Inside the hidden abode of immaterial production: advertising 'creatives' *and autonomy*

In this paper I attempt to delve into the politics that govern and are reproduced by the labour processes of workers in the field of advertising production. I will examine post-*operaismo* – sometimes called Autonomist Marxist – assertions on the politics of a changing landscape of labour with reference to ethnographic and interview data on the labour processes and power relations in the production of advertising[1]. By using some of the tools of Labour Process Theory, I will demonstrate that the politics proposed by many of the post-*operaismo* school are both empirically and theoretically naive. Autonomy in work is a surface phenomenon; we must examine the power relations that govern the labour process. This paper identifies some consequences of the division of productive tasks in the production of advertising, and does so from the perspective of creative workers. In challenging this important body of literature's focus on autonomy in work, I propose that we should bring practices of compliance, resistance and subversion to the centre of our analysis of the politics of work and pay more attention to the effects of work under capitalism upon the person. In this way we might be able to understand what autonomous labour activity might look like.

Why follow the worker and the capitalist into the hidden abode of production? Surely, as the Frankfurt School[2] point out, the political content of advertising production is most pernicious as it stalks the sphere of exchange in its commodity-form. That is, the politics of advertising is most clear when we see advertising as objects that articulate capitalistic prescriptions for modes of life. However, a more recent body of literature has emerged, two key figures being Maurizio Lazzarato and Antonio Negri, which proposes that 'work [today] is immediately

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[1] *Journal of Advertising, Journal of Marketing Management, British Journal of Management, International Journal of Advertising*, and *Journal of Advertising Research.*
[2] Particularly Theodor W. Adorno. *The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture.* (Routledge: London, 2001).

something free and constructive'[3], that work in the advertising industry clearly demonstrates this new character, and that this growing tendency toward autonomy in work produces a radical politics. This form of labour, *immaterial labour*, is both new and hegemonic; all forms of work they argue are becoming immaterial. Immaterial labour, they propose, is the labour of knowledge, communication, and the production and manipulation of symbols and affects[4], and the work of advertising creatives is at the apex of this tendency[5]. What is immaterial about immaterial labour, they caution, is not the labour itself but rather what it produces, and that is cooperation. The increasingly communicational character of economic-value production, they argue, means that technical mechanisms of control have become fetters, or barriers, that obstruct cooperation and therefore obstruct the production of economic-value and the exploitation of surplus-value. That is, cooperation has become a means by which the optimum magnitude of economic-value is produced and the maximum amount of profit is exploited. As a result, the post-*operaisti* argue, 'labour tends to be increasingly autonomous from capitalist command'[6]. Therefore, they assert, this tendency for the auto-production of cooperation represents the reappropriation of the locus of cognitive control over the labour process by the worker. That is, the worker has the autonomy to control his or her own cognitive processes as they work, making their own decisions regarding the most appropriate way to conduct their labour in cooperation with their fellow workers. The worker's appropriation of cognitive control over their own labour process, the post-*operaisti* argue, means that labour under capitalism is more and more becoming a means for, and they use Marx's words, 'the free development of individualities'[7]. This tendency

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[3] Maurizio Lazzarato and Antonio Negri. 'Travail immatériel et subjectivité', *Futur antérieur*. 6. 95-6. Cited in André Gorz. *Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-Based Society*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999). 40.
[4] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). 29.
[5] Maurizio Lazzarato. 'Immaterial Labor' in Paulo Virno and Michael Hardt (eds.) *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*. (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996). 137.
[6] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Commonwealth*. (Cambridge, MA.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009). 173.
[7] Karl Marx. *Grundrisse*. Martin Nicolaus. (London: Penguin and New Left Review, 1973). 699 and 706.

toward the autonomy of labour and the production of cooperation as something that is an immanent, a direct product of the labour process they argue, means that society, in work and outside work, has become 'a common field of cooperation – a field which is, be it virtually, communist'[8]. By following the worker and the capitalist into the hidden abode of immaterial production, we see that the organisation of autonomy in work does not have such an emancipatory character.

When talking of the hidden abode of production Marx clearly states its potential to open up a politics. In contrast to the sphere of production, the sphere of exchange, 'within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom [and] Equality...'[9] The implication here is that freedom and equality do not rule in the sphere of production, do not have the potential to rule in the capitalist mode of production , and that the character of production under capitalism reveals the lack of freedom and equality in the sphere of exchange. This belies the post-*operaisti* view of society becoming a common field of cooperation. Therefore, in order to open up an inquiry into how the politics of work might produce politics, I ask, what are the labour processes of advertising production? That is, what is the activity, instruments and subject of creative advertising work[10]? Do the labour processes of creative workers indicate that advertising production is becoming a realm of autonomy and freedom? What is the character of cooperation in advertising production and how is it facilitated, managed, and reproduced?

In an advertising agency, there are usually three key divisions in the allocation of labour tasks: creatives, account management, and the third, becoming more common in the '70s and

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[8] Alberto Toscano. 'Vital Strategies: Maurizio Lazzarato and the metaphysics of contemporary capitalism'. *Theory, Culture & Society* (2007) Vol. 24(6): 74.
[9] Karl Marx. *Capital: A critique of political economy*. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2003). 172.
[10] Marx *Capital* 174

now ubiquitous, planning. In examining these labour processes of advertising production, I want to focus on the 'creatives', but to also examine how account management and planning facilitate or impede the potential for autonomy. Creatives always work in teams comprising at least one copywriter and an art director, and I restrict my analysis here to two-person creative teams. Creatives are central to vernacular understandings of advertising production, and there is a historical justification for this. In the early days of advertising, one person would be responsible for all facets of production and their skills would tend to the creative aspect[11]. Creative advertising work begins within the bounds of the client 'brief' listing the client's aims and requirements for the advertising. The brief is itself a product of negotiation between account management and client. The activity of the labour process for creative advertising workers is the activity of imagination, and the communication of the products of this imagination using words, hands, pens and pencils, etc., as instruments. This process is undertaken within a worker-formed matrix of cultural referents, such as film, TV, music and art, a broad-range of which are filtered through a 2-step process. The first stage is the development of a novel idea; the second is the subsequent integration and elaboration of that idea within a problem-solving framework[12]. This process almost always results in a tension between the idea and the criteria that make up the problem-solving framework, thus the 2-step process is repeated and discussed until the creatives are themselves satisfied with the product. The problem-solving framework that forms the criteria of value for the product is implied by the client brief, although this framework is formulated by the workers themselves. Thus, although there is a semblance of autonomy to this labour activity it is impossible to open the discussion about the work of creatives without also coming face-to-face with an apparent fetter on production – clients, who 'are the ones in control...they're the ones who

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[11] Sean Brierley. *The Advertising Handbook, 2ⁿᵈ Edition.* (London: Routledge, 2002). 61-62.

[12] Sheila L. Sasser and Scott Koslow. 'Desperately Seeking Advertising Creativity: Engaging an Imaginative "3Ps" research agenda.' *Journal of Advertising.* (2008) Vol.37(4): 13.

say yes or no'[13]. Notwithstanding, creatives describe their work as one in which they try to cover the 'mandatories' of the client brief but 'still try to do it [their] way,'[14] indicating a process of active subversion of this fetter that is undertaken with some success. However, a further problem emerges from the analysis of the creative labour process in terms of autonomy, even when we consider the creative labour process in isolation.

Cooperation between creatives is a requirement that accords to a technical division of labour. Copywriter and art director teams are not an immanent production of their labour processes but are rather brought together at the site of production by the employer of their labour-power. However, capital's initial organisation of cooperation in this case does not preclude the possibility that cooperation is maintained and reproduced as an immanent product of the labour process, or that cooperative networks in this industry have not arisen autonomously from the strictures of the model of the technical division of labour of advertising production. Therefore we must delve deeper into the hidden abode of this site of immaterial production and observe the relation between the worker and the subject of their work.

In order to isolate the subject of creative advertising work, we must dip very briefly into the labour theory of value. Why? Because if we do not we might be left with the idea that the subject of work is merely billboard posters and TV clips. The subject of creative advertising work is the minds of others. Labour is the production of use-values and the use-value of advertising is that it is a medium by which other commodities can come to be exchanged for money which is then utilized as capital. Of course, the work produced may have a use-value as an aesthetic artefact for example, but as advertising it is a commodity, and a commodity has both a use-value and an exchange-value. Therefore, in its commodity form, its use-value

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[13] Copywriter in Aiden Kelly, Katrina Lawler, and Stephanie O'Donohoe. 'Encoding Advertisements: The Creative Perspective.' *Journal of Marketing Management* (2005) 21: 520

[14] Copywriter cited in Elizabeth C. Hirschmann. 'Role-Based Models of Advertising Creation and Production.' *Journal of Advertising* (1989) Vol. 18(4): 46.

is its ability to realize exchange-values; this is the use-value to be produced by the labour-power for which capital makes the wage-labour exchange. It immediately becomes apparent then that the subject of advertising work is the consumer, or rather the potential consumer who will, upon consuming the advertisement, go to market and exchange money for the commodity showcased[*]. It is hoped. However, the character of the relationship between creatives, account managers and planners indicates that advertising production, rather than being a network of self-produced autonomous cooperation, is actually a site in which creatives also make their colleagues, and the client, the subject of work.

Rather than being a hive of cooperation, the advertising agency is an arena of conflict between people who draw on different criteria for assessing the value of the creative product. The conflict for the creatives is their desire to not have to produce 'middle of the road stuff to keep everybody happy'[15]. Power relations, of which account managers and planners are an embodiment of, are an integral part of the problem-solving framework by which creatives come to objectify the products of their imagination into a tangible product. Importantly, the key workers in the production of advertising, the creatives, the account executives, and the planners, all describe themselves as having a degree of control over the product, not always in concord with one another.

Several factors other than the desire to create something 'entertaining...thrilling [and] compelling'[16] inform how creatives put together an appropriate problem-solving framework, and we can see these factors emerge from the power relations under which creative work is subsumed. First, as discussed, the client and the account manager define the brief, which in turn sets boundaries for the creative product. The brief may also be laden with a set of

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[*] NB. Marx *Capital* 176 fn1. "It appears paradoxical to assert, that uncaught fish, for instance, are a means of production [subject of labour] in the fishing industry. But hitherto no one has discovered the art of catching fish in waters that contain none."

[15] Art director in Kelly, Lawler, and O'Donohoe. 'Encoding Advertisements' 517

[16] Copywriter in Hirschmann 'Role-Based' 50

political and moral values. For example, many advertisers are keen to include only certain models of the family or the worker or the consumer in their advertising. Furthermore, the extent of sophistication of the brief varies from agency to agency, with one copywriter explaining that the labour process as described by the brief is 'all fairly well sorted, exactly what they want before we even see it: at least it should be... they're good like that here'[17], while another describes their activity as a continual search for 'some element of originality'[18]. Second, the production of advertising is a lengthier process than I have indicated so far. The usual process from which the finished product emerges loosely follows a generic model that looks something like this: i) client-account manager negotiation of the brief, ii) the first creative process, iii) creatives-account manager-planner discussion of the creative product, iv) account manager presentation to client (this step may itself involve several negotiations moving up the client's own internal company hierarchy), v) revision of product by creatives, vi) consumer research conducted and analysed by the planner, vii) research presented to client by account manager and planner, viii) revision of product by creatives, xi) product release.[19] At any point, a "back to the drawing board" moment may be instigated, usually by the client, and the process begins again. All of these stages of negotiation have been described by creatives as a "battle" or a "struggle" as 'other people have other priorities'[20]. The creatives describe their own priorities as the production of 'the best advertising [which] touches people....is based on the truth', as trying in their work 'to get that insight, that reason to believe'[21]. Contrarily, the account manager's key concern is to keep production to deadline and cost and to keep the client happy, while the planner's key concern is the production and

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[17] Copywriter in Chris Hackley. 'Silent Running: Tacit, Discursive and Psychological Aspects of Management in a Top UK Advertising Agency.' *British Journal of Advertising*. 11 (2000). 249.
[18] Copywriter in Kelly, Lawler, and O'Donohoe. 'Encoding Advertisements' 515
[19] Hirschmann 'Role-Based' 44-47., John Josling. 'The Advertising Agency' in Norman A. Hart (ed.) *The Practice of Advertising*. (Oxford: Heinmann, 1990). 42-44.
[20] Copywriter in Kelly, Lawler, and O'Donohoe 'Encoding Advertisements' 515
[21] Copywriter in Chris Hackley and Arthur J. Kover. 'The trouble with creatives: negotiating creative identity in advertising agencies.' *International Journal of Advertising* (2007) 26(1): 69.

maintenance of sufficiently accurate systems of consumer research with which to placate and reassure the client and to manage their expectations.

A form of cooperative conflict is built-in to the technical division of labour in the advertising agencies studied here. The work tasks and aims of creatives, planners and account management are structured in such a way as to demand cooperation, but the forum of cooperation is arranged so as to set different and competing priorities for the product against one another. The power relations of advertising work are arranged in such a way as to impede too great an element of autonomy for any of the workers, but to also facilitate limited amounts of autonomy and to create a competitive arena in which a product that meets a broad-range of value-producing and value-realizing criteria can be produced. We cannot understand the labour processes of advertising production in terms of autonomy or in terms of the production of forms of cooperation that might be immanent to the labour process itself. Rather, the labour processes, that is, the activity, instruments and subjects of work, for all three of these types of workers are preset by a technical division of labour, which has a common form across the industry, and which imposes strict limits on the autonomy of any one worker.

This would also indicate that the labour-process undertaken by creatives is informed by their awareness of the priorities of other workers, and of the client; foremostly in the minds of creatives, the awareness that planners, account managers, clients and more senior agency staff 'have the power to decide what counts as work'[22]. The activity of creative work is an internal negotiation of *their* priorities for the product, and their perception of the priorities of those they work with and those of the client. This could be the setting of aesthetic, instrumental, moral, etc., priorities against commercial priorities. It is not for nothing that in

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[22] Hackley 'Trouble' 73

many agencies the creatives divide themselves from 'the suits'[23]. In this way, creatives make their colleagues and the client the subject of work, because it is they who decide whether the creative product has a use-value or not. It is they who decide if creative work is productive or unproductive.

To investigate the impact of these power relations upon any notion that we might regard the labour-process of the advertising creative as autonomous, the character of the formation of the problem-solving framework that they reportedly use to filter their ideas may offer some insight. The activity of creatives is not a simple process of the integration of an idea into a problem-solving framework defined by the brief. It is important to recognise that the creatives' formulation of the problem-solving framework itself is a product of the politics of work. A politics of work that has a bearing not only upon how we might consider cooperation in work but also how we might think of the worker's subjectivity itself as subsumed under and distorted in accord with the requirements of the production of economic-value.

It appears that the problem-solving framework through which the creatives filter their novel ideas and cultural referents is not merely informed by the brief but also by the creatives own experience of the power relations of their workplace and their knowledge of what their colleagues might 'count as work'. We might regard this as a self-internalization of the power relations created by the specific technical division of labour in each agency.

Sasser argues that the most effective utilization of the 2-step process of creative idea development is dependent upon two factors: 'disciplined training' and 'consistent practice'[24]. However, the question remains whether these two factors are merely determinants of an effective self-control of thought processes or if there is a political character to the mode of thought that results from training and practice in the production of advertising products under

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[23] Creative in Hackley 'Silent Runnings' 249
[24] Sasser 'Desperately Seeking' 12

capitalism and within these power-laden forms of the technical division of labour. That is, if training and practice are prerequisites to successful creative thinking within this labour process, might we be able to consider the work of the creatives in terms the self-internalization of mechanisms of control? If we define autonomy as the ability to direct one's own actions according to norms one sets for oneself, as we should, and understand that to train someone in an activity is to introduce an alien set of norms into that person's thinking processes, we might recognise that although this does not preclude an assimilation of those norms into a set of self-defined norms, it would be negligent to not go beyond the merely formal character of this cognitive training process and to also examine it in terms of practice.

There is a political character to the training and practice of advertising idea development. As mentioned, the generation of creative advertising ideas requires the worker to draw together cultural referents within a problem-solving framework, that problem being "how do we sell more cat-food/etc.?" In this way, despite protestations from some creatives that advertising is "bullshit"[25], the content of creative thought is formed and continually practiced according to capitalist norms of consumption and with the aim of expanding the system of needs. Rather than presupposing an inherent value in the act of creativity, we must examine it in terms of its content and the power relations that surround its practice. We should not, as the post-*operaisti* do, reify the mere act of thinking in work and concretize it as an example of autonomy, but rather examine how the power relations of work can shape subjectivities.

In conclusion, it appears from this research that it is the breadth of the power relations that organise labour through the structure of a technical division of labour and the internalization of mechanisms of control and not, in this case, the production of cooperation that makes advertising work a site of politics. A pattern of conflictual cooperation appears to lie at the centre of all of the examples of the technical division of labour researched here, and this

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[25] Copywriter in Hackley and Kover. 'The trouble with creatives' 68

cooperation is a management construction, not one that is immanently produced as a result of the labour process. We should question whether it is the instances of subversion and resistance to capitalist norms, rather than a search for autonomous practices, that should be at the centre of the analysis of the politics of work and, in light of the deleterious effects of work upon the integrity of the subject, whether the politics of work should occupy a more central position in our understandings of politics.