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Re-Futuring Creative Economies: Beyond Bad Dreams and the Banal Imagination

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At a time when it is becoming more urgently necessary to question the capitalist foundations of economic life, supporting 'growth', free markets and unfettered accumulation remain the foundational premises of 'creative economy'[1] policy. In the UK, for example, the dominant claim is that investment in culture and creativity boosts economic activity and national output – outlined in publications such as *Culture is Digital* (DDCMS, 2018), the *UK Digital Strategy* (DDCMS, 2017), *The Culture White Paper* (DCMS, 2016), the *UK Industrial Strategy* (HM Government, 2017, 2018), the *Independent Review of the Creative Industries* (Bazalgette, 2017) and in the complementary work of industry-facing agencies such as the Creative Industries Federation (2016). Such claims are echoed in the policy framings of other economically-powerful European nations such as France (France Créative, 2013) and Germany (BMWi, 2017), and have been consolidated at EU level through growth-oriented initiatives such as *Creative Europe* 2014-2020. Current EU plans for funding culture and creativity beyond 2020 seem set to further reinforce the growth-led agenda (European Commission, 2018; 2021). The creative economy policies of Australia (Government of Australia, 2013) and Canada (Canada Heritage, 2017) are similarly fixed on economic expansion as the primary objective. At wider level, while UNESCO through its *Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* (2005), *Creative Cities Network* (2017) and publications such as *Creative Economy Report* (2013), might more strongly advocate for more socially-just and locally-sensitive economic progress they tend to do so from within the confines of a conventional (GDP-focussed, capital-led) 'sustainable development' approach (see Isar, 2016, Throsby 2017). There is very little in this policy discourse that seeks to *question* capitalistic growth as the primary socio-economic objective, or that considers the more damaging and deleterious consequences of a commitment to ceaseless economic expansion. Indeed, this policy and advocacy work tends to more generally lack *any* explicitly environmental or (wider) ecological[2] priorities or perspectives.

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[1] The creative economy has no single definition; for UNCTAD (2018, no pagination) 'It is an evolving concept which builds on the interplay between human creativity and ideas and intellectual property, knowledge and technology. Essentially it is the knowledge-based economic activities upon which the 'creative industries' are based'. For Nesta (2013, 34) it is 'those economic activities which involve the use of creative talent for commercial purposes'. I use the term as a shorthand to capture the full range of the designated 'cultural and creative sectors' (European Commission, 2018) – the arts, media, and cultural and creative industries.

[2] I use the term ecological to refer generally to the symbiotic and integral relations between people, animals, processes and environment; and more specifically the relations between *the social and cultural, the economic and the environmental.*

In an era of unfolding and urgent crises[3], and growing concerns for climate justice, such a lack seems – to say the least – both inadequate and inappropriate. For those of us who accept that the current economic crisis is not a passing phase but enduring and systemic, and very much integrated with social inequalities and a growing abundance of environmental crises (Banks, 2018), it seems there is no better time for exponents of the creative economy to be thinking about more genuinely different and sustainable models of organising and producing. This means ways of making arts, media and culture that don't rest on assumptions of unchecked growth, and expansive exploitation of physical and human resources, but seek instead to divert from (or challenge) these conventional understandings, norms and practices. In this respect, of course, there are now a whole range of established and incipient 'socially-just', 'inclusive', 'ecological' 'transitional', 'post-growth', 'decolonised' and 'co-operative' forms of cultural industries production that appear to offer different ways of producing the creative economy (e.g. see de Peuter and Cohen, 2015; Fletcher, 2016; Imagine 2020, 2018; McHattie et al, 2019; O'Dair, 2015; Sandoval, 2018; Serafini, forthcoming). These are vital, valuable and worthy of our support, yet they also remain quite marginal, undervalued and outside of the orthodox imaginary of the creative economy. I see the task of any kind of *critical* creative economy studies is to bring these counter-initiatives further to the fore, while continuing to challenge established and hegemonic practices, and the range of imaginaries, metaphors and myths that sustain them.

I stress this latter point, since here I wish to draw particular attention to how orthodox narratives of creative economy have come to fix a set of what I would term *banal utopian imaginaries* in government, in organisations, in universities, in commercial life: positive stories and images of tomorrow that might initially appear complex and plural but are actually quite restricted in the range of creative futures they desire and present. These tend to be most avidly fashioned by those driving the upsurge in creative economy policy and advocacy, particularly now that this activity has come to be so strongly tied to technology, state industrial strategies, and faith in machines to deliver progressive and equitable social futures. To my mind however this positivity begins with its own negation – a denial of the existence of many of the problems with how the creative economy currently operates, and a refusal to acknowledge that delivering pacific social futures might be as much undermined by the creative economy as enhanced by it. What is more, as I will argue, these banal imaginaries not only serve to secure existing arrangements of power and inequality, and offer much less than they promise, they also work to close down the possibilities of other, potentially progressive and non-capitalistic, forms of creative economy developing or coming into being.

Creativity Economy and Ecological Crisis

It's worth thinking first, though, briefly, how we might have got to this point of neglect.

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[3] As I write, in early 2020, Australian bushfires, flooding in Indonesia and the emerging COVID-19 virus pandemic loom largest.

In the last 20 years, the creative economy has become an important policy focus internationally. Governments - especially in the richest nations - have turned to the creative economy to help drive post-industrial (and, now, post-financial crisis) economic growth, employment and social cohesion, partly based on assumptions that the creative sectors are greener, more socially inclusive and more sustainable than traditional industries (ACE, 2017; British Council, 2010; European Commission, 2018). However, the evidence-base supporting these assumptions is remarkably thin – and their opposite more likely true. A growing body of research in the arts, humanities and social sciences has argued that the creative economy is highly resource and energy intensive, socially exclusive, and, ultimately, at current levels of activity, ecologically unsustainable (Banks, 2018; Caraway, 2017; Maxwell and Miller, 2012; 2017; Murdock, 2018; Oakley et al, 2018).

Yet when it comes to ecological matters, governments and exponents of the creative economy have tended generally towards quiet-ism or indifference. Compared to manufacturing industries or primary extraction, creative industries tend to be (erroneously) presented as 'greener' (and therefore 'good') by nature (Maxwell and Miller, 2017). We also know that while the creative economy still tends to be favoured as a 'positive' solution to problems of social and economic restructuring, a large body of research has revealed the persistent spread of clearances, gentrifications, displacements and exclusive (and usually resource-hungry) developments that have occurred in the name of cultural regeneration or reanimation of 'dead' urban space (see Grodach et al, 2017; Oakley, 2015, Pratt, 2011). And even within the cultural quarters and districts that house the apparently equitable professional enclaves of cultural, media and creative industries, we know that deep rooted workforce inequalities are not only persisting but often also expanding (Banks, 2017; Saha, 2018).

Researchers and campaigners in the Global South, have alerted us to the plights of workers involved in the global extraction and supply chain of raw materials, or in processes of sweatshop manufacture producing creative economy goods for consumption in rich countries, as well as those involved in the global trade and circulation of waste, e-waste and detritus of the creative economy which creates problems of disposal, disassembly, toxic hazard, ill-health and death (e.g. see Chan, 2016; Cubitt, 2015; Grossman, 2016, Murdock, 2018; Taffel, 2016).

Many producers and policy-makers tend to stick to the optimistic claim that technological innovations and efficiency-savings in production will eventually overcome these ingrained problems and negative 'externalities', sufficient to ensure that economic growth can continue without fatally damaging ecological capacity. But the assumption that capitalistic growth can be absolutely (rather than simply relatively) 'decoupled' from ecological impacts looks increasingly like delusion (Jackson, 2017). In creative tech, the

rapidly expanding demand for electronic communications, entertainment and content is tending to generate environmental and energy costs that outstrip any savings made by efficiency improvements in the manufacture and design of individual technologies themselves (Caraway, 2017) – the so-called *Jevons Paradox.* The fashion industry might be pioneering new ways of making clothes more 'renewably' and 'responsibly' but the vast resources thrown at pricking the demand for new product and the staggering levels of waste and disposal this generates seems likely to offset any efficiency gains made (Thomas, 2019). The music industry – seemingly relocated to the dematerialized ether – creates and drives traffic through the expanding network of servers, generators, cables, devices and accessory hardware. As research is now revealing, the emissions and waste profile is displaced and made indirect, but not necessarily reduced (Devine, 2019). There are of course many other examples we could cite.

While most supporters of the creative economy have tended to gloss over these inconveniences, it is of course the case that *some* mainstream ecological approaches (such as 'sustainable development', 'inclusive growth', 'green growth', 'urban prosperity' and so on) have now been mooted for some greater coupling to the creative economy (I'm thinking here of the work of the OECD, World Bank, UNESCO and others[4]). Yet these tend to take for granted continued growth within an established economic framework: one where you can have more of the same if you make some well-meaning but minor concessions – but the direction of travel overall remains unchanged (see for example, Florida, 2017). But even if the economy climbs off the floor, the idea of economic development premised on *continually* expanding GDP and 'sustainably developing' (i.e. using up) existing resource will eventually hit some unavoidable bio-spherical limits (Hickel And Kallis, 2019). In parallel, since none of these approaches foreground labour issues or politics, societies must somehow address the absolute and relative poverty inequality and insecurity being accelerated by current economic and ecological transformations, which will, for many, increasingly challenge the sustainable bases of social cohesion, community and life itself – and it's no longer acceptable to pretend that cultural, creative and media industries are not implicated in this, because they are.

Creative Economies of Tomorrow?

This, then, offers some prelude or context, but I especially want to address how the creative economy's own banal and orthodox futurology - its stories, imaginaries and visions of tomorrow – has remained markedly indifferent to, or unaffected by, the need for system change. Indeed, while we might be suffering the expanding effects of sustained economic and eco-crisis you wouldn't necessarily know this by looking at any kind of orthodox discourse on the creative sectors. Just in the UK alone, the current Industrial Strategy (including the Creative Industries Sector Deal and AHRC Creative Clusters research programme), the Creative Industries Federation, most university innovation centres and business schools, and the British

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[4] See for example OECD (2020), UNESCO (2017), World Bank (2012)

Council abroad, have maintained faith in the dominant imaginary. This is the one that identifies the creative economy as a wealth-creating machine driven by enterprising individuals transacting in free markets, with upbeat growth projections, unfettered production of commodities, and unlimited technological expansion, consumption and national accumulation – the only real future considered palatable or imaginable:

> 'The UK's future will be built at the nexus of our artistic and cultural creativity and our technical brilliance. The Centre for Economics and Business Research 2018 World Economic League Tables identify this particular blend of creativity and technology skills as the driving force behind the UK's strong economic prospects over the long term1; a powerful combination of talents to project to the world as we prepare to leave the EU'. (Matt Hancock, *Culture is Digital,* 2018)

> 'Looking forward fifteen or twenty years to what our future economy could be like, in every scenario the Creative Industries are of central importance to the UK's productivity and global success. We have two great assets: the English language and our national capacity for creativity. But the skills and business models of this sector and of the wider creative economy are those which many experts judge to be of increasing importance: blended technical and creative skills; collaborative interdisciplinary working; entrepreneurialism and enterprise. (…) The cultural and creative sectors are the engine of the UK's international image and soft power'. (Peter Bazalgette, *The Independent Review of the Creative Industries,* 2017)

True, tokenistic nods to social inclusion, 'sustainability' and economic transition might garner some mention – but mainly to prove the powerful are not ogres. History shows that those in government and the organization with a real commitment to progressive change tend to find themselves blocked or stymied. Ultimately, then, it seems the powerful will continue to trust the market to make any necessary social adjustments as it expands once again into infinite space. But this is a future that is built on past assumptions and expectations that can no longer hold.

The narrow optimism of this economic projection is mirrored in the thinness of the social world such speculation now anticipates and imagines. What is at stake here is not simply a forecast about likely economic performance, but a whole set of assumptions about the organisation and relations of tomorrow's common life. Orthodox creative economy imaginaries have become so tightly harnessed to a script that states simply 'culture is digital', 'culture is immersive', or that culture is simply benign and 'good for growth', and need only be properly harnessed and arraigned in order to bring goods for all. Yet this masks a dubious disavowal of politics and the deeply commercial and disaggregating logic that underpins the strategy – one where social and political problems (such as questions of material inequality, cultural inclusion, participation and justice) – can too easily be reduced to problems of inadequate connectivity or failures of individual engagement or enterprise. The true beneficiaries are, of course, those emboldened and

enabled corporations investing in monopoly building across platforms, software commodities, AI systems, algorithmic computing and machine learning. The social worlds they imagine seem to mirror their own corporate fantasies of digitally afforded, frictionless and aseptic human encounter. The dominant stock-imaged sociality of the creative economy is one which seems perversely obsessed with well-dressed, VR-helmeted male monads groping blindly into the future, bedazzled by the profundity of their own interiorized experience. Such imagery also reinforces the assumption that the primary use and mode of engagement of creative economy tech is *personal* - geared around fulfilling the satisfactions of the capable and empowered consumer-individual interfacing with the co-present experience, entertainment or augmented reality in hand.

We should note also that creative economy advance never really appears as *initially* operative in any kind of real geographical context other than this characteristic landscape of corporate interiors; sanitised modular offices, labs, co-working spaces and work-pods, or other similarly indistinguishable non-places largely unmarked by difference or social complexity. Such environments bear no traces of crisis or its potential – but tend only to reproduce the idea that no kind of restriction *or* limitation on the expansionist tendencies of creative class professionals will ever be truly necessary.

It's not just big tech, here, of course. Translated and taken into the art space, or gallery or museum, we're told that creative economy approaches are justified because they are driven by the increased expectations of established audiences and consumers for new kinds of 'immersive experience' – the desire for new stories and sensations told and sold through interactive technology. Some of this stuff is highly admirable, good and impressive - dazzling, even. Some of it, less so. But whether immersion entails anything other than absorption in personalised consumer experience (even if those experiences are shared) is not yet clear – and how it supersedes or extends the more traditional 'immersions' able to be provided by arts and culture – remains to be seen. The policy nexus is in thrall to the privatised, commercial application of technology, much more than the cultivation of cultural democracy, or the production of convivial social tools in the broadest interests of the community. This raises questions arise about the democratic and inclusive potential currently enabled by the creative economy monies now being directed at the arts. This is certainly not to deny the many good things arts organisations and their partners are doing in terms of using funding and resources to make arts and culture more socially accessible and engaging to non-established users. But what seems less prominent in any kind of orthodox discourse on creative economy is recognition that the capacities for immersion and imaginative futurity are *socially endowed* as much as technologically driven. They rely on 'immersive' investment in democratic education, engagement and access programmes across the whole social field and not just the existing coterie of socially advantaged audience-users. They also require well-trained and fairly-paid staff working in a diversity of sustainable and valued organisations – certainly as much as on any kind of disassociated 'roll-out' of 'content' amidst digitally-optimized 'solutions'. Additionally, immersion in a real future of the arts and culture – as opposed to a romanticized or

individualized digital utopia – demands a much closer engagement with the likely consequences of a world increasingly shorn of the securities provided by carbon and resource-rich economies underpinned by a relatively stable social democratic polity.

Why is it then that the creative economy seems blind to those emergent crises that will fundamentally transform its own conditions of possibility? Partly the usual reasons – vested power and interests. But it's also a wider societal problem of disbelief – as the political philosophers have argued (e.g. Forrester, 2017), it's always been easier to abdicate responsibility for the future in order to focus on the immediate needs of the present, partly because it's been seen as more justified to extend a moral obligation to the living rather than to non-existent future persons. But such an orientation is only justified in a world where further material progress can be assumed and ecological limits need barely be considered. Where the future was once a remote and misted abstraction which societies gradually evolved *towards* from the greater clarity of the present, now the future seems to be rudely reversing *into* the present, and it is the escalating arrival of the faraway in the here-and-now that seems most urgently to matter. So we might say that while the orthodox creative economy - as it most commonly appears - might wish to be seen as exciting and futuristic it now appears paradoxically *anachronistic* - increasingly and wilfully stuck in a rapidly receding past; a world of possibility now seriously on the wane. But we shouldn't of course discount the seated *power* of its projections; orthodox creative economy futures are not simply sets of stories and images to be dismissed, but constitutive elements of the desired futures of the powerful in the present, and must be addressed critically in so far as they remain capable of shaping decision-making and orienting human action.

We need to challenge the limitations of these projections, because, to my mind, and to borrow from the design philosopher Tony Fry (2015; and see Escobar, 2017), they are at risk of *defuturing the future.* The most orthodox imaginaries of the creative economy appear to be instrumentally and artificially narrowing (rather than expanding) the range of possible ways of thinking about culture, economy and technology and ways of doing and being human; an approach, which, while being cloaked in the rhetoric of openness may actually be closing us down at the worst imaginable time. And such imaginaries fail to acknowledge how they are actually *sustaining the unsustainable* in the limited range of their own economic, social and environmental assumptions and practices. In this respect we might say that the creative economy is now culpably *de-worlding* us*, literally, in its accelerated contributions to ecological crisis, and figuratively, and conceptually, in its pre-emptive closing down of the cultural imagination and all the diverse possibilities and promises that we know culture and arts can offer.

Towards Re-Futuring?

So where now? Though there has never been any ideal state of grace, it is important to keep hold of and extend those progressive elements of the social, and of politics, that have long proved sustaining and energising to cultural academics, producers and activists (see Banks, 2017, de Peuter and Cohen, 2015). We must also keep up the critique of actually existing conditions. But I would also say, in the face of de-futuring, we might also look to *re*-future. To re-future is to reject the authority of the already prescribed future-present in order to rethink the fundamental categories we live by – in our case, 'economy', 'creation', 'growth', 'inclusion' and 'choice', for example – and to work in pursuit of more socially-situated media, technologies and forms of art and cultural production that are not 'decontextualised and value neutral, but embodied, place based, convivial and conducive to care' (Escobar, 2017, p. 35). The creative economies of tomorrow might serve us better if they drew more on heterodox, feminist and ecological social and economic thought – where production is not imagined as a limitless and empty abstraction, but more concretely understood in the context of different human (and non-human) needs, and connected to the ongoing obligations, contradictions and challenges of our shared social and ecological reproduction. Such a holistic perspective might help inform the creation of worlds of cultural production, circulation and exchange that focus less on GDP and 'sustainable development' and more on sustainable *prosperity* – worlds where human (and non-human) well-being can finally be disassociated from crude, economistic formulas (Jackson, 2017, Oakley et al, 2018, Weeks, 2011). In re-futuring we might also find licence to engage in the kind of genuine 'open thinking' (and I mean more in the sense of a Theodor Adorno or a Donna Haraway rather than a Google or Facebook) that allows to move outside of the accepted and banal discourse on creative economy and posit for alternative or transitional creative economies, ways of being and provisioning in the cultural sphere that take seriously the need for progressive and egalitarian change, in all social domains.

There is real possibility here because what art, culture and aesthetic production will look like, sound like, feel like or aspire to be under crisis or transition is not yet anywhere near being on the policy agenda. But it should be, and we can help put it there. We already have innumerable social utopias (both good and bad) fomenting in public discourse, many new 'post-work, 'post-growth' and other ecological imaginaries emerging across the humanities and social sciences, and actually existing alternative economic futures being constructed and lived in practice. Now would be a good time to see some new *creative economy imaginaries* emerging, because while our critical inventories of existing harm and inequality are valuable they are also perhaps insufficient. The social facts of the present could be used to better inform our own more ambitious attempts at *re-worlding;* that is, for us to say collectively what kinds of alternative futures we might wish to see. These might be conceived in the form of 'real utopias' as the late Erik Olin Wright (2010) suggested, practical and existing ways of living together better, or explored in the idea of 'utopia as method' proposed by Ruth Levitas (2017), where the future is cast as a constant and unending experiment in better ways to prosper and thrive, rather than a riddle to be solved or fixed with the correct solution or masterplan.

In taking these steps academics and practitioners can avoid falling into the trap of thinking our critical work isn't important – that the culture, arts and media industries are somehow going to be mere distractions to the more ominous challenges to come. But whatever future transpires, it will undoubtedly be cast in the imagination, created, aestheticized and sensed; it will be pervasively mediated, screened and projected, and (of course) intensively laboured over, by many of the same individuals, communities and organisations that have always laboured. I want to propose, then, that the job of critical creative economy scholars and activists is not simply to make those futures apparent, but to also contribute positively to their progressive imagining and building.

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