

Precarity, Biography and Event: Work and Time in the Cultural Industries

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Abstract

This article explores the temporality of work and employment in the cultural, creative and media industries ('cultural work'). Building on recent sociological writing on 'event-time', I explore the ways in which owner-managers of small creative firms navigate the contingent workplace in a world of allegedly advanced 'precarity', yet seek also to maintain their own stable anchorage to a linear 'biographical' time marked by continuity and a control of material privilege. It is argued that understanding the political economy of time in cultural work requires theorisation of temporal continuity as well as change, not only to avoid making undue epochal judgments, but also to ensure continued recognition of social differences in the ways time is being encountered and experienced at work.

Keywords: cultural work, careers, temporality, biography, event

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Introduction

This article explores the temporal organization of ‘cultural work’ – work and employment in the cultural (or ‘creative’), arts and media industries (see Banks, 2007; Beck, 2004; Cohen 2012; Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015; Gill, 2014; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Scharff, 2017). In recent years, cultural work has often featured prominently in the writings of sociologists who’ve argued that workers have become more ‘individualized’; made self-responsible for forging and maintaining their own career paths in a world of work marked by increasing instability, discontinuity and the ‘political economy of insecurity’ (Adkins, 2013; Gill, 2014; Sennett, 2006). Indeed, cultural work is often regarded as individualized work *par excellence* – since culture, media and the arts tend to specialize in offering contingent, insecure and discontinuous work that individuals must continually self-manage and self-navigate over the course of a career (Banks, 2007; 2011, Gill and Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2016). Here individualization is presented in ambivalent terms as both threat and opportunity; a world devoid of guarantees but where there appears increased opportunity to engage and participate in work on one’s own terms, free from inherited restrictions or traditions (e.g. see Banks, 2007; Ross, 2013).

However, some recent approaches have begun to more strongly emphasise how structural transformations are further unsettling economic organization – including the extent to which work is able to be controlled and managed by individuals over time. One assumption of such perspectives is that the actual capacity of individualized workers to pursue a freely-chosen course of life is increasingly threatened by conditions of generalised ‘precarity’ or ‘precariousness’ – most commonly understood as a systemic, accelerated and chronic instability that increasingly undercuts *any* efforts to secure temporal security and continuity at work (Armano et al, 2017; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Standing 2011). Theorists of precarity have argued that as work has become increasingly flexible, insecure and contingent in terms of its allocation and undertaking then the capacity of workers to plan and control their work - and to so predict its future – has become more firmly challenged. For many, cultural work is often seen as especially precarious in this general sense (e.g. Bulut, 2015; de Peuter, 2014; Lorey, 2006) – since it relies so strongly on discontinuous work undertaken by people who valorise their ‘free’ individuality yet appear ‘preternaturally adaptable’

(de Peuter, 2014, p. 264) to absorbing any of the unsettling demands that work might make.

While this article supports a general theory of precariousness, it seeks also to examine its limits. One of these limits is a tendency to gloss over some quite marked social *differences* in the temporal experience of cultural work - including the continued capacities of (at least some) individuals within it to maintain a conventionally linear and planned approach to the management of economic circumstances and their own working life. Put otherwise, the article aims to show how under conditions of (temporal) disruption and a more generalised precarity, not all cultural workers are unsettled or made similarly precarious. Taking my cue from Lisa Adkins' germinal writing (including an article in this journal) on the changing chronologies of cultural work I draw on some of my own historical and current empirical research to show how a linear experience of manageable and controllable time – what I'll refer to here as 'biographical time' – remains available to some cultural workers even under the conditions of precarious temporal disruption that Adkins has recently referred to as 'event-time' (Adkins, 2009; 2013). However, I also show that the ability to live one's working life in 'biographical time' is not evenly distributed; the capacity to control time in a continuous and self-sustaining fashion, and to evade precarity, is socially differentiated and tends to reflect established patterns of social inequality in the cultural industries. Thus, the first contribution of this article is to consider how far the control and management of time might have been *transformed* in the cultural industries workplace (and for whom), and secondarily, and relatedly, to contribute to ongoing discussion of the problems of temporal (and social) *injustice* in the provision and undertaking of cultural work itself; a significant concern for many sociologists and theorists of the cultural industries (Banks, 2017; Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013; Gill and Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2016).

Cultural Work as Ideal Type

'Cultural work' is a term now commonly used to refer to activities of artistic, creative or aesthetic production that take place in the contexts of the cultural (or 'creative'), arts and media industries (e.g. Banks, 2007; Beck, 2004; Cohen, 2012; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Scharff, 2017). This mainly (if not exclusively) includes the labour of artists,

designers, musicians, mediators, authors and ‘creatives’ in general – those primarily responsible for the authorial production of symbolic goods and commodities. The labour of such workers is often imagined to be especially inventive and meaningful and to provide personal freedoms and psychological rewards not generally available to other kinds of (non-cultural) worker (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Ross, 2000). While the ‘specialness’ of cultural work is contestable (e.g. see Stahl, 2013; Toynebee, 2013) and the grounds for its idealization open to dispute, there is sufficient distinctiveness in its organization to invite reflection on its specific ‘social-symbolic features’ (Stahl, 2013, p. 84), and how these might compare or contrast with other and related forms of work (Ross, 2000).

Paradoxically, however, while cultural or creative work is often idealized as unique or distinctive, it’s also often used to predict the changing nature of work in general. For example, cultural work (especially in its emerging, digitally-enabled forms) is often fetishized as providing more generally ‘pioneering’, ‘new’ or ‘cutting edge’ models of work, especially when cited in the rhetorical context of ‘creative economy’ policy and discourse (e.g. DDCMS, 2017; and see Schlesinger, 2016). In more academic terms, Matt Stahl (2013) suggests that cultural work is often regarded by theorists as a ‘limit case’, that is as a special type of labour whose characteristic form tends to exaggerate both the positive and negative extremes of work in general. For Stahl, cultural work both ‘heightens and denaturalizes’ (2013, p. 74) more widely-found employment struggles over creativity, autonomy and commercial exploitation, because of its tendency to foreground such struggles in its ordinary undertaking. Indeed, for many policy-makers, practitioners and social scientists, culture-making has long retained a particular (if not exclusively-held) value as the kind of work that might allow us to see into the future of work more generally (e.g. see Mills, 1966; Bell, 1973; Florida, 2002).

In recent years, much of the sociology of cultural work has focussed on the mooted transition to a more unpredictable and unstable form of work and employment marked by ‘precarity’, as an accelerated expression of the ‘political economy of insecurity’ (see Adkins, 2013, Gill and Pratt, 2008; Sennett, 2006). Precarity in cultural work is, for Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt, understood as:

‘...a preponderance of temporary, intermittent and precarious jobs; long hours and bulimic patterns of working; the collapse or erasure of the boundaries between work and play; poor pay; high levels of mobility; passionate attachment to the work and to the identity of creative labourer (e.g. web designer, artist, fashion designer); an attitudinal mindset that is a blend of bohemianism and entrepreneurialism; informal work environments and distinctive forms of sociality; and profound experiences of insecurity and anxiety about finding work, earning enough money and ‘keeping up’ in rapidly changing fields’ (Gill and Pratt, 2008, p. 14).

Cultural work has become regarded less as a stable continuity and much more a series of discontinuous *events*; a job-to-job or freelance existence marked by discontinuity, unsettling individualization and enforced mobility, where the worker is often conceptually cast in terms that serve to emphasise the essential fragmentation, unpredictability and impermanence of their conditions of labour - the hired hand, the contractor, the ‘portfolio-worker’, the ‘flexitarian’, the ‘gig-worker’. Cultural work has been shown to be especially amenable to informal, flexible and non-standard modes of work organization and especially marked by technological and social changes that seem continually set to transform the conditions of production (Banks 2017; Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015; McRobbie, 2016; Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013). Yet the extent to which this is occurring generically - and how it is being understood and experienced by *different kinds of workers* - we are only just beginning to comprehend or measure.

From ‘Clock-Time’ to ‘Event-Time’?

One of the problems in theorizing cultural work and the ‘creative economy’ is precisely the fact that it is very rarely thought of in temporal terms – other than in the context of its popular and routine celebration as ‘new’ and ‘innovative’ thereby unlike previous work in the (presumably dull and uncreative) ‘old’ economy (e.g. see Florida, 2002; Howkins, 2013). However, in contrast to these positive analyses, Lisa Adkins (2009; 2013) has made one of the more developed attempts at trying to critically understand the changing temporality of different kinds of cultural work. In this she has particularly focussed on what she terms the putative shift from ‘*clock-time*’ to ‘*event-time*’. In her formulation, if clock-time is the time of industrial society,

where work largely unfolded within linear and modernist chronologies (e.g. fixed hours, working days, standardised career paths, workplace hierarchy, long-term investment and planning, established and unchanging business cycles and rhythms), then event-time describes the *usurping* of clock-time in favour of a more disorganised, fast-moving and flexible chronology, in service of advanced post-industrial capitalism.

For Adkins, event-time in cultural work is first marked by the decline of ‘standardised, narrativised biography and knowable predictable futures’ (Adkins, 2013, p. 153). Following writers such as Ulrich Beck (2000) and Richard Sennett (2006), Adkins suggests that working lives of today have been cut loose from the stable contexts that once gave them shape – such as conventional arrangements of class, gender and ethnicity, forms of continuous or tenured employment, relatively limited labour mobility and established organizational cultures and hierarchies. In industrial societies, marked by the dominance of an abstract and measurable clock-time - it was possible to more accurately plot ones progress and predict one’s future according to some relatively stable anchoring points in this external context – political, social and economic structures that offered points of orientation and continuity (Adam, 1994). Thus, in industrial modernity, it was assumed that people held a more secure perception of where they had ‘come from’ and were ‘going’ socially and economically, and felt more confident that the future could be projected at least reasonably accurately - such as in the assumed ‘job for life’ under Fordism, or the stable affordances of full employment associated with the ‘golden age’ of post-1945 capitalist democracies (Marglin and Schlor, 1992). A migration from such trends now appears especially marked in the cultural or creative sectors, since work here is predicated on unusually strong investments in the practices and tropes of *creativity, newness, novelty, originality, innovation, speed, flexibility* and *project-working* that tend to valorise ‘nowness’ and an introspective and obsessional engagement with the demands of the immediate task (e.g. see Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013; Gill, 2014; McRobbie, 2016). In cultural work a fixation on ‘the now’ is supported by the ubiquitous presence of digital production and communications technologies whose ‘always on’ affordances (Gregg, 2011) appear to accelerate and intensify the disruption of traditional senses of time.

But, secondly, it is not just a matter of trajectory, linearity or predictability, but a matter of how one conceptualizes the relationship between different spheres of social time. For Adkins, clock-time ordered the world in a particular fashion where life's events were differentiated from the temporal context in which they sat – or, rather, biography was sequestered from history – for the purposes of telling a coherent story about one's self. Put another way, biographical events, in their telling, and in their reconstruction, were made to appear *separate* from social context, even as they tried to relate to or reflect on that context. Event-time now describes the collapse or merging of events and social-historical time, or a folding of life's events and social context into a single converged temporality, one which cannot be understood from an 'outside' position or reflected upon in a coherently linear or detached (biographical) fashion.

We should note that Adkins' arguments have strong resonances with recent wider turns towards theorizing the philosophy and sociology of the 'event' (e.g. see Abbott, 2010; Badiou, 2005; Wagner-Pacifici, 2010; Youssef, 2016). For some, events can be defined as some kind of new temporal 'happening' or occurrence – an exogenous shock that occasions 'ruptures and significant transformations of social structures' (Youssef, 2016, p. 8); events being the marker of a changing social world in systemic motion. Alternatively, for others, events can be defined as kinds of situated encounter that provide a mediating context between relations of structural social forces and acting human agents. Here events are understood as not simply imposed from without but also made from within through interaction and the human 'relay of signs and symbols, gestures and exchanges, images and texts' (Wagner-Pacifici, 2010, p. 1366) that shape their constitution and unfolding. Adkins tends to describe the 'event' of work more in these latter terms – a world where constantly transforming and updating social forces meet human subjects trying their best to adapt and make sense of often disconcerting changes, but always from a position of event *interiority* (see Adkins, 2013, p. 159). In reflecting these assumptions, Adkins contends it is much less easy for workers to anticipate, plan or reflect on time in the abstract, since chronic instability and ingrained precarity render this extremely difficult or even impossible – as everything now collapses into the constant event of the present. The event is now the (dis)organizing principle for work, since work has become subject to a constant 'irruption of the new' (Bassett, 2016, p. 281) as flexible working contained within

discrete projects becomes the ‘new normal’ (Luckman and Taylor, 2018) and where it seems the only possibility of escape is to exit the occupational field.

Pursuing this line of theorizing, and based primarily on interviews she undertook with digital media workers in the North-West of England, Adkins (2013) shows how event-time is made evident in the ways in which decisions about work and careers are not made with reference to some predictable, knowable future ‘out there’ – since this doesn’t exist – but shaped by the immediate demands of the most urgent event; such as the current job, project, or opportunity in hand. Furthermore, while this itself contains trace elements of the past, present and future, it does not necessarily invite abstract measurements of those temporal aspects, or recognition of social or historical points of anchorage that would allow people to grade their progress against an external standard, or to predict their future according to established social patterns or trajectories. For example, and just by way of illustration, ‘Peter’, one of Adkins’ participants, reveals the constant pressures to adapt to the immersive and unstinting tempo of work in the present, while trying to prehensively speculate on the possibilities of work in the future:

‘I have to keep trying to learn new things (...) there is a balance to being productive and getting the money coming in using the skills I’ve already got and then actually working and learning new stuff where I know I’m not actually making money doing that but I know that it is for the future’ (Peter, self-employed web designer, in Adkins, 2013, p. 156) [1]

Event-time therefore describes the new permanency of the folded-in, immediate moment of the ‘now’ which contains its own ‘already present forthcoming’ (Adkins, 2009, p. 1). While workers like Peter might appear to be in positive control of their own, individualized ‘do-it-yourself biography’ (Adkins, 2013; Beck, 2000) - the much vaunted ‘portfolio-career’ so celebrated by creative economy enthusiasts - it is actually the intensified *lack* of external referents and resources that seems to disallow the possibility of workers forging their own predictable and controllable futures from within the maelstrom of instantaneous events.

The great value of Adkins' work is to bring a critical theoretical perspective to understanding the temporal organization of cultural work. Her research illustrates neatly the ways in which certain kinds of precarious and unpredictable forms of work, that have to be navigated *in situ* and without the availability of stable external reference points, may have come to assume a greater primacy in the most advanced and mediated forms of cultural work. Yet we should not discount that event-time - and the experience of being subject to the contingencies of the event - might still only constitute *part* of the temporal landscape of cultural work.

Narrative Returns: In Search of Biographies

While the idea of event-time offers a suggestive way of theorizing cultural work transformation, it's also useful to think about its potential for a wider application, as well as consider its limits. Firstly, then, one challenge to Adkins's arguments is that they might only be applicable to the particular kind of cultural worker or industry she chooses to study in her research – mostly young, educated men working in 'new' digital media. This demographic and this industry might easily be imagined to be at the forefront of any emergent (and exclusive) work culture that demands a capacity for unfettered personal flexibility, rapid delivery and the effacement of established temporal hierarches and boundaries (Gill, 2014; Gill and Pratt, 2008). Secondly, there is the question of event-time limits – or rather, how far we can abandon the idea of thinking about the lives of cultural workers in terms of clock-time with its characteristic tropes of linearity, planning and control? To what extent are the lives of cultural workers actually marked by pervasive non-linearity (Adkins' first observation) and the recursive enfolding of the world into event-time, a time where context and event are co-existent, and not separated out (Adkins' second observation)?

To address these questions of applicability and limits I want to refer to a research project that I first co-worked on in the 1990s, and to which I have recently returned. The initial project [2] was based on in-depth interviews with 50 cultural workers in the UK city of Manchester UK, mostly employed in small firms or self-employed as artists, musicians, DJs and fashion designers, as well as in digital and media industries. The aim of the project was to try and understand what kinds of newly-

emerging ‘cultural’ or ‘creative’ work such people were engaged in, to map their career paths and aspirations, and to uncover something about their wider social embeddedness - not only in the space of the urban, but also in the time of the present. In recent years I’ve attempted to locate and re-interview some of those workers first encountered in the original project. I was interested to discover how the lives of these cultural workers had changed over a period of fifteen years and how their careers had transitioned or developed. This is part of a developing attempt to think longitudinally about career trajectories in an industrial context that has so often lacked an historical research perspective or considered accounts of how careers develop over time (Banks, 2017; and for an example in this journal, see Taylor and O’Brien, 2017).

My attempt at research *redux* has generated initial data that might start to bring into question some of the foundational assumptions that ground Adkins’ approach. Firstly, while I would agree that there has been some disruption of the temporal structures of cultural work – that might putatively be cast in terms of the folding together of ‘clock-time’ and ‘event-time’ – I would suggest that this is by no means yet a universal (or perhaps even widely generalised) process. More specifically, I want to challenge Adkins’ idea that continuing to think about cultural work and cultural workers in terms of *biography* has limited value, by identifying that biographical experience in ‘clock-time’ persists, albeit in a socially variable way. Thus, it is not simply a general collapse or supersession of traditional time-space structures that is characteristic of the contemporary cultural workplace, but also a *continuity* of social divisions of time and space that reflect already-established social biographies and narratives, related to recognized social structures. However, in caveat, the data I use here is not meant to be comprehensive or generalizable but merely *suggestive*; deployed tactically as an initial case to open up the future possibility of developing a critical counter-perspective on the structural contexts under which cultural work is currently undertaken and the temporal politics that pervade and shape its particular undertaking.

Turning Back the Clock: Reflections on a Cultural Career

This section draws on interviews undertaken with two of our original research participants - a self-employed graphic and digital designer and a self-employed fashion designer. Each participant was interviewed twice, once in 1998, and once

again in 2013. As illustrative cases or vignettes, they speak to two of my aims, above. Firstly, they *do* begin to show some of the potential wider applicability of the idea of event-time to the experience of different kinds of cultural worker, but also, secondly (and more crucially) they suggest how – at least for some more privileged workers – there remains the continued possibility of experiencing working life in a personalized, ‘biographical’ and linear time. As I’ll show, this experience appears to rely on and reproduce some familiar structures of social inequality, ‘carried over’ from the era of clock-time and its allegedly more stable and knowable social world(s).

Nick, Graphic Designer

I met ‘Nick’ in 1998 as the owner of a somewhat ‘arty’ (his term) graphic design and marketing company in Manchester. By the time of our second meeting his business had been in operation for over 20 years. As his company grew it attracted both industry plaudits and commercial success, leading to more lucrative commissions and higher-profile work. During this period, Nick has deliberately sought to contain the growth of the company, only ever employing a handful of core (but changeable) designers, support workers and administrators, over which he exerts executive control as the owner and manager (‘Creative Director’) of the company. Let’s consider, in Adkins’ typology, the extent to which Nick’s career is located in a ‘biographical’ clock-time or an unstable and converged event-time.

When I initially met Nick, his firm was already established - but somewhat underdeveloped. It was a largely reactive organisation that had no considered business plan, and a somewhat *ad hoc* existence, with Nick himself multi-tasking and managing numerous roles which, he admitted, threatened to overwhelm him; the overall ambitions, however, were modest: as he said at the time:

There’s no great scheme. The company needs some more people involved in it and it needs to be healthy enough financially to allow that. It needs to be (...) financially secure so that doing the work we do is enjoyable.

There was some limited sense of an abstract future time, but in essence Nick was immersed in the moment. This might initially seem like event-time – and perhaps it

was. But now, I would argue, in the current phase, Nick exists in a more evidently managed, controlled and linear working environment. This has different modes of expression. For example, here Nick attributes some of his commercial success to an intrinsic orientation to ‘craft’; widely understood as a mode of work strongly characterized by the historical continuity of time-served, incrementally constructed and embodied expertise (Sennett, 2007):

Craft is the bedrock as far as I’m concerned (...) we strive to retain the craft, which requires thought and process, which requires time, which requires billing [charging clients] for it...we’re regularly called ‘expensive’ but on the other turn of the key you do get what you pay for. Because we’re not cheap, everything we do has to have logic and a reason. It takes time, there is research, a strategy, a brief, and time spent.

In event-time, stable anchoring to the abstract endowments of history is questioned. Yet, here, Nick, like many cultural workers, defines his work in ‘practice-like’ terms (MacIntyre, 1981), that is, as an established, intrinsically-rewarding activity with objective and realizable standards of excellence, understandable in terms of skill, community and continuity – all those attributes allegedly usurped in advanced precarity. Like many skilled cultural workers, Nick situates himself in a linear historical narrative, and effects a biographical orientation in relation to it. He is part of and contributes to a recognized and valued tradition of expertise and craft-ship (see Luckman, 2015).

However, this is not the only way in which narrative and a linear sense of time persisted for Nick. Let’s consider here Adkins’ idea of the impossible separation of events from abstract time:

Mark: At the time [1998] there was a sense that small was beautiful...there wasn’t any grand projections about where [the business] was going, if I recall?

Nick: There wasn’t any business development then (...) but things changed, we decided to get into place-branding....now at this point there’s been an epoch of place-branding that started around 1998 and ended in 2010 with the new [Coalition] Government, [it] stopped dead, that was our last 10 years of work....we branded [names a number of clients] and at that point we grew a reputation in the kinds of public sector branding

that became politically abhorrent 18 months ago, and it killed a chunk of our market. There's [now] no political interest in local authority branding (...) the retraction of that work has led to us reducing the number of designers.....we've given ourselves limits...we're now looking at the next 5-10 years.

In the last fifteen years, Nick has come to exert a considerable control over his work, in terms of its intensity and extent, and more effectively manage both a changeable roster of employees while maintaining and improving the commercial range and quality of clients. We might say that success has been enabled (at least partly) by Nick's capacity to control time, to manage it, and shape it to his own ends. This has not simply happened by accident, or contingently in relation to an unknowable and unpredictable market place, it has also been effected in more orderly and linear fashion, by adapting and planning for anticipated changes in the market and with conscious calculating with reference to an externally-realized and abstracted future-present.

Even if we accept that to some extent Nick's account is an artifice constructed after the ungovernable fact of the event, a rationalization of irrational chance, or even a provocative effect of social science method [3], we ought not to underestimate the real possibility of actors making a strategic calculation and management of events and biography amidst external, abstract time. The extract above illustrates the absolute necessity of planning, projection, reflection – situating oneself in external events, while abstracting oneself from them – in order to ensure continuation of the company and Nick's privileged role at the centre of it. Nick (and his company) have survived because he has been able to insinuate himself within (and separate himself from) external events, according to the shifting rhythms of commercial priority and need, in a linear time that is conceptually narrativized and lived.

Finally, Nick's capacity to lift himself out of event-time, and to draw on established narratives and time-tested structures, begins to intimate something wider about the social organization of time in cultural work – its durable rootedness in historically-established power relationships and social divisions:

Mark: How have you managed the fluctuations in the number of employees, like when you've had to let people go?

Nick: Yes, depends on the exact moment whether we make them redundant or whether we pay them out or sort of [say] 'cards on the table there isn't the work'. One of the elements of the design trade is a natural cycle of things and people don't expect to stay at the same company all their lives anyway.

But, then, also:

Nick: I find it quite reassuring when designers [apply for jobs] who've been somewhere for five or six years previously (...) because they've committed to somewhere. Because of the kind of work we do, large scale branding, there are sprinters and there are marathon runners, we're not the kind of place for sprinters....we're here for the long run, a short job for us, well, it can be a six month run up to a job, and relationships for a client last a number of years (...) Recruiting is a fun time, largely we're looking for someone who's not driven by job title, there is no upgrade path, I'm always going to be the Creative Director, I welcome them being interested in wages, but we want people who are driven by the work (...) somebody who's looking for the long run.

These extracts talk to a point of contradiction that I want to convey about temporalities of cultural work – namely, that while some workers might live in linear, biographical time, others might well be forced to live in event-time. Nick's routine strategy for dealing with external contingencies, such as a fall-off in business, is to make redundancies and not renew contracts – accepting instability and discontinuity as routine (and acceptable) aspects of the industry. These expendable workers, employed on a temporary or project basis, are precisely the kind of workers Adkins' might see as exposed to the non-linear, folded-in time of the event – living from job to job, unsure of the future and unable to plan for it because of an unstable and unmanageable industrial context. Nick, on the other hand, remains in his role as owner and Creative Director, and largely untouched by the unstable 'event' – indeed, his capacity to develop a biographical career of manageable contingency and continuity actually relies on his unburdening the event experience onto the shoulders of his employees – their precarity being the guarantee of his stability.

Yet, ironically, the above extract also reveals how - despite his willingness to impose event-time conditions on his workers - the employees that he values most highly are those possessed of what we might call 'qualities of biography'. They are 'marathon runners not sprinters', people who can see the 'long run' and develop character and skill over time – despite the fact they quite openly cannot progress up the company hierarchy and are only sustained for the duration of current or available work. Workers are therefore expected to come into Nick's company with biographically-established credentials and skills, but must become attuned to event-time rhythms – with no stability or guarantee, no vertical progress, and nourished only by the satisfactions of the immediate project. Like 'Peter' in Adkins' study, they must live in the moment while investing in the anticipated (but unknowable) future of work likely to be located elsewhere.

As owner-manager, and the only consistent employee over the life of the firm, Nick has worked to secure a work situation that can be understood as linear, continuous and 'biographical' – that is, amenable to self-conscious and abstract reflection on events separated from social time and affording the possibility of a future orientation. He therefore uses his material resources and historically-established position to further *reinforce* that position – as owners and managers have always done. But for those other employees, who are expected to adhere to the so-called 'natural cycle' that Nick seems more firmly insulated against – it's quite likely that event-time does best describe their work situation.

Sarah, Fashion Designer

Let's take another indicative example to further illustrate how a managed control of biographical time helps effect and reproduce an economic advantage. When I first met 'Sarah' in 1998, she was an independent fashion designer who made her own clothes with a small workforce in the Northern Quarter of Manchester, a traditional textile manufacturing area. She very quickly became successful, securing contracts and concessions in a number of high-street retailers – and made a lot of money. She was also smart and by her own admission 'business savvy', and realised that by the early part of the 2000s her business model was becoming outmoded, especially as the

kind of flexible independent production she provided for high street clients (so-called 'fast fashion') was being developed much more efficiently by the retail corporations themselves, using combinations of in-house designers, outsourced overseas production, and reduced production schedules. Having anticipated the emerging threat, she elected to close down her company:

I think the biggest thing was that the environment for fashion in the UK changed massively, really quickly in that decade (...) we were fast fashion on a small scale before H&M hit the high street and before Zara hit the high street. (...) So as soon as I can remember seeing H&M on Market Street here in Manchester, I remember walking in there thinking 'oh shit' (...) I thought, I'll just keep pumping money into this and then I'll lose everything. And I stopped and made everybody redundant, within in the space of four weeks everything was closed down.

In one sense this is an example of economic precariousness – another case of the global market upsetting local intentions. But rather than being at the mercy of fate or caught up in its contingent effects, Sarah asserted control over time and pre-empted its unfolding. She anticipated crisis and made sure she was wasn't financially disadvantaged by it, though you might note (as in the case of Nick's firm) her employees weren't forewarned or afforded this luxury. Sarah subsequently moved to a new city, bought an apartment and by her own admission 'did nothing'. This largely involved investing her remaining money in property and stocks, and living on the returns. Eventually she decided to return to Manchester, still financially secure enough to not have to work.

Sarah's capacity to make and manage a biography was based on her previous success over a decade which provided the financial security that allowed her to manage events to her own advantage. It was her employees whose lives and security were more significantly disrupted by the acute instability of the event. Sarah had made the career she wanted and exhibited control of its cessation and afterlife, in the midst of something like an emergent event-time. But this wasn't the last gasp of a biographically-ordered life as the contingencies of event-life took over – since her capacity to exist in a biographical, linear time was able to endure. Recently, for purposes of enjoyment rather than necessity, she had decided to go back into making

clothes commercially – but on her own terms – creating bespoke designs through an online craft production site:

It will be a creative thing and I'm not really going to think about the money. I miss the creative stuff (...) I really am starting to get excited about making. [It's like] I'm going back to my Mum's dining room almost and I am quite thrilled at the prospect. Nobody telling you what you're doing and not doing, and nobody asking you to do this or that.

In her mind, though under markedly different circumstances, Sarah was returning to those early entrepreneurial days of cutting-out designs on her Mum's dining room table, the time and place where it all began. Sarah is therefore closing the circle, but moving things forward – displaying the mix of narrative coherence, continuity and control that mark out the chronicler of the biography.

What can we learn from Nick and Sarah? We should note that the primary aim here has not been to criticise their achievements as entrepreneurs, or present them as being wholly selfish or self-interested employers. In fact both can be taken to represent fairly typical owner-managers of small businesses, albeit ones more successful than most. Rather, the point here is to show that, even in precarity, there are *some* cultural workers (in this case, owner-managers) who are more significantly endowed with the capacity to control time, to map out stages of life, and secure themselves against the contingencies of the event. Such people are also equipped to move *between* the different temporal contexts I've been discussing – since it is biographical endowments – mostly, in this example, the capitals established in the successfully staged and managed career – that can provide the insurance policy for a more controllable engagement with contingency and the unstable world of events. For Sarah, re-entering the fashion industry – notoriously difficult to break into – only minimally exposes her to the risk of events since she (like Nick) is able to fall back on the security of established resources cultivated and protected over time.

Conclusion: Biography and Advantage

While sympathetic to the idea of event-time, it seems both premature and politically undesirable to intimate any epochal break with clock-time, and the death of biography, with quite the same level of certainty as Adkins or other theorists might want to do. Biography is not an outmoded model of work and life but rather it's the ongoing ability to make a biography that demands a sociological explanation – since the experience of time will vary according to where one is positioned in relation to its effects. As Sarah Sharma has noted, there exist different 'temporal classes' co-located and occupying different positions in the relational plane that makes-up the 'uneven cultural politics of time' (2014, p. 4-5). While Adkins perhaps assumes something of a generic experience under event-time, my own investigations have more strongly hinted at some social contrasts between those who are able to manage the biographical risks of event exposure, and those who find themselves at the mercy of chronological events over which they have limited control. This suggests that it 'is not technological speed that determines one's temporality [but] where one fits in the biopolitical economy of time' (Sharma, 2014, p. 138), and supports Renato Carmo et al's view that 'situations of precarious employment (...) contribute to the limitation and restriction of choices in respect of future horizons' (2014, p. 354).

However, also, my conveyance of Nick and Sarah's accounts shows only through local example (and in small measure) something which is more generally and perniciously established in the heart of the creative economy: that time is not necessarily a contingent and ungovernable force, contained in discrete events, but a *manageable resource* that is able to be deployed and manipulated in the interests of established social advantage. This certainly applies to successful 'self-made' entrepreneurs like Nick and Sarah, who built their businesses from scratch, managed time to their own benefit, and so secured a valuable biographical security. But it also applies to others – and in different ways. Indeed, we now know that when it comes to obtaining continuity of rewards or a sustained prosperity in the cultural industries - say in terms of being the best paid or most rewarded workers, or securing the prime managerial positions - then Nick and Sarah might even represent unusual or anomalous cases. For in the cultural industries it is now becoming more widely acknowledged that it is the biographical continuities provided by *social inheritance* - rather than entrepreneurial self-making, or self-resourcing within the contingencies of the event – that provides the surest guarantees of economic power and success.

Indeed, the class composition of the creative economy now displays all the hallmarks of biographical linearity and continuity when we consider that the best jobs tend to be ‘passed on’ to the established sectors of the middle-classes that have traditionally populated them. In media, fashion, design, music and the wider arts, the data now shows a remarkable tendency for employers to favour the favoured by recruiting from an ever-narrowing social class constituency – the one that is usually their own (Banks, 2017; Taylor and O’Brien, 2017). We also know the socially privileged are better equipped to thrive amidst the uncertainties of precarious cultural work since they are more likely to possess the social and material means and skills to traverse and manage time, to navigate the choppy waters of contingency, and be sustained amidst the unstable phases of the event. This further reinforces the idea that the control and mastery of the temporal domain is something readily available, but only to the privileged few. We might therefore suggest that both within specific occupations and across the social field, the stable work biography might continue to persist, but as a *social luxury* – a stable set of co-ordinates in abstract time; a continuity made possible by patterns of social difference embedded in a capitalist division of labour and in class reproduction. I would propose that overcoming the social injustices occasioned by this luxury is one of the more immediate challenges that must be faced in the cultural industries of today, and tomorrow.

Endnotes

[1] Adkins uses workers narrative accounts (as I do) as a proxy or indicator to evidence changing work practices. While narratives and practices are not the same, the use of such narratives is justified as a means of trying to understanding changing temporalities of work, not least because narratives are also constitutive of the very events they attempt to describe, and, as Wagner-Pacifici (2010, p. 1365-6) identifies, events are as much a ‘replay of signs and symbols, gestures and exchanges’ as they are objectively separate phenomena. Narratives help elucidate aspects of the wider structure, even if they can never fully describe or contain it.

[2] ‘Cultural Industries and the City’ (1998-2000) funded under the ESRC Cities: Competitiveness and Cohesion Research Programme (ESRC L130251048), PI Justin O’Connor.

[3] Interviewees were contacted and invited to interview; interviews took place in 2013, at the participant's place of work. Each lasted 1 to 1.5 hours and was audio recorded. Prior to meeting, I emailed each participant the transcript of our original interview from fifteen years ago. The purpose of this was to not only encourage the participant to remember and revisit the original encounter, but for us to also *use* it as a means of triggering a new conversation about how their careers had developed and changed since the earlier period. This was a means of both orienting and anchoring the interview, or, in other words, situating it *narratively* and *biographically*, from the start. Arguably, in Adkins' terms, the selection of this research method might have served to shape in advance the social reality I intended to objectively describe – a criticism that I would partially accept. However I'd also argue that the idea of biographical narrative is not simply a construct of the social scientific method but linked to the sequential and unsparing objectivity of an 'irreversible' (Adam, 1994, p. 98) life course that (for most people in the global North) begins with birth and ends in old age with death. In between, the efflorescence and decay of the mind and body, and all the stages of development, maturation and decline therein, are still predominantly understood through biographical narrative; as an unfolding 'journey', path or trial; one that occurs (predominantly, if not unvaryingly) in the past, present and future of a linear time that is realised in both abstract and concrete forms.

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