

# When Creativity Becomes the Watchword

*by Olivier Alexandre*

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**‘Let’s be creative!’ Andreas Reckwitz traces the genealogy of this word, joyfully exploring its successive historic circumvolutions. A stimulating work that has not relinquished a certain philosophy of history.**

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**Reviewed:** [Andreas Reckwitz, \*The Invention of Creativity\*. Malden, Polity, 2017, 300 pp.](#)

Be it his campaign, his swearing-in, his communications, his diplomacy, his tweets or even his tax proposals, the French media have regularly qualified Emmanuel Macron’s actions as creative. Meanwhile, the international press praised his charisma, comparing him to a Hollywood star.<sup>1</sup> From 18<sup>th</sup> century German romanticism to the presidency of the French Republic, the same term has progressively emerged from the languid fringes of Rimbaud and Verlaine’s Paris, to be indiscriminately applied to cooking, entrepreneurship, advertising, sport, the way power is wielded or the ‘creative’ industries, which, in the short space of thirty years, have risen the top of the world economy. It is this irony of history that the German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz attempts to elucidate in *The Invention of Creativity*. In order to understand how a niche has come to concern the world at large, the author, who could be seen as some kind of late representative of a lively ‘Frankfurt School’ adopts a genealogical approach over the course of which the taste for novelty slowly gains ground as the organising principle of modernity.

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<sup>1</sup> From ‘President Macron, A Lesson in Style’, The New York Times, 2 August 2017.

## **The Artistic Field**

The author recalls the historic importance of the advent of the artist, emancipated from the academy and religious forms of artistic creation. From Goethe to Manet, the work of art is subjected to a vocabulary of ‘rupture’, ‘novelty’, ‘originality’, ‘authenticity’, ‘uniqueness’ and genius, while being seen as universal. However, its means of development are present at specific sites, amidst a community of peers, a network of galleries and exhibition sites frequented by an educated audience, buyers who purchase selectively and can be identified with bourgeois society. These characteristics explain why art worlds flourish in the heart of large European cities, the most lively example being 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris.

This idea is not new. We find it presented in a more sophisticated or detailed form in the numerous history and sociology of art reference works. But the author’s argument reveals two variations with regard to the existing literature. On the one hand, unlike the specifically cited works of Niklas Luhmann or Pierre Bourdieu, the artistic worlds are not chosen here for their singularities, but for the general state of mind they foreshadow. As a result, the reflection shifts from questions about Field empowerment and enclosure, to the dissemination of creation as a practice and a value, over different periods, sectors and forms of sociability.

This decisive philosophy of history approach is accompanied by a conceptual clarification. Equidistant from a fetishism that reduces the artist to his productivity, the price of his works or his efforts, and from a sociology narrowly limited to interactions, the author focuses his argument on the associated modes of thought and perception. The categories ‘sensitive’, ‘creation’ and ‘aesthetic’ are also reviewed, less to demonstrate a theoretical strength in a field where the German philosophers have long proven their brilliance, than to do justice to the sentiments that inhabit anyone who takes the hypothesis of his own singularity seriously: the fact of existing on the basis of ideas, emotions and representations, which arranged in a specific manner, distinguish him or her from their peers. Here, the strength of the thesis lies in the contrast with theories of modernity that focus on the consequences of the principle of rationality that led Karl Marx and Theodor Adorno to alienate aesthetics, Emile Durkheim to neglect it, Max Weber to limit it, Pierre Bourdieu to only see it as localised, while Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello described it as a managerial manipulation technic.

## **The Subject as a Star**

The argument hence goes beyond the defined sociological field of the artistic worlds, to question the manner in which a taste for creation progressively penetrated the world. In this respect, psychology and the creative industries are presented as privileged paths. A. Reckwitz recalls that psychoanalysis maintains a relationship with the act of creation. Thus

Sigmund Freud sees Léonard de Vinci and the principle of sublimation as a major driving force of civilisation. The Rorschach test, named after its inventor who was himself an art enthusiast, was later interpreted from the opposite perspective: in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 'eccentric' perceptions, originally interpreted as signs of 'abnormality', went on to become positive indicators, suggesting a unique and creative personality.

Clinical psychology mirrored this new standard by enhancing the value of cognitive plasticity. Creativity, a sign of intelligence, is evaluated and sought out; it provokes the interest of scientific institutes and publications as well as psychology magazines that see their audience increase from the 1950s onwards. The idea of a good life is redefined. The search for a life of wisdom is replaced by the ideal of an optimized life. Individual abilities must find the means and the time to express themselves fully. The genius, formerly seen as surly and rebellious maverick, becomes an exemplary even mainstream figure, inspiring a range of television serials (*Breaking Bad*, *Big Bang Theory*, *Silicon Valley*), while the photograph of Albert Einstein sticking out his tongue is reproduced in various forms on tee shirts and coffee mugs.

The economic field is marked by the same type of reclassification as creation shifts from the realm of pathology to become one of society's ideals. J. A. Schumpeter opens the way in classical theory, by giving the entrepreneur the status of an artist. The author of *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* makes the entrepreneur the hero of industrial society, to the detriment of the manager or the capitalist bogged down in mechanistic rationality. From the 1920s onwards, and all the more so after the 1950s, management gives pride of place to the individual, central to the organisation of work, within flexible and egalitarian structures that encourage the circulation of information, in contrast to the rigidity and pace of the Fordist model.

More than any other, the creative industry adopted this credo. The book looks anew at the importance of a triumvirate: fashion, advertising and design, which had long been looked down upon by the social sciences due to its applied and commercial nature. Beyond their specificities, these three sectors share the fact of being emancipated from a limited professional framework as a result of the application of the referent of creativity to a wider group. From producers it was extended to employees, before being adopted by consumers. Despite the virulent criticism condemning the fetishism of goods, in reality brands and consumer objects create associations, hybridisations and alignments that people perceive as imbued with a power of distinction. Indeed, these industries soon made a space for the consumer through evaluations and feedback on their experience. However, A. Reckwitz locates the peak of this historical evolution at the other end of the chain, among the 'stars'.

Where earlier scholars and politicians were the symbols of bourgeois society, based on a clear distinction between private and public life, the star makes his whole existence a show. Celebrities shows themselves as open and transformable objects, through a series of stagings and performances. Cinema roles become feats, involving an act of physical and psychological

transformation: the Actors studio method, spectacular weight gain or loss, the ability to embody different genres or stages of life. Simultaneously, the new faces of pop culture stand out by the ease with which they reinvent their style on a daily basis, from their music to the way they dress, their looks or their hairstyle (haircuts, body building, tattoos, cosmetic surgery, sexuality, etc.), and even their personality (upward mobility, decline, redemption, change of lifestyle, films on their own lives, etc.). The ability to sustain these variations has a decisive effect on the mobilisation of a vast audience that is a stakeholder in this industry. The expansion of the mass then the micro media has a snowball effect, reinforcing the gap between the carefully orchestrated reputation of a Charles Dickens in the London of the 1860s and Beyoncé's planetary fame. A. Reckwitz traces the lineage of this spectacularization of life by exploring Ralph W. Emerson's reading tours, the emergence of biographical journalism and the progressive mediatisation of the body, like an archaeologist of the star system, a system in which today's political avatars are Donald Trump, Justin Trudeau or Emmanuel Macron.

## Loft, Neighbourhoods, Cities

The mechanism of creation also includes spatial dimensions. As early as 1970, the title on *Life* magazine's cover read: 'Life magazine presents a photo reportage titled: 'Living big in a loft'. One of the captions was: 'If you don't have lots of room, your ideas get very small'. This consecration of what should have been considered a dysfunctional space (large, badly insulated spaces, with no equipment) reveals numerous changes: the growing place artists occupy in cities (about 4000 in New York in the 1960s, over 55000 in 2015), the fact that creation can be grasped as a spatial system, and the room allotted to representing it.

With the loft, crude, open spaces encourage a circulation of energies, bodies and identities. Life in a loft (that would go on to become the first TV-reality show with *Big Brother*) thus resembles an experimental play, punctuated by the constantly changing occupants' entrances and exits, and their trials and errors. Andy Warhol's *Factory* can be envisaged as the ideologically finished form of the loft. Here, the space is imbued with a strongly symbolic dimension: emblematic places belonging to the industrial bourgeoisie (factories, workshops, abattoirs) that had been criticised in the 1960s and 1970s, are reoccupied, subverted and reinvented as spaces of creativity and experimentation.

This type of recuperation is often stigmatised as a symbol of gentrification. But this trend diminishes a historical dimension: the fact that individuals can envisage their neighbourhoods as complete aesthetic spaces, organized through a network of dedicated and interconnected locations (cafés, galleries, clubs, nightclubs, businesses and alternative spaces) crammed with street art, start-ups, creator's boutiques, nouvelle cuisine, FabLabs, etc. In this sense, neighbourhoods like *Williamsburg* in Brooklyn, *Wicker Park* in Chicago, *Kreutzberg* in

Berlin, *Mission* in San Francisco, or the banks of the canal that flows from the 10<sup>th</sup> arrondissement in Paris to Pantin, are not only sectors under high real estate pressure. They also represent spaces where people can feel, eat, watch and live. This aestheticization revives Walter Benjamin's 'Wanderings', Guy Debord's 'drifts', and their alchemical power that renders beauty visible in concrete, or in other words puts the hip into 'square' and the 'glam' into 'grit'.

While a benevolent political approach has often encouraged the revival of these neighbourhoods, it most often benefits the same category of inhabitants, whose private and public lives are intertwined, as are their work and pleasure, practices and mentalities.<sup>2</sup> The benefits municipalities reap are mainly in terms of image: neighbourhoods that had earlier been associated with a combination of types of deviance (prostitution, drugs, criminality, vandalism) are now celebrated as creative clusters, combining design, IT, fashion, architecture, gastronomy and tourism. From this viewpoint, cultural capitals, or UNESCO classifications, constitute the administrative aspect of elective tourism, celebrating a nomadism of the five senses, that will itself have to be reinvested in a centripetal approach to creation.

## Young German Sociology

This overview does not ignore the aporia of creation. The exhaustion of being oneself, warring for attention, the antinomy of judgment between communities of peers and the pre-eminence of expert judgement are all mentioned in turn. The author nonetheless pleads in favour of a dispassionate approach to the system of creation to better grasp its historical depth. We can only acknowledge this ambition and the attempt to trace the long history of creativity through a series of carefully interlocked elements that range from Jason Pollock's studio to personal management, from portraits in the *New Yorker* to IQ tests.

Nonetheless, while the impact of the shifts is often convincing, the superposition of contexts sometimes propels the argument from a suggestive reading to an expedition on the high seas. In the worthy tradition of *sozialtheorie*, the scholarship is backed by a capacity for abstraction. But as the facts give way to concepts, however solid they may be ('dispositif' borrowed from Michel Foucault, or 'artistic field', even if it is not related to Pierre Bourdieu's definition), they are subjected to a pressure that weakens the whole edifice with each new addition. All the more so, as the choice to reveal a historical principle common to modernity follows the straight teleological line of creation, although at times it runs away with us and creates an effect of enchantment with History. We could ask that the inequalities in terms of

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<sup>2</sup> On this issue, see the abundantly commented work by Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, *The Sum of Small Things. A Theory of the Aspirational Class*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 2017.

recognition be taken into account, or that greater attention be paid to the movements that resist or oppose this new watchword 'we're all creative!'.

But this should in no way deter the reader from discovering *The Invention of Creativity* that is also an opportunity for readers to gauge 'young' German sociology. Andreas Reckwitz of course, but also Hartmut Rosa and his critique of acceleration, Joseph Vogl and his rereading of capitalism, Ulrich Bröckling and a *mise en abyme* of the entrepreneurial way of thinking, who sustain a critical tradition that has no fear of plunging into deep waters to better raise the major questions of our time.

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