

The Myth of Creative Work as Liberation

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Abstract

The rise of the creative industry as the new economic sector for post-industrial societies has afforded great interest in the global economy, with its promise of autonomous and self-realizing creative work that not only satisfies the labor force, but also generates substantial revenue in the process. However, there is a blatant disregard for the exploitative nature of creative work, which mainly results from its precarious nature, in the hopes of institutionalizing it. Creative work then becomes nothing but a myth manipulated by neoliberal technocrats in order to attract potential public and private investors to the creative industries agenda. Through a historical materialist approach, this paper aims to illustrate the exploitative nature of creative work and how it is magnified in developing countries by using the Philippines as a case. This paper concludes with the limits of extensive and institutionalized creativity and its potential repercussions on the capitalist society as a whole.

Keywords: creative work, creative economy, creative industry, exploitation, precarity, Philippine film industry

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Introduction

Creative work concerns the production of symbolic commodities that are *primarily* aesthetic rather than functional, albeit involving other kinds of non-creative labor in the creative ecosystem (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009, p. 416). Creative work brings a promise of liberation in the nature of its work: flexible hours, increased autonomy and self-realization, meritocratic hierarchies, and equal access to employment—all the while putting primacy to self-expression in the name of ‘passionate work’. These virtues have been highlighted in creative industries proposals to aid the marketing of the creative industry concept to potential private and public investors. But there is a seeming unease in the superficial treatment of creative work, a depth that is blatantly disregarded by the neoliberal technocrats involving the darker side of creative production: creative work is as exploitative as it is liberating, sometimes even more.

The exploitative nature of creative work can be traced back to the subsumption of cultural labor and artistic labor as creative work, accounted for by the creative industries’ claim of the “*conceptual and practical convergence* of the creative arts with the cultural industries” (Hartley, 2005, p. 5) in the advent of the new economy. This paper will explore and build on the occurrence of exploitation in creative work by first defining the nature of creative work through the nature of the creative commodity¹ being produced and consumed in the creative industries. It will be followed by the promise of creative work as operationalized by technocrats and various sectors championing the creative industries across policy documents and researches. Lastly, this paper will attempt to demystify the myth of creative work by enumerating the three situations by which exploitation occurs. It will be supplemented by the current conditions creative work in the Philippines with a specific focus on film workers, the various attempts at institutionalizing creative work, and the probable repercussions of institutionalized autonomy on the capitalist society as a whole.

The Nature of Creative Work

Art and culture as a commodity stems not from its capitalist notion but from the nature by which it is being exchanged. The autonomy and divinity of art instigates a substantial and distinct value as a “way of understanding the world and trying to change or affect it for human purposes” (O’Connor, 2010, p. 34). We can look at the evolution of the nature of the creative work, based on the production and exchange of the creative commodity, across four phases: 1) Pre-capitalism; 2) Renaissance market economy; 3) Industrial Revolution to Fordism; and 4) Cognitive Capitalism.

Across all four phases, the crucial commonality is the development of the concept of ‘autonomy’ where the promise of creative work is based. For both pre-capitalism and Renaissance market economy, prestige and mysticism were associated with the commodity and the workers themselves. In the advent of pre-capitalist societies, it is the cultural commodity being exchanged under the *gift economy* that is associated with

¹ In the context of creative industries, also pertains to the cultural and artistic commodity

prestige, as these ‘gifts of exchange’ acquire their sociopolitical value by the transference of the objects through complex non-monetary negotiations. However, it was during the Renaissance market economy when the association of prestige shifted from the commodity to the creator or the artist himself through the patronage system considered a prestigious condition of commissioned or long-term employment. This association of prestige in artistic labor devalued manual labor by deeming artistic labor not as work but as *creation* made possible by a ‘visionary faculty’. It was also during the Renaissance period when the concept of ‘autonomy’ flourished through the content and quality of the works of artists previously anonymously engaged in artisanal work.

The Industrial Revolution, continuing on to 20th Century Fordism, democratized art and culture as commodities through mass production. Fordism influenced the creative work through the adoption of Fordist reproduction in art and culture, much to the critique of Adorno and The Frankfurt School who first referenced culture as an industry. In this phase, autonomy is now seen as an expression of freedom of ‘public opinion’ independent from patrons and religious production. However, the 1968 crisis in France and the crisis of Fordism, fueled by mass education and the social and artistic criticism of capitalism, resulted to the evolution of commodity production into ‘*cognitive capitalism*’.

Cognitive Capitalism ushered in the present nature of creative work, wherein the relation of capital to labor was no longer primarily temporal but rather marked by the production of the immaterial and cognitive aspect of labor. Cognitive Capitalism established a new paradigm in the subjection of labor that challenged the relationship of the exchange value and use value (Vercellone, 2007), and called for new mechanisms in accumulating surplus value using the intellectual, immaterial and affective labor as capital.

The present nature of creative work in the context of Cognitive Capitalism can better be described through the nature of the production of the cultural commodity. Cultural commodity production is characterized by the indeterminacy of the commodities’ cultural value set against a difficult business model in a capital-intensive industrial setting, adopting mass production and distribution through technological means, with hierarchical organizations and highly developed divisions of labor predominantly aiming for maximization of profit and efficiency (Garnham, 1991). Capital accumulation lies on two distinct profit-strategies: audience maximization and creation of artificial scarcity. Audience maximization is through the provision of a repertoire of cultural goods where several types of audiences can choose from, since the commodities’ use value is constructed by its subjects. Creating artificial scarcity, through mechanisms such as intellectual property, aims to limit audience access since cultural commodities, unlike other commodities, are not destroyed in the process of consumption (Garnham, 1991). The bulk of these strategies, however, can be felt in the impossibility of pre-determining of the use value of cultural commodities. The several mechanisms for determining cultural use value include: the ‘socially’ necessary time to produce it, the meaning and enjoyment attained in its consumption, and the authenticity of experience despite its liable volatility in the face of profit (Ryan 1992, as cited in O’Connor, 2011).

Given that landscape, the creative workers who produce these commodities include “a vast multi-national workforce of talented people applying their individual creativity in design, production, performance, and writing [who] range from fashion designers in Milan to shoe-factory operators in Indonesia” (Hartley, 2005, p. 29). These workers comprise the creative ecosystem lured by the promise of the nature of creative work.

Creative Work: Liberating or Exploitative?

The promise of creative work has been instrumental in heightening the interest of various stakeholders by articulating and promoting its virtues, as can be seen in creative industries proposals such as UK’s Creative Britain and the Philippines’ *Arangkada* (Move) Philippines by the Joint Foreign Chambers (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Forbes, 2010). These virtues such as autonomy and flexibility are said to address the requirements of the ever-changing ‘globalized’ economy, wherein the need for ‘flexible specialization’ entails harnessing a workforce capable of innovating and producing a repertoire of goods in the spirit of competition (Oakley, 2011). In order to nurture this workforce, there should be a semblance of ‘post-Fordist socialism’, ‘humane’ workplaces, less hierarchical working environments, autonomy in creative work through self-expression and individualization, and the freedom to produce meaningful work. Creative work becomes ‘good work’, ‘desirable work’ or ‘passionate work’ because of its predisposition to the immaterial, emotional and affective labor. It is said to be the actualization of the situation foreshadowed by Marx wherein the leisure of the workers is gained through the contraction or fluctuation of temporality, of the working day and the socialization of work, eventually changing the nature of the work as liberation: the workers can now appropriate their free time to education or self-actualization and full individual development.

This promise of meaningful work hinged in the autonomy and self-actualization lures the workers into ‘*apparent voluntarism*’ (Ursell, 2000 as cited in Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009), dubbing it a *vocation* and making it indistinguishable from leisure or play. Another cause of this apparent voluntarism is the meritocratic promise of creative work: the democratic nature of work seems to level the playing field wherein anyone can ‘make it’ out of sheer talent (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009). But the crux of the matter lies once the liberating promise of creative work is actually adopted, more so when it is adopted to neoliberal enterprise. It becomes a myth, a ‘*motionless prototype*’ (Barthes, 1972) of the experience: stifling, limiting and rather exploitative in its subjugation of the workers to a fixed institutionalized promise. As a consequence to the conformity to the conditions imposed by ‘mechanisms of rule’ (Banks, 2009), the autonomy of the creative workers are being sacrificed, resulting to further alienation brought about by the regulated conditions of production. The shift to a flexible and globalized economy leads to further rationalization in subjecting the precarious nature of creative work to capital, strengthening capital over creative work and making it more ‘uncreative’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002 as cited in Banks, 2009). The creative economy agenda, with its myths and promises, paved the way for further urban decay, inequality, gentrification, disenfranchisement, cultural value reduction and new forms of exploitation, all deeming creativity, innovation and entrepreneurialism as mere ‘empty signifiers’ (Oakley & O’Connor, 2015).

Creative workers on average are relatively younger than other workforce, are metropolitan-based and better educated and are subject to underemployment, self-

employment or intermittent unemployment, thus forcing them to second-job or multiple-job for sustenance. When employed, their wages are non-substantial and remain as such because of the vast reserve of unemployed creative workers who posit tough competition, escalating the difficulty in employment access which are 'resolved' by job-sharing, or shifting between creative and non-creative work (Menger, 1999). The occurrence of these exploitations can further be categorized into three situations: 1) through the generation of surplus value; 2) through the facilitators of exploitation; 3) through the 'precarity' emerging from the combination of the two.

1. Exploitation through the generation of surplus-value

When there is a fluctuation in the temporality of creative work due to flexible working hours, how then is surplus value generated? One simply needs to look back on the two profit-making strategies: through supplying a repertoire of commodities for audience maximization, and through the creation of artificial scarcity by limiting audience access and imposing intellectual property. In the abundance of creative commodities that make up the repertoire, the creative worker sells himself short by shouldering the production of high risk, likely to fail commodities in the hopes of becoming that one 'hit' that subsidizes the many misses. And the hopes of becoming that one 'hit' leeches on the autonomy and self-realization of the worker by demanding from the workers high levels of personal and emotional investment at the face of public scrutiny in the marginal likelihood of appealing to an individual or to niche markets (Hesmondhalgh, 2011).

Alienation in the advent of creative work expresses itself in many ways: by the seeming meaninglessness of an emotionally invested work set against the other works in a commodity repertoire (Hesmondhalgh, 2011); by the 'shriveling of the aura' in the ironic distancing and renunciation of the product compensated by a wage that can never equate to the investment of the worker's heart and soul in creating a product inseparable from the person (Benjamin, 1892; Vercellone, 2007); and by the mechanics through which the products are circulated in the interest of the new primitive accumulation via intellectual property, cementing the commodification of creative work for the sake of creating artificial scarcity (Vercellone, 2007).

However, the mere fluctuating temporality of creative work fosters exploitation in itself whereby 'free time' begets 'free labor' or intense labor over long periods of contractual hours generates a stop-go 'bulimic' pattern of working which poses emotional, psychological and physical hazards to the workers (Gill & Pratt, 2008). The blurring of lines between work and leisure, despite initially promising, favored the enlistment of the workers "thoughts and impulses in the service of salaried time" (Hesmondhalgh, 2011, p. 72).

In this case, the promise of autonomy and self-realization are simply replaced by disappointment, disillusion and self-blaming (McRobbie, 2002 as cited in Hesmondhalgh, 2011) as these virtues are institutionalized and rationalized by the industrialization of creativity itself.

2. Exploitation through the facilitators of creative work

In the advent of Cognitive Capitalism, the facilitators of creative work as the ‘new cultural intermediaries’ similar to Bourdieu’s ‘new petty-bourgeoisie’ are the ones who facilitate the generation of surplus value. They are the ones who are increasing the managerialism, routinization and (self)-exploitation of the proletariat, dubbed as the ‘precariats’ or proletariats of precarity. The shift of power to the financial and managerial aspect allowed for the rise and reassertion of the new cultural intermediaries under neoliberalism (O’Connor, 2013). They now become agents of ‘*precarity*’ as the dominant fraction overseeing the competition between the dominated precariat through the manipulation of the costs of production and the demand for commodity repertoire (Garnham, 1993 as cited in O’Connor, 2013).

Owing to the prestige and mysticism of artistic labor, the new cultural intermediaries presuppose that psychological reward, as opposed to proper remuneration or other citizenship benefits, is enough payment to the workers for living ‘the life of an artist’ and ‘doing exactly as he pleases’ (Girard, 1982). This validates the cutting of production costs by compromising the wage of the workers, along with other mechanisms for extracting surplus value.

3. Exploitation through the ‘precarity’ of creative work

The new cultural intermediaries and the generation of surplus value have created a landscape of precarity in the nature of creative work. Because of the multiplied precariousness brought forth by high levels of competition and a reservoir of unemployed creative workers, precarity has been vehicle to ‘flexible exploitation’ which includes volatile employment conditions, unequal access to employment, self-exploitation, and so on. The false democratization of the work intensified self-commodification and apparent voluntarism in the hopes of attracting gainful employment (Hesmondhalgh, 2011).

Another ‘trend’ prompted by precarity is ‘*network sociality*’ (Wittel, 2001) which prioritizes networks in the advent of socialized work; wherein unpaid work, as *favours*, is seen as a requisite to overcoming barriers to entry. These barriers to entry, now somewhat sociopolitical, become more exclusive as indicated by the underrepresentation of women, ethnic minorities and the working class in the creative workforce (Oakley, 2011). Technological advancements also allowed for the participation of the audience as ‘*prosumers*’ or producer-consumers. As a result, creative work is now seen to be generic, easily accessible for the middle class and without the need of the specialized creative worker. Nonetheless, if and when the working class gains employment, the meager wage offered to creative workers is insufficient for his subsistence, pushing him to multi-job or to abandon creative work altogether. Precisely because of this that the demographics of creative workers are centered around the young generation, mostly in their twenties and thirties, continuously haunted by the insecurities of precarity and socialized work (McRobbie, 2015; O’Connor, 2013; Hesmondhalgh, 2011; Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Gill & Pratt, 2008).

All in all, these forms of exploitation in creative work were mythicized to fit the institutionalization of its liberties-turned-demons. The extent of these exploitations will be

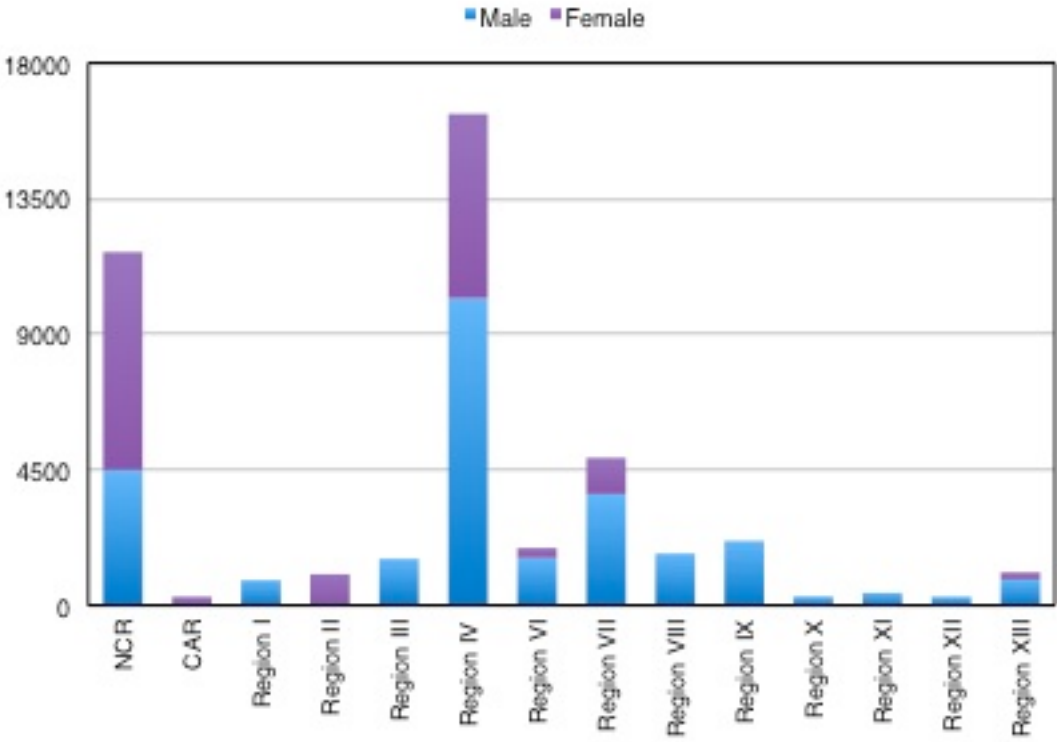
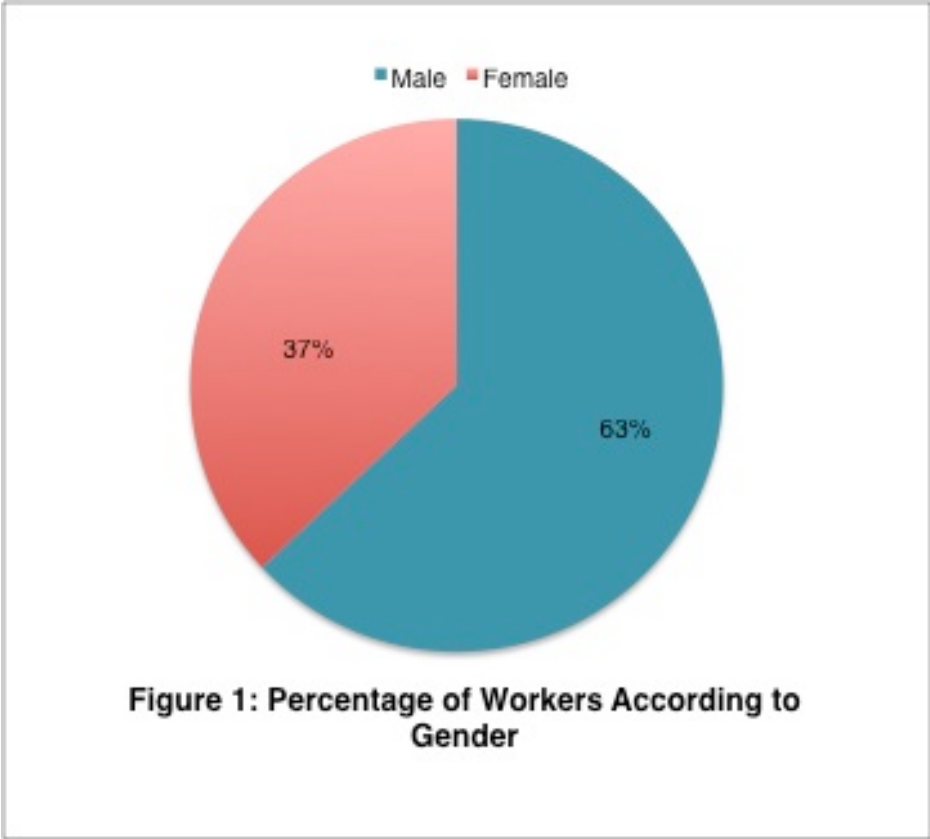
further exemplified through the analysis of creative work in the Philippines and the Philippine film industry.

Creative Work in the Philippines

The Philippines have been catching up with the global creative industries fever, turning its promises of GDP and job-creation into industry proposals. According to Nestor Jardin, former president of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, “the economic contribution of artists is such that in 2006 alone, the arts contributed to the Philippine economy P324 billion or 5.37% of (the) GDP” (Nono, 2014, p. 3).

However, Filipino artists still fall prey to the creative industries paradox of high levels of employment and unemployment in the face of precarity, wherein the dynamics of unequal access means the successful ones are the ones who were ‘born to wealth’ and who engage in art as members of the cultured gentry. Success in the Philippine creative industries is often for the bourgeoisie. However, artists from the working class who still engage in creative work “are mainly ignored by industry and revenue services,” for reasons such as: “culture costs”, and art as a “waste of taxpayers’ money” (Nono, 2014, p. 3). In an effort to fend for themselves, artists, out of their own initiatives, have built organizations for the protection of their members. But these organizations remain sector-based, contingency-driven and quite exclusive.

To specifically illustrate the nature of creative work in the Philippines, one can look at a particular sector which is considered the most lucrative: the Philippine film industry. Film workers employed in the film industry and their auxiliary sectors comprise 0.13% of the total labor force, with a nationwide population of 52,733 engaged in Motion Picture, Video and Television Programme Production, Sound Recording and Music Publishing Activities and Creative Arts and Entertainment Activities (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2017). Film workers, which include actors, directors, producers, technical workers, production staff, creatives and artistic staff, often fall prey to exploitation and various forms of discrimination due to the lack of articulation of their basic rights and privileges. Average taping hours extend to more than 24 hours to avoid extending shooting days, which means additional costs for the producers. Work remains contractual or project-based, with most big studios and networks doing away with benefits and privileges for their workers. There is a large discrepancy in the wages of workers, where “stars” earn P 500,000 to P 1 M (USD 10,000 to USD 20,000) per shooting day while background talents and technical workers earn as low as P 300 (USD 3). In the Creative Arts and Entertainment Activities sector, gender discrimination remains prevalent: the male population is projected at 63% while the female population remains at 37%. Seven regions throughout the country have all-male workers, while regions with female workers have a ratio of 3:1.



In this light, agencies such as the Film Development Council of the Philippines² (FDCP) saw the need for championing the interests of the workers through a binding policy that stipulates their basic rights and privileges such as the Magna Carta for Film Workers. There are other existing private organizations that support the welfare of film workers and provide ample benefits such as MOWELFUND or the Movie Workers Welfare Foundation, Inc., an industry development foundation established by former President Joseph Estrada (MOWELFUND, 2011). But FDCP aims to address the exploitative nature of creative work on a national level, using legislative infrastructures to provide benefits such as social security and health care services while standardizing wage and regulating working hours. This buffers the exploitative nature of creative work in the film industry by providing government support to self-employed workers, but at the same time raises the question: Are we merely institutionalizing the benefits, or are we institutionalizing creativity itself?

Conclusion: True Liberation in Creative Work

The institutionalization of individuality is the last straw by which neoliberalism can get a hold of human existence. For autonomist Marxists, the subjection of immaterial labor to capitalism creates a spontaneous communism, a social potential that feeds on the affect of the human in its socialization (Gill & Pratt, 2008). Precarity activism is exercised through ‘creative activism’, which uses theater, performance, music, and visual arts to effect and affect political change through the artistic critique of capitalism. The transcendental notion of art, of its association to beauty, to religion, to magic, and to the various ways of understanding the world, in its subsumption, has made labor for the multitude a venue for self-reflection that is paradoxically critical of the nature by which production takes place. The creative worker now becomes more ‘social’ and more ‘political’ in their creation wherein they now clamor for ‘alternative way of production’ that considers the ethical and moral value of economics (Banks, 2009; Gill & Pratt, 2008).

Creativity, when institutionalized, becomes a subversive threat to the present economy by providing a reflection of alternatives that can easily be adopted by the creative workers. In this case, choice and freedom—initially mythicized—are no longer to the benefit of the neoliberal technocrats. As Mark Banks (2008) perfectly puts it: “Encouraging people to ‘be independent’ and ‘think for themselves’ runs the risk that one day they may actually do it—in ways unanticipated and unwelcomed by the government.” The promise of creative work, therefore, does not lie in the mythicized liberating nature of the work, but rather in the subversive potential of its institutionalization that will ultimately set the workers free.

² The Film Development Council of the Philippines is a developmental government agency under the Office of the President

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