspiration*. As the word implies, inspiration comes from outside – the magic stuff is breathed in. This idea that can be traced to classical Greek thought ⁵, which formalized the belief that emotions have an independent existence from human beings, as evident in the *fuel* and *feed* for the imagination I mentioned earlier. Emotions are around, as it were, and come into the mind with the in-breath, taking hold of the person. This belief has continued into the Jewish-Christian tradition – in the last book of the Christian Bible, St John tells of when the Spirit *came into him* and an angel dictated to him the text that became the book of Revelations (another term associated with creativity).

This separation between external and internal domains is very present in current everyday language, in expressions such as

- what has got into him?
- ... she was out of her mind
- ... bursting with anger
- ... full of doubt
- ... filled with laughter.

Perhaps because of the concomitant notion of fullness that these expressions imply, creativity appears so attractive. To be possessed by the gods; to exist, even if for an instant, in the 'fullness of being'.

2 Sexuality, intimacy, art

Like conception in sexuality (and we should notice that 'possession' has a sexual connotation), the intimacy of creativity is exciting and it is also frightening. Since in the creative act the creator feels exposed, it may be the experience of a manageable risk which makes the creative predicament pleasurable, as a representation of the ability to survive existentially threatening situations. This may partly explain the pleasure that humans derive from horror and action films. As anyone who has taken a roller coaster ride knows, the pleasure resides in the anticipation of the fear of annihilation and disintegration, followed by the relief of making it through. The physical excess of the violence of an almost free fall that is survived has an orgasmic quality.

Just as it happens with violence, madness poses another, psychological, threat of disintegration, and it is particularly in relation to creativity that madness has traditionally been associated with artistic practice. To be creative one must be 'out of one's mind', a state to be cultivated and which has been enshrined in the concept of the artist as the heroic sufferer⁶, the one who risks his physical and psychological integrity going into madness to serve **his** (notice the masculine pronoun) **muse** (notice the feminine noun).

Considering creativity as rooted in the practice of art restricts the perception of its occurrence across all other areas of human experience. Donald Winnicott stated the necessity of separating the idea of creation from works of art, proposing that 'creativity belongs not to the manufacture of artefacts but to the engagement of the individual with external reality.'⁷

This engagement is mediated by the human capacity to translate (re-present) concepts into symbols and to articulate thoughts in language. While some authors⁸ have cogently argued that the creativity of artists and designers is the consequence of a particular type of personality, it is this linguistic capacity that gives humans the ability to think, and creativity results from this innate capacity, manifested in every human endeavour – in art, science, education, industry and trade – towards improvement and transformation.

Art, on one hand, may be an outcome-centred high-unpredictability practice – the maker may not know in advance what they are aiming at – and therefore it does not require a brief or description of the expected features of the artwork, as these will emerge in the process of the making. Organizational consultancy, on the other hand, works by design, which may be defined as devising 'courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones'⁹. Both design and consultancy require an explicit brief, i.e., an account of the problem and of the desired outcomes of the intervention, beyond the production of pleasure. The brief, in order to be operational, will identify the criteria that the solution must necessarily fulfil to produce an effective transformation of the original situation into the preferred state.

However, it will be useful to consider the difference between effective and efficient. Effective is what delivers an intended result. Efficient does the same without waste or excess and is concomitant with a particular aesthetic experience of order and

elegance. In fact, there seems to be something beautiful in the elegance of creativity, as the experience of beautiful simplicity lingers. We may wonder with astonishment, how could not I/we/someone think of that solution before?

3 Concreteness and commodification

But a difficulty becomes evident – our species are prone to transform abstract notions into concrete objects, paradoxically disowning their own experience, confusing function and object. Thus, like inspiration, creativity may become reified, as a consequence of the predisposition to ‘apprehend human phenomena as if they were things, that is, in non-human or possibly supra-human terms; [as if human products are] facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will. ... The reified world is, by definition, a dehumanized world.’¹⁰

You may remember the original title of one of the themes in this symposium: ‘Creativity in crises’, later changed to ‘Risks, creativity and destructiveness’. While the original may have also referred to creativity at times of crises, this problematic formulation also pointed to creativity itself as the subject undergoing the crisis, a someone or something to which things happen.

Reification and misplaced concreteness¹¹ are two of the conditions for the emergence of commodities. You will be aware that goods (fabric for clothing, clothing itself, crafts, food stuff) were initially produced for consumption within the immediate social group. However, as production increased, any unused surplus began to be exchanged for other stuff, and this gave products, above their use value (what they were needed for), an exchange value (what they could be traded for). Simple commodity production was the economic system of early societies, bartering products with one’s neighbours, at a market or place for exchange. But, when owners/producers made profit and grew in size, they were able to buy the labour of those who did not own the means of production and whom they might now employ. Thus, labour itself became a commodity.

The value of a commodity is determined by supply and demand, which causes the exchange value to fluctuate. Monetary systems removed some of the difficulties of a barter system, e.g., if a farmer wished to get a pair of shoes, he had to find a shoemaker who wanted wheat. But when money became the norm, he could sell his wheat to anyone for money and use the money to buy shoes from any shoemaker.

In the culture of commodity production that gave birth to capitalism, creativity, like labour, knowledge, and any other social product, has become commodified, and like money, taste or status, is now offered as a product for exchange. This is in evidence in contemporary design practice. A cursory look at design group websites and publicities¹² shows the proliferation of statements offering creativity as the object of consumption, misleading both designer and client into believing that creativity can be turned into something to be consumed and therefore subjected to power and possession. This is partly in evidence by the proliferation of ‘designer objects’, i.e., consumables which are presented as having the added value of being the product of creative practice. Creativity

has become a commodity and is consumed as a brand, just like cars, drinks, celebrities and governments¹³. This particular branding is also used by business and management organizations. Organizations do not just engage in the creative production of services – they also (and sometimes, primarily) sell the creativity of their approach as that *what is sought by the client* beyond the solution to a particular problem. What consumers consume, therefore, is the brand – or creativity – where the value is imagined to reside. Say I was able to offer you (as a gift) either the secret recipe of the drink made by Coca-Cola, or the rights to its brand – which one would you be best advised to choose?

A similar dynamic occurs in education in art, design and the humanities, when both the student and the teacher are under the illusion that creativity is an external essence or gift, unconsciously experienced concretely as an item that the course or the teacher actually have. The teacher can then be easily set up and seduced by the student's desire and flattering belief that it is in the teacher's power to offer this gift. The idealization of the teacher's role by teacher and student, by designer and client, by analyst and analysand – or by organizational consultants and their clients – needs to be grappled with and processed by both, as this expectation cannot be fulfilled.

4 The workings of (unconscious) desire

I referred to the notion of crisis earlier on, a term that comes from Gk. *krísi* 'decision', as the 'turning point in a disease when an important change takes place, indicating either recovery or death'). Like climax, crisis refers to this critical turning point as the location of excitement, the anticipation of the release of the accretion of stimuli.

At the root of this there is an 'imaginary' (rather than imaginative) engagement with the nature of creativity. By Imaginary I refer to what Jacques Lacan described as one of the registers of the mind, the other two being the Real and the Symbolic. Žižek explained the relationship between the three registers using the game of chess as a metaphor. The rules one has to follow to play it are its symbolic dimension – 'knight' is defined only by the moves this figure can make. This is different to the Imaginary, which concerns the way the figures are shaped (knight, queen, bishop, etc.). And the Real is 'the entire set of contingent circumstances that affect the course of the game: the intelligence of the players, the unpredictable intrusions that may disconcert one player or cut the game short.'¹⁴

The imaginary cannot be dispensed with or overcome. It is the dimension of the human subject closest to animal psychology, and mammals show evidence of the imaginary as instinctual. The Darwinian 'struggle for existence' is not staged amongst different but near relations. As Lorenz described¹⁵, aggression manifests itself on sight of a member of the same species because the animal perceives the other as a likeness of the Self, that is, someone who has the same cravings and from whom they have to defend, and will therefore attack¹⁶. As a large and complex mammal (ruled not only by the imaginary but structured by the symbolic), human beings have the capacity both to create and to destroy, sometimes even indistinctively, as when in *basic assumption*

fight/flight, shifting positions with great speed, unable to imagine (i.e., form a mental concept of) an Other that is not an imaginary Self.

An article from *The Guardian* newspaper earlier this year suggested the likelihood of aliens being just like us, providing an almost banal example of the imaginary at work. It read 'Extra-terrestrials might not only resemble us but have our foibles, such as greed, violence and a tendency to exploit others' resources, said a professor of evolutionary paleobiology from Cambridge University.'¹⁷

It is only by the development of an ego-based reaction-formation¹⁸ that the Other can be conceived as someone different, with whom the Self can identify and empathize (understand and feel their feelings), allowing for ethical regard. These contradictory impulses make up a complex species, having to balance the tension between individual gain and common good, assisted by their unique capacity for imagination.

The imaginary (rather than the imaginative) aspect of creativity can be explored with reference to *desire*, which Lacan described as a continuous force that cannot be satisfied and is to be found at the heart of human existence¹⁹. (Unconscious) desire does not refer simply to the sexual drive or how it is evident over the sexualization of culture, but it is an early (primitive) configuration that may be explained thus: the need of the child (who makes demands by calling or crying) may be nourishment or security. But because it is given by someone, the presence of this Other who gives the nourishment soon acquires importance by itself – this presence symbolizes the Other's love. So after the need has been satisfied (the infant has been fed or appeased) what continues to exist and remains unsatisfied is the craving for love. This left-over that cannot be satisfied is desire. So, beyond the efficient solution or decision (the nourishment) regarding the design or business question, creativity is what is still unconsciously and inevitably longed for (the Other's love) and the solution/decision, even if efficient, can never be fully satisfactory.

Thus, creativity becomes a fetish, a term that we can consider from both political and psychoanalytic perspectives. According to Karl Marx, capitalism fetishizes commodities, for 'as soon as [an object] steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent'²⁰ and they are believed to contain value, neglecting the effects of labour in their manufacture.

As a fetish, creativity is the location of perverse and naïve attraction as distinct from the desired outcomes of production, and the task of the consultant is to expose the hollowness of creativity as a reified concept, exploring the workings of desire in the group. In that respect, creativity is an aspiration (i.e., the power or spirit to be taken in, made flesh, to become one with) that can never be attained, because it is an instance of the surplus meaning, a remnant or left-over, the object of anxiety, as the *cause of desire* rather than that towards which desire tends. That is to say, creativity is 'the feature on whose account we desire the object'²¹. We don't just want an object on its qualities, but for being 'creative'; we do not prefer a drink for its flavour, but by the illusionary promise it appears to deliver. For Lacan, 'the fundamental impasse of human desire is that it is [...]

desire for the other, desire to be desired by the other and, especially, desire for what the other desires.’²² Furthermore, ‘... desire is a social product [as it is] always constituted in a dialectical relationship with the perceived desires of other subjects’²³.

This is given form by the concept of ‘added value’ or increased worth of a commodity as a result of marketing. The four factors which generate additional value are features, quality, customer perception (or image) and exclusiveness²⁴. Yet, in spite of its rational appearance, this list describes the workings of creativity as surplus value.

5 Solution as a myth

It is my contention that creativity, rather than being an attribute of the capacity to play, to invent, to engage with reality, tends to be ritually considered as a disembodied essence that only some individuals (artists, designers, managers, leaders) and organizations have or excel in – rather than a quality intrinsic to human nature. Considering that creativity is limited to the few is a myth, a social construction that naturalizes a narcissistic narrative.

Lévi-Strauss posited that myths are not reservoirs of encoded meaning but ‘structures that realize themselves in and through the listener (in this respect their meaning is always local). “A myth, like a piece of music, is a score whose silent executors are the audience.”²⁵

The myth of creativity at work proposes that there is something magical, ineffable that others have, obscuring the fear of barrenness. In that respect, creativity is an aspiration (i.e., the power or spirit to be taken in, made flesh, to become one with) that can never be attained. The wish to make the creative extraordinary is a consequence of a limiting cultural discourse with the intention of coping with the impossibility of satisfying unconscious desire. As a consequence, one of the tasks of the organizational consultant is to address the hollowness of the individual and organizational pursuit of creativity as a reified concept, as a (cultural) myth, by exploring the workings of desire in the group, that is, by the use of the symbolic (i.e., language) to ‘dislodge the disabling fixations of the imaginary’²⁶. We must reclaim the commonality of creativity, which is to be found in any exchange, in any action with the potential to transform our experience, exposing creativity as ‘ordinary’ in the way that Raymond Williams proposed in respect of Culture, stating that ‘the system of meanings and values which a capitalist society has generated has to be defeated in general and in detail by the most sustained kinds of intellectual and educational work.’²⁷ The task at hand is to expose that

Culture is ordinary. [...] Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is a constant debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact and discovery, writing themselves into the land.²⁸

After all, creativity is the innate human dialogic capacity (i.e., reasoning with an other) towards transformation effected within the boundaries of an actual, virtual or imagined group, constructed by the conscious and unconscious discourse(s) of the group. In effect, the practitioner is in both an actual and an imagined *conversation* – a term whose etymology is ‘turning things over with others’. In a now classical work on reflective practices, Donald Schön considered designing itself to be

‘a conversation with the materials of a situation. [...] The designer [...] shapes the situation, in accordance with his initial appreciation of it, the situation “talks back”, and he responds to the situation's back-talk.’²⁹

6 Staying with the paradox

I have argued in this paper that the wish to make the creative extraordinary is a consequence of a limiting discourse with the intention of coping with the anxiety arousing due to the impossibility of satisfying unconscious desire. However, creativity is indeed extraordinary, whether in procreation, in art, or at work – when devising, planning, and managing transformations. The story of the two Jews in a train seems appropriate here:

- ‘Where are you going’, asks one.
- ‘To Warsaw’, responds the other.
- ‘Listen’, says the first man, ‘You tell me that you are going to Warsaw so that I will think that you are going to Lodz. But I happen to know that you are actually going to Warsaw. Why do you lie?’

Why say that creativity is extraordinary when it is, in fact, extraordinary? This is a paradox that remains open and should not be closed, at the danger of simplifying the complexity and richness of the concept. But how can creativity be simultaneously a quality both ordinary and extraordinary? How can we acknowledge another aspect of desire, that of the teacher for the learner to learn, the analyst's desire for the growth of the analysand, the consultant's for the success of the consultation? It has to be left open rather than resolved. The myth of creativity has to be seen as managing that which cannot be managed in any other way – a simplification denies it, its exaltation reifies and erases it.

So, I can now return to the title of my paper to remind us that the myth of creativity at work in Western culture is rooted in the inevitability of dissatisfaction that drives us (and Rosie) to value that which is imaginary (in Lacanian terms) because of the lack which cannot be experienced in its distressing full dimension. Only when the impossibility of satisfying an unconscious totalizing desire is mourned, this will foster an efficient (that is, elegant) transformational engagement with the creative ordinariness of our actual working practices. ■

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