Creativity and Its Discontents

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Published by Duke University Press


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Creativity as a Product of Labor

In the preceding chapter I located the ideological roots of the creative economy in Western modernity. To understand the complex lacework of the ways creativity is used economically, in this chapter I would like to shift my focus from modernity to capitalism, from creativity as freedom to creativity as a product of human labor. The critical stance I took against the instrumentalization of creativity in chapter 1 does not imply an uncritical celebration of transcendentalism or naturalism. While Vico’s *pa* might reflect human beings’ spontaneously creative and fearful responses to the wonders of nature, the creativity celebrated in the creative economy does not just happen; it involves elaborate industrial manipulation. The creative economy relies on, but also readily dismisses, the materiality of creative labor. My objective in this chapter is to uncover the labor factor that makes up this creative economy, although there is also a danger in privileging the industrial aspect of creativity, which will be treated in greater detail in chapter 3. First I will deal with the notion of creative labor.

One of the most important theoretical works on the concept is Maurizio Lazzarato’s “Immaterial Labor,” in which he argues that the old dichotomy between manual or material and mental or immaterial labor has failed to grasp the new nature of production activities. According to Lazzarato, the late 1970s witnessed a new phase of capitalist production that emphasizes the value of communication, which in turn acts as the interface negotiating the relationship between production and consumption. It is also in this new kind of commodity and commodification that the dichotomy between material and immaterial labor falls apart. At the end of the essay, Lazzarato demonstrates two models of immaterial labor: Simmel accepts the division of labor founded on the opposition between manual and intellectual labor, whereas Bakhtin defines immaterial labor as the diffusion of the two.¹ Lazzar-
rato argues that Simmel runs the risk of legitimizing the regulation and mystification of the social process of creation and innovation, because in Simmel's model members of the upper middle classes create fashion, and the lower classes attempt to imitate them. Lazzarato finds Bakhtin’s call to supersede the division between material labor and intellectual labor more productive, in that it offers a view to understanding how creativity is a social process.

Of greatest significance in Lazzarato’s essay is his advancement of a new theory of social production that diffuses the boundaries between manual and intellectual labor, which, he believes, would also provide room to demythologize the division of the two classes to which the two kinds of labor supposedly belong. However, I believe the increasing overlap of the two kinds of labor which Lazzarato identifies is not maintained by mutual diffusion: the two logics exist simultaneously in new global conditions, and their coexistence does not cancel either out, but intensifies both. Unlike Lazzarato, I would argue that creative labor does not embody the disappearance of boundaries between manual and intellectual labor, but it is a unique function that demonstrates the intensification of the contradictions between the two logics.

In fact the current creative economy is saturated with an abhorrence or ignorance of traditional manual labor. People in the West lament the moving of factories to developing countries, but the fact is that fewer and fewer educated people are attracted to routinized production work. The migration of monotonous assembly line work is in part willed by the citizens of wealthy nations, so that they, and particularly members of the younger generation, can partake in more “innovative” and “rewarding” careers. Alvin Toffler’s claim—that traditional labor has become less important in the new information society, and the new hero is the innovator, who combines imaginative knowledge with action—is clearly naïve. Traditional labor is not less important; it is just less visible. Sweatshops are exported to faraway lands, rendering them invisible to most of the developed world, which retains only the most “desirable” sorts of work.

Toffler also describes the disappearance of labor exploitation in the new economy: industrial workers were exploited because they owned the few tools of production, but today the most powerful wealth-amplifying tools reside in workers’ heads, making the workers irreplaceable and therefore unexploitable. But we know that exploitation of the creative class continues to intensify in the developed world. In the new economy, labor is seemingly bifurcated: regressive, exploitable manual labor is considered obsolete and should be replaced and displaced by creative works and knowledge production. In the affluent parts of the world, the new economy dematerializes not only com-
modities but also labor, in the sense that work is packaged as leisure, and hardship and boredom are effaced by the promises of creativity and satisfaction. This eradication of traditional labor and the romanticization of creative labor in the West are made possible by the exploitation of Third World labor (or Third World populations in the First World). Labor exploitation has become impossible to discuss among the new creative workers, as exploitation is thought to have vanished.

The problematic dichotomization between the First and Third Worlds leads to, or is partly justified by, the false dichotomization of the two types of labor; intellectual and manual labor are concentrated in completely different geographical locations and political economies to allow the opposite logics to operate alongside each other.5 The developed world therefore is empowered by the works of “symbolic analysis,” to borrow Robert B. Reich’s term; scientists, researchers, and designers in the West busily sell their ideas and discoveries and plan globally.6 Abstracted and isolated either as figures of jobs lost in the developed world or as human exploitation in the developing world—both of which could be used to justify claims of globalization—actual labor vanishes, or is distorted, in the formulation of the creative economy.

While Lazzarato and his futur antérieur fellows are right to point out the false dichotomization between the two types of labor, focusing on the immaterial labor in the contemporary West they tend to privilege the vanguardism of the “intellectual proletariat” without examining more closely its ideological formation.7 Herein I wish to reconnect the relationship between creativity and labor. It is important to bring labor back to the investigation of the creative economy in order to demonstrate that creativity is not just an aesthetic concept but also a social praxis and to examine how the new creative economy continues to harbor exploitation while investing in fantasized notions of creativity. The notion of the creative economy should not mislead us into believing that creativity has replaced capital as an end unto itself. As long as this economy remains firmly grounded in capitalism, the ultimate object remains capital, and labor is an essential form of input.

The Artist versus the Creative Worker

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the modernity project celebrates the individualistic controlling subject, which in the domain of art and culture is the artist genius. The artist’s expressions are believed to be the result of his or her unique talents, expressions whose creativity cannot be replicated. This notion of the artist can be seen as the ideological antithesis of, on the
one hand, alienated industrial workers who lack opportunities to engage in their work creatively, and, on the other hand, the masses who revere, or are ignorant of, artwork. However, the actual economic conditions governing the creative worker currently are vastly different from any idealized world of art: creative commodities are produced for the consumption of the masses. Whereas the notion of the artist suggests autonomy and freedom, creative labor operates under the division of labor, so that no individual can claim complete ownership of a product. The two logics are not dichotomized in the new economy, but logics of aesthetic production and industrial production simultaneously structure creative labor, whose products can be considered both artistic and accessible to the masses. A careful investigation of the tensions and negotiations of the two strains of logic should give us a unique angle from which to understand how the current creative economy incorporates creativity as a new condition of late capitalist production.

I believe that any criticism of the creative economy must start with a careful analysis of the author function. As Martha Woodmansee argues, the artist or author as creative genius did not fully emerge before the eighteenth century, but then became dominant in Western society. The concept of moral rights is steeped in this Romanticist understanding of the artist, with a strong possessive connotation based on the premise that the author owns the work. We should guard against the exploitation that results from distributor-based copyright discourse, but a nostalgic return to the notion of the autonomous artist does little to help us analyze the creative economy, which is only a continuous development of author-based modernity.

The creative economy continues to rely on the Romantic notion of the genius artist to reify creativity, while at the same time overcoming the “inefficiency” associated with the artist discourse. The creative worker might still be characterized by his or her personal artistic sensibilities, but he or she also rationally weighs both creativity and business considerations to produce salable products. The main activities in the late capitalist economy are centered on consumer desire for identification and self-expression, and this economy advances subjective and unpredictable evaluations of taste, making styles and trends extremely volatile—but profitable. The creative worker is mythologized as the source of these transient but priceless ideas, and the consumer buys freedom and self-realization from the producer in the form of the commodity. The discourse of talent built around creative labor has afforded the worker entry into a privileged class, perpetuating the illusion that it is the creative class, instead of the capitalists, that leads the way in the current economy. However, while the discourse of the genius persists, the con-
cept of artistic creation is also the most estranged by the commodification of creativity. Marx suggests that the more the logic of exchange values dominates the production process, the more laborers will be alienated. This condition of industrial labor now applies to creative labor: artists, who supposedly produce for the sake of their own self-expression, are estranged by their own products, which are subject to capitalist logic; these works are no longer ends in themselves, but are meaningful only in their exchange values.

The simultaneous existence and mutual reinforcement of the logics of art and commerce are not new and have been structured over the course of the development of modern art in the West, in which the art market developed in tandem with the discourse of the genius artist. Since the seventeenth century the commodification of art and the discourse of the master artist have mutually penetrated. What distinguishes the uniqueness of our current creative age is not only the mutual support of the two domains of art and commerce, but also how the new category of the creative worker simultaneously embodies two seemingly oppositional logics. The master artist, although embedded in the art market, remains at a distance from commercial activities pertaining to his or her work due to the supposed separation of artistic production and reception. But the creative worker does not have this privilege; his or her labor is situated squarely in a dense economic reality. A recent Hollywood film offers us a glimpse of the complex intertwining—and mutual rejection—of the artist discourse and management logic simultaneously embodied in the same creative worker. I choose to discuss a Hollywood film as an illustrative example here, instead of a real social case, because there have been many empirical studies already conducted (see the introduction) and also because of the unique ideological value Hollywood cinema maintains and which is constitutive of the creative economy. This film has the quality of both aggrandizing the phantasмагoria of creative labor and subtly revealing the repressed exploitation.

*The Devil Wears Prada* (directed by David Frankel, 2006) evokes the glamour as well as the gloom of the working environment of the creative economy. Miranda Priestly, chief editor of the prestigious fashion magazine *Runway*, embodies the most powerful type of creative labor, because it is her aesthetic taste that determines which designers get media exposure and she dictates global fashion trends. She is not an actual designer, but the arbiter of “taste.” She is both manager and artist, and she uses her talent and power to control global fashion. The film revolves around the trust that develops between Miranda and her new assistant, Andrea, who initially disdains the pretentiousness and the lack of social importance of the fashion business. In spite of Miranda’s ruthlessness and the submission and transformation of Andrea, the
film is a clear endorsement of the power and glamour of fashion, indirectly reinforcing Hollywood’s role in constructing fashion.

But both the aura of art and the brutality of commerce loom large in the characterization of Miranda. Miranda’s career is inherently linked to a diversified range of labor, from designers to factory laborers, and her power is based on the hierarchy among these different forms of labor. In one of their early confrontations, Miranda lectures Andrea on the sacredness of her work, stating that any single decision she makes will determine the livelihoods of thousands of people working at the various levels of the fashion industry. In the hierarchy of the new global division of labor, Miranda epitomizes the pinnacle of work (or nonwork), which controls and coordinates the actual production taking place in, say, Third World factories. But the film is not just a glorification of this position, and it can also be seen as an effort to strip Miranda of her aura by exposing fierce competition behind the scenes. She not only possesses the aura of the artist, but also embodies the treacherous entrepreneur. She is set against Nigel, the magazine’s creative director, who has helped Miranda to make creative decisions in the past. But when Nigel thinks that he can finally leave Miranda and embark on a creative life of his own, Miranda makes a scapegoat of him in order to preserve her own job; Nigel’s new job is then given to Miranda’s rival.

Not only Miranda, but also the film itself, vacillates between the glorification and the condemnation of fashion. The morality of the film seemingly can be summarized in Miranda’s accusation of Andrea: “You sold your soul the first time you put on that pair of Jimmy Choos.” At the end of the film Andrea decides to abandon fashion and embark on a journey of self-realization. But the thrust of the film is clearly Andrea’s coming of age through her life in the fashion industry, and the film’s narrative structure and visual pleasure are clearly organized around the display of fashion. We could therefore read two different sets of ideological values in this film: fashion as capitalist vanity ultimately to be discarded, and fashion as creativity, freedom, and self-realization, which characterize the essence of creative labor. This dual set of values assigned to fashion makes up Miranda’s subjectivity. The struggles between Miranda and Nigel, or those between Miranda and Andrea, can be seen as externalizing Miranda’s own internal tensions: she is torn between the logic of art and the logic of commerce she simultaneously embodies. In spite of, or perhaps due to, her arrogance and selfishness, Miranda absorbs the complete attention and devotion of the people around her. But the artistic aura she embodies is also demythologized by her own submission to power. Like all creative workers, she possesses a split personality because she must both
self-actualize and fulfill competitive market demands at the same time. The film resolves these tensions by separating Miranda and Andrea. However, in reality the actual operation of creative labor cannot be differentiated between “good” artistic qualities and “bad” market calculations—and this, I think, is a unique feature of creative labor that merits further exploration.

Creative Labor: Input and Processing

Marxist discussion of raw materials is valuable to our understanding of creative labor, because the new economy is characterized by the feeding of creativity—as one more type of raw material—into the chain of production. In classical Marxism, there are three elements necessary for capitalist production: raw material, labor power, and machinery; these are the material embodiments of the “self-expansion” of capital. Simply speaking, the value of an exchangeable good is determined by the labor and the machinery required to transform raw materials into commodities. In other words, labor and machines are treated largely as tools employed to transform raw materials into commodities.

\[
\text{Industrial Labor + Technology} \rightarrow \text{Tangible Commodity}
\]

In the production of intellectual property, the input is not tangible raw material but intangible knowledge, ideas, or expressions, which are provided by the creative worker and transformed by technological mediation into commodities, whether something as “simple” as writing down musical notation or as complex as putting together a Hollywood movie. In the creative economy the factory is replaced by a computer, so that industrial labor disappears into the creative worker working comfortably on his own.

\[
\text{Technology} \rightarrow \text{Intellectual Property} \quad \text{(Creative Labor)}
\]

The two formulae differ most clearly in the form of input: tangible raw materials in traditional industrial production are replaced by abstract ideas and knowledge conceived and organized by a creative agent to produce intellectual property. Theoretically, a creative idea is not depleted after exploitation, and a single idea can be applied to an infinite number of products. The ever renewing trend of “glam” in the fashion industry, for example, derives partly from 1970s glam rock, whose visual dimensions were highly influenced
by pop art of the 1960s. David Bowie himself can be seen as a specter perennially haunting the fashion business in different forms. Glam, in an abstract way, can be seen as a raw material to be applied in different creative processes for different creative products. We could describe this characteristic as “non-rival,” as an idea that can be shared infinitely. The economics of intellectual property, therefore, might be described not in terms of scarcity, but of abundance. Many argue that this inexhaustible dimension of intellectual production is the key feature of the creative economy, in contrast to industrial capitalism’s basis in competition for limited resources.

However, a simple differentiation between scarcity and abundance does not truly describe the differences between the creative economy and the traditional industrial economy. First, we must note that in Marxism, traditional raw materials also have an inexhaustible dimension. According to Marx, “The object of labour counts as raw material only when it has already undergone some alteration by means of labour.” To Marx, raw materials differ from natural resources: natural resources are those means of production supplied by nature without human assistance—such as land, wind, and water—and create use-value without contributing to the formation of exchange value. In all other operations of capitalism that create exchange values, raw materials themselves must be understood as products of labor, meaning that they are already processed. Raw materials, in other words, are both products of labor and means of production. Cotton, for example, is both a product of industrial extraction and a piece of raw material for further industrial manipulation. “Hence we see that whether a use-value is to be regarded as raw material, as instrument of labour or as product is determined entirely by its specific function in the labour process, by the position it occupies there.” His interest lying not in the primitive process of animalistic survival but in the ways an advanced economy functions, Marx emphasizes that raw materials are not collected to be consumed, but are embedded in the chain of production. They must be constantly used and reappropriated, because it is through the incessant process of production and consumption that surplus values are created. Therefore, in the chain of production, raw materials do not stay unchanged, but are constantly transformed, consumed, and reappropriated to facilitate the production of capital.

I want to emphasize that Marx does not understand raw materials in terms of abundance or scarcity, as they are not inert and waiting to be exhausted, but are always worked over by labor. Raw material in itself does not interest him; it is the applied labor that is vital to our understanding of capitalist pro-
duction. It is in the processing of raw materials by labor that capitalism generates and recoups its energy. Marx describes the capitalist mechanism of raw material production:

On the one hand, the immediate effect of machinery is to increase the supply of raw material: thus, for example, the invention of the cotton gin increased the production of cotton. On the other hand, the cheapness of the articles produced by machinery and the revolution in the means of transport and communication provide the weapons for the conquest of foreign markets. By ruining handicraft production of finished articles in other countries, machinery forcibly converts them into fields for the production of its raw material. Thus India was compelled to produce cotton, wool, hemp, jute and indigo for Great Britain.14

While labor of the developing world continues to be exploited, production efficiency is greatly improved by industrial machinery. They both help reduce prices, and therefore expand markets. This process of constant harvesting of raw materials then drives colonialism and imperialism, which further expands the production of raw materials, and therefore capital.

This Marxist understanding of raw material as continuous, inexhaustible, and constantly transforming applies also to intellectual property, and our understanding of creative labor would be productively enriched by taking into account the continuous nature of raw materials. To return to our second formula, the labor factor is effaced in the production of creative commodity because ideas are thought to be produced effortlessly. But on a closer look, labor is required both in the production of ideas—in the various forms of training and experimentation, as well as group discussions and collaboration—and, like all other modern forms of commodities, in the transformation of ideas, as raw material, into commodities.

Therefore the labor factor in the production of intellectual property is manifested into at least two connected forms: labor that initiates ideas (CL₁) and labor that transforms creative input (CL²):

\[ \text{Technology + Creative Labor / CL}_2 \]
\[ \text{Ideas} \quad \text{——————————————————→ Intellectual Property} \]
\[ \text{(Creative labor / CL}_1 \text{)} \]

Marx argues that raw material is not the origin of production but is embedded in the incessant chain of production; as such, labor is also embedded in the raw material. The production of intellectual property follows a similar
logic, in that there is also no absolute origin of the creative idea as implied in
the traditional artist genius discourse, and therefore the two types of creative
labor (CL\(^1\) and CL\(^2\)) cannot be separated. The new ideas one is able to come
up with are necessarily versions of the products of previous cultural produc-
tions, and both CL\(^1\) and CL\(^2\) involve selection, processing, and recycling of
“old” ideas into “new” ones. Be it tangible commodity or intangible intellec-
tual property, the production input must be an output of a previous produc-
tion process, but at the same time the material is consumed and transformed
in order to produce surplus value. Therefore, as is the case in the capital-
ist mode of production, creativity, like traditional raw materials, cannot be
simply understood as either scarce or abundant, but needs labor input to
introduce it to the capitalist system.

I am not arguing that the logic of creative labor is identical to that of tra-
ditional labor, but we know that the labor involved in the production of intel-
lectual property is much more complex than that of traditional property, as
the identity of a creative worker not only resides in his or her output, but he
or she is also consumer and tastemaker. In his discussion of the creative class,
Richard Florida not only describes its work, but he also elaborately docu-
ments its lifestyle. The creative class is admired not only for its labor but also
for its consumption, as well as the intricate overlap between work and leisure
manifested among this group of people. Members of this creative class con-
sume their own products, and they themselves define what style is. Due to
the quasi-artist status given to creative laborers, not only are they passive
consumers, but they are also their own critics, and they shape and endorse
trends. In the case of advertising, a profession which heavily manipulates
the notion of creativity, the success of agencies and individuals is directly
linked to awards received; the power to dictate and shape creativity is gov-
erned by the profession itself. This phenomenon is described as “peer re-
gard.” Andy C. Pratt argues that “peer regard works most effectively in fuzzy,
fast-moving environments that are about ‘quality’ not ‘quantity’: industries
driven by fashion and consumption changes are a good case.” I agree with
Pratt that in the new creative industries it is the common task of peers to
shape what style is and what creativity is, but I believe that not only quality
but also quantity must be highlighted in the creative economy, in the sense
that abstract creativity and rational calculation constantly negotiate with and
complement each other.

Contemporary creative workers also exhibit strong entrepreneurial ability.
Creative workers tend to be freelancers, or have a job that is short term and
insecure. In general, they are responsible for their own careers, so they need to take risks, develop their own networks, and readily adapt to changing markets. In order to maintain their own competitiveness, they need to be innovative, flexible, and sometimes aggressive in order to gain access to the latest knowledge and opportunities provided by the market. At the same time, they need to maintain good interpersonal skills, build trust networks, and offer and receive peer support. As a result, many creative workers lead lives very similar to those of entrepreneurs, and they manage their career more as entrepreneurs than as artists, constantly coping with risks while remaining open to new career breaks. Dialectically they manage their careers as much as they are managed. As Stefano Harney argues, the creative industries are primarily a manifestation of the logic of management, organizing labor in such a way that it is not art being commodified, but the creative industries commodifying those who produce art. Between the dynamics of management and the dynamics of self-management, the creative worker is both empowered and disempowered.

Despite, and because of, the trend toward flexibility, spaces for independent work are actually shrinking. It is clear that the components of creative freedom and individualism inherent in the traditional artist discourse are not compatible with the components of peer evaluation and collective contribution in the discourse of creative labor. The notion of freedom continues to be circulated, but it does not really describe the mode of production of the creative worker so much as it legitimizes job insecurity. In fact creativity poses hidden threats to our creative economy, and discipline must be enforced to keep creativity contained. To be commodified for mass consumption, the components of freedom associated with creativity must be restrained. Marissa Ann Mayer, vice president of search product and user experience at Google, justifies the company’s exploitation of its creative labor by arguing that creativity triumphs over and benefits from “rules.” By delimiting how many designers work on each new product and for how long, management limits the company’s investment. Mayer argues that this limitation is in fact good for creativity, as their designers come up with better ideas and throw away bad ones faster: “Constraints shape and focus problems and provide clear challenges to overcome. Creativity thrives best when constrained.”

While this creative economy craves creativity, it also recognizes strong incentives to tame creativity. Creativity can be a most time- and capital-consuming activity. If we indulge in it, it can eat up the entire support of the economy. In other words, although this late capitalist economy relies heavily on cre-
ativity, creativity—as an unraveling of potentialities and unfamiliarity—is also a natural enemy of capitalism, whose principles are efficiency, productivity, and management. I believe the theory that “creativity loves constraints” is not only Google’s justification for exploiting its creative workers, but a dialectical demonstration of the threat of unrestrained creativity.

The simultaneous dichotomization and intensification of intellectual and manual labor is manifested within not only identical creative agents like Miranda in The Devil Wears Prada but also the creative class. We know that the creative class is composed of a hierarchy of workers ranked largely by their level of creative input: there are glamorous designers who make key decisions, and there are also strata of less creative workers suffering from low job security and high career risk. Research suggests that in the rapid expansion of the service sector in the past two decades inequality grew within the sector, not simply between sectors. As critics explain, “‘Hot’ industries and ‘cool’ jobs not only normalize, they glamorize risk, and the entrepreneurial investment required of individuals seeking these jobs leads to a structural disincentive to exit during difficult economic times. The image of glamorized risk provides support for continued attacks on unionized work and for ever more market-driven, portfolio-based evaluations of workers’ value.” Such an illusion is clearly a result of the aura accorded the creative dimension of the creative class. In spite of the actual complex manifestation of creative labor, the glamour of creativity continues to prevent us from seeing the intimate relationship between industrial labor and creative labor, allowing the creative economy to privilege spontaneous creativity as being naturally more valuable than the labor required to change raw creativity into commodity, although it is labor that really makes up the creative economy.

A radical subjectivism is still retained in the creative economy, in the sense that creative energies supposedly emerge from a creator’s self-exploration, and the creator’s expressive power derives from imaginative depth. At the same time, creativity can now be planned, exercised, and executed by careful formulation and coordination, and it has become a collective product. The creative agent, then, is no longer an autonomous individual artist who exercises creativity for her own sake; nor does she follow rigid rules to perform her duties. But this agent combines both logics, maneuvering a diversified mode of thinking and training in order to produce both creatively and industrially. Endowed with both the elite status of the artist and the consumption pattern of the leisure class, the popular imagination of the creative worker effectively conceals her actual labor circumstances.
The Democratization of Creativity

In the logic of the creative economy, there is a dialectic relationship between creativity scarcity and creativity democracy. In order to justify their property status, contrary to the other commonsense understanding that intellectual property is “nonrival,” intangible materials like ideas and creativity are understood to be exhaustible, so that activities related to sharing and copying can be delegitimized. Owners do not want to share their creative ideas with others because, they claim, ideas can be exhausted through sharing and copying. It is believed that the value of a creative idea decreases with each successive iteration. In order to apply the notion of exhaustion to creative ideas, these ideas must be understood in temporal terms: fashions come and go; creativity becomes a sparkle doomed to fade away. Increasingly medical discourse is also built upon concepts of competition; constantly mutating diseases and viruses continually make drugs obsolete. In addition to fetishizing newness, IPR owners also artificially create scarcity. In her analysis of film collecting in the VHS and DVD era, Barbara Klinger demonstrates that digitally reproduced films can never become rare. But in order to raise the desire for ownership among videotape or disc buyers, the language of scarcity (e.g., limited editions or rare items) permeates the discourse of video releases. In order to conjure up the brand aura in spite of infinite production capacities, many companies, from Louis Vuitton to Nike, persistently introduce new “limited edition” products to the market to keep the retail price high and the queuing line long. The myth of exhaustion is most trickily revealed in the case of publicity right, which is based on the assumption that celebrity can become exhausted, so that the one who owns the public image can claim property rights to the image. As Landes and Posner assert, “The trademark and right-of-publicity cases . . . recognize that intellectual property can be diminished by consumption.” As I have mentioned earlier, while the image of David Bowie is constantly alluded to in the fashion industry to give value to new products, publicity right also assumes that Bowie’s value will decline with constant use. Obviously both sides have their own audience.

The scarcity discourse of creativity is intimately related to the fetishization of creative labor. To return to the formulae analyzed earlier, the creative worker seems to be situated at the origin of the production process, which places him or her in a more privileged position than the industrial laborer, who is only a tool. The scarcity myth of creativity can be maintained in this age of creative economy only by the exalted position of the creative agency. In
examining the digitization of film culture, Michele Pierson asks to what extent special effects are still special, if computer-generated imaging (CGI) effects are taken for granted in current Hollywood productions, and whether these so-called special effects only serve to meet the demand for photo-realism. Pierson argues that a discourse of scarcity is still maintained, but in the sense that only a certain group of people (i.e., Hollywood) can produce such images. The aesthetics of scarcity continues to dominate Hollywood's fetishization of CGI, which produces the effect of impressing upon viewers that special effects are still special, and they are owned exclusively by Hollywood. While creative workers employed by Hollywood studios or related corporations are subject to the constraints of marketing strategies, company profiles, deadlines, and teamwork, the decoy of the Hollywood brand unifies them as the abstract author of commercial films, thus reifying the values of this creative class. The gay population is now sought after by the notoriously conservative Singapore government on the assumption that gayness equals creative talent, and many formerly prosperous and up-and-coming American cities are also investing in cultural infrastructure to attract creative workers and (re)vitalize urban areas. In general, the creative economy justifies the scarcity of creativity by conjuring up the scarcity of creative agents in order to legitimize the discourse of creativity ownership.

However, the myth of the scarcity of creative workers is both contradicted and supported by the opposite discourse of creativity democratization. Responding to the rise of the creative economy, Florida articulates a new framework of the “creative class,” which is unified by the values of individuality and meritocracy, as well as the recognition of diversity and openness. The elitism embedded in the discourse of the genius is discarded, which limits the availability of the creative source. In this sense, Florida’s work contains a hidden tension in his formulation of the creative class, as he argues that creativity is both intrinsic to all, a biologically and intellectually innate characteristic in all human beings, and realized only selectively. He is most disturbed by the fact that only one-third of the workforce is employed in the creative sector, in which employees are often treated much better than those in the manufacturing sectors. So he advocates expansion of the creative class. I infer that Florida believes in the mutual reinforcement of the growth of creativity and the growth of economics, both of which have no limits. In other words, he uses a capitalist mind-set of development to understand creativity. He argues that “the role of culture is much more expansive, that human beings have limitless potential, and that the key to economic growth is to enable and unleash that potential.” Although creativity is innate to all, within the capitalist
framework the competitive dimension of the creative economy must be retained and further emphasized, thus Florida’s self-contradictory discourse of fetishizing something that’s supposed to be universal. Now competition rests not in the discovery of individual geniuses, but in the democratization and intensification of creativity, so governments need to promote the teaching of “creativity,” and there should also be a more extensive merit system to reward the creative ones.

Since the rise of the creative economy, creativity can no longer belong only to a talented few, but must be democratized to expand the creative labor force. John Seabrook observes that as the mainstream becomes ever more homogeneous, the fringes have also become ever richer in cultural offerings, with an enormous increase in niche markets as well as “artists”: “Virtually everyone under twenty-five I met at MTV was an artist of one kind or another.” This phenomenon is reinforced by the IPR legal regime, which has also loosened the qualifications of authorship. Jane Gaines observes:

All works of authorship are original. Why? Because they originate with authors. . . . Every work is an original work, regardless of whether it is aesthetically unoriginal, banal, or in some cases, imitative. Every individual person is also a potential “author” whose “writings” will be as “original” as those of a renowned or acclaimed literary figure. . . . Copyright’s minimal point of origin requirement, which considers light fixtures and belt buckles as “works of authorship,” performs a critique of traditional theory’s notion of authorial originality. Copyright law is a great cultural leveler.

As Gaines suggests, copyright’s loose demands on the qualification of authorship help democratize authorship, so that everybody can now be a writer or an artist in the legal sense. With various new production (cheap cameras and easy editing programs) and distribution (YouTube and other online sites) technologies available, everyone can make and exhibit moving images, dramatically increasing the number of legitimate video artists worldwide. While Gaines is right to point out the impact of this cultural democracy on the traditional understanding of the artist, we cannot assume this “cultural leveler” will lead to a more egalitarian society. This democratization of creativity also supports current economic conditions, so that the proliferation of creativity, with the help of the legal protection of IPR, continues to fetishize the capitalist value of creativity, and the competition toward creativity only intensifies, as implied in Florida’s arguments.

The idea that everybody produces is not new to us, as the Birmingham
school of cultural studies has demonstrated that consumption can be active and political; this is most easily observed in the ways that fans not only exchange and accumulate ideas, but they also poach and create values. But the drastic democratization of art production training and art-performing experience is an altogether completely different phenomenon, as creativity is not only democratized but also fetishized by our education system and popular culture, to the extent that each of us is fed the illusion that “I” am uniquely talented. Seemingly contradictory ideas of creativity—elitist and democratic—can also be found in today’s popular culture, in which fans think of celebrities as gods. The structure of fan culture remains largely hierarchical: the audience reveres the artist. But the coexistence of different conceptions of creativity is more intertwined: although an artist may be so unique as to be worthy of mass worship, the worshippers themselves may one day become idols in their own right, as demonstrated by the global popularity of reality TV programs such as American Idol. In other words, the creative economy’s celebration of the democratization of creativity is manifested in the individual fan’s fantasy of being an idol. Such creative democracy does not demythologize notions of talent or deconstruct the associated hierarchy, as the Birmingham school strives to do. It only reinforces competition and naturalizes the social ladder based on the myth that everyone is equal. Going back to my discussion in the previous chapter, creativity should not be revered only as a production drive; we also need to acknowledge the creative dimension in reception in order to recognize creativity as a process of social intercourse.

The reification of creativity as a form of personal aptitude permeates not only discussions of creative labor but other, even oppositional discourses. Eva Hemmungs Wirtén rightly observes that a major problem of recent critical discourses against IPR expansion is the resurrection and reinvention of the author under names such as “hacker.” The hacker becomes just another romanticized form of artist, whose hacking exercises are considered his or her own personal productions and expressions of creativity and freedom. As a result, we continue to mythologize creativity, ignoring the actual labor involved. Although Florida introduces the concept of class to address the collectivity of creative labor, which seemingly takes away the individualist dimension associated with the artist, he essentializes the supremacy of creative labor over other forms of labor. Class is a highly constructed concept; it is not simply a structural category based on the nature of property ownership, but is always politically and ideologically constructed. The notion of class therefore requires a constant reflection on power. But today’s discourse on the creative class is grounded on the assumption that creativity is the natural property or
immanent capability of a selected group, or “aristocracy.” If we are to hold on to the collective notion of class to understand the new creative labor, we must also be alert to various contrived ideological matters related to identification and representation, which Florida simply casts aside.

When we incorporate culture into economy, economy must take human dimensions into account, and there are inevitable tensions between the two logics that might result in a plethora of consequences. It is true that creative labor might introduce noncapitalist economic notions of collaborative networks and creative ecologies. As some scholars argue, the community of the creative workers might generate a collective resource which exists independently of capital, “providing a mezzo-level structural defense for autonomous artistic labour, and a politics of autonomy within and beyond the commodified cultural sector.” Other scholars have also emphasized that the intimate entanglements between creativity and economy in current society actually offer opportunities to develop working communities in which economic activities are subordinated under wider social and cultural imperatives, so that the economy can no longer afford to be blind to human affect and social relationships.

However, there is also a danger of romanticizing the exercise of creativity as liberation, which runs the risks of idealizing the working environment and ideological limitations associated with this form of labor. The exaltation of “taste” and “beauty,” for example, can be extremely intellectually constraining, and such sensational appeals also make the works readily available to be appropriated by different political interests. In discussing the role of a photographer in the age of commodification, Walter Benjamin argues that the photographer easily becomes “illiterate,” unable to read his own pictures because his production of the “beautiful” prevents him from seeing the political content captured in his own pictures. Being lured into the production of the beautiful and capitulation to the fashionable, the photographer can never discover the full meaning of his own work. In a period characterized by aestheticization, Benjamin believes, people are too paralyzed by the “beautiful” to use critical thinking to discern social ramifications. He praises photographers of an earlier generation, such as Atget, who was able to turn his photographed space into a crime scene: “Isn’t it the task of the photographer—descendant of the augurs and haruspices—to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures?” However, the photographer, who was able to reveal to us the optical unconscious in the nineteenth century, increasingly serves the status quo by producing “the beautiful world.” The “creative” therefore covers up political maneuvering. Benjamin claims, “The more far-reaching the crisis of
the present social order, and the more rigidly its individual components are locked together in their death struggle, the more the creative—in its deepest essence a variant (contradiction its father, imitation its mother)—becomes a fetish, whose lineaments live only in the fitful illumination of changing fashion.” The crisis Benjamin refers to here is certainly fascism, but I think his insights can also help us understand our present situation. He uses the term “creative” pejoratively in the quote above, as he equates the creative to the production of the beautiful, and therefore to insensitivity to any other forms of knowledge. He argues that because current photographers no longer manifest the physiognomic, political, and scientific interests shown among earlier generations of photographers, the photographs produced become “creative.” In general, Benjamin believes that photographers must be driven by the desire for engagement with the world, instead of indulging in “creative” activities to legitimize their indifference. As the earliest generation of photographers shows, social engagement and craving for knowledge can be manifested in many different forms—only through the submission of one’s creative efforts to other social pursuits can the photograph be enlightened and captivating.

I will continue to explore Benjamin’s understanding of creativity in chapters 8 and 9. Here let us be careful to avoid equating the creative with aesthetics, which might uncritically endorse the transcendental discourse of the artist. It might essentialize one’s ownership of one’s work and dissociate the work from its social embedding. The creative economy employs the creative in exactly the way Benjamin criticizes it. In order to carry on Benjamin’s critique, our task is not to brush aside the materiality of creative productions altogether and to consider them ideologically regressive, but to take creative labor more seriously and understand it as a site of contestation. Creative labor is informed by both the logic of modernist art and the logic of capitalism, and this new form of labor is equipped with a wide array of aptitudes and values. At the same time, it is also under a broader spectrum of pressure and exploitation.

A problem of Benjamin’s argument is the way he takes production for granted and associates labor as political. But the property logic, which is predicated on the relationship between labor and product, works precisely to depoliticize labor. I will follow up on this in the next chapter; but for now, it suffices to consider the almost religious devotion to labor in traditional Marxist thought. While property rights in capitalism are legitimized by the Lockean thesis of the unalienating relationship between a person and his labor, Marx conceptualizes labor (not labor power) along similar lines, in the sense that labor is a basic condition of human existence and mediates the relation
between man and nature, and therefore human life itself. Marx believes that human relations are largely defined by people’s labor and the sociopolitical structures that instigate it.

Hannah Arendt launches a full-fledged criticism on this Marxist understanding of labor in *The Human Condition*: “In all stages of his work [Marx] defines man as an *animal laborans* and then leads him into a society in which this greatest and most human power is no longer necessary. We are left with the rather distressing alternative between productive slavery and unproductive freedom.” Arendt is most critical of the private dimension of the common understanding of labor: “Of all human activities, only labor, and neither action nor work, is unending, progressing automatically in accordance with life itself and outside the range of willful decisions or humanly meaningful purposes.” Therefore, instead of labor, Arendt emphasizes public actions, which distinguish humans from animals, from which politics arise. She points out that Locke develops his property rights theory by using the notion of labor. Locke claimed that by adding our labor to a certain piece of the common life, we appropriate that piece into our private possession, and it is the private nature of labor that legitimizes property rights. Arendt is disappointed that Marx did not interrogate this logic but continued to privilege this private site as the base of his political theories.

Following Arendt’s criticism, I must emphasize that labor should not be privileged for the sake of its private relationship with the laborer, because it runs the risk of preempting the social and the political (thus my criticism of the discourse of rights, to be elaborated in the next chapter). But I think Arendt also misses the point that instead of emphasizing the personal nature of labor as Locke does, Marx stresses the social relations labor elicits. Through labor people enter into definite social relations with each other, whether positively as members of the same community, or negatively, propelled by capitalism, as slave or master, lord or serf, or capitalist or wage earner. But the creative economy works precisely to render creative labor radically private and therefore apolitical. An urgent task for critics of the creative economy is to explore the collective nature of creative acts, therefore the indissoluble relationship between CL₁ and CL₂, in terms not only of industrial collaboration but also of meaning production. Creative labor cannot be substantiated as one’s isolated toil, but is always embedded within the chains of industrial production and meaning production, processes which are much more complicated than the current concept of the author or artist can grasp.

In his studies of the intercourse between students and factory workers in nineteenth-century France, Jacques Rancière demonstrates the mutual desire
of the two groups for the liberating possibilities inherent in the other’s material labor situations. The confrontation between two different kinds of workers and different modes of production could point out the deficiencies and repressions in the different sets of social and subjective conditions, providing both of these groups with a new perspective from which to understand desperation, social unrest, and revolution. Within a Marxist framework, Rancière seeks to reconceptualize the actual political meanings of industrial laborers, who were considered the only people who could lead society to revolution; it was not the nature of their labor or material hardship, but their predetermined quality of life that was the real source of agitation. By the same token, Rancière also “rescues” the notion of intellectual production from the damnation of orthodox Marxists as nothing but “false ideology.” Most important, he demonstrates that the confrontation between different forms of labor is politically productive, as such confrontations often help to denaturalize the working environment one is too mired in to see beyond.

As such, the simultaneous embodiment of artistic and industrial logics in creative labor is potentially revolutionary, as we can see the value of creative labor in its ability to bring to crisis the inherent limitations of both logics. Instead of following Florida’s uncritical celebration of creative labor, we might choose to complicate the constituents of creative labor and see such complexity as politically confounding, because it constantly incorporates and interjects different kinds of labor and different ways of thinking, although it also means that workers are exposed to exploitation on different fronts. The creative economy seems to have provided the infrastructure to realize the democracy of creativity, which allegedly addresses the innate creative ability of all people and promises to provide enough incentives and training to allow all individuals to turn their innate creative ability into not only means of self-realization but also forms of cultural capital. But the myth that everybody can be creative uncritically endorses the superiority of creative labor over other forms of labor, fulfilling the human-centered modernity project in a different way. Instead, if we can discern the complex social embedding of creative labor, we will not fetishize creative labor as a “higher” form of labor, but understand that it actually embodies the site where contradictions of late capitalism operate. Labor does not evaporate in the creative economy, but it is only more intricately shaped to accommodate and justify a condensed and twisted economic logic.