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978-1-107-03343-6 - Exploring Creativity: Evaluative Practices in Innovation,  
Design, and the Arts

Edited by Brian Moeran and Bo T. Christensen

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

BRIAN MOERAN AND BO T. CHRISTENSEN

This book explores creative processes surrounding the conception, design, manufacture, appraisal, and use of creative goods. In short, it explores creativity. More specifically, it is about evaluative practices in the creative industries: about the choices made by different participants in a ‘creative world’, as they go about conceiving, composing or designing, performing or making, selling and assessing a variety of creative products. Consisting of ten case studies focusing on a novel, a travel guidebook, performances of a piece of classical music, an advertising campaign, a line of faience tableware, an oriental carpets auction, new Nordic cuisine, film juries, design, and fashion design, this book reveals a broad range of material, stylistic, aesthetic, organizational, situational, and financial factors by which different actors are guided and constrained during the course of their work.

As a general rule, creative work moves through many hands before it finally passes from producer to consumer. In so doing, it is subject to all sorts of judgements by a long series of intermediaries (professional colleagues, clients, performers, managerial staff, and so on) before some sort of evaluative standard of what constitutes creativity is arrived at in relation to work whose quality has yet to be determined by those consumers at whom it is directed (Hauser 1982: 431). The studies presented here show that, to understand the meaning of ‘creativity,’ we have to explore what choices are made by those involved and from what range of possibilities they are selected (Becker 2006: 26). In short, they take creativity out of the crypt and air it in the alley.

Creativity is a word much used and abused – by politicians, civil servants, policy makers, administrators, and academics, among others. The majority of books with ‘creativity’ in their titles are in the fields of business and organizational management, which – like politicians, civil servants, and policy makers – see creativity as a – sometimes *the* – key to commercial success. We also find them in the field of education, ‘which is supposed to produce the kinds of creative individuals who will go on to

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succeed in a knowledge-based economy' (Ingold and Hallam 2007: 2). In other words, creativity is celebrated entirely in economic terms as education feeds into the organization of capitalism and business.

And yet creative *processes* are rarely examined in depth in the manner of the case studies presented in this book. This is not to say that *Exploring Creativity* is the only volume of its kind; far from it. Anthropologists, artists, authors, business and management gurus, consumer and cultural studies scholars, linguists, poets, psychologists, philosophers, sociologists, and many, many more have had a lot to say about creativity over the years. But this is the only volume that we are aware of which systematically uncovers the creative processes at work in different forms of cultural production: the (re-)writing, editing, and marketing of an historical novel; the creation of a 'funky-formal' fashion line for HUGO BOSS; preparations for the first performances of a piece of classical music written for not one but four string quartets; the design of electronic goods at Bang & Olufsen; the introduction of a faience tableware range at Royal Copenhagen; the concept of 'good work' for travel guidebook writers in the face of digitization and the Internet; the play-off between age and novelty in the evaluation of the quality and value of oriental carpets; the struggle by different actors for recognition of their role in an advertising campaign that won prizes for its 'creativity'; the processes by which prizes are themselves awarded at film festivals; and the awards systems developed by Michelin and San Pellegrino in the rating of *haute cuisine*.

This in itself invites us to say here and now what the book is *not* about. It is not about the study of consumption practices as cultural or symbolic creativity (Willis 1990). Nor is it about cultural creativity and resistance (Fiske 1989), the aestheticization of everyday life (Featherstone 1991), or cultural intermediaries (e.g. Bourdieu 1984). It does not consider creativity as a 'weapon of the weak': 'the underdogs of the modern world: consumers, workers, women, teenagers, colonial and post-colonial subjects' (Löfgren 2001: 97). It does *not* 'celebrate' creativity (Liep 2001: 1); it merely explores it (Boden 1994).

### **Creativity, innovation, and improvisation**

This volume provides ethnographies of creativity at work, although only some of those whose stories are told use the word 'creativity' themselves to describe what they are doing. Fashion designers and advertising

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creatives do, but generally not musicians, writers, designers, or potters. 'Innovation' is another word that may or may not be used. It is important in Bang & Olufsen design, where it implies an ability to produce something that appeals to consumers at a relatively affordable price (Krause-Jensen). It is not important so far as inspectors for the *Michelin Guide* are concerned, but is so for its rival, the San Pellegrino list of the world's '50 best restaurants', under the headings of 'novelty' and 'originality' (Christensen and Strandgaard Pedersen). All these words – creativity, innovation, originality, quality, and so on – are semantically dense 'key-words' (Williams 1976) that allow different constituents in a creative field to propose, negotiate, argue over, and, provisionally at least, sometimes agree on a particular meaning or set of meanings (Moeran 1984). That such negotiations do not always end in a positive result may be seen in the argument that took place between a digital shop and the advertising agency which employed it to help produce an award-winning campaign: each claimed, and refuted the other's claim to, 'originality.' What matters to all concerned is who takes credit for things such as 'originality,' where creative ideas are generated, how they develop, who contributes what, and to what ends they do so: in short, who defines a creative narrative (Malefyt). Those who are publicly recognized for their 'creativity' – an advertising agency or well-known design company, for example – are not necessarily those who create winning concepts; others – a digital shop or independent designer – may be the driving forces behind them. Legitimacy is everything.

One word that illustrates the social processes described in many of the chapters that follow is 'improvisation.' It is how different people decide on and evaluate improvisations made along the way that is of interest, and not just the final product. The argument put forward here rests on two contrasting theories of creativity proposed by anthropologists John Liep (2001) and Timothy Ingold, with Elizabeth Hallam (2007). While the former equates creativity with innovation (Liep 2001: 2), the latter counter-argues that innovation can be gauged only by looking backwards at past products (which is basically how politicians and administrators function because it provides them with a means of *measurement*). What is required, they propose, is a focus on *processes* of 'in-the-making', rather than on the *products* made. At the heart of such processes is improvisation, and it is improvisation, not innovation, which explains 'creativity' because it is *forward-* not backward-looking (Ingold and Hallam 2007: 2–3).

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This is a neat distinction, but alas, it doesn't quite work in practice, for it is often hard for those working together in creative situations to detach improvisation from innovation, process from product. Perhaps this is a characteristic particular to cultural production in the 'creative' industries, which are always conceptualizing and manufacturing new products on the basis of past products and experiences. For them, primarily because they are working for the most part with defined genres and brands, the present *is* the past.<sup>1</sup> This is made very clear in how travel guidebook writers improvise with novel descriptive language in their otherwise formulaic tasks, determined by previous guidebooks (Alačovska); and in how a team of young fashion designers must first comprehensively understand and then 'tweak' the BOSS Orange brand in such a way that their collection is 'true' to the brand's image but also advances it onto new symbolic territory (Vangkilde).

Contributors to this book for the most part follow the line that creativity is *product-as-process*, neither one, nor the other, but both together. Take, for example, Clayton Childress's account of the making of the novel *Jarrettsville*, which elicits so many different reactions at different stages in its production and reception that it is more a 'multiplicity of novels' than a single work of fiction. Its author, Cornelia Nixon, first heard the basic plot from her mother at the age of sixteen on an airplane: one of her ancestors had shot and killed her fiancé while pregnant with his child, in front of fifty witnesses during a parade celebrating the fourth anniversary of the surrender at Appomattox in a border town in Northern Maryland following the Civil War. This, together with a family photograph, a single line in a court transcript, a memory of an old backyard, and other details, she gradually turned into a full-blown manuscript that was then rejected by one publisher after another because it didn't fit neatly into any single publishing genre. Was it 'literary' or 'popular,' 'romantic' or 'historical' fiction?

One comment from an editor spurred Nixon to rewrite her novel in such a way that a story about a person (*Martha's Version*) became a story about a place (*Jarrettsville*) and its structural effects upon the characters in the novel. Accepted for publication by an independent publisher called Counterpoint, the revised manuscript was subjected to further evaluation of two different kinds: one related to the image of the

<sup>1</sup> In this respect, we might note that creative industries do not even begin to materialize over Ingold and Hallam's intellectual horizon.

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publisher; the other to the genre in which the novel needed to be marketed. How was *Jarrettsville* to become a ‘Counterpoint book’? The fact that it spanned genres by being both ‘literary’ and ‘popular’ was good, as was Cornelia Nixon’s established reputation as a novelist: both fitted the Counterpoint image. But the novel’s opening, with its focus on Martha’s love affair, might lead readers to think of it as a ‘romantic’ novel – and romantic novel it was not, given its unhappy ending. So the author engaged in a further rewrite and reorganization of her material, until the publisher was able to classify and market *Jarrettsville* as a readily recognizable example of ‘historical fiction’ (even though it wasn’t!).

This case study, like many others in this book, elegantly illustrates the processes involved in conceptualizing, making, marketing, and using cultural products, and how different people (writer, editor, publisher, cover designer) are obliged to improvise along the way in order to meet certain established preconditions of the product with which they are engaged. In their edited volume, Ingold and Hallam (2007) posit four characteristics of cultural improvisation which we outline here with examples from other chapters in *Exploring Creativity*. But what we wish to emphasize from our ethnographic experiences is that improvisation is never *only* generative or temporal, never *only* relational or in the way people work. Rather, creative people make use of different forms of improvisation sequentially and/or simultaneously as circumstance requires.

The first characteristic of improvisation is *generative*. Kasper Vangkilde recounts how five young designers, who form a ‘Talent Pool’ at HUGO BOSS, Ticino, are told by the Creative Director to come up with something ‘truly innovative and creative’ and present a ‘funky-formal’ collection for the BOSS Orange brand. The young designers first have to get to know the brand, then seek to be *inspired* as they transform it into a compelling and valuable *concept*. This generates a whole string of ideas – such as Double Life, Surface and Soul, Liquid Cut – that they transform into designs situated between newness and continuity of the brand. But which is ‘better’ than which? They battle their ideas out among themselves in a series of strategic exchanges, as each tries to convert inspiration into a compelling concept and so justify their status as a *designer*. But in order not to create winners and losers among themselves, they avoid singling out any one concept and, instead, present several in the final round, since it is the

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Creative Director who is the ultimate arbiter of BOSS Orange taste. They work, then, in a ‘creativity of uncertainty,’ guided only by a vague knowledge of and feeling for ‘the time’ (or *zeitgeist*), and it is such uncertainty that allows the unexpected to emerge: funky-formal as ‘ergonomic,’ ‘energetic,’ and somehow ‘twisted’!

The second characteristic of improvisation is *relational*. In many of the chapters that follow, we see how mutually constitutive relationships are forged – and, in the case of an advertising campaign discussed by Timothy de Waal Malefyt, occasionally questioned – by people working together. Through a concatenation of circumstances, the Danish potter, Ursula Munch-Petersen, for example, found herself attached to Royal Copenhagen’s porcelain factory. There, as Brian Moeran relates, she set about developing a new line of faience tableware. To do so successfully, she needed the assistance of Royal Copenhagen’s glaze expert, with whom she tested, discarded, and eventually selected a number of different coloured glazes for her pots. At the same time, though, she had to gain the respect of the product manager, with whom she worked to develop suitable forms, and who liaised between her and the company’s board of directors, advising her about what to do when, and where to draw the line regarding her craft ideals. She also had to enlist the willing cooperation of other specialists who made mock-ups of her pottery forms, as well as final moulds for casting them. It was the combined abilities of potter, glaze specialist, product manager, and various different factory workers to improvise as they went along, and so to overcome the technical and managerial difficulties that emerged, that enabled the famed *Ursula* line to be mass produced, in spite of reservations on the part of senior management.

Third, improvisation is *temporal*. A piece of music written for four string quartets may have existed first as a composition on paper, but it then had to be played for Sir John Tavener’s musical vision to be realized. Yet, getting four string quartets to play *together* – or ‘ensemble’, in Shannon O’Donnell’s phrase – did not involve a simple conversion of written notes to sound. The layout of the venue for the premiere performance – the Rubin Museum of Art in New York – necessitated each quartet being placed on a different level of a spiral staircase. As a result, players in one quartet could not see other players in other quartets. Yet visibility is crucial to communication between musicians, who need gestured cues to maintain a musical rhythm and so ‘ensemble.’ The resolution of timing thus became central to performance and different

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options were tried. A lead violinist, for example, stood up to enable others to see and follow her, but she was visible only to some and not to all others. In the end, the issue was resolved – unwillingly on the part of some of the musicians – by use of a ‘click-track,’ a metronome heard only by the lead player in each quartet, which enabled her to keep in time with the others. Temporal improvisation allowed a musical piece to be successfully performed.

Finally, improvisation is in the *ways we work*. Ana Alačovska’s account of travel guidebook writers nicely illustrates this characteristic. Guidebook writers are committed to doing as good a job as possible within the limits imposed upon them by their publishers in what is known as ‘the editorial brief.’ Constrained by stringent rules about word length, detailed stylistic guidelines, extensive product manuals, and meticulous instructions that characterize both the genre of the travel guidebook and the brief given to each writer by the publisher, guidebook writers take pride in meticulously following instructions (since this may lead to repeat commissions), while at the same time providing work that is ‘atmospheric,’ that has ‘an angle,’ and that gives a sense of ‘being there’ for an imagined audience. Because they care about the products they create, guidebook writers constantly employ craft standards, or inner criteria of excellence, by which they judge good or bad performance.

It seems fair to say that the vast majority of creativity research, especially in psychology, has focused mainly on generative processes: on how creative ideas and products come to surface through more or less ‘special’ processes such as insight, which arrives seemingly ‘*ex nihilo*.’ Part of the reason may be that a lot of the playfulness and fun in creativity comes from these generative aspects; it was always more fun to follow wild ideas than it was to sort the Post-its and make a plan for action in a brainstorming session. Much of the romantic feel of creativity comes from closely tying it to such specialized, seemingly magical, processes that bring it into being. In this book, we shift the emphasis to the equally important processes of being able to ‘explore ideas,’ and to ‘recognize creativity when you see it,’ in order to guide the creative process ever onwards, or to select the uniquely valuable among a pool of ordinaries. The overwhelming focus on generative processes in past research, at the expense of evaluation or exploration, seems unjustified since it does not matter whether someone generates five potentially creative ideas if they are not picked out for further development

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and brought to completion in the creative process. Creativity involves a heavy dose of both generative and evaluative practices (Finke, *et al.* 1992). This book, then, focuses on the much overlooked judging, picking, choosing, guiding, and directing of creativity. Importantly, we do not intend to replace one romantic set of (generative) processes with another romantic set of (evaluative) processes. By focusing on evaluative practices across a broad range of creative domains, this book uncovers everyday evaluation in the creative industries, and shows it to be much more about bitter quarrels, negotiations, compromises, and ‘books by many authors’ than a matter of having magical abilities to ‘pick the winners.’

### Editorial moments

If we accept that creativity emerges out of a series of different kinds of improvisations made during the *processes* of engaging in cultural production, and that ‘innovation’ can be recognized and measured only by looking back at past *products*, then we need to ask ourselves why and for what purposes people *evaluate* the work that they do in creative industries. Evaluative practices are what Howard Becker (1982: 198) calls ‘editorial moments’ – the actual choices made by different people at different stages during the performance of a creative work: a potter’s decision to use faience, rather than porcelain, clay for a line of ceramics; an editor’s decision to opt for one literary genre rather than another; a composer’s decision to write a piece for not one but four string quartets; an audio-visual home electronics company’s decision to separate the functions of design and engineering, rather than to make them joint activities. Such decisions tend to have their knock-on effects: the choice of a particular kind of clay affects the kinds of glazes used and thus the finished tableware; a genre change involves writing changes on the part of the author who makes adaptations to the plot of her novel accordingly; compositional style brings in its wake numerous technical difficulties for those asked to perform the piece in question; an organizational decision leads to designs being created first in a ‘cloud’, then in the more customary ‘tube.’ During the course of such developments, we find different critical observations about the same product – a dish, a novel, a piece of classical music, or an audio player. These should be seen not as competing solutions to particular problems so much as variations that are in one way or another related (Hauser 1982: 478).



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Above all, then, editorial moments confirm that creative work is a cooperative venture (Becker 1982: 201) and it is creative professionals' involvement with and dependence on such cooperative links that necessarily constrain the kind of work they produce (Becker 1982: 26).

Editorial moments constitute a kind of evaluative practice taking place throughout the production–consumption chain. It is easy to assume, mistakenly, that *production* primarily makes use of generative creative processes, whereas the *consumption* side mainly constitutes evaluations by critics, reviewers, and consumers. However, such a close association between production and generative processes on the one hand, and consumption and evaluative processes on the other, is unwarranted. The chapters included here show that evaluative practices in the form of editorial moments are not just something that takes place after the creative outcome is finished, but rather something that occurs throughout the production–consumption chain. One overarching theme in the book is precisely that evaluative practices abound both during the production of cultural goods (typically by the creator or co-creators) and in the consumption thereof (for example, by critics, reviewers, and consumers) subsequent to their making. As such, editorial moments may be separated into two important forms. In the first place, they embrace the internal evaluations made by producers and stakeholders during the creative (and managerial) processes of conceptualizing, designing, and finally making new products. Second, they refer to external, 'post-production' evaluations that seek to compare and rank cultural producers and goods in a particular domain, such as film and food. Some of these are then picked out and given prizes or awards at regular intervals. The ordering of the chapters follows this distinction, in that the primary focus of Chapters 1–7 is on evaluative practices on objects in-the-making, while that of Chapters 8–10 is mainly on editorial moments post-production, with external systems evaluating creative products.

In the first form, we find all the nitty-gritty detail of evaluating practices that, constantly and continuously, take place as those involved in creative work go about their work and search for 'novelty' – that small difference distinguishing this particular product from all others that have gone before or are currently on the market. In order to make such an assessment, those concerned take into account how the current state of the work-in-progress compares with the artist's (composer's, designer's, film director's, potter's, writer's) vision, the criteria and

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constraints of the task at hand, the norms of the categories and genres in question, and the standards and canons of the domain in which they find themselves. When managers are involved, we find that important editorial moments may be put in the hands of people with a financial, technical, or administrative background – people who are neither trend-spotters nor designers, and probably know little about creative processes. This can lead to ‘social dramas’ (Krause-Jensen). In organizational contexts, what seems evident from these chapters is that it is less a matter of the creator ‘having a vision’ than it is a ‘struggle for which vision to pursue.’ Work-in-progress assessments can be more or less formalized. Product development funnels and stage-gate models explicitly dictate exactly who, when, and how decisions are to be reached when killing ideas. Less visible, but perhaps more common, is the informal on-going conversation among co-creators in trying to make sense of what is good or bad; what holds promise and what is a dead end; what ‘sparkles’ and what ‘stinks.’

The main purpose of this form of editorial moment is to guide the ‘creative process’ ever onwards in fruitful directions in order to arrive finally at ‘valuable novelty.’ Progress, however, tends to be characterized by fits and starts rather than by a smooth, continuous flow. Considerable disagreement can arise when key actors make use of differing standards or criteria in their judgements about what is, or is not, ‘good.’ This then leads to different takes on what the object-in-the-making should be, as well as on whether it will succeed or fail. Several of the case studies in this volume highlight such disagreements. At Bang & Olufsen, a disagreement over the criteria to be used to evaluate good design – one aesthetic, the other functional – led to the establishment of two different departments within the company’s organizational structure (Krause-Jensen). Different interpretations of the composer’s vision and intention led to disagreement about what criteria should be used to evaluate procedures in performing a piece of his music (O’Donnell). Young fashion designers at HUGO BOSS, exposed to vague and uncertain criteria about what constitutes a particular product line, end up with distinct interpretations of how best to go about the work at hand (Vangkilde).

The second kind of editorial moment concerns the practice of evaluating and making decisions in institutions and systems that are external to the actual production of a cultural good. An art world of any kind devotes much of its time to discussing the relative quality and value of individual artworks, which it then compares, ranks, selects, and