

**Building a creative persona** - JOBS MARKETS AND  
EXCLUSION IN ORGANISATION

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## **Abstract**

### **Building a creative persona**

This thesis is an investigation of the following question: How is talent recognised in companies that see themselves as creative? Recent sociological debates about the culture industries suggest new kinds of work and work organisation, emphasising enculturation and fragmentation. They draw attention to increasingly individualised responsibility for trajectories and the significance of individual subjectivities in creative careers. My analysis draws on ethnographic data (participant observation and interviews) gathered in the London-based digital division of an international publishing company. I follow eight people, as they attempt to generate careers in the turbulent context of work in new media. I argue that, to be successful in this setting, workers had to build a creative persona. This involved adopting creativity, self-selling, passion and flexibility as elements of an individual subjectivity. However, applying the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, I seek to reassert the importance of organisations in this field and the relevance of class fractions particularly the 'new' bourgeoisie. I explore how the process of building a creative persona relies on managerial structures. I argue that creativity works to achieve and legitimate a specific kind of managerial authority rather than relating to aesthetic output. I show that in 'service' or 'support' positions, workers are effectively 'trapped' despite the apparently open and flexible working environment. The thesis is a structural analysis, within a setting that exhibits enculturation and fragmentation. Organisational hierarchies are generated using cultural references (attributed to personalities and markets). Importantly I reveal that the labour process and market definitions work together as inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms. By interrogating 'natural' talent in this setting I explain how the valuation of authenticity in web work contributes to the reproduction of class, gender and 'racial' differences, specifically in ways that support the 'new' bourgeoisie. I conclude my thesis by discussing how my findings impact on theories of creativity, institutional exclusion, as well as theories of the 'new' bourgeoisie. Finally I identify and explore a kind of racism without hate which is connected to the way that I theorise an encultured organisation.

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## **Introduction**

Before I came back to academia, I worked at a publishing company I have called Epic PLC. When I left, I was determined to study the company. At that stage, I hadn't formulated my research question. I simply felt that the organisational culture was one I needed to understand better. It is fair to say that my initial frame of mind was suspicious rather than open. I wanted to improve my understanding of the company, but only because I felt uneasy about it. This reveals an initial value judgement – before I had even begun – that there was something 'not right' about Epic, in my view.

A paper by Sean Nixon on 'talent' helped me to narrow my research question. He analysed the trade press, looking at magazines such as the *Creative Review* and *Marketing Week* and argued that creative talent was constructed as a rare and natural gift (Nixon 1998). He called this specific construction 'the maverick genius' and he argued that creative talent was constructed as male. I found this article very interesting but frustrating for the following reason. Assuming people in the advertising business read the trade press, how do we know that they are influenced by it in thought or action? But I felt that his question was precisely the important question:

### **How is talent recognised in businesses that see themselves as 'creative'?**

I was extremely interested in his answer to that question, that 'talent' is at once recognised and manufactured. But I wasn't convinced that talent is recognised as 'maverick genius' within the advertising industry. It was easy for me to think of journalistic reasons why the 'maverick genius' would be an interesting character type to

use in stories. I felt that observational work was required to establish how and when talent was recognised. I really wanted to understand whether cultural evaluations of that kind are used when recruiting and promoting people so my research combined interviews with participant observation. It will show that idealised personality types are certainly in use but are best understood within the commercial context of their making.

At Epic, creative personas were worked out during the process of making products and making audiences. In this sense, creative identities proved to be an integral part of the negotiation over what an audience is, and what it needs. Creative identities must be re-presented and revaluated in the face of new audiences (such as web audiences). Secondly, creative identities are worked out in the process of allocating work.

Ideal personalities, as Nixon identifies them, can seem coherent and unshakeable particularly in their historical longevity. The maverick genius figure, that he found, has been a popular picture of the artist for centuries. These ideal types often appear as practically unachievable standards. My ethnographic study is able to de-mystify creativity by showing that the process of defining talent and non-talent is a practical one. Talent is constructed and recognised in the most mundane conversations, for example:

Guy has made a big fuss at Lisa because she expected him to make a file into a PDF for her. “How come you marketing guys can’t do this? It’s technical work – I’m a designer!”

Field notes 27/09/00

This very short interaction shows how Guy is careful to define his talents as non-technical. Even though Guy has the ability and works with this software all the time, it is not what he wants to be doing or how he wants Lisa to perceive his contribution. In very casual conversations and micro-power struggles like this one, Guy constructs his own

'talent'. It is not even fixed to his skills as it is built around the work he *wants* to be doing. A creative persona is something that requires this kind of work all the time. To understand the construction and applications of these personality types I spent my time as an observer at Epic asking what kind of work does the creative persona win and how? How is work distributed and claimed? How do managers decide who to recruit and promote?

### **Office banter**

For me, one of the best things about returning to Epic as an observer was immersion in the office banter, which following extended periods of solitary study always engendered the relief of homecoming. Even now, three years on, when I read my field notes these group interactions make me smile. I can immediately picture the open-planned office, the windows, the brightly painted walls and the layout of the desks. I can remember my view across the desk dividers – some people standing up and other people straining their necks to make eye contact and participate. I can remember smiling (inside and out) at the comments flying about like bullets overhead. The office was always especially raucous when sales or editorial teams had been away (at client meetings or events) and came back in. This is an extract from my field notes on the day after a team strategy day:

They were all talking about the strategy day. They'd all done Belbin's personality test. Carmella was joking that she agreed with all the good points but not the bad. Harvey was joking because he was a mix of two types and said "Maybe it's time to go see a shrink". Lisa was very vocal about the whole test being a load of rubbish: "I mean I'm sure my answers would be completely different if I did the test tomorrow," (she confessed to me after work that she was furious at being given exactly the same type as Tracey who she described as bitter and obstructive and definitely not a 'people person'). Dan [the sales manager] was laughing at them. "There's no need to take it to heart," he said. "It's really an exercise to illustrate the fact that there's no such thing as a perfect person but there can be a perfect team." Harvey told him not to be so cheesy. "But I'm paid to cheesy," replied Dan winking, and everybody laughed.

Field notes 30/11/00

I want to use this example to introduce some of the main themes that I look at in this study. Many writers within sociology have written about changes in the world of work. Some emphasise increasing disintegration, dissatisfaction and dislocation (Smith 1997, Sennett 1998, Ehrenreich 2002, Bunting 2004). Others emphasise increasing creativity and enculturation (Leadbetter 1999). Others try to comprehend the coexistence of both (Lash & Urry 1994, McRobbie 1998, Beck 2000). It is hard to relate the most pessimistic analyses to my case study. Working at Epic was intensely social and engendered feelings of inclusion and equality. As you can tell, Dan, the manager, participated with us, took jibes on the chin, and was able to laugh at himself. He was even able to laugh at his managerial role and describe it as 'cheesy'. He was a modern manager, not desperate to assert his authority, but witty and warm. He made no effort to cultivate distance because he enjoyed the banter as much as anybody and didn't perceive it as time-wasting. In fact he valued this relaxed atmosphere. This certainly created a sense that power differences between worker and manager weren't very important on a day-to-day basis.

This kind of informal culture has come to be expected of creative companies. The term creativity can even refer to this kind of workplace climate - fast-paced, lively and sociable – as much as it refers to the work. The advertising agency St Luke's is a much celebrated example, particularly because rigid job titles are discarded in order to promote worker development and idea-sharing (Law 2001). Openness and equality are also anticipated values: people in creative companies expect to be treated as adults. Creative companies earn the adjective and its many implications because of real differences in how they operate but are they intrinsically democratic? The relaxed effervescent managerial style can be identified as a specific philosophy of management. Yet it is personality and personality types that are invoked to explain why some people are more in tune with profit-making and leadership responsibilities (Du Gay 1991). Workplaces as spheres of creativity, sociability and solidarity (rather than exploitation) are seen as dependent on

having the right kind of manager. So the gregarious managerial personality can be seen as a contemporary justification for managerial authority.

Another interpretation of the extract from my field notes could point out that the manager's need to have the last word reflects his managerial power and his desire to control the meaning of the test experience. Dr Meredith Belbin's test is not meant to reveal intrinsic personality as it identifies team-types (behaviours that tend to arise within any given team). The banter in the office, though humorous, actually suggests that people were too quick to interpret the results as labels. Lisa was intensely irritated that she did not get the label she wanted (people-person). Her concern points to a need to sell her 'self' on the open market (Beck 2000). Lisa was also aware that the different types were in a hierarchy of value at Epic (Du Gay 1991). She wanted to avoid the same label as Tracey who was the office administrator. Lisa did not want to be read as a personality suited to administrative work. Being given this label in an apparently scientific test was far from superficial. Since economic potentialities permeate 'personality' it would be impossible for the team not to take this test 'to heart'.

In the study that follows I will be using my experience at Epic to explore these issues. What happens when managerial authority is legitimised as personality? Is it possible for employees to control the labels they are given at work? Does this relaxed, 'creative' managerial style reduce inequalities or create opportunities?

### **Gaining Access**

I was dependent on my existing contacts to get back into Epic for my research placement. I contacted a former boss who had just recently been moved to become the publishing director of one of Epic's new digital divisions. I told him about my research project, and

that I wanted to study Epic. Things were a bit ‘up in the air’, he told me, but he offered me a couple of days a week right away as they had a marketing survey they needed to finish. I went in as a freelancer for two days a week from June to August 2000. There was no mention at that point about my research agenda.

Tom (the publishing director) and Lisa (the product manager) both knew that I wanted a full time research placement. They couldn’t confirm anything, they said, until they knew their budget. They had no idea how much work they would have, until their budget was known. Even then they would only know about the following three months, as this was the period their budgets covered. Tom and Lisa wanted to do an independent audit of the traffic on their websites. This was to coincide with advertising campaigns for all four sites. They had applied to the board of directors for a much larger marketing budget than usual and they had no idea if they would get it. But they did get it and I found out, at the end of August 2000, that they could offer me three months’ work.

I spoke to Tom about my project, and he was very keen to be helpful. He was anxious that his division would be useful for me. He was worried they weren’t going to be recruiting as many people as I needed. He didn’t seem anxious that I would criticise the company or his division. But then he was primarily interested in getting another marketing worker in time for his site audits. I was very pleased to be able to do my case study on Epic Digital. I wrote a list of reasons in my field notes at the time. They were:

- 1) The company has only just been created and they are starting from scratch
- 2) They are growing
- 3) They work in business-to-business *and* consumer markets
- 4) They are based in [a main office building] where there are lots of other divisions and where there is the only in-house creative studio.

Tom sent an email round saying that I was being taken on for three months and that this was for my university work. I sent an email round after his, telling everyone I was doing

research about recruitment and promotion and that I was interested in issues of 'creativity' and 'flexibility'. I said that I was observing and writing field notes but that I also wanted to interview people about these topics. I got some emails back immediately from people saying they would like to be interviewed.

My access felt pretty fragile at the time but it was as secure as it possibly could have been. There was some vital work that I was employed to be doing. It was dependent on my professional contacts and their budget. It is important to acknowledge that it was ultimately their organisational values that enabled my access; their valuation of marketing work over other kinds of work they could spend the money on and the fact that they weren't committed to a formal recruitment process.

So I undertook my research in one of the divisions of Epic Digital beginning with its confident launch. The period of interviewing included the company's sudden closure just nine months after the launch. Epic's amorphous nature provided me with an ideal case study with which to explore important changes in the world of work. An encounter with such a successful and ostentatiously creative company raises many important, if familiar, issues. What are the effects of deregulation and constant restructuring? What is it like for the employees who are effectively forced to manage portfolio careers? How do we make sense of contemporary organisations that are so fragmented and so keen to outsource more aspects of their production? Isn't it exciting to work in the media and interesting to have a job where you can develop your cultural knowledge or express your aesthetic tastes? Isn't it better to work in creative companies, which are more informal, where traditional professional formalities have been replaced with more friendly and relaxed work styles?

In the first chapter of the thesis, I look at these broader questions in more detail as they form the context in which Epic operates. I examine the symbolic power of creativity and

important contemporary debates about the liberating potential of creative workplaces. Creative companies can appear to offer workers more autonomy as they seem to allow greater space for individual expression and often reject complex hierarchical structures. I look at the grounds for this optimism and draw out the history of the meanings of work that give the concept of creativity such magical connotations. I problematise the polarisation between the 'institutional' and the 'expressive'. Are these values really mutually exclusive? What insights might be missed as a result of this assumption? I argue that opposing bureaucracy and creativity will not help us to understand contemporary organisations. It is vital to put creative workplaces under scrutiny *as institutions* even though they appear to be so different from the cold and regimented formations that were the focus of ground-breaking sociological critiques in the past. I argue that in spite of evident fragmentation and enculturation of work, we should not underestimate the institutional weight of today's people-friendly workplaces.

In the second chapter, I explain my decision to use ethnographic methods which was motivated by my desire to ground my analysis in everyday commercial practices, and ordinary (if difficult) career choices. I explain that I wanted to look at cultural and economic factors together. I describe the advantages and disadvantages in the way that I was included in Epic PLC, and the complexities of ethnographic involvement in people's working lives. I explain why I understood my project as a 'dialogical quest for comprehension' and why I value this particular perspective for the study of a commercial organisation (Clifford 1988:261). I also discuss the data that I gained from my interviews and show that managers at Epic are under pressure to frame their talk positively. So in the second chapter I begin my deconstruction of the creative persona and my analysis of the pressures workers experience at Epic.

In Chapter 3, I trace sales manager Dan's progress over time and show how he manages to achieve a creative identity for himself and for his sales team. I am able to break down

the components of a creative identity by using Sennett's work in *The Fall of Public Man* (Sennett 1974), and I show how these components actually contribute to workplace hierarchy. I also explain that talent evaluations at Epic are closely linked to imagined markets, and this gives them credibility. Some workers, however, prove to be trapped by definitions of creativity and are effectively excluded within Epic Digital. This is because creativity works as a mechanism for distancing creative workers from technicians and non-professionals. I am able to explain in more detail the fact Young observes that 'mobility from the non-professional class into the professional class is nearly impossible' (Young 1990:221).

In Chapter 4, I follow designer Guy as he leaves Epic PLC to set up a small design agency. In looking at the way he organises his small creative company, I show how Fordist work-roles remain useful in this context. This chapter makes it clear that the 'specialness' of creativity continues to draw much of its strength from both the discourses and structures more usually associated with Fordism. However, I also show how Guy uses naturalised 'personality' to create and sustain the hierarchy he enjoys in his new company. It is the ability to sell and sell the self, that seems to work most effectively to differentiate managers from workers here. I show how personalised creativity is used as the basis or the justification for this contemporary hierarchy where it is character more than expertise that is used to naturalise power differences.

In Chapter 5, I focus on some motivational meetings that took place at Epic Digital for the first three months after the company's launch. These meetings were meant to inspire the workers at the newly formed company and help provide a sense of their identity as digital workers. By analysing the presentations, I look in detail at the creative ideals as they relate to Epic's structure. The morale-building function of these meetings was somewhat undermined by the pressure they generated. They promoted individualised success stories, and emphasised the importance of 'genuine' knowledge and enthusiasm. I

show how this idealised picture of the passionate creative worker is at once an economic and cultural model. It is a model which is individualistic, and which works to support essentialist views of knowledge and culture. Yet it is because they are implicitly economic models that they were so hard for workers to reject. By diffusing their economic models in this way, Epic mystified them and prevented debate about them. Workers took on cultural and dispositional ideals as they took on these economic theories.

In Chapter 6, I look at a company 're-structure', which amounted to the closure of Epic Digital. I describe the redundancies and show *how* creativity triumphs. By adopting flexibility as their value, some workers are better able to survive in volatile employment conditions. This chapter on the restructure reveals that an organisation in flux, retains its powers of judgement. At Epic, flexibility becomes powerful when it is incorporated in personal disposition rather than an approach to any kind of temporal organisation. It is a value that is connected to Epic's managerial logic, sustaining myths of freedom that diffuse managers' positional power. I try to make the organisational preferences at Epic explicit, as well as showing how individual managers invest in them. I argue that flexibility, allied to anti-bureaucracy, is implicated in Epic's mechanics of exclusion.

I conclude the thesis by returning to the issues that I discuss in the first chapter. How do we make sense of organisational power and responsibility in the face of new kinds of work organisation? What has Epic PLC gained from being so explicitly anti-institutional? I argue that while individualistic success models demand intense levels of energy and commitment from the workforce, they also deflect responsibilities that come with institutional power. I argue that emotive anti-bureaucratic sentiments are used at Epic to sanction undemocratic and secretive decision-making practices. I am able to contribute to the important debates about work inequalities showing that anti-bureaucracy is not the answer to improving organisational inclusiveness. It is more important that we continue

to recognise and theorise the powers of social institutions (be that notions of collective responsibility or the positional power of managers), especially as they seem to be fragmenting and organised according to new principles of creativity, openness, dynamism and passion. Organisations such as Epic do have the power to provide interesting work, to bestow and share knowledge and also to generate self-esteem, but the continuing preference for managerial structures represents the persistent hold of workplace hierarchies that needs to be acknowledged. This thesis demonstrates how managerial structures constrain talent and shows how friendly and creative managers are implicated in what amounts to a miserly and self-serving approach towards knowledge and potential.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Institutional evaluations of talent**

#### **The symbolic power of creativity**

Creativity and creative work are emotive concepts. They have all kinds of associations most of which are positive. It would be hard to imagine using the word 'creative' about a person or about their work and for this to be taken as an insult. In the late 1990s with the Cool Britannia episode, a grass-roots creative ethos, previously associated with specific youth cultures was even promoted as the expression of British national character. This was the time when the pop group Blur were invited to Downing Street, when British artists Tracey Emin and Damian Hurst were promoted by the Saatchis as world leaders in modern art, and fashion designers Vivien Westwood and Alexander McQueen were promoted for their specifically British eccentric style imbued with a kind of wry humour. As McRobbie notes, creativity became politically salient, used to encourage and celebrate entrepreneurialism in the cultural sphere (McRobbie 2002). Creativity gives life to national 'cultural-political targets' invoking culture, inclusion and identity to express economic goals in more human terms (Beck 2000:69). Beck and McRobbie argue that amidst all this excitement there lurks the ideology to support a social environment in which self-sufficiency and personalised risk are the compensations for the erosion of jobs-for-life and welfare entitlements. McRobbie writes 'It is not just that there is a downside to the talent-led economy, it is more that the concept of talent is aggressively deployed to dramatic effect' (McRobbie 2002:101). So why is it that the notion of creative talent has this symbolic power and if it is a political issue, how is it better understood? This thesis is concerned with precisely this question.

In this chapter I interrogate some of the social meanings given to creativity at work. It is not an exhaustive review of all the literatures relating to the culture industries, workplace exclusion, and the sociology of work. It is rather an attempt to contextualise my work in the light of existing debates and to provide a theoretical base from which to explore talent recognition and organisational struggles over value. First of all, like McRobbie, I examine these contemporary debates about work and optimistic assessments of late capitalist labour markets with particular attention to the issue of hierarchy and expressive opportunity. I show that creativity at work is an ideal that has a long history of association within liberal and Marxist thought and often takes centre stage in anti-establishment discourses. However, I seek to temper the positive and radical glow around creativity by discussing how creativity at work also derives its meanings from historical associations with dominant economic and political interests. In an industrial-capitalist division of labour, creativity in work is something reserved for a privileged minority. For all its liberal overtones, creativity, I will argue, is a deeply classed concept when it is applied to work-roles and particularly useful to the professional classes.

I argue that Bourdieu's theories in *Distinction* (1984) offer the best framework for understanding contemporary uses of creativity including its political appeal. I explain how I understand 'creative talent' as particular skills and dispositions that are institutionally legitimised. I explore creativity as a value particularly useful to Bourdieu's 'new' bourgeoisie. This involves a lengthy discussion of how we can approach the idea of class interests and puts my interpretations in this context. I introduce the notion of cultural capital, and the social processes this concept has enabled me to explore in depth. I argue that it is important to recognise that institutions determine the relative value of different kinds of cultural capital and so in order to get to grips with these issues of creativity and hierarchy we need to understand the forces that constrain institutions.

## **Creativity and the knowledge economy**

In Charles Leadbetter's *Living on Thin Air* (2000) he argues for globalisation and what he calls the impending 'knowledge economy'. He describes the expansion of the tertiary sector in the US and the UK and a corresponding shift of interest within the business community from production processes to dispensation of information. He believes that the functions predominating in Western businesses largely concern a company's 'intangible assets'. Leadbetter uses the term 'intangible assets' to include a company's existing knowledge base, its research and development potential, the value of its brand as well as, of course, its ability to manage its consumer base. He wants to bring home to us that the purpose of work with intangible assets is not find the one best application for a material or an ingredient but instead to build and exploit knowledge and reputations. He argues that this new purpose demands a new kind of work organisation.

Leadbetter's argument is essentially anti-bureaucratic. He believes that better ways of working with intangible assets will inevitably disrupt (and generate dissatisfaction) with traditional professions that have spawned secretive, elitist and cumbersome bureaucracies. He elaborates on new motivations for sharing knowledge within 'knowledge companies', between companies and with customers. He argues that many different kinds of knowledge are valuable in a company or institution that is organised to mobilise its intangible assets. Companies that hope to succeed in the 'knowledge economy' cannot afford to be inward-looking. Furthermore, workers are important to these 'new' companies not simply for their use value but for what they know and how they relate to others – for *who they are* as much as what they do. To Leadbetter, this spells the end for organisations with rigid hierarchical structures arranging people as if they are units of production. Though knowledge workers are employees in organisations they also hold the means and tools of production inside their own heads (Beck 2000).

Because these intangible assets are more difficult to measure and harder to predict, knowledge companies are dealing with uncertain outcomes and uncertain output. It is this that makes them particularly vulnerable to outsourcing and restructuring, Leadbetter explains, although they are always open to new business ideas and new alliances. As these things go hand in hand, he suggests that we need to learn to take the rough with the smooth.

This uncertainty is apparently another factor spelling the end for bureaucratic corporations and institutions. The standardisation of work tasks prevents a company from being able to change its direction quickly. It is no longer useful to model companies on an efficiency-driven Fordist model. For Leadbetter, work standardisation has a very minor role to play in the 'knowledge economy'. The standardisation of work tasks is presented as the enemy of innovation, dynamism and creativity. It also hampers efforts to tailor products for discerning consumers. Fordism, he suggests, is driven by the desire to make many incremental improvements to a winning production formula, but companies in the knowledge economy must be driven by a search for original ideas and an ability to actualise them quickly.

Interestingly, this is the very opposite of the trend that George Ritzer describes in *The McDonaldization of Society* (1999). In Ritzer's analysis, globalisation is presented negatively, leading instead to *increasing* work standardisation. He makes a compelling case for the longevity of Fordist work organisation and a persisting drive for efficiency and rationalisation. He illustrates what he sees as a trend towards standardisation in many contemporary institutions, not only fast food chains, such as retail operations, universities, hospitals, and in tourism.

Even though these two writers identify a trend in opposite directions both arguments are anti-bureaucratic. Both emphasise that the Fordist organisation of work creates a majority of boring, repetitive, and de-skilled jobs. Both writers champion creativity, variety and autonomy at work. Both writers have as their ideal work roles which are about more than fulfilling instructions, or completing procedures that have been designed by someone else. Self-direction is pitched against and above narrow specialisation and routine in large organisations.

It is not my intention to explore and find out which of these writers is correct about the direction of trends in work organisation. I suspect that both trends remain in evidence in different contexts. Standardisation is perhaps more likely where companies are expanding their operations (Mills 1951). I certainly do not believe that companies in the West are engaged in 'new' functions at work. Indeed the shift that Leadbetter describes towards work with 'intangible assets' is exactly as Mills described in his book *White Collar* (Mills 1951). I do want to explore, however, the terms of this debate and the anti-bureaucratic arguments evident in both works (and also in fact in *White Collar*) and this recurring idealisation of creativity at work.

In exploring the history of the meanings of work, Mills identified two kinds of social justification for work (Mills 1951). The first emphasises rewards that are external to the activity itself and this is found historically in both religious and capitalist justifications. The Christian motivations for work lie in the offer of a pious life, free of idleness, and its eventual recognition in salvation after death. The capitalist motivations also rely on external rewards – in terms of profit or subsistence. These converge in the sense that both play down the pleasure or meaning that could be found in the activity itself. The second strand Mills calls a 'Renaissance' view, which emphasises the gratification that can be gained from craftsmanship. Craftwork (idealised) offers a challenge, a sense of satisfaction, and peace, although this depends on certain conditions.

This 'Renaissance view' was used in the nineteenth century to argue against large-scale industrial work organisation. "Men, such as Tolstoy, Carlyle, Ruskin, and William Morris, turned backward; others such as Marx and Engels, looked forward." (Mills 1951:217). Mills argues that the idealised image of a mediaeval community of free-artisans and the materialist analysis of production draw on the same moral source – the Renaissance idea that people in charge of their own work are therefore able to derive pleasure from it. The craftsman, unlike the factory worker, has no need to divide 'work and play', work and self or work and meaning (Mills 1951:220). The craft worker does not experience alienation as s/he is master of production and personally connected to the product. Mills goes on to use this ideal himself, to paint a negative picture of the expansion, specialisation and standardisation in white collar work organisation he observed in America in the 1940s. The routinised and salaried middle-class work of the corporation is set in contrast to the autonomous and knowledgeable work of late nineteenth century professionals. Their self-employment and self-directed knowledge was likened to the idealised position of the artisan craft worker.

This ideal is revived again in Leadbetter and Ritzer and also actively promoted within companies as part of popular theories about effective management (Rose 1989, Rose and Miller 1990). Nikolas Rose interrogates the populist discourses about employee empowerment that seek to raise workers' expectations about their fulfilment at work and encourage them to believe that their employers want them to be happy. As Mills explains, "What is actually necessary for work-as-craftsmanship, however, is that the tie between the product and the producer be psychologically possible" (Mills 1951:221). So as Rose shows, promoting this work-ethic within companies demands more ways of linking the worker to their work emotionally. For this craft ethic to be successful, workers, at the very least, need to be given more responsibility or 'ownership' as it is also called. Dividing work into projects and extending the reach of the product's relevance using the

idea of the brand also facilitate this personal linkage to the product. Workers are justified in indulging their own quality standards in order to protect the brand's image. Rose's Foucauldian interpretation suggests that this Renaissance work-ethic is dubious when it is brought into a corporate organisation. Although workers may appear to gain autonomy, variety and increased pleasure from their own work, it is never in reality their own. Rose also questions whether this personal investment can be freely chosen in a corporate context.

Clearly then, as ideals, creativity, autonomy and self-cultivation through work are appealing in different contexts and useful to different arguments about the best organisation of work. The appeal of creativity seems to have extraordinary longevity and deserves attention. At root it champions free individual intelligence, development and expression. Although Marxism is normally portrayed as an argument for the reorganisation of society for the greater good, Mill's observations show Marx argued to protect the sanctity of the individual personality against the mass organisation of work and the threat of alienation inherent in narrow specialisation. Reorganising society for the greater 'good' is articulated with reference to enabling greater individual creativity (Berman 1983). This explains why arguments for creativity at work and against bureaucratic institutions have radical, liberatory and humanist associations.

### **Creativity and Class**

So autonomy against dependency, the creative against the mundane, and the expressive against the repetitive are terms that have been in use for a long time in evaluating work roles and different kinds of work organisation. These are the terms that we use to negotiate the morality of work organisation. Interestingly, they are terms that can be employed to create hierarchy *and* to challenge it.

In *Professional Powers* (1986) Freidson explains that at one time there was more prestige in being an 'amateur' than a professional. The term 'amateur' once connoted genuine interest in a subject. The interest was considered genuine because the activity was not tainted with a need for an income. Being an 'amateur' showed that you were a financially independent gentleman with no need to work (Freidson 1986:22). Even though professionalism and amateurism clearly have historically changing meanings, and 'the professions' themselves have expanded and changed fundamentally, the terms used to elevate work have not changed. Work activity still gains greater prestige if it is freely given for individual gratification. Professionals today are esteemed for the same reason the amateur was then – because they are assumed to have chosen their career and have space to expand their knowledge in the direction they want to. Work is more akin to leisure when it is presented as a deliberate choice, for the purpose of self-cultivation.

The reason that autonomy, initiative and creativity at work indicate 'better' work is not simply because these things have historically been associated with a higher class of person. It is also because the life of the gentleman is free from toil and free from service and is traditionally presented as a better *quality* of life, lived for your own ends.

Importantly, the gentleman can convincingly present himself as a more rounded individual personality if his life appears to afford him a wider range of thoughts, feelings and experiences or, at the very least, more time to explore them. The terms that are used as neutral values in the debates about work now appear as deeply (i.e. historically) class-laden notions. This is complicated because the moral weight of these terms comes in part from these classed associations.

In *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1972) Sennett and Cobb explored some of the perceived distinctions between middle class and working class jobs. They examined how people rated different professions and concluded that in a hierarchical class society, autonomy, responsibility and self-expression are the key attributes of middle class and higher status

jobs. They went on to argue that the psychological motivation for self improvement in a class society is not to make money and buy more consumer goods, nor to achieve more power over others but is rather to heal a doubt about the self that is created by a society that does not bestow human dignity or allow for self expression in the occupations of the masses (Sennett and Cobb 1972). It is the ability of middle class jobs to make people feel and seem more human that can explain the appeal of jobs that are at present called creative. Sennett and Cobb help us remember that this issue of fulfilment and expressive self-hood only has such treasured specialness because so many people are denied this possibility in their work.

George Ritzer explains that although efficiency is an *organisational* goal in a bureaucratic company, it is not a goal for the most senior directors' own work. 'The owners, franchisees, and top managers want to control subordinates, but they want their own positions to be as free of rational constraints – as inefficient – as possible' (Ritzer 2000:125). The irrational is celebrated even within the rationalised hierarchy as more human, emotional and expressive against the cold and calculating technicians in middle management and the unthinking proletarians serving the burgers. So creativity is not a neutral value in the world of work as it is the opposite of all that is rational, mundane or standardised. At work, at least, creativity connotes a classed space – an autonomous and expressive space often reliant on other people doing the repetitive or administrative tasks, just as the pre-modern labouring classes freed gentlemen of the nobility for 'higher pursuits' in art, literature, religion, science and philosophy (Young 1990:218).

Since creativity has been used in arguments for and against professional work it is easier to see what the term 'creativity' is actually communicating. To Mills, 'old' professionals (the village doctors and roaming architects) were *real* professionals because of their freedom and their self-direction at work. His 'new' professionals (the specialists and technicians of the American corporation) were not real professionals because they could

not be seen to be autonomous – their limited knowledge, their place in a huge pyramid of management and their payment in wages proved this. So as ‘creativity’ connotes self-expression and self-direction at work it is particularly useful for professionals protecting their freedoms as much as it was meant to come to the aid of the proletariat against industry, or bureaucracy.

Creativity is a term that works against work specialisation generally and this is why it can be used to devalue the work of technicians and bureaucrats. Creativity is in no way anti-professional when it comes to endorsing the work conditions of the elite, or the work-spirit of the ‘gentleman’. In fact creativity must be championed by elites and claimed as their own, when facing the threat of de-professionalisation and work re-distribution. In a modern context, creativity at work comes to defend knowledges and experiences gained in employment that are nevertheless self-directed. In this situation, creativity is not evoked to improve work generally and make work more human generally, but defends quite specific interests. So despite the fetishisation of the peasant-artisan, it must be remembered that creativity is just as likely to operate to celebrate professionalised elites.

Rather than a neutral or even universally positive value, creativity should instead be seen as a privileged *condition* often depending on a privileged position. Space for autonomous creative work is enabled by company hierarchy and also facilitated by economic privilege. This explains why I do not read ‘creativity’ at work as a liberal, liberatory or egalitarian even when writers expect the knowledge economy to offer freedom from bureaucratic or elitist institutions. It will be argued in this thesis that creativity and the conditions it depends on are deeply classed. I will show that creativity is an ingredient in hierarchies as much as a potential cure for them. Unlike Leadbetter, I do not expect a lack of bureaucracy to spur a greater appreciation of human capital in general. My case study shows that creativity is not necessarily a democratising force when it is used to make

space for more human and expressive work. It is only when creativity at work is promoted as a right for all that it should be considered radical in the traditional sense.

### **Conditions in the cultural industries**

There is widespread lack of recognition within the literature on the cultural industries that creativity is such a profoundly classed concept. Nevertheless, writers on late-capitalist society identify growing inequality. Leadbetter acknowledges the extremes in poverty and wealth in the state of California (the environment he credits with forming the most creative companies and knowledge-sharing networks) and he is forced to treat stark inequality as a blip in an otherwise thriving economy. Lash and Urry also document growing inequalities even as our lives are apparently constrained less by rigid social structures and more by information structures (Lash and Urry 1994). McRobbie in her work on the fashion industry wants to champion the creative ethos among young people in the sector and yet concludes that the biggest labels take their pick of talent while young people drive themselves into debt struggling to demonstrate their creativity (McRobbie 1998). None of these writers has questioned the value of 'creativity' itself or explored how it can be put to use precisely to create hierarchies and inequalities.

Instead academics in the social sciences have been fascinated and stimulated by what they see as the increased significance of culture in our society and the work opportunities that have been created. The pervasive mechanisms that divide, categorise and exploit the markets of the West are analysed and deemed sophisticated. The fact that value differentiation is achieved through applying exciting new technology and creative design seems to allow more space for human imagination (Lash and Urry 1994:136). Products and markets are injected with cultural meanings and create 'disembedded lifestyle enclaves' that can be effectively bought and sold and can be easily reinvented once the market is saturated (ibid.:141). Lifestyle enclaves are seen and described as disembedded

and ‘despatialised’ because they are rather considered *less* tied to class groups (Beck 2000:159). This fragmentation is put forward as an essential element of consumer society necessary to facilitate aspiration and experimentation. Like Leadbetter then, the promise is that a society organised around information and consumption (rather than manufacturing or production) is a freer space for meaning and wealth creation. The predominance of culture and mushrooming creative industries seems to offer not only an opportunity to disrupt class but an intrinsic social and economic need to.

With the increased relevance of culture, entrepreneurs in the artistic, information and media sectors are credited with more power and social influence and are celebrated as the model for both success and fulfilment (McRobbie 2002). Design and information skills for the creation of goods with more ‘cultural’ content have increased in value: imagining and creating products and lifestyle enclaves that belong together. Not surprisingly, much of this kind of work is located in the culture industries (publishing, film, fashion, advertising, music, decoration and leisure) though it can now be found in sections of almost every industry. At present, creativity at work is highly valued and even becomes an important organising principle for entire industries, stimulating self-employment and helping to generate some interesting and glamorous jobs. In Angela McRobbie’s book on the fashion industry, she describes how the concept of creativity provides the rationale for the ways people work, whom they work with, how hard they work, who they are willing to work for and even whether they work at all. The notion of the self-directed creative career is central, offering purpose, direction and dignity in a fragmented and competitive labour market (McRobbie 1998). Industries organised around creativity appear to offer work and rewards to people with natural talent and so creativity also provides an ‘egalitarian gloss’ on recognition in the cultural economy (McRobbie 2002).

And yet, McRobbie has exposed the ‘normal’ career route in fashion as a direct route into debt. Setting up your own label is the most convincing but most labour intensive and

risky means of demonstrating your productivity and creativity if you have no capital. Clearly the appeal of creative careers can win huge amounts of time and drive from workers. Built on Mill's Renaissance view of work, personal investment is part of the pleasure. But they are at the same time insecure and so carry risks in terms of health, stress and sacrifice and can lead people to sell themselves short for the 'privilege' of gaining this kind of work and identity. This should awaken us to the fact that without significant government or commercial support for young designers, differences in private economic capital in this context are paramount. Despite the experimentation apparent at a cultural level, McRobbie's analysis of work conditions suggests that in an analysis of creative careers, class should be central.

### **Conceptualising class**

Class is a notoriously difficult concept to define and many different indicators can be used. Attempts to categorise by occupation, income, home ownership or education are problematic not least because individual life situations (and even more so families) frequently incorporate contradictory elements. When academics try to pin class down using a standard measure, class seems slippery and too complex as lived experience 'so that we cannot look for homogenous 'whole ways of life' anymore' (Willis 2000:108). Furthermore, class is also experienced at the level of identification or aspiration as well as social position. Beverley Skeggs found herself in the uneasy position of defining her respondents as working-class women while they were actively trying to disassociate from this label in preference for less stigmatised identities (Skeggs 1997).

Of course these problems with categories have been exacerbated by the break up of traditional working-class industries to the point where the relevance of Marxist class theories is now contested (Carter 1985, Lee and Turner 1996). The dispersal of the 'proletariat' combined with the attack on the unions seems to mark the decline of overtly

politicised class groups and the resulting ‘fuzziness’ apparently makes social structures harder to detect (Beck 2000:70). Cultures are seen to be in flux rather than ‘solid blocks’ of classed culture (Willis 2000:68). So far I have discussed the fact that work roles are classed according to the qualitative nature (as much as the remuneration) of different occupations. I have examined class with specific reference to the amount of creativity available in work. In this study I combine this approach with Bourdieu’s analysis of class understood in terms of different kinds of capital: class understood not only in terms of different amounts of economic capital but also different types of educational, cultural or social capital. I argue that struggles over creativity at work can be interpreted as struggles over certain kinds of cultural capital and over opportunities to develop cultural capital.

The advantage of understanding class using Bourdieu’s terms is that it enables an analysis that can take into account (at the individual level) educational and social background, economic capital and social networks (inside and outside the family). This affords the recognition that class positioning has many facets but that there are nevertheless positions in which some education/work/lifestyle options are impossible. While class is certainly strongly linked to education or occupation (here we gain cultural capital with recognised economic value) it can never be reduced to one or the other. The lived experience of class is more complicated than the class bands which are derived from job titles, salaries and industry sectors. Understanding class in terms of different kinds of capital enables an analysis which is multi-faceted in structural and cultural terms.

Furthermore, Bourdieu’s notion of the habitus is much more than a situated classed condition as it operates to *generate* knowledges, attitudes and everyday sense-making schemas (Bourdieu 1990). It also points to motivations for knowing, by showing how our habitus determines the specific aspects of reality that we are most sensitive to and most interested in (Charlesworth 2000). This offers us a structural interpretation of ‘personality’ and a welcome alternative to impersonalised class indices (Charlesworth

2000:63). Bourdieu explores in *Distinction* the kinds of personalities that are predisposed to (and enabled by) different kinds of work, different types of social life, different expressive and consumption opportunities (Bourdieu 1984). Important in all this is the individual's anticipated class trajectory which is arrived at through an assessment of where they've come from, where they are, and making what are usually realistic (i.e. rational) decisions about where they might go next. In this way, Bourdieu's class analysis is even able to offer us a structural basis for emotions – optimism and pessimism (which are linked to our expected trajectory) and other emotions and attitudes connected to the capacities we develop in work and consumption. I read Bourdieu's work as a structuralist theory because people's life chances are determined by how they are 'situated in relation to certain fundamental structures, like the labour market, the education system, the state apparatus of the D.S.S. and the political system itself...' (Charlesworth 2000:57). It is the lived, embodied outcomes of our position vis-à-vis these structures and our investments (or not) in reproducing them that Bourdieu explores. In this way, socialisation and life experiences are understood as 'processes of acculturation of position' (Charlesworth 2000:57).

### **Class relations; cultural capital and its legitimation**

For Skeggs, understanding class in terms of access to different kinds of capital "enables an analysis of the micro politics of power" (Skeggs 1997:8). Since this thesis concerns talent evaluations in a specific organisation, an analysis of micro-politics is precisely what I wanted to be able to do. But Skeggs is also anxious that classifying people's dispositions 'ultimately code behaviour in a cold and mechanical classificatory manner' (ibid.:10). This is a danger that I do not see myself. In my view, academic work which can incorporate different kinds of capital actually allows room for a wider possibility of positions, dispositions and interests than any other theory of class. Fowler describes Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital as controversial. This is because it is considered a

poorly rooted concept as methods of accumulating it do not obviously depend on surplus extraction. How can it be a form of capital if it is not more easily connected to the means of production (Fowler 2000)? However as Fowler points out, it is precisely this disconnection that has made it possible to explain social phenomena which arise from discrepancies between amounts of economic and cultural capital. *Distinction* is extremely sophisticated in being able to explore the complicated and uncomfortable dispositions resulting from this discrepancy between amounts of cultural and economic capital which became extremely important when higher education started to expand. For this reason, far from being limiting, it offers a way of looking at class that is best placed to explore the disproportionate expansion of cultural fields and the complexities of individual opportunity and capability, as well as mixed feelings about life chances that this expansion fosters. It also helps us to broaden our understanding of class interests and motivation as different activities may be undertaken to accrue different kinds of capital (Fowler 2000).

The main problem is however that acknowledging and exploring all these facets (educational capital, social capital, economic capital) in any study makes it a massive undertaking involving large teams of researchers, as in *Distinction*, and/or incredibly detailed biographical information, as in *The Weight of the World*. Inevitably, my own study concentrates on cultural capital and only points to other kinds of capital in passing. This is certainly an inadequate examination of class position in relation to my respondents. But it is also my view that Bourdieu has been misread and misrepresented as being fascinated with class origin and definitive description. His categories are useful as a means to explore and understand positions rather than an attempt to create fixed categories or stereotypes about kinds of people. These positions are identified in order to explore *social processes*, not to offer an exhaustive and pretentious narrative about class characteristics. Bourdieu's economic metaphors enable a means of understanding class reproduction in human, everyday terms. At the same time a means of understanding

human, everyday actions and behaviour in economic terms. This is then a *theory* of class reproduction seeking primarily to show us the importance of:

- a) Differential opportunities in accessing different kinds of capital
- b) Institutional processes that legitimate cultural capital
- c) Differentially valued processes of acquiring cultural capital.

Accurate descriptions of classes and how much they are out-dated are not as relevant as these insights into the mechanisms of class reproduction. Bourdieu's analysis privileges institutions (public and private) in processes that legitimate cultural capital and this is the difference between objectively (i.e. publicly) assured value and subjective value judgements. Cultural indicators of class depend on social institutions (public and commercial) for their meaning and legitimation. Qualifications and occupational boundaries represent the institutionalisation (an attempt to control the social and economic value) of skills and dispositions. Class relations also therefore encompass what might seem like localised struggles between institutions, organisations and professional bodies to promote, or at least maintain, the value of their particular kind of cultural capital and skill. Individuals, of course, find themselves with investments in these institutional outcomes although these investments can be temporary.

Certifying qualifications must be seen as a political process, and qualifications should be seen as 'objective' in so far as they are publicly endorsed. Acknowledging this means that what is actually important is not the validity or objectivity of merit criteria but 'who should decide' the criteria and who else is consulted in this process (Young 1990:211). What Bourdieu emphasises is that if professional associations, educational establishments and unions were to widen conditions of entry or recognise talent in more people, they would inevitably devalue and de-mystify their own culture and skills. So of course it is usually those who already have the qualifications who decide how certificates and

experience should be gained, Bourdieu's theories seek to demonstrate that it is rarely in their interests to widen access.

So what makes a class is not that it is a 'real' social group or that every member has the same position or precisely the same kinds and combinations of capital. Probably most people would find that their unique combination of capitals, capacities, and values made it difficult to inhabit *any* of Bourdieu's class categories comfortably. They might feel that they inhabit different categories in different areas of their life (work, family, friends) or at different times in their life. This does not change the fact that we are repeatedly if strategically required to inhabit certain positions as we encounter social institutions – getting our education, getting work, and in our leisure pursuits. We are forced to encounter and engage with class relations that exist before we do. In resisting our place or seeking to forge a new one we cannot be outside class, or as individuals even upset class because it is a *social* relation and as such depends on social institutions. Thus we can only effect change in as far as we affect institutions. The existence of a social group is not enough to change social relations since a group does not necessarily have the power to legitimate cultural capital even if it is massive and conscious of itself as a group. A group depends on institutional recognition of its demands before it can be said to have improved its relative power, before it can be claimed that social relations have changed.

Bourdieu and Skeggs do not describe class relations in a way that depends on class consciousness or politicised class identification. Instead we are required to widen our understanding of class politics. Examining class with particular reference to cultural capital does not emphasise conflict between the workers and the owners of the means of production but these on-going efforts to protect the value of knowledge and skills nevertheless demand constant struggle. These struggles are over the economic and social value of occupations, cultural objects, leisure pursuits, and different kinds of knowledge.

These struggles might also be articulated over the economic and social value of dispositions which are *embodied* expressions of different types of knowledge and experience. Class-struggle over the value of cultural capital can encompass educational qualifications or professional qualifications but refers to any explicitly labelled knowledges and skills with publicly recognised value. In this sense, creative abilities and creative dispositions can only have value if they have institutional legitimation, and their precise value depends on the competitive relations between different institutions. Understanding the power and relevance of creativity using Bourdieu involves looking at how and why it is so effective at achieving social legitimation and value at this point in time. It also requires a determined focus on organisational value and strategy even when studying the careers of individuals.

### **Professionals and social exclusion**

I have also found these discussions about class useful in informing my approach to analysing managerial power at Epic. On what grounds do professionals have or hold power, and how might this relate to the ways that power is understood and named in the workplace? Beverley Skeggs's respondents made their life choices with reference to 'respectability'. This is how class relations shaped their struggles over the economic and social value of their homes, qualifications, occupations, and dispositions. Like Skeggs, Young emphasises respectability which she claims is dependent on professional work and life-styles (Young 1990). Although the class position of professional classes is ambiguous when using a classical Marxist definition, Johnson argues this ambiguity exists precisely because professionals have taken collective responsibility for some of the functions, interests and needs of capital – while obviously not being owners of company assets and still being productive to some extent (Johnson 1977). So he suggests it is wrong to define professionalism by occupational labels illustrating his argument with the example of two very different kinds of accountant: the bookkeeper who monitors stock levels is a world

apart from the accountant who creates systems of surveillance enabling cost reductions. He argues that professional power and certainly mystique depend on adopting some of the functions of capital; while not being owners, professionals are involved in strategic decisions regarding the investments and cost reductions that increase surplus value from capital.

Young also argues that the division between professional and non-professional labour is a class division as professionals benefit from the work efforts of non-professionals. Despite being wage-earners and therefore not completely in control of their work, Young argues that professionals are not usually receiving better wages because they are more productive. Their higher wages (and profit shares) should be seen as an 'appropriation' of the surplus value achieved by production workers (Young 1990:219). Also Young emphasises that the professional *position* brings with it entitlements, working conditions that depend on the invisible menial labour of non-professionals and also power not least the power to control the work of non-professionals.

Young goes on to argue that the creation of unskilled jobs is unjust because it condemns people to a situation where they can not exercise their human capacities. In this study I use Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to further illuminate the positional power of professionals that Young identifies. Young defines a professional position as a place in which it is possible to develop your capacities dependent on restricting and controlling the work of others. Bourdieu's economic metaphor makes it more apparent that developing your capacities in a work situation is not only a question of exercising your human potential; work also presents opportunities to accrue cultural capital over time. Professional positions are dependent on institutions as they offer an opportunity to develop expertise that is publicly recognised and to mobilise organisational properties and resources. However non-professionals are denied the opportunity to develop and then trade their own cultural capital. This shows clearly how the professional class is

structurally distinct. Despite the fact that professionals are accumulating and trading in knowledge, their class position becomes less ambiguous once we accept that these cultural entitlements have the potential to work in the same way as economic advantage and, in effect, earn interest. Bringing in Johnson again, cultural capital is more likely to be developed where work roles are at least partially concerned with the general functions of capital.

Young asserts that to professionalise is to 'formalise' skills and techniques (Young 1990:220). Using Bourdieu and Johnson my argument is not the same for in Chapter 3 I show how explicitly informal skills can also be used for professional differentiation. That is informality, idiosyncrasy, and creativity are available means for the professional class to define themselves. Certainly skills must be publicly recognised to achieve professional standing and higher financial rewards, but it is misleading to assume that they must always be formal or technical to be professional. This is because of classed associations with creativity that I elaborated earlier and the fact that we have inherited cultural norms that 'value occupations according to the degree that they involve abstract rationality removed from practice' (Young 1990:219). This is also where class intersects with gender and racial oppression as:

'The work of abstract rationality is coded as appropriate for white men, while work that involves caring for the body or emotions is coded for women, and the 'menial' work of serving and being servile is coded for non-whites. In this way the cultural imperialisms that structure racism and sexism modulate with a cultural imperialism that structures class difference' (Young 1990:222).

It is in fact *because* these ideological and symbolic divisions intersect with classed positions in the labour market that they are not merely symbolic and provide a rationale for distributing differential rewards and life-experiences on the basis of gender or 'race'. Young discusses feminist arguments claiming that women's domestic labour can be interpreted as class exploitation in terms of their dependence on the male wage. Young also examines other feminist theorists who have shown that a gendered division of labour

mirrors a classed division in the sense that women's domestic labour freed men for paid work and also public work of higher status than domestic work (Young 1990).

Similarly, slavery, colonial activities and the control of migrant labour can create racially specific classes of manual, menial and service workers (Brah 1992). Again, in servant's work, colonised people's labour is undertaken directly to enhance the comfort and status of those they serve, freeing time and energies for leisure, intellectual and political engagement. The classed and racialised concept of 'breeding' was used to create space for taste, learning and culture as well as justification for governance and exploitation (Cohen 1988:65). Of course there are many different kinds of racism, and 'race' should not be reduced to class, but it is often the case that 'the criteria invested with a 'racial' (and a fortiori cultural) meaning are largely criteria of social class; or else they wind up symbolically 'selecting' an elite that already happens to be selected by the inequalities of economic and political classes' (Balibar 1990:284). It is also the case that class 'can only be known through other categorisations' such as 'race', gender and sexuality (Skeggs 2004:27). It is important to acknowledge that there are specific gendered and racialised versions of the class divisions of mental and manual, mind and body, thought and practice that are distinct and yet are still, in a structural sense, 'complementary' (Cohen 1988:21 also Gilroy 1992b).

It is precisely in commercial, intellectual and professional settings that white, male privilege seems to remain secure. This is because, as Young shows, the more creative and idiosyncratic the work, the more normative and cultural the criteria for judging workers (Young 1990). It is only possible to apply value-neutral criteria to the most narrow (and therefore identifiable) productive tasks and objectives. It is only the lowest level jobs in highly rationalised organisations where performance can be measured with a plausible sense of accuracy and comparability. The most interesting work with the highest financial rewards involve 'judgement, discretion, imagination and verbal acuity' so it can not be

evaluated scientifically and is always evaluated culturally (Young 1990:203).

Unfortunately because the opportunities are scarce and there is more at stake, this is exactly where it would be helpful to find value-neutral criteria for evaluating workers.

This is the reason it is so important for us to look at the cultural assessments of creativity in depth and find useful ways of politicising these processes.

### **‘New’ professionals**

Bourdieu wanted to draw attention to the economic significance of ‘cultural intermediaries’ – the people who work to inject cultural meaning into everyday objects and activities such as designers and the people who create cultural artefacts such as works of art, music, film and fashion (Bourdieu 1984:325). Cultural intermediaries are also people who create audiences through cultural work; advertising people, music promoters, journalists and web innovators. Furthermore, there is much blurring of these functions.

These cultural intermediaries are considered professionals but not only in the traditional sense of accumulating specialist knowledge, but also in their ability to keep up, to know what is cutting edge and to predict what will be the next big thing. These creative professionals also called by McRobbie image-makers and tastemakers and by Gilroy cultural brokers, do not provide a superficial layer over the material, but are in themselves highly influential in the post-industrial material reality (McRobbie 1998, Gilroy 2000). This is partly because it is hard to separate the production of culture from objects, as all objects have cultural meaning. It is also because the cultural knowledge of these creative professionals is actively producing new economies by:

- a) inventing new products;
- b) reinventing products;
- c) creating new markets (e.g. ‘the new man’) by constructing certain groups as dynamic consumers where they weren’t before (Nixon 1993).

Secondly, McRobbie points to the many different types of work that make up the fashion industry; informal teamwork, subcontracting, freelancing, and even work done while on the dole which, alongside traditional company jobs, are all an essential part of the workings of this industry (McRobbie 1998). McRobbie suggests that the creative ethos of the sector contributes to this occupational fragmentation and fluidity. People in the fashion world will create their own jobs both inside and outside of private companies, shifting between retail, merchandising, design and PR, because they are creative people, able to exploit the fact there is a 'high degree of integration between different sectors of the industry' (McRobbie 1998:156).

Both these trends, the importance of culture and the fragmentation of careers, seem to encroach on the 'old-school' version of the professional who has detailed knowledge, gained through elitist education and years of work experience within an exclusive field. The skill of the cultural intermediary is to know the market, to be able to predict what will be 'hip' next, to move products forward and to take the market with them. Yet these activities still fit with Johnson's definition of the professional that I mentioned earlier – in being closely tied to the functions of capital (Johnson 1977). While their economic functions have not changed, this more intuitive version of the professional seems to allow room for a different life experience and cultural background.

### **Anti-bureaucracy and the 'new' professionals**

Bourdieu's analysis of the 'new' bourgeoisie is useful here in helping to locate these shifting definitions in a much broader economic and political context. The 'new' bourgeoisie and 'new' petite-bourgeoisie refer to classes that Bourdieu saw expanding after the Second World War with the burgeoning tertiary sector and welfare state. These growing sectors of the economy provide different kinds of opportunity as much as they *demand* new kinds of worker, or rather workers with new kinds of cultural capital. He

associates these classes with the *soixante-huitards* and ‘the potential for generational conflicts’ that was fuelled by the expansion of higher education, upsetting traditional public and private institutions in France (Bourdieu 1984:295). In the ‘new’ bourgeoisie and petite bourgeoisie he includes the growing number of managerial executives in finance and marketing that reflect and manage the increasing powers of banks relative to the traditional industrialists in the post-war period (ibid.:297). He also includes ‘the vendors of symbolic goods and services, the directors and executives of firms in tourism and journalism, publishing and the cinema, fashion and advertising, decoration and property development’ (ibid.:310). And lastly, the ‘liberal professions’ the social workers, therapists and advice workers; anti-institutional thinkers obliged to apply their ideals to individuals in the logic of the new economy (ibid.:369).

Bourdieu seeks to emphasise the ideologically expansionist aims of this class which he attributes to their economic functions. ‘The new bourgeoisie is the initiator of the ethical retooling required for the new economy’ (ibid.:310). They produce consumer-profiles and symbolic representations. They instruct others on appropriate lifestyle and fashion choices. As an ‘ethical avant garde’ they seek to promote expression over calculation, pleasure over duty, therapy over ethics and art over money (ibid.:365). In this sense, creativity, dynamism, flexibility and passion are understood as the values of a particular class. These values are adopted not for their intrinsic value but because they relate to the positions and functions that this class wish to claim in expanding economic sectors. They promote a specific ‘art of living’ – consuming, expressing, constantly developing and inward looking (ibid.:366). As champions of the new against tradition and challengers to the status and wealth of the ‘old’ bourgeoisie their purpose and their discourse is anti-institutional. As Bourdieu describes it, their general hostility towards all kinds of hierarchy is a crucial means of promoting their values against the culture of an elite as well as constantly asserting the benefits of cultural change. Their declaration of distaste

for hierarchy and tradition is a tool in their own struggle for cultural power and at the same time necessary in driving the economy by promoting the logic of fashion.

I have found Bourdieu's analysis useful when looking at apparently subjective values and how they work in the organisation I study. I have been able to examine the values of the people in my study, in economic terms. Looking at talent evaluation from this broader perspective, rather than taking judgements at face value, as personal preference, has generated important and surprising insights about creative managers. In particular Bourdieu's analysis has helped me to contextualise the irreverent rhetoric that I encountered at Epic. The 'new' bourgeoisie's anti-institutional agenda is used to promote a different kind of professionalism. This is why throughout I use the terms 'new' professional and 'new' bourgeoisie interchangeably. This 'new' professionalism includes 'velvet-glove management' or a management style that seeks to play down and soften its authoritative function (Bourdieu 1984:311). The 'new' professional positions do not offer the job-for-life guarantees of the 'old' professions so they are characterised by risk 'resulting from the indeterminacy of the positions' (ibid.:358). This enables variety and fluidity but without institutionally defined trajectories the 'new' professionals understand progress entirely in terms of personalised capacities notably 'dynamism, competitive spirit' (ibid.:314). So both their purpose (teaching others about legitimate lifestyles) and their conditions (insecure) demand self-assurance. As Sennett argues in *The Corrosion of Character* (1998) it is highly problematic when institutions and/or specific economic structures demand strengths of character that they simultaneously undermine. Bourdieu suggests that this is precisely why these industries continue to take in people from the 'old' bourgeoisie as those with some private capital are protected from risk. These are jobs that promise dispositions that their conditions do not necessarily generate.

In staking their claim to aesthetics and psychology the 'new' bourgeoisie have to maintain their distance from 'ordinary' workers and from the unfashionable – 'executants

without economic, political or cultural power' (Bourdieu 1984:304). They need to monopolise the definition of 'creativity' and their authority to recognise it, in order to claim these positions in the expanding tertiary sector. In the process of claiming creative work and cultural influence they seek to distance themselves from the powerless, the voiceless and the un-expressive. This is part of the process of creating managerial or professional space on the basis of disposition.

They also need to distance themselves from other fractions within the bourgeois class. Lury, using Bourdieu, argues that struggles between the media and the academy over knowledge and taste represent a struggle over whether authority comes ultimately from experience or intellect (Lury 1996:92). She describes this as a struggle for power and status between fractions of the middle classes. Similarly the 'new' bourgeoisie are persistently anti-bureaucratic in order to distance themselves from technicians and many workers in the public sector. They accuse the 'old' bourgeoisie of generating hierarchy and bureaucracy and interpret both these things as expressions of an 'old' worldview. But importantly because of the history of class relations, creativity (as a conceptual disposition) is always above technique and bureaucracy (as executional dispositions). The 'new' bourgeoisie have probably been so successful in promoting themselves and reifying creative work because their agenda is in tune with these historical values. But fulfilment through creative work remains such a sacred space in part because they are so active in promoting it.

These distancing methods and the hierarchies within them are the central themes of my work. Although I describe the actions of individuals, I do not interpret their behaviour as individual personality. Instead I frame it within Bourdieu's depiction of the 'new' bourgeoisie and with an understanding that their judgements reflect class affiliation and institutional investments. Struggles over the value of cultural capital are always expressions of class relations, and reflect institutional struggles even at the micro-level

that I describe. These distancing methods are exclusionary, because they are not just about difference and because they are the basis on which people's capacities and potential are judged. Class relations demand that people learn to see their own cultural capital as more useful and valuable than others. Also in order to protect the *rarity value* and the *mystique* of their cultural capital, professionals are likely to invest in making sure theirs is hard to acquire.

It is important to stress again that I use Bourdieu's description not to understand the *essence* of the members of a class but to understand a class in its *relations*. It is not my intention to suggest that my respondents are 'new' bourgeoisie in nature but in their *affiliation* (which may be temporary and is certainly sometimes uncomfortable). Since these are the relations in which, and with which they operate at work, it is important to examine the effects they have. As Fowler argues, Bourdieu's work is anti-essentialist as ultimately it seeks to reveal 'the symbolic violence of institutions' (Fowler 2000:1). However, this is still a fragile position because it does require holding two opposing ideas at once – that class labels do not connote essence but that class struggle nevertheless involves 'the ultimate values of the person, a highly sublimated form of interests' (Bourdieu 1984:310).

A defining feature of the 'new' bourgeoisie is contradiction. As Bourdieu argues, the image of their work (in journalism, advertising, social work) and the 'subversive dispositions' these jobs demand, contrasts with the function of their work as socio-economic manipulation and even policing (Bourdieu 1984:366). Their anti-establishment tone appears to contradict their efforts to claim cultural authority. Their seeming distaste for hierarchy contradicts the fact that as a class they need to distance themselves from people in less powerful kinds of work. Of course, the 'new' bourgeoisie are no longer new (and this is why I put the word in inverted commas). Although they still speak the language of newness they are very much established now. This study shows how people

claim creative work day to day. It aims to reassert the relevance of Bourdieu's theories showing how we can understand the symbolic violence of institutions even as our institutions seem to be fragmenting and adopting discourses of individual natural talent.

Of course it is also necessary in accepting and using Bourdieu's class categories so much, that I locate my own position within his framework. These are issues that I explore in more depth in the next chapter but it is important to mention here that Bourdieu argues that it is our fractional class interests that determine the weight we give to cultural or economic capital at a given time (Bourdieu 1984:316). This puts rather a different spin on my efforts to establish a useable theory or ontology of class. I have inadvertently chosen to focus on cultural capital but this could be read as a reflection of my positioning in Sociology within the academy. This very project can even be seen as one class fraction trying to make sense of another – all the while limited by its own values. This has its advantages as, of course, it is this difference that generates the questions, finds seemingly unexplainable actions and never tires of interrogating the field. It is this difference that throws the characteristics of the 'new' bourgeoisie into sharp relief.

So I seek to explore how exactly these old hierarchies endure in apparently new kinds institution peopled by seemingly new kinds of professional. I show that the knowledge economy will not necessarily bring about greater equality and knowledge-sharing since the value of cultural capital still depends on its scarcity. As we know, when work is organised in a Fordist hierarchy, with the narrow specialisation of tasks monitored by managers and initiated by directors, it is the autonomy and creativity of the directors that commands greatest social prestige. When work is organised to maximise intangible assets the autonomy and initiative of the 'ideas-people' is valued above the services of those who execute the ideas. The 'new' professionals may seek to change the conditions of their own work but they do not promote a radical re-evaluation of work itself. Leadbetter

has elaborated on changing work conditions and this is important, but he does not in fact draw on any new values when thinking has for so long been valued over doing.

### **Anti-bureaucracy and the state**

It is also important to recognise that in their anti-bureaucratic tone the 'new' bourgeoisie were also in line with the Conservative government of the 1980s. Paul Du Gay (drawing heavily on the work of Rose and Miller 1990) has identified specific political origins in the celebration of the idea of self-determination and self-expression. He argues that the values of responsibility and initiative were not only useful to commercial organisations but were necessary to facilitate the Thatcherite project of creating a more flexible economy and an enterprise culture (Du Gay 1991, McRobbie 2002). As the Conservatives sought to roll back the state, there was a perceived need to replace what was called the 'dependency culture'. In the flexible economy, workers really had to accept the fact that their income was more likely to fluctuate than increase year on year. They had to be able to deal with change. They needed to be persuaded to accept these things without making a fuss.

Keen to encourage private enterprise to take on more social and health provisions the Conservative government also needed people to accept that they couldn't rely on their employers or the state for a permanent income and would need to invest in themselves and their future. They would need to accept that they couldn't count on the state to safeguard their family's health care and would have to take responsibility for every aspect of their existence. Illness, financial difficulties and dissatisfaction could be reconceptualised as self-generated through a failure to make appropriate lifestyle choices. This idealisation of autonomy had clear economic motivations with the aim of getting people to embrace rather than protest about new financial burdens and insecurities.

As they contribute to this 'ethical-retooling,' cultural intermediaries and life-style gurus continue to contribute to this pressure on individuals, and this increasing requirement to invest in the self. This is important because although anti-bureaucratic discourses appear to undermine institutions, at the same time they downplay institutional power and responsibility. The 'new' bourgeoisie are in tune with a right wing agenda when we are encouraged to underestimate the power of institutions in our lives, the importance of our positioning within them and the power they have to shape our social world for the better. This is why a renewed consciousness of how much we depend on institutions is as politically significant as it is sociologically.

### **The myth of bureaucratic power**

The tendency to underestimate the power of institutions feeds certain myths about bureaucracies in order to promote privatisation and deregulation (Du Gay 1991, Du Gay 2000). The negative aspects of bureaucratic organisation are emphasised in portrayals of Soviet control and resurface in arguments against leftist local government and the European Union (Beck 2000). These particular myths about bureaucratic power were shattered by Hannah Arendt's important work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1967). In her examination of Nazi power in Germany, she asserts that it is wrong to understand the strength of the regime by its stability of structure, its efficiency or expansive bureaucracy. These stereotypes prevent us from understanding Nazism but also prevent us from understanding *how* institutions become powerful. She argues that the Nazi regime was never designed to last but to *effect*. Though seeking to imitate the military, the defining feature of the Nazi state apparatus was meant to be action, rather than order. Stable structure was not a priority and there was rather a 'labyrinth of parallel institutions' all in competition and prone to reinvention (Arendt 1994:71). Ad-hoc groups and temporary coalitions were always springing up to achieve particular goals (Bergen 1998). Despite this, the Nazi regime is repeatedly depicted in ways that suggest stability, uniformity and

scale – layer upon layer of administration. This myth works to portray the people within it and their ‘bureaucratic personalities’ as unquestioning, disengaged, blindly following orders.

Arendt famously examined the Nazi deportation ‘expert’ Eichmann’s defence at his trial in Jerusalem. She argued that he should not be read as the ‘fabled bureaucratic personality’ despite his administrative skills (Bergen 1998:41). Arendt believed Eichmann’s loyalty was not to his own role, task or future because the SS inspired commitment to the idea of being at the cutting edge – leading the world – daring to make history. The Nazis were able to offer members a meaningful role in history because a social group can ‘develop a full-fledged otherworldly morality, for the group outlives its members’ (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:21).

This means that the regime’s power did not derive from an all-encompassing bureaucracy able to dupe everyone by allocating them positions with only limited vision – far from it. It was powerful without the coherency and secure underpinnings that we are led to suppose it must have had (Gilroy 2000). Arendt’s work shows it was actually powerful *precisely because it did not have these underpinnings*. This meant people could see themselves as part of a *movement*, of an effecting organisation racing towards its goals. It was ideologically powerful only because it offered members administrative positions in which they felt they were making a tangible difference to society and history and they could believe it because all their functions and procedures ‘were subordinated to movement’ (Arendt 1967:259). This combination of flexibility, urgency and commitment to action was engaging. The devolution of responsibility was inspiring and exciting, especially to ambitious recruits such as Eichmann. The regime openly demanded conviction and courage rather than dull obedience. If it was efficient it was not from a bureaucratic love of systems but because it generated a collective confidence in being able to change the world and this sense of urgency about action. Arendt shows that

institutional loyalties are powerful when they are inspirational, and leaders are willing to give people a taste of power. The threat of being left behind in the past was as powerful even then as the real threat of violence. We should learn from this that anti-bureaucracy is not necessarily an ideology that will prevent prejudice, bigotry and oppressive institutions. Prejudice and exclusion also come in dynamic forms.

So while institutions can discourage reflexive thinking, Arendt directs us to be wary of assuming that this is because of the worker's limited role in a rationalised bureaucracy. Anti-bureaucratic arguments rely on the notion that increased work specialisation and repetition prevent the individual from seeing the bigger picture and using their initiative. Arendt's arguments propose instead that institutions should not be regarded as dangerous because they discourage thought but for the ways that they enable collective action. Her work alerts us to the fact that we should read any tendencies to exclude within organisations as designed to facilitate action in the public sphere rather than achieve ideological conformity purely for the sake of internal social harmony or worker compliance.

Arendt's work is extremely important because it is precisely these pathologised powers of bureaucracy that are used to bolster the moral case for the deregulation of work organisation. This is George Ritzer's argument in *The MacDonaldisation of Society*. Ritzer offers the Nazi regime as the ultimate expression of Weber's rational work organisation. He uses this to suggest that organisations driven by creativity will be able to celebrate idiosyncrasies and are therefore morally preferable. At the end of the book we find him championing all the middle class consumer environments, workplaces and products that are designed to nurture the individual. The charismatic authority found in modern businesses such as Ben & Jerry's is presented as less threatening to the individual than bureaucratic authority. Arendt shows us that all organisations are potentially threatening to the individual because they exist to make collective action possible.

Whether they are fragmented, privatised, bureaucratic or creative does not alter this fact about organisations.

## **Conclusion**

It has perhaps been more common for sociologists to apply Bourdieu's theories to studies of consumption behaviour. Mine is located in a specific working environment. But the theories I have explored in this chapter have introduced the themes that I work with throughout: Firstly, the importance of classification in social struggle and in understanding ordinary hierarchies. Secondly, the 'new' bourgeoisie and their claim to creative work in certain economic sectors. Lastly, how anti-bureaucratic arguments prevent us from understanding the power of more dynamic kinds of work organisation.

It is important to work with Bourdieu's ideas in a work setting because there is so much at stake here. Public recognition in our society is mostly sought 'in the realm of work and the companionship and position it ensures' (Charlesworth 2000: 60). The social valuation of work activities in terms of their contribution is important in offering status and potentially feelings of personal fulfilment and esteem. The great majority of people depend on institutions for the opportunity to exercise their capacities and certainly for social recognition. This means that self-esteem is not an individual issue and is at many levels also dependent on access to 'institutionalised conditions' i.e. on how people fare in institutions (Young 1990:55). When people are deprived of the conditions in which they can experience their humanity positively, they cannot find fulfilment. Neither can they understand their own capacities positively and in this sense they are not personally lacking in self-esteem but have been denied it at work (Charlesworth 2000). Yet despite this, arguments such as Leadbetter's and glamorous concepts such as 'portfolio workers' deflect attention from the power of organisations implying that any individual can find fulfilment at work if only they make sensible decisions.

It is also vital to interrogate creativity precisely because it is celebrated as an ethos and being offered as a magic ingredient to improve work conditions, output, economic performance and social regeneration. Dynamism and cultures of experimentation are hailed as the solutions to the closed shop, organisational stuffiness and even national decline. This study will reveal that creativity can not be offered as a solution since cultures of creativity are not inherently less hierarchical or more open. Creativity is no magic ingredient. Instead I argue that we should learn to see it as a tool that is used in the negotiation of hierarchy in work organisation.

How can we better understand creative workplaces and the career opportunities in them? How do we make sense of the expressive opportunities in cultural work? How do people currently make sense of their work – do freelancers actually see themselves as portfolio workers? If so, does this help them find the work they want? Is it inspiring to work in a dynamic, fragmented organisation? How do managers evaluate and recognise the people working in creative workplaces – are they, as Beck claimed, valued for what's inside their heads (Beck 2000)? Are they as Leadbetter claimed, no longer evaluated as units of production (Leadbetter 2000)?

In this chapter I have introduced the impressive and emotive meanings in creativity and provided some reasons to suspect that it might not be as liberatory as it first appears. What is the impact of the 'shifting emphasis on culture' within Epic PLC (Skeggs 2004:174)? In the next chapter I turn my attention to the methods I used to collect talent judgments and the ethnographic insights that can help us to understand what is going on in an organisation. I bring my discussion back to everyday issues and describe what I did in order to base my own analysis on the actions, practices and sense-making strategies of workers – my dynamic and creative colleagues at Epic PLC.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Regrounding the debate**

In this chapter I will be describing how I went about accessing and researching the media company that I have called Epic PLC. I have changed the name of the company, the names of all its products and all the people in this study as these were the conditions under which I gained access. It was only as an insider (an ex-employee) that I was invited into the professional and social life of the company. Also, as an employee it was assumed that I would care enough about the company's reputation to want to protect it, at least for the period of my work placement.

#### **A 'common or garden business effort'**

In the introduction I explained that I had wanted to return to study Epic because there were things I found disconcerting, and confusing while I was working there. I could appreciate that in many respects Epic was a glamorous place to work, the environment was vibrant and fast-moving, and I felt free to 'be myself' in the sense that I felt free from the constraints on language, dress and expression that I might have expected in more traditional professions. Yet there were certainly many ways that I felt unable to 'be myself' and I will come on to these later in this chapter, at this stage I want to revisit this 'confession' that I had already half constructed my problem before entering the field (Willis 1997:186).

Certainly the issues raised in the previous chapter can be said to have coloured my perspective, because I have undertaken and written this research precisely in order to

engage with contemporary debates about the potential for creativity and new kinds of work organisation in media enterprises, knowing that I would be writing within debates that were already politicized (Willis 1997, Back 2004). However, this does not mean that my intention was to counter optimistic prophecies with a determinedly negative ‘reality check’. Rather, I articulate my project here in the terms laid out by Don Slater in his article ‘Capturing Markets from the Economists’ (Slater 2002). In this article, Slater makes a case for a need to reground or ‘rematerialize’ debates about new economies (Slater 2002:75). In the last chapter I discussed historical debates that position art in contrast to dehumanising work. This polarisation provides opportunities to glamorise work in the cultural industries and reify its output. Slater argues, in a similar vein to both Nixon and Mort, for the centrality of everyday business practices in any attempt to theorise media and cultural work (Nixon 1993, Mort 1996, Slater 2002). I agree wholeheartedly that our impressions of what work is like in these sectors should be based on what people actually do to make the products, and not just on the aesthetic or symbolic qualities of the products themselves. In the case of advertising, Slater argues, where there is a clear commercial purpose, the business of selling things is never theorised as ‘a common or garden business effort’ (Slater 2002:61).

Slater’s argument includes a strong case for ethnographic methods – well suited to the project of regrounding studies and debates about the expressive opportunities in creative workplaces. He positions the company ethnography as an ideal method when looking more holistically at issues and activities that have traditionally been divided between cultural and economic spheres of academic interest. Slater points out that while the practices involved in coming up with advertising strategies create spaces for imagination, fantasy, personality and creativity, the business of selling products within markets is nevertheless *routine*. I used ethnographic methods in my own study for similar reasons; a need to examine routine business practices, a desire to use these as the basis for theorising

the potentialities in creative work, and a desire to explore cultural and economic processes more holistically (Nixon 1993, Slater 2002).

Slater's argument is, of course, an update on a project that was outlined brilliantly by Douglas and Isherwood in *The World of Goods* (1979). They showed how objects gain meaning according to the interpretations of their value in, and between, social groups. In this process Douglas and Isherwood stake a claim to the economic territories of pricing, exchange-value and consumer motivation. Rosaldo also touches on these struggles over disciplinary territory, in *Culture and Truth* (1989), discussing how stories communicate precisely what is valued about an activity or an object. It is 'economic stories' as much as *forces*, he argues, that shape our reality, as managers use stories to communicate their aspirations and how they believe they might come about (Rosaldo 1989:129). Stories shape events – as long as they are convincing enough for people to work towards their realisation – which is why managers at Epic were always talking about achieving 'buy-in' on their projects. These important attempts to approach economy and culture holistically, and to examine what Slater has called 'micro-economics', are a compelling basis for the relevance and usefulness of ethnographic methods.

How do you go about looking at cultural and economic aspects concurrently when working alongside people, forming relationships with them and analysing their behaviour? It is not a straightforward task at all, even though concepts such as cultural capital have made it into the everyday vocabulary, there is still a tendency to treat economic calculations as if they are entirely separate from other kinds of evaluation – emotional reaction and comfort, personal taste – recognisable by their mathematical nature. So in order to see the subjective in an economic light, ethnographic methods have to be complemented with a willingness to make connections where contrasts are normally made, a commitment to 'transcending dichotomies' (Willis 2000:117). In this chapter I begin my project of exploring workplace personas, economically, and economic

practices, subjectively. Not only to 'make the personal political' but to illuminate, in the way Bourdieu set out to, economic implications in the subtleties of everyday interaction.

### **Introducing Epic PLC**

Epic is an international magazine publisher, although at the time of my study they also had several radio stations (local and national) and one cable TV channel. Almost every magazine also had a website, even if it was just a page of description with an opportunity to subscribe online. In the year 2000, the executive directors created a new division called Epic Digital, and brought almost all the websites into this new company. Epic Digital was further divided into subdivisions, which mirrored the way the magazines were grouped. I worked in a subdivision of Epic Digital, that I have called Wellbeing, which contained four health websites. The decision to create a new digital division was meant to generate a more entrepreneurial approach to Epic's online activities. Rather than brand extensions, the sites were to become profit-making as stand alone businesses (through subscription, advertising or sponsorship revenue).

The structure of the new digital division was as follows: every site had an editor, responsible for writing or commissioning the content, and possibly also a reporter. Each site also had a sales executive, paid on a commission basis, responsible for selling advertising. At Wellbeing there was also a small marketing team, responsible for online subscriptions, and increasing the number of site visitors. Finally there was a technical team of seven people who maintained the sites, uploaded content, advertisements or data, managed customer queries, built mini-sites and managed email alerts, (although a web development company built the sites initially and were continually involved in problem solving). The publishing director and sales and marketing manager were the most senior managers in the subdivision, but there was a further layer of management above them; Epic Digital's board of directors. All the publishing directors, of the various sub-

divisions, met with this board to discuss the revenue generating potential of their sites and present plans for their development. It was this board of directors that set the sites' budgets and revenue targets every three months. In Chapter 5 I describe how two members of this board attempt to inspire the employees to work more creatively. This attempt backfires, as the employees are hyper-conscious of the overwhelming financial targets that the board have introduced.

It was incredibly difficult to find information about Epic's wider international structure. The Annual Report and Accounts simply listed every product, grouped by division. This was not enough to build up a picture of the company's workforce. I tried to find out more information about the employee composition of the company, in terms of gender, race and age, but after speaking with several PAs could find no one who was responsible for monitoring this. My black and Asian respondents (Sharena, Jasmine and Imran) were conscious that Epic was a 'white' environment in which to work.

Not long into my three-month placement at Epic PLC, I began to worry about whether I had chosen a good company for my ethnography. Although it was continually described as a creative company, I had growing doubts. I started to think I really ought to conduct a comparative study with another company. I envisioned this to be a smaller more obviously 'creative' company, such as a design agency, or music company and certainly not another PLC. I found this wasn't necessary because I had a lot of data from my respondents and one of them actually left Epic to set up his own small design agency that I was able to include. However, these doubts about Epic are useful in revealing my expectations about creative work places.

The fact that Epic PLC was owned and led by the shareholders seemed to me to undermine its creative identity, for it was ruthlessly commercial. While the company appeared to value creativity for its own sake, there was awareness that products were

esteemed for their revenue-generating potential more than their creativity. While the product teams were concerned with creative *and* commercial considerations, the board of directors were solely focused on commercial results.

Another concern I had about Epic's creative status was the size of the company. There were several divisions in London, other divisions throughout the UK, as well as in Europe and the US. The size of the company was for the most part irrelevant to the employees. Although people were often recruited from other divisions, it was actually rare to work with other divisions. It was even more unlikely that the members of the product teams would meet anyone higher than the publishing director. For the employees, the shape of the company above and around them was unimportant – for most of the time they worked autonomously on 'their' products within a small creative team. Even though on a day-to-day level the teams worked independently and intimately, I felt that the size of the company was at odds with my expectations of a creative company: occasionally Epic appeared to me as an expansionist global corporation. The artificial but powerful divisions I have mentioned between economic and cultural areas of academic interest contributed to my doubts about the usefulness of my descriptive data gained within such a ruthless, commercial and international PLC.

At least the working atmosphere appeared to be to be creative. Employees didn't have to wear suits, and were encouraged to party, both in and out of work. Office walls were painted bright colours, pink, orange and yellow; while the internal dividing walls were sometimes curved or wavy, and might include photos, a video wall, or modern flower arrangements. Most people had untidy desks, surrounded by product samples and pictures from magazine covers, advertising campaigns, or photo-shoots. It was easy to see people behaving as if they were the head of a small lifestyle consultancy pronouncing on the correct 'look', placement or approach. "We really want to give something back to our readers"; "We don't want to patronise people do we?" "There's no point doing it at all if

it doesn't look right." Every day people discussed the pictures and comments that were going in the magazine or up on the website. Meetings were for the most part lively occasions, full of opinion and ideas and laughter. Yet, I had further doubts about Epic's creative credentials for I had a growing sense that most of the work was administrative. This seemed to be the case in the marketing, sales, and editorial teams, certainly in management, and also in the technical department. The tasks I would consider creative (those that dealt specifically with aesthetic or written content) didn't amount to a huge percentage of overall work. Even designers bemoaned that their work was formulaic and involved a tedious amount of 'cutting and pasting'. The commercial constraints often felt frustrating, even overwhelming, to the creative workers. I was conscious that working in this creative company, at least, didn't necessarily amount to doing creative work.

More than a romantic notion of creativity (as artistic expression), work in Epic PLC actually required what Lash and Urry have called 'value-added labour' (Lash and Urry 1994:122). This is where the 'human' content of work becomes more important. This could be where the workers' aesthetic judgements are linked more directly to the final products, as they work with images and information to inject meaning into products and consumer experiences. It could be shown in the increased need for emotional labour, often in the form of sociability with clients or customers. It could be seen in the need for worker intervention in order to transform processes, products and audiences responsively as part of the provision of newness and customer tailoring. This need for worker intervention provides a qualitative element to the work and so facilitates the reinvention of administrative roles towards more creative job types and job titles – allowing for a different and more glamorous story about work roles. The appeals to creativity at Epic were made plausible as the majority of roles involved elements of aesthetic judgement, information processing and sociability, and genuinely demanded 'value-added labour'.

This ambiguity about creativity is important, though I am not actually concerned about whether Epic was truly creative, what I want to draw attention to is the way glamorous cultural ideals and everyday work practices feed off each other, while at the same time, exist in awkward contradiction. In later chapters it becomes clear how this tension creates an aura of opportunity for all, and makes it difficult at first glance to appreciate that some roles have absolutely no future at Epic.

As I've said, my initial assumptions about creative companies included the notion that they would be small-scale operations both intimate and informal and that the work would involve a high proportion of aesthetic or imaginative activity. I was surprised to discover how much I had been influenced by the predictions that such companies might make work itself more exciting. It is a mark of the success of these prophecies that I imagined I ought to be able to find such an idyllic work place for my case study.

### **Recording talent judgements**

As I mentioned in the introduction, I was only able to go back and study the digital division at Epic PLC because I could leverage an existing relationship with the publishing director, and I continued to be involved with the company for a period of 18 months, only because I had professional networks that I had built previously. Later in this chapter, I explore in more detail that as a worker with a long history at Epic, and potentially a future there too, people gave me information as a colleague. This is important for, as Ourrosoff makes clear, researchers who go into organisations temporarily hoping to gain a snap-shot of a company are easily dispatched with a highly sanitised version of a company's activities and employee relations (Ourrosoff 1997).

The reason I was invited back to Epic, for a full-time contract, was to increase traffic on

four websites, during the month that their audience figures were to be independently audited. I would never have been allowed there simply observing. The audit project was important to everyone (the sales, editorial and technical teams). I had worked in two other Epic divisions before Digital, and people knew this, so when I joined the division, I came as much from somewhere else in Epic, as from a university.

Working in a marketing function obviously affected what I was able to see. I had access to marketing meetings but not to what were called 'Exec meetings'. I had no access to these meetings of the most senior layer of management in my division. Sometimes, I didn't have time to go to any meetings if I had too much work on. My main aim as an ethnographer was to observe and record as much as possible when people were recruited, promoted or leaving the division as well as the things that were said about these events. I was also looking out for any other times when it seemed people's efforts were publicly recognised. I had access to things that were said out loud around our small open-planned office. Although I didn't have access to recruitment and promotion discussions in Exec meetings or even more senior meetings, and didn't have access to the official company line other than the rumours and special announcements that everyone else was aware of, I was certainly in a very good position for looking at talent judgements as they related to Epic's outward-facing activities.

I was included in Epic's attempts to know and grow their digital markets and in a prime position to find out what kinds of knowledges and behaviours were valued at Epic for the 'common or garden business' of selling things. This includes insights into the kinds of knowledge that were perceived to be marketable to internet users, and the kinds of consumer behaviours that were deemed to make a market exciting and worth pursuing. As a marketer, I was also included, as a colleague, in the daily struggles and debates over *the value* of workers and markets (that were, more often than not, translated into debates over strategy).

It was not difficult for me to write field notes at my desk, as writing was part of my job and it is not considered strange when people write during meetings at Epic. In this sense I was lucky that note-taking was 'broadly contingent with the social setting under scrutiny' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:177). I took the notes I had written home and copied them into my field notes. And I had separate note books for ideas, so as to try to keep my theories separate from the descriptions of events.

I felt most uncomfortable about my position as researcher at social occasions. Obviously I went to leaving and birthday drinks in local bars and pubs but I couldn't sit there with a pen and paper. I felt it was outside the unofficial contract. I had made people aware that I was observing them at work, but I had never mentioned their being watched when trying to relax. Nevertheless, some important conversations and job offers take place outside work hours, as I found. So these were included in my data. However, these notes were never written down at the time, and had to be written down from memory later.

There was one occasion when I had written down a whole conversation and had lost it. This was because we were in the middle of an office move. (Incidentally this was the third office move the division had experienced in just eight months.) I felt nervous at the thought of someone finding this piece of paper. I didn't want anyone to know that I wrote down conversations. So I was relying on the assumption that my respondents did not know the level of detail involved in an ethnography. This highlights the dishonesty that I felt was necessary to protect my activities. However, people's opinions and 'their perception and evaluations of others' evaluations and the meaningfulness held in complex juxtaposition of practices and ways of being cannot be recorded in the same way as facts' (Willis 2000:116). There are even times when 'artful lying' might be necessary, simply to earn respect within a field that values the skills of a social strategist (Metcalf 2002:38). In this secretive way I noted down casual conversations that followed interviews, informal

attempts to claim prestigious projects and even change career, and remarks made as asides about colleagues and freelancers. Unlike my interview data, the people making these comments had not been given the chance to choose their words. They are nevertheless talent judgements that have been incredibly useful for putting together a picture of how talent recognition works at Epic.

I felt that within Epic, writing out conversations would have been perceived as being beyond the scope of 'normal' research. I assumed that people would have been happy with my recording things such as 'strategies', 'plans', 'agendas', 'decisions', announcements and meetings. I knew that from articles about other companies, they would expect me to write descriptions of the office and the atmosphere in order to set the scene, but not conversations. These, I was certain, would still be considered private, and of questionable use in the analysis of a company. They might be used to make individual people look bad. My deception amounts to hiding *methods* which I suspected I might be prevented from using. I had not even attempted to explain how micro-interactions would help me to understand Epic so, at some level, my access relied on the artificial division between the cultural and the economic since I knew that nobody would imagine that I could be interested in individuals, and their relationships, for my work.

I wanted to protect my methods because, despite what is generally perceived to be public and private in companies, much 'official' business is conducted conversationally, and strategic alliances are also often formed informally. Without becoming a participant observer I could not have described the pressures and pleasures of working in this division. I would have also missed out on recruitments and promotions that I had no other way of seeing – because they were discussed by the photocopier or announced at people's birthday drinks. I first heard that the 'Creative Services' department had been disbanded when I passed one of the designers in the corridor. He introduced the topic like this: "I'm going out for a meal with my wife tonight. We have a lot to catch up on, we've just been

given *the briefing!*” Much of this kind of ‘gossip’ related to what was actually happening to people in the company – who had been got rid of and who had been moved. It was important data for me not simply as news, but also as evidence of how workers were being evaluated.

This ‘gossip’ that I have recorded in my field notes is something that my position as an ex-employee gave me privileged access to. For with my former career in the company, my time at Epic Digital and then my return to a different division the following year, I was able to contribute to these conversations with ‘news’ of my own. I was not only taking stories from my colleagues but also able to give some in return. This is the reason I was included in these activities at all. I simply took it for granted that in order for people to tell me things as gossip, I would need to trade information. As a researcher it is impossible to banish all the feelings that it is ‘wrong’ to influence the setting and that it is ‘better’ to let things passively unfold before you. But since gossip in the workplace is currency, and it *does* matter if you hear news before other people, it would be quite naive to believe that such valuable information would ever be freely given to you simply because you were a ‘researcher’.

Of course, this makes it quite plain that I was complicit in the practices that I describe and, at least while I worked there, complicit in the values and culture that I attribute to Epic PLC. This is inevitable as Ourrosoff reports when she found herself turning a blind eye to fabricated performance figures while she undertook an ethnography of a British manufacturer (Ourrosoff 1997). At work it is not so unusual to feel implicated in, or ethically compromised by, actions that you also feel you have no control over. These experiences are important because they draw attention to the ways we decide to understand our relationship to the organisations we ‘belong’ to. It is certainly possible to underestimate the influence individuals can have in organisations (even those in low-status roles), but Ourrosoff also makes it clear that managers especially, are encouraged

to attribute institutional powers (that come with purchasing power, legalised property rights, symbolic capital, etc.) to their own personal charisma (ibid.:179). Ethical dilemmas in the workplace compel us to explore the grey areas between individual and collective responsibilities and powers.

### **Insider or Outsider?**

Even with all my history there, for the three months that I was researching Epic, I felt like an outsider. As ethnographer and ‘professional stranger’ (Agar 1980) I felt completely different to the times I’d worked for the company before. Although Agar has described the ethnographer’s attempts at ‘detached involvement’ as a strain, I far preferred going into work with an extra reason for being there, and a different approach (Agar 1980:51). What used to be stressful was at least giving me data. Even the worst days were ‘interesting’. The project of data collection made it easier to embrace the internal politics and daily frustrations that had previously tired me out. I found detached involvement to be a less stressful frame of mind in which to negotiate a corporate organisation than that of the committed employee.

I also felt different because I felt that as a freelancer, I was vulnerable. I believed that only being there for three months set me apart from everyone else. I was lucky to be being paid the market rate to do my fieldwork, but I knew that once the audit was finished I might not be able to stay. If I was only there one month would this be enough time? However, I now know that I was not in a minority being there for three months. One-third of the people in my division were on three-month contracts at the time I was there. Although most of them had contracts, I was really no more ‘temporary’ than any of them.

There are other clues about how I was perceived within the field. Reading through my field notes I find I am described (to my face) as intimidating, confrontational, girly and

hippy. Lisa, who was, in effect, my manager, thought that I spent too much time wandering about and talking to people. But Lisa was well aware that I was there as a researcher. Once when another team had failed to show up at a meeting, she said 'somebody should be doing a study on internal communications in this place'. Later she admitted she'd wanted to go and tell the other team that I had been sent by the Chief Executives to do this research. She enjoyed the idea of using my presence as a way to unnerve them. Indeed it is not unusual for respondents to want to play with your role somehow. Most people asked me at some point what my project was about or how it was going. People were generally aware of my purpose and also interested in it:

At lunchtime Harvey was asking me what made me leave to do a PhD. I told him I was tired, completely frazzled. He said, "Do you realise that when you talk you always try to make people say exactly what they mean. You always pick on words and phrases. This is just the salesman in me", he said, "thinking about the way you talk and the way you want to hear things."

Field notes 25/08/00

It is clear that people had to make sense of why I had left Epic and what it meant to be in education again. And this extract also shows that Harvey was very conscious that I was researching and so evaluating him. I tried to think about how this might have affected the way people acted in front of me but it was very difficult. I didn't notice any different treatment after the email had gone round about my research. I think this was because most of the time, people were speaking to me in a work capacity. They mostly talked to me as their colleague in marketing and only occasionally remembered I was also at university.

### **Relationships and mixed feelings in the field**

My position as marketer put me in a specific relation to other departments. I necessarily became involved in some of the internal struggles such as the one I described in the introduction over what constitutes work for design or marketing practitioners. This means

I am able to make claims about what 'we' as professionals are trying to do. It also means that my own position, my own status struggles can be used as data for analysis.

Rosaldo has written extensively about the value of emotion in ethnographic description and the risks in attempting to erase emotions in the name of objectivity or unachievable distance (Rosaldo 1989). In my own field notes I made sure I was always explicit about my personal favourites or affiliations. This is a fine example:

Ned was really annoying me about the competition because he was over helpful. I think he is a meddling, patronising, do-gooder goody-two-shoes. Also he is insincere. Seems to be all for this appearance of being a 'nice guy'. What a total waste of time. Doesn't he have his own work to be doing?

Field notes 24/10/00

I can learn a lot from this entry. I can see how much I am evaluating relations in terms of my own need to save time. The pace of work at Epic was certainly frantic; I had clearly succumbed and become intolerant. I judge everything in terms of maintaining individualised workloads, to the extent that I find an offer of help offensive. Although I am suspicious of his motives, at that point I had no way of making sense of my gut feeling that his offer was insincere. With hindsight however, I know that Ned was trying to gain different kinds of work experience in order to move into web journalism. Working with me on a competition would have been one way to work on site content. Just two days after the entry above, Carmella told me that Ned would be spending half his week with the editorial team. A year down the line and Ned made it into journalism; his social efforts obviously paid-off.

Being able to look at the extract above with the benefit of hindsight, my emotional response reveals two important factors; first that I am implicated in Epic's culture of intolerance, and secondly it reveals something of the intensity and style of Ned's efforts. Emotion in this case is useful in illuminating strategy (his and mine). If I had tried to

repress emotion in the name of objectivity, I would not only have been altering the representation of my response to the pace of work at Epic, but missing his social efforts in the field. Who is appealing to others and how they manage it can be described as my specific object of study. Obviously it is also my business to know and understand why people appealed to me while I was working there.

As ethnography is (in the first instance at least) experiential knowledge, it proves impossible to edit out pain, frustrations or personal attractions. Working alongside others in a competitive and insecure climate, it was inevitable that I would generate relationships that were not established solely for the purpose of my research, they also helped me to survive and thrive there. However, all the relationships that I made and my feelings about them, are relevant (Chapman 2001). For example, I found one of my respondents (Carmella) to be extremely attractive as a friend but especially as a colleague. She was bold, mischievous and light-hearted and I had immense admiration for her ability to inject humour and joy into any situation. She appeared, on the surface at least, to sail through any tough or draining assignments that came her way. Yet I found the flagrant flippancy with which she approached the people-management aspects of her role including, of course, redundancy, impossible to agree with blandly. These mixed feelings, which at one level expose one of the 'vices of subjectivity', ethical engagement, are nevertheless fruitful (Rosaldo 1989:169). Doesn't this dilemma illuminate what is involved in a more holistic approach to the economic and the cultural? Is it reasonable to judge Carmella for helping to orchestrate the redundancies or for her nonchalance? Is it not simple enough say that any managerial role demands an ability to take certain actions for economic motives and that it is pointless to read any of it in moral terms? My analysis of the redundancies in Chapter 6 shows quite clearly that naming these actions as economic, and therefore abstract, is an attempt to de-personalise the judgements involved in these processes, which can never succeed completely. I go on to make moral judgements about different kinds of management style, and I draw the reader's attention to work practices

that are at once attractive and morally questionable. I can use my own 'mixed feelings' as the starting point for this kind of analysis.

### **Interviewing at Epic Digital**

In the year 2000, I worked at Epic Digital for three months part-time followed by three months full-time, and at the end of the placement I interviewed eight people. Eight people represents one-third of the division that I was studying. I interviewed the same people two more times at six-monthly intervals. I was involved with Epic Digital for a period of 18 months. As I have mentioned, in the Summer of 2001 I had a job at a different division, which meant that for two months, I was again part of Epic PLC. The people I was interviewing, could see me as a 'colleague' for the length of the project.

Opportunism had a lot to do with how I selected my respondents. The first two people I interviewed were just about to leave the company. I interviewed them simply because I believed they would have time to spare. I wanted to talk to managers and non-managers and from a variety of professional disciplines. I also wanted a mix in terms of gender and 'race'. This was not from any attempt to be representative but a desire to be inclusive and so increase the 'interpretive range' of my data (Back 2004:269). I was not looking for anything more specific because importantly I was asking people to commit to talk to me six months, and then a year, later. I had no idea what would happen in that time, or where they would end up working. So I knew that any feelings I had about controlling my sample were pointless, as it could very well change completely.

The most interesting question to ask in any qualitative research project is why the respondents gave up their time to talk. Some respondents have very definite ideas about what you 'should and should not know' in the field (Metcalf 2002:20). Guy, the designer, was very keen to talk to me. When he found out that I was looking at Epic PLC

specifically because the company claimed to be creative and flexible he said “You really need to speak to me about that”. He ran the in-house design studio and was trying to manage a creative department flexibly. He considered himself an expert on everything to do with creative work. He felt I needed to talk to him in order to claim that I knew anything about creativity at Epic.

Guy had other more pressing reasons for wanting to influence me. He had many frustrations about working with marketing people. We briefed his creative department on jobs and these were often last minute. We irritatingly changed our minds mid-project or, even worse, made changes to his finished designs. The shifting power balance between his centralised creative department and the people in Epic’s scattered marketing teams intensified these awkward relations. While I was there the design studio was squeezed out: everyone was either relocated or made redundant. The marketing people made no efforts to keep Guy’s creative department and quietly shifted their design work to external suppliers. Guy felt let down. As no space was made in our day-to-day business to reflect on this relationship, Guy was able to use the interview to do this. So he saw the interview as an extra window, to spell out to me how he thought marketing people should work with designers, and how we should give them more autonomy, respect and support. He wanted me to see how important and useful the studio had been, and how we would suffer without it. Guy seemed to have little interest in who the wider audience for his words could be. These interviews were, if you like, my time of instruction and they were used to address an internal power struggle that was given no official or public space for review.

When Guy left Epic and started his own design agency, the format of our interviews did not really change. He still positioned me, in the interviews, as a marketing worker, rather than an academic researcher. He was still dealing with marketing professionals, and they still annoyed him. It was as if he believed we would work together again in the future. In fact, after the second interview, he tested the water about whether I would be able to work

as an account manager in his new agency. Furthermore as a marketer, I could potentially become a client for his new agency. In this sense, I believe that Guy saw the interviews as a kind of networking opportunity. For these reasons, my interviews with Guy can be seen as a continuation of our professional relationship, certainly comparable to a client/supplier lunch meeting.

### **Economics in tone of voice**

Interviews about work were not unusual at Epic. There were job interviews, and appraisal interviews, which involved speaking at length about work. There were also editorial interviews. Certainly for the trade magazines and websites this regularly involved interviewing key industry personalities about their work. There are also the ‘interviews’ we’d do with potential suppliers. In my job these were mostly with freelance designers and copywriters. There were many situations in fact, where one person mainly asked questions, and the other mainly answered.

It is worth picking up on the idea of the job interview or appraisal. I found it particularly amusing when I remembered that appraisals at Epic also take place every six months. It seems likely that the interviews I did at Epic would have felt very much like a career review. Even the structure of the conversation was similar – with products first, the team next and ‘your ambitions’ at the end. This general sense of being appraised could reasonably be expected to make people feel they had to sell themselves, rather in the way that Guy had tried to impress upon me the value of his department’s contribution.

While my respondents could talk to me as an insider – someone who was familiar with the projects they worked on – they occasionally felt the need to differentiate themselves from me. This difference was always a matter of our disciplines, and never because I was at university. As I have already acknowledged, I have no evidence that anyone I spoke to

knows, or is that interested, in what is involved in a sociological ethnography. So without the knowledge of how their words can be used they are more likely to treat the conversation as an interview with a colleague. This may encourage them to think of it a bit like a job interview or a regular appraisal, or think of it as an opportunity to make an ally or to network.

The tone of data-processor Sharena's interviews were quite different from Guy's, and this reflects the fact that she was using her interviews with me for a different purpose. In our first interview, Sharena expressed her dissatisfaction and her frustrations with her role. She described her disappointment in Epic, and a feeling that promises made to her had come to nothing. These were explicit promises made to her at interview stage and also implicit promises that lay in the size of the company, its reputation for being creative and for being generous with training. I know that Sharena was keen to report these failings to me. In our second interview, she brought up a specific disappointment which she said she'd been planning to tell me about. She told me that if she was still working at Epic by the time of our next interview, I could beat her up. When we made arrangements for it, she remembered this because she said "I'll be wearing my protective clothing!"

Sharena's desire to talk was motivated by more than a need to expose what she saw as hypocrisy in the company discourses. She was also keen to tell me her ambitions, and to speak confidently about her abilities. In this sense, she was using the interview to tell me a story about herself that she was unable to tell as a worker at Epic. At one level saying 'what you see of me inputting data at Epic isn't the real me or the best me'. She came across as genuine because she was actively presenting something as 'real', against a misrepresentation. She presented an explicitly personal picture of the self, where Guy had presented a professional picture. This reflects their different positions in the company and their different positions on their own career trajectories.

Because of the longitudinal nature of this study, I was able to see that these differences in tone were dependent on position (in terms of managerial security, recognition and confidence about personal prospects). Sales manager Dan's interviews offer the best illustration. The first two interviews were very much in the 'elaboration of my professional stance' style. In the last interview, which came after the second restructure, Dan used the time to discuss anxieties he had about his positioning. This last interview was more like Sharena's as he used the interview to argue for a different definition of his capabilities. The interview gave him the space to tell me what he was 'really' like and the kind of work he should 'really' be doing. Again this interview initially came across to me as more authentic because of this more active/explicit construction of the 'real' Dan. In this way I understand the production of the authentic interviewee as a reflection of a context where they feel that their evaluation at work is incorrect. Where people are happy with their public evaluation they are likely to come across as more confident, but also less real at the same time because they have no reason to make any special efforts to present an authentic self.

These differences in tone of voice that I describe illuminate in different ways a general pressure to present a success story when talking about your work. Sharena acknowledges that she isn't telling the story that she ought to be, and this is her central problem – how come I ended up with the wrong story when I'm a graduate? Another graduate respondent who struggled to find work after leaving Epic refused to do any more interviews with me because she didn't know what she was doing work-wise. Of course, this made no difference to me, but it illustrates the pressure she felt to have a clear and positive story about her career, the discomfort she felt in being 'left in suspended animation' without a job (Willis 2000:89).

Why are these stories about work so important? Is it simply a reflection of 'the value imperialism of work' and how much we gain self-respect and gauge people by their work

(Beck 2000:125)? David Silverman argues that hero stories (where the interviewee presents themselves as the most significant agent in the narrative) are an everyday genre in conversational interaction. The purpose of hero stories, he claims, is 'to construct a profoundly *moral* universe' in order to preserve dignity in social interaction and present the self as morally blameless (Silverman 2001:186). Certainly there is something in this. By retelling her career narrative, Sharena is able to re-establish her dignity as it has been threatened by the way she has been treated at Epic and the low status of her work role. However in a professional setting there is potentially more at stake than personal dignity, there are more implications in saving face and, I will argue, in tone of voice.

One of the reasons why I read the difference in tone as a reflection of positional difference is because I also noticed that managers were more positive and optimistic in their talk. Even when Guy is critical, he always goes on to say the way things should be. "The thing people misunderstand is"... "If you want results you"... "What Epic should be doing is". He presents all his criticisms as a real desire to make things better and easier. Dan, the sales manager, also talks about problems as projects. "We're trying to bring a focus"... "We're trying to balance". He is able to turn difficult and uncomfortable situations into projects by stressing the good we're trying to do (balance, focus) rather than how difficult or awkward it currently is. Dan described all his projects in terms of improving relationships and encouraging people. Luckily, Dan was excellent at this, so company problems were framed in such a way as he could really make a difference. It's not all bad, because I am here.

An element of this managerial positivity was to play down vulnerability. In his third interview, despite considerable insecurity, Dan persisted in telling me about the all things he had achieved – "I think it went pretty well"; "we've been more successful in this than any other department". He was made redundant two months later. Carmella, the technical manager, told me she liked stress and coped well with unrealistic deadlines. In the third

interview, Carmella confessed that at the time of the second she had felt very low about work. I was surprised I hadn't picked up on this but when I went back to the tape I could hear no signs of it. I was amazed by how definitely she relayed personal achievements and strengths in an uncertain climate at a time when she felt down emotionally.

The managers use this positivity to present themselves as winners. I think it would be a mistake to read this as a hero story, useful only in protecting personal dignity. Positivity in a work context can be read as an expression of power and influence. Someone who is sociable and influential in an organisation needs to have a public face. The positive disposition can be seen as a marker of a person who is (or who ought to be) further up the hierarchy, for it implies an ability to sell ventures to others, and an ability to take on individual responsibility without succumbing to doubt and stress. The person who is positive is someone who is able to talk at length about all the good things they are and will be doing to make a difference.

So what is at stake in the tone of work talk is both status and survival. The frequent restructures generated uncertainty among managers and there were some things that were 'out-of-bounds' for them. They were not free to moan and complain (Hayes and Winyard 2002). They were not free to talk about obstacles and suffering if they implied that nothing could be done. Expressing pessimism and doubt was simply not an option for them. This offers a starting point for investigating the creative professional identity as a construction. It is vital to be able to talk positively about what you are contributing. A constant, perky, upbeat optimism characterises the tone you need to succeed.

It is because 'optimism', and the ability to talk it, has a market value that there is more at stake in these interactions than personal dignity. Values are held and expressed for their use and not their truth but not only for their use in a moral story, also for their *material* use. This is another area in which divisions between cultural and economic means of

evaluation can prevent us from seeing the profound implications of subtle differences in disposition. It is easier to see how professional jargon is used to indicate specialist knowledge and skill, but the ability to be upbeat all the time can help you hold on to a managerial position for longer.

This 'optimism' differentiates managers from workers and communicates a person's ability to direct others. As a manager, your optimism is convincing and appropriate. You know things can be better because it is *you* that can influence them. Whether things will improve does not depend (for presentation purposes at least) on a decision that is made by someone above you. Organisational improvements are directly related to how you look at things and approach difficulties (your individuality comes to the fore, and the institutional sanction it depends on is eclipsed). A managerial role mobilises a disposition that is oriented to the future because it is a position in which you can influence the future. Optimism has economic value because it sets you apart as a leader or, at the very least, a self-determining worker and this has extra appeal in such an uncertain industry in uncertain times.

### **Culture and class**

Within debates about racial 'matching' in interviews, assumptions about authentic communication have been problematised (Twine 2000, Back 2004). David Silverman, from a different angle, argues that we should be wary of assuming that easy conversation is a result of cultural compatibility and we should pay more attention to *how* we have successfully created this sense of ease using everyday conversation skills (Silverman 2001). Nevertheless I couldn't define an 'easy' conversation without elaborating on my own cultural values. I think it is possible that the authenticity I preferred in the contender's story derives from my specific class background. I am middle class, but my background is not the corporate/commercial middle class. It is the educational/public

sector middle class so it is in some ways closer to the 'old' petite-bourgeoisie than the 'new'. My evaluations could be read as evidence of this culture clash – feeling more comfortable with people who have to struggle to 'get on' in life. Bourdieu writes about the conflict between people who experience difficulties in realising their desired trajectory and 'the social optimism of people without problems' that reveals their different path (Bourdieu 1984:292).

I originally left Epic because I had stopped enjoying the work and the cultural environment. Saying that I burnt out is certainly true but requires elaboration. Why choose to return to academia? This decision reveals my assumptions about the cultural values within these different settings and my current preference. At Epic, I had loved the sociability, the glamour, and the individualised responsibility, but I also had constant anxieties about my role which I felt sometimes amounted to lying, relied too much on guessing and occasionally felt overwhelmingly superficial. These uncomfortable feelings seemed irresolvable within Epic. My worst nightmare would be to have to present a hunch as an infallible plan and as I worked in marketing this nightmare arose with wearisome frequency. I hated to make decisions and evaluations in a rush. I always wanted things to be done differently and this was very tiring emotionally. This is an important part of the reason I burnt out and also offers an explanation, that eluded me for a long time, about how something I counted as superficial could still cause me so much stress. This explains the appeal of academia for me with different notions of truth and different conditions in which to generate knowledge and opinion, where I feel more comfortable. At the time I left Epic, academia offered a refuge from the stifling positivity even encouraging judgement and critique.

The things that seemed to count as knowledge at Epic were things that I did not count as knowledge. The missing elements were history, detail and questioning. The history of the market, was 'known' by whoever had worked on the product the longest – even if that

was just a couple of years. Research was sometimes carried out by market research and focus group companies but mainly to test the ideas for launch projects rather than for any broader understanding of the audience. Questioning always returned to what else we should be doing, rather than who our audience was. These observations are my interpretations and spring from my anxieties. I see these anxieties in Bourdieu's terms, not as my subjective impressions but as a result of a lack of fit between my (educational) middle-class habitus and the (commercial/media) middle-class field. I think my problems with Epic PLC should be seen in terms of this culture clash, ultimately expressed as epistemological difference. This difference, as long as it has been made explicit, can generate useful insights for the study.

Undertaking this research has helped me to gain more self-awareness about my preferences and differences. It has also helped me to articulate difference in a more useful way as I have learnt to see aspects that I used to resent or tried to ignore (such as the terrifyingly risky but surprisingly successful professional 'blags' – inflated success predictions) as cultural capital. It was only in recognising my commitment to my own cultural capital that I became aware of why it is so hard to see and value the cultural capital of other class fractions. There is always this temptation to ignore or devalue it because it is difficult to let go of the need to compete over value. Visweswaran comments that researchers express willingness to interrogate their personal prejudices within the field but rarely expect or desire to interrogate their principles (Visweswaran 1994). I have found in undertaking this study, my feelings of ownership towards my values have been questioned, showing how field work and ethnographic writing demand a certain amount of identity exploration and then reconstruction (Coffey 1999). This learning curve was made possible by looking at personal preferences in an economic light. While my thesis might seem like an attempt to devalue the cultural capital most valued at Epic, actually it is an attempt to make it explicit. I do not want my argument to be a passing shot from one

class fraction to another but I go on to use these fractional differences to help me demystify success in this field.

The problem with making your position so explicit is that the research argument can too easily be understood as your project – all about you, your history and your hang ups (Skeggs 1997). This is problematic because the work is about other people, and the working environment they have to deal with. It is also problematic because it has a tendency to fix the researcher outside the field when it is so blatant in this study that sometimes I am in that world, and sometimes I am outside it. Indeed I could never have done it at all without this movement. Debates within anthropology concerning the politics of observing and describing other people have sought to discard the traditional basis of the ethnographer's authoritative tone of voice (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Marcus as Fischer 1986/1999, Clifford 1988, Rosaldo 1989, Geertz 2000). Rather than a total retreat into the author's own life, these politicized approaches advocate accounts that are 'peopled by both the social actors of the field and a critical self-conscious, ethnographic self' (Coffey 1999:145).

Les Back argues that understanding depends on open-mindedness, being open to the possibility that our own views will be shown to be inadequate, at the same time as acknowledging that the researcher's role is to interrogate taken for granted practices and interpretations within the field. The result should generate a 'mutual destabilisation' and a valuation of readings that come from 'the space between what is familiar and that which is alien' (Back 2004:266). I have certainly experienced feelings of destabilisation and also found that these have generated useful readings because they meant I was able to approach value from a vantage point that felt less committed and was new to me.

## Secrets and lies

During the interviews, the managers expressed concern that unflattering judgements they made about their staff would never get back to them. This presented a problem for me; because of the nature of my research question I felt these talent judgements were my most valuable data. However, having such close contact with journalists, I knew that requests to keep information 'off the record' had to be respected completely. And yet, of course, this was exactly the information I felt I needed to develop my argument.

This presented me with a difficult problem. For the managers' judgements *and* their assumption that it is reasonable to keep them hidden are expressions of their managerial power. Also their desire to hide these judgements perhaps relates to something specific about Epic's culture in the way that the managers profess their distaste for hierarchy while still holding the power to make the most important decisions in their work and about other employees. In asking them detailed questions about their talent judgements, I am emphasising their authority, which is something they generally prefer to distance themselves from. I am trying to get them to be explicit where they are used to exercising their own discretion and unused to being called to account. So although my research project ought to investigate this power, it is not in their interests for me to probe their judgements or critique them.

For a long time I struggled with this conflict of interests. Although I wanted to use all this data, I knew that precisely because I was spoken to as a colleague and not an outsider, 'off the record' just had to mean 'off the record'. So I tried as often as possible not to use these extracts. In one instance, however, I decided to generalise the evaluations. Although the extract has been tampered with so it is not possible to identify the specific subject of criticism *the terms* of the manager's evaluation are still available for me to examine.

Of course, I am also implicated in these negative judgements, though I interrogated them at the time, I did no more to counter them. It was an awkward aspect of my position as researcher that for all that time I carried knowledge of my interviewee's evaluations of each other. This was only exaggerated by the fact it was a longitudinal study. This put me in a privileged position in the sense that, in many cases, I knew more than those speaking about how they were viewed by others at Epic Digital. This can be illustrated by the following extract, where technician Lindsey starts reflecting on what this means:

**Lindsey:** I'm just getting concerned. You've interviewed Carmella and it just occurred to me that she probably said really horrible things about me.

**Emma:** Don't worry, you've said much more horrible things about her (laughs).

**Lindsey:** Oh God have I? (laughs nervously)

**Emma:** Sorry, no. Anyway, this isn't for her is it? It's for college. It won't get back to her. And she doesn't even know that I've seen you either so she won't even ask me.

**Lindsey:** It's just that it sounds like you've got such a good grasp of the work I used to do and I was thinking you just must have got that from speaking to her about my job already.

**Emma:** I worked with you Lindsey!

**Lindsey:** I suppose.

**Emma:** For months we worked together. You know all about what I did in marketing and if you were at college thinking a lot about it, you'd be just the same.

**Lindsey:** I would yeah. I guess I would.

Interview 21/03/02

This extract is important because it illustrates clearly what is at stake in this interview. Lindsey does not even work at Epic anymore, and yet she is extremely worried that people at Epic have evaluated her negatively and that her own judgements could get back to them. In this conversation, I have to work hard to diffuse the threat of my insider information and my power (I could conceivably destroy her relationship with her former boss and her employer reference) by claiming that the knowledge I have about her work comes from working with her. This is, of course, a lie. I also initially introduce the idea that these derogatory judgements are mutual, which of course they are not because Carmella is her boss. I do this because I want to reassure Lindsey and restore trust so that she carries on talking to me.

This shows how powerful my position as researcher is in this situation and how potentially devastating my work could be to the people included in this study. Disclosing people's evaluations of others' talents could destroy very valuable work connections. My research then represents a threat to their social capital. In the very process of doing my research I set up a kind of network, which existed for almost two years, of people who were connected by my research, (because of the significance of the information I was collecting) even at the time when most of the respondents had left Epic. In a sense I can be seen to have created a temporary but fairly solid network bound by shared experience of being interviewed as well as curiosity and anxiety about what might be in my work, or what might come back at them as a result of taking part in it. This shows again that the information that was given to me was sensitive and significant professionally, by which I mean that the reputations and relationships which could have been affected (negatively or positively) had *material* value.

I found it quite difficult to cope with this during the interview period and plucked generalist comments out of the air whenever I was asked about my opinions or even asked for the precise topic under investigation. Already my understandings were based on knowledge of other people's ambitions and interventions so I felt a need to impose an artificial silence that was not only about creating a semblance of respondent confidentiality. It was mainly because I had already begun exploring a confrontational dialogue between my respondents in my thinking and writing which also made listening very strange at times (Back 2004).

As a final word on this, it is telling that the conversation above does not become strained because Lindsey realises that she has told me more than she normally would. It becomes strained because during the interview I hide more than I would in a general conversation. In a conversation I would never have expected her to reveal so many opinions about her

work relationships, without also contributing a lot more of my own. It is this disparity, created by my silences, that makes the value of her information suddenly so apparent.

### **Research in an uncertain climate**

At the time that I was working at Epic Digital in Autumn 2000, there was still excitement about the potential in internet businesses. Though, of course, there had been high profile company failures already (boo.com a significant example), those I worked with still spoke of the internet as 'ahead' of print, offering genuinely groundbreaking commercial and editorial possibilities. People made jokes about the impending obsolescence of 'treeware' and felt confident that they worked in the most cutting-edge division of the company. However, in March 2001 a massive restructure resulted in the closure of the digital division and many websites. It represented a company view that most websites would not be able to make money in their own right. However sophisticated, they would be likely to remain reliant on the revenue from their respective magazines. From this point on the mood changed fundamentally. A further restructure in October 2001 pared the division I had worked for down to just five people, from twenty four.

These dramatic events, and the longitudinal nature of my research, have enabled me to represent and analyse my respondents' professional trajectories. Sennett in *The Corrosion of Character* (1998), uses narrative to emphasise the disorientating personal effects of economic change and in this context, argues for the restitutive power in narrative. As I also follow my respondents through changing times, I am able to do something similar, showing the impact of the restructures on people's careers. In Chapter 6 I describe how the restructure was unveiled. In contrast to Sennett, however, neither my respondents' nor myself, feel able to rely on the restitutive powers in narrative. In fact, when I examine the restructure, I argue that these attempts to reclaim individual responsibility only draw attention away from secretive and undemocratic workplace decision-making practices.

The changing environment created both constraints and opportunities. As I mentioned earlier, one of my respondents would not continue talking with me because she had no idea what to do about her work situation, and putting this stress-inducing fact under the microscope for an hour was the last thing she needed. The ups and downs in Epic's digital enterprises made it possible for me to talk with people in vastly different states of security and confidence. I think this is important as it has made me less interested in creating a permanent snapshot of Epic, or a definitive portrayal of any of my respondents. A longitudinal study can really convey the 'emergent' nature of business when it is not unusual to find that 'the futures expected and planned for in interview 1 were confounded and overturned by interview 2' (Chapman 2001:29). You will see that I always look at my respondents in terms of what they are trying to do at a given moment and I see each and every one of them negotiating a trajectory. As I said at the beginning of this chapter, I set out to ground my analysis in everyday working practices and this involves approaching people's opinions 'as cultural practices rather than finished consciousness' (Willis 2000:79).

The approach that I am advocating here is one that is based on forming relatively strong relationships with people, where possible over a long period of time – not to get to know them definitively but in order to understand them in flux as they deal with the practices and the logic of a dynamic organisation. As I have mentioned, sales manager Dan's perspective shifted in the last interview because his position at Epic was no longer stable. I have also explained that the information I collected was valuable to individuals and extremely sensitive so it is worth examining whether my approach was too risky – too close to causing pain. How would my respondents feel to read my evaluations of their actions and decisions? How would they feel to read their evaluations of each other?

Philippe Bourgois has written that when documenting crisis, suffering and failure there is always a real danger of 'publicly humiliating' your respondents (Bourgois 2001:11). He argues that this issue can be ameliorated in part by retaining a focus on macro-level issues (Bourgois 2000, Bourgois 2001). This is something that I also attempted by turning my attention to broader principles concerning managerial responsibility, Epic's organisational responsibility, and using theorists that are concerned with class relations, historical inequalities, and fractional interests. Bourgois makes an interesting point, I think, when he suggests that by over personalising the moral decisions that every ethnographer has to make, we risk obfuscating the responsibility of those within the field who have more influence over the precise nature of experiences and relations there (Bourgois 2001).

Nevertheless, I am under no illusions that my respondents would find it anything less than unpleasant to read this thesis. I have criticised Carmella's actions, and rhetoric as a manager, exploring her investment in creativity as a powerful and successful working identity. I do not underestimate the displeasure she would encounter in reading this, because I do not underestimate the value, or the pleasures, in the identity of the modern creative manager. Furthermore my critiques are not mine alone, and are based on the critiques of other respondents in this study and my encounters with their unhappiness. My approach is a deliberate attempt to make conflicts more explicit. This is not something that my respondents are likely to want to do, or to enjoy reading about. Yet it has certainly worked to explore the human impact of the working practices at Epic that can, from one angle, appear so casual. At Epic the managers are friendly yet I will show that the climate of judgement is peculiarly harsh. It is not in the interests of my respondents for me to put this in writing, but I feel it is worth exposing the exclusionary mechanisms of Epic, where there is so much at stake.

In such a dramatic encounter with career changes (redundancy, promotion, entrepreneurial ventures), with winners, losers and the mechanisms of exclusion,

obviously I would want to consider the impact of historical inequalities in terms of 'race', gender, class, age and sexuality. Yet throughout, my respondents were surprised by my interest in these issues. The managers I spoke to acknowledged that they had never been encouraged to think about equality issues while working at Epic. All were willing to recognise the value of social skills and networks, but nevertheless found it bizarre that I should want to examine these with regard to social privileges and disadvantages.

Sharena, the young black data processor that I interviewed, and Imran, the young Asian designer, both remained adamant that they had never witnessed racism at Epic, or at any point in their media careers. Yet Sharena was struggling to get any kind of interesting work, and although Imran felt his work experience and his levels of inclusion were improving, he remained firmly at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy throughout my research period.

France Winddance Twine, drawing on her experience as a black interviewer in Brazil, has written about the dangers of assuming that black respondents will share or embrace politicised discourses about racism (Twine 2000). She unravels the questionable assumptions behind standpoint theory that respondents 'should' have acquired a certain politicised subjectivity. Les Back has also pointed out that explicit anti-racism on behalf of a white interviewer can never negate the fact that racism will structure the relationship between researcher and respondent (Back 1993). This is true, for despite my desire to privilege Sharena and Imran's understanding, one fact remained unspoken in our discussions – that I (the white interviewer) obviously hadn't experienced any comparable difficulties claiming interesting work, or winning promotions, during my career at Epic.

I found Sharena's analysis of 'race' at Epic PLC incredibly useful. She repeatedly told me that she had never witnessed any overt discrimination at Epic, against herself or other people. However she also identified a specific problem for the black people at Epic in

moving out of administrative roles. Furthermore, it worried her that there were so few ethnic minority people in junior sales, marketing or editorial roles. These were the roles that could realistically lead to a creative 'career' within Epic. My dialogues with Sharena determined my approach to 'race' at Epic. You will see in the next chapter that I focus on the day-to-day practices involved in recruiting for these jobs that have a future.

So throughout this thesis, my argument is that conceptions of racism as workplace bullying or harassment limit a critical assessment of how racism is evident at work. Also in the chapters that follow, I approach the issue of institutionalised difference through an analysis of the practices involved in distributing work and making-markets so I look at 'race' in terms of commercial understandings about racial groups rather than hate-racism. The working environment I describe at Epic certainly could not be explained as a 'culture of avoidance', as identified by writers on whiteness (Kenny 2000 also Frankenberg 1993 and Dyer 1997). In Chapter 5, I show that managers do make use of notions of 'natural' social groups when they want to deny intention or downplay the political implications of their interventions in labour markets or consumer markets. However, in a context where people are employed to define, create and intervene in markets, it would be impossible to sustain a culture of avoidance; social differences must be exploited, imagined and manipulated for the everyday project of selling things (Slater 2002).

So the word racism, with all its violent and aggressive connotations, was not one that proved very useful to me in this field. Despite this, you will see that in the actual process of writing this thesis I have had to devote a large proportion of my energy to writing against the repeated and far-reaching dehumanisation of both Imran and Sharena, by their own managers and implicitly in ordinary understandings of the value of their work roles. The extent of the rehumanisation effort that was required in the writing process is reason to suspect that the effects of run-of-the-mill 'creative', commercial practices might eventually be comparable with more extreme kinds of de-humanising racism.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have drawn attention to the relational nature of the data I have captured but argued that this does not compromise its validity. I stressed the fact that throughout the 18 months of my involvement with Epic Digital I feel I was spoken to as a colleague rather than a researcher from outside the organisation. I also explained the different ways that interviews could be construed as fairly ordinary kinds of interaction in that setting. My positioning as a marketer within Epic made me privy to certain information and constrained my relationships with interviewees in different disciplines. These constraints, far from undermining my data, indicate that I have captured conversations within working relationships, rather than pre-prepared speeches on fashionable management topics.

As a longitudinal study, within a company that openly celebrates change and dynamism, my work throws up opportunities to explore shifting positions in organisational strategy and in individual careers from the privileged vantage point of a later date. This chapter has explored many layers of relational difference between ‘before’ the restructure and ‘after’, between ‘my’ discipline and ‘theirs’, my background and ‘the field’, and while I hold none as absolute, they can all, through contrast, generate valuable insights about work organisation at Epic. In this chapter I have focused on an organisational preference for an upbeat and positive gloss on expression. I was able to generate this particular insight because I took the time to make these differences explicit (Rosaldo 1989).

My selection of interviewees based on recruiting workers and managers, and people from different disciplines, was designed to facilitate Clifford’s dialogic or discursive model which ‘brings into prominence the intersubjectivity of all speech, along with its immediate performative context’ (Clifford 1988:41). Examples in this chapter have illustrated the conflict and potential pain that this kind of work can generate – Guy’s anger at the marketing teams who’d watched his department go under, Lindsey’s fear that

the criticisms she made of her manager and potential reference might get back to her, Sharena's disappointment in Epic's managers for the promises they made at her interview. My respondents have their own insightful critiques of Epic and also of each other. The project of making sense of these ultimately draws attention to Epic's structure and priorities. Yet as Hammersley points out, respondents 'have insights but also blindnesses, perhaps even reason to lie or to deceive themselves' (Hammersley 2000:138). The process of combing several viewpoints, of looking at conflicts between public and subjective perceptions, can make such blindnesses apparent - though again, for a respondent, potentially painful to read.

Acknowledging the risks, it is possible to see the value in grappling with the 'polyvocality of social life' (Coffey 1999:118). First of all there is value in putting these opinions through an inter-interrogation because, as I have argued, in a workplace setting, subjective views, apparently superficial perceptions of personality and petty judgements mobilised in inter-departmental struggles, all contribute towards public versions of employees' economic value and affect career opportunities. Secondly I see the value in attempting to artificially construct democratic discussions precisely because public collective opportunities to reflect on organisational struggles were so limited in the field. Of course I have not really generated a democratic discussion because my respondents never engage directly with each other's views and I am always the moderator of the conflicts as I represent them.

In my role as moderator, or sociological arbitrator, I am working to depersonalise the issues at stake. 'The sociological imagination' is so valuable because people's 'private troubles' can rarely be resolved within their immediate milieu (Mills 1970:15). If the movement of history 'outpaces' people's abilities to orient themselves, they retreat, along with their frustrations, into the private (Mills1970:10). I know from my own experience, and from talking to my respondents, that this retreat is rarely helpful. Mills argues that in

periods of social change people do not need information as much as a sense of ‘social relativity’ – the means to understand ‘the intersection of biography and history’ (Mills 1970:14). My thesis concerns several short biographies, and relates them to institutional and historical struggles. ‘Making private words public’ gives the sociologist a chance to take the things that appear to be inevitable about private troubles and demystify them (Bourdieu 1999:1). By acknowledging Epic’s version of success and failure as a specific institutional perspective (rather than a universal truth), it becomes possible to see that it may not be wise for an individual worker to take this version to heart. Wisdom is better enhanced by an opportunity to shift between this institutional perspective and other perspectives (individual, historical and institutional).

Also ‘the sociological imagination’ generates empathy and understanding of the people who are constrained by Epic’s individualistic structure and pervasive discourses about self-directed careers (Willis 2000). It is no mean feat to theorise collective and positional responsibilities where they are persistently avoided or deemed irrelevant. While I certainly do not see my ‘local treachery’ as a ‘means of wider emancipation’ (Willis 2000:126) I do want to offer an alternative reading to the individualistic interpretations of success and failure that left people whose talents were never recognised with a bemusing and demoralising sense that they lacked some personalised ingredient that should have guaranteed their valuation.

I gave this thesis to an ex-colleague from my earliest days at Epic because as a freelance sub-editor, and generous friend, she’d agreed to proof read it for me. Although not one of my respondents, I was obviously keen to hear her reaction to my interpretations as she’s had her own experience trying to negotiate a freelance career at Epic. One of the things she said to me, when she returned my corrected proof, was “reading this has finally helped me to forgive myself for that episode in my life”. I am not sure what she has forgiven exactly but I was pleased nevertheless. I am more than happy if my readings

have helped take the sting out of any one of the work-induced frustrations and anxieties that are routinely individualised.

Already I have shown something of the working environment at Epic, the pressure that managers are under to speak in certain ways, and the ever-present threat of redundancy they deal with. I have also addressed the informality, as well as the value, of talent judgements in this setting, and the need managers feel to protect their private evaluations. I have begun my argument that temperament, or disposition, matters because it affects a person's economic value, and their positioning in managerial (i.e. hierarchical) structures. The *implications* of different dispositions belie the innocuous nature of everyday work conversations about different personality types. But achieving a successful creative persona at Epic involves a lot more than being positive. In the next chapter I look in more detail about what goes into constructing a creative persona – can anyone achieve it? If you are not in a creative department, is a creative identity possible? How is creative talent recognised in new recruits? As I have explained, I will be using the practices and activities that took place at Epic, as the basis for exploring these questions. In the following chapter, you will see how I use a conflict (between Carmella's managerial discourses and the experiences of Sharena the data processor) to generate insights about the mechanisms of exclusion at Epic PLC.

## Chapter 3

### Building a creative persona

In the introduction, I mentioned Sean Nixon's work on the 'maverick genius' (Nixon 1998). In order to be viewed as talented within a creative company, an individual must foster a creative persona; promoting themselves as a 'personality' with certain traits thought to reveal creativity. In Nixon's example these were 'larger-than-life', 'laddish' and unpredictable. In such a scenario, self-portrayal as a 'character' or an unusual personality could be as important, if not more so, than work produced – though of course the two were conflated.

Richard Sennett, in *The Fall of Public Man* (1974) explores the emergence of 'personality' as a political force in great detail. In doing so, he also tracks the evolution of the artistic personality. As an example, he describes how the role of the orchestral conductor changed during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. As the size of orchestras grew, the task of coordinating them also grew. The conductor's role was transformed from a timekeeper, to a musical authority and leader of many people. The orchestra's music could then be understood as an expression of the conductor's personal will and control. As Sennett writes:

'The question is not whether conducting is a legitimate enterprise but why by the 1890s was so much *personal authority* invested in this one figure' (1974:211 my emphasis).

The audience became deferential in their consumption of music that was produced in this way. They stopped seeing the music as if it was provided as a service for their pleasure, according to their tastes. Until this time, musicians had been viewed as servants. The

members of the audience were losing faith in their own capacities to judge, giving up many of the traditions of active participation for more passive consumption behaviour. This passivity made it possible for the conductor's demonstration of personality and musical talent to simultaneously be read as the demonstration of scarcity. Only once the general public had lost confidence in its own expressive abilities could public demonstrations of individual taste attain the economic value of a star. The conductor's reinvention facilitated his class mobility in two ways, he became economically scarce and so more valuable, but he also overtook the class of his audience culturally.

Sennett uses the example of the conductor to examine how the role of the artist changed as part of a more general cultural and political trend towards elevating personality. In this chapter, I will use the same example more specifically to investigate what might be practically involved in the production of a creative persona. First of all, in becoming an artist, the conductor must personalise his activity in order to make it unique. He must present his product as an expression of his own taste, and not simply the execution of general musical rules. In doing this, he downplays the elements of the work that can be seen as a craft. He tries to replace the routine (time-keeping) with new gestures. He adds many more signs that can be practised or learnt as specific skills while emphasising the elements that require his imagination and management.

The conductor also downplays the service relation that must inevitably be a part of creative work if it is undertaken for an audience or patron. This is reliant on the new role of the audience. It depends on an audience to which he can remain aloof, generously sharing his creations with them. The audience then looks to the conductor to provide the sophisticated music they are supposed to appreciate. Going to watch the orchestra becomes an exercise in learning taste, as much as an opportunity for their immediate enjoyment. This can help us understand what is involved in constructing a creative

persona in order to achieve economic scarcity and elevated status. I have summarised this project in three key elements:

- 1) Emphasising your unique personal gifts over specific technical skills.
- 2) Downplaying the service element of paid creative work.
- 3) Emphasising the authority of your taste in your relationship with the audience.

In the rest of this chapter, I will explore how the three elements I have identified from Sennett's description, are relevant to the construction of creative identities at Epic PLC. In this way, Sennett's observations offer a useful analytical tool for unravelling *how* a creative persona is established.

### **The representation of sales 1 – the tyranny of targets**

Sales manager Dan Birch was one of the most cheerful people in the digital division of Epic Wellbeing. He was in his forties, white, and wore a suit everyday. If you saw him on a train he would look no different from the other commuters. However, he was a very theatrical person. He said 'Hello' in the style of the comedian Kenneth Williams and would say "Hello! I'm Dan dot Birch, what can I do for you?" which had the dual-effect of hamming up his sales role and the internet business at the same time. He would always introduce himself in an over-the-top way even when people he knew came up to his desk for an everyday conversation. This humorous introduction suggested he wasn't taking himself or his work too seriously. Despite the fact that he looked conventional, his camp style, which included a raucous laugh, definitely established him as a 'character'. Dan also enjoyed real credibility within Epic. He had been working on lan.com (the *Local Authority News* website) for seven years. This meant he had worked at publisher level on the only site in the portfolio that was actually making money. For this reason, his experience was highly respected.

Dan was rarely downbeat, and never came into the office in a bad mood. He liked laughing and joking with his team, and enjoyed all the work elements that were communicative and playful. At one brainstorming meeting he said, “Look at us, doing word associations, and it’s supposed to be work!” He was delighted with this: he felt it was a lucky break to have such a job. However, it was hard for him to sustain the tenor of the approachable and upbeat modern manager because, while he tried not to show it, Dan was actually very stressed about the sales targets that his team were trying to meet. He tried various strategies to improve their performance. Initially, Dan introduced a reward system, using Capital Incentives vouchers (redeemable in high street stores, and on flights, etc): if his team reached a set target for face-to-face visits each month, they would receive vouchers. When he mentioned that he was introducing this system, Lisa said: “Oh God, what if one of them lets [the team] down!” And Harvey replied laughing, “I know, I’ve seen teams totally destroyed over things like this!”

There was also a flip chart at the end of the sales team’s bank of desks showing their individual targets. These financial targets did not strictly relate to the number of available page impressions as the sales executives were also expected to achieve extra sponsorship deals on the site and for email alerts. Dan’s presentation of the site’s page impressions created a unique type of pressure – for without sponsorship they represented time and money slipping away. The team were constantly in the presence of the huge targets they had to meet (for most *months* Alyssa’s target was more than her *yearly* basic salary) as we can see from this extract in my field notes:

At the end of today Dan is back up on his board again. He says to Alyssa “Look at all this disappearing”. She doesn’t get it so he says “I mean all this is going to waste because there’s no revenue”. Alyssa doesn’t react except to point out to him that one of his figures is wrong. “How are we going to do it?” he asks. “How about lowering the target?” quips Alyssa, “It’s a mentality” he replies, “you all spend too much time in meetings and not calling people”. Alyssa says the call targets are too rigid, “We’re all much happier when we manage our own time”. Dan says “We could do it that way, but *I’m* not happy yet” (he says this in a jokey way).

Field notes 25/09/00

The performance pressures at Epic posed a real threat to achieving the positive tone of voice that I described in the previous chapter. They also posed a threat to the creative persona in terms of maintaining the optimism that I argued was so valuable supporting managerial power. During the time I was there as an observer, Dan seemed to get more and more fixated on his targets until he reached this depressing state a month later:

It was the sales meeting today. Dan was very teacherish about how many calls they've made each week and how many face-to-face visits. They all went round making excuses and it was pretty painful. Alyssa tries making noises about how it doesn't feel good to be monitored every day. But she sounded half hearted and no one jumped to back her up. Dan was unsupportive, there was no encouragement, no idea sharing.

Field notes 23/10/00

In this extract the sales executives are not able to reassure Dan with the required decisive and optimistic tone of voice and neither can he reassure them. With a target for sales calls, a team target for face-to-face visits, a financial target, and the forever-looming figure for the impressions they had 'lost' so far that month the sales team worked under enough layers of pressure to instil job insecurity:

At the end of the day Dan is writing on his flip chart. They all start making disappointed noises as he puts stuff up. Dan says to them, "I tell you what, don't bother coming in next week, I'm recruiting a new sales team." They all laugh. (The thing is, Harvey is on holiday next week.) Then Dan says "Oh, I shouldn't have done this just before you go on holiday, but the thing is, when you get back..." "I won't have a job!" chips Harvey and laughs.

Field notes 8/09/00

As Dan was such a good-humoured person, I am sure he would have hated to think of himself as an authoritarian. He believed that he was helping his team to become a great sales force and he wanted to be a manager of the new school – inspiring and charismatic rather than controlling. Dan struggled along with this mis-match in his behaviour and his overall disposition. He was communicating sales success as a quantitative issue; more visits and calls would equate to more revenue. He was certainly unaware that his

monitoring activities (almost always affectionate and smiling jibes) were consistently undermining the confidence and, in effect, the performance of his team.

However, at the very end of my placement Dan organised a team day, which seemed as though it might change everything. During an interview at the time, Dan was full of new ideas that really excited him. Dan was about to introduce a whole new way of looking at sales work that would restore the status and ethos of the creative persona.

### **The representation of sales 2 – a consultative sell**

From emphasising sales as measurable, the issues that were tackled at the away day showed that Dan was trying to move his team away from a quantitative approach. The away days were specifically designed as an opportunity to break away from the established methods of selling used on the magazines. Dan believed that the new possibilities of the internet meant that their sales techniques required a new approach:

**Dan:** What I wanted to focus on [at the away days] was how to sell differently in that we are a different type of media. And how can we get that across in our presentations to clients?

Interview 30/11/00

The training day seemed to have been a lot of fun. A facilitator led Dan and the sales team in acting workshops. During light-hearted, role-playing exercises the team tried out different presentation styles. They were experimenting with different ways of presenting the site and, at the same time, their own work. When they returned to the office – which had been quiet in their absence – the sales team were excited and inspired by all they had discussed. Their sales role had been re-articulated and they were buoyed up by it.

**Dan:** We're not selling a product that's been produced for hundreds of years. If the product's evolving you need people who are confident in themselves because

they can't rest on the quality or the name of the product. They're working with new ideas that come through. That's how a consultative sell is built up.

Interview 30/11/00

From feeling anxious about the new medium, with its uncapitalised past and its unknown future, the away day had encouraged the sales team to see the lack of product history as an advantage. Although magazines had brand names that had been recognised for a century, the digital sales people would be doing something much more exciting, precisely because it had never been done before. The team were dissuaded from feeling they lacked security. In place of this security they had been offered a more interesting job. This job would be 'so much more' than sales because it would move beyond the confines of improving technique. This is how the creativity of the role is restored.

**Dan:** A company might say we don't want to advertise on your site, but if you link to our site we'll give you a share of our revenue. Now we would *never* have considered anything like that in the previous regime – the magazine environment. We built brands and we built audiences and people can buy it if they want. But this is 'let's have a partnership' and 'let's have a risk!' and the sales person has gotta think 'is that something that would work for us? How can I sell it in such a way?' So I've gotta have open-minded people who can also be convincing.

Interview 30/11/00

In this 'exciting' new sales environment the team are not dealing with a target and a contacts book. Now they are dealing with new ideas, genuinely original sponsorship solutions and complex financial deals. When magazine teams had seen a client and sold some space their work was over, but for the web team selling the space would be just the beginning. They would come back to the office to experiment and see what options they could create. They would be involved in inventing the content solutions. They were consultants and they would be evaluating risk. They wouldn't just think about whether the client wanted to buy or not, it would be up to them to *imagine* what they could buy:

**Dan:** I feel it's a question of belief in themselves when they're going out because ... we do get tough questions and we get new things thrown at us that we don't know, you know, *we're learning* about digital. So to be confident about what they're selling and turn these issues into ideas, they've gotta feel that when they come back they're supported and they'll be enabled to do that idea.

Interview 30/11/00

With the reinvention of the sales role Dan is concentrating on ideas and confidence rather than specific sales skills. Here we can spot the first of the strategies of Sennett's conductor. A sale is no longer an interaction that can be enacted and predicted, practised and perfected. Now, it's not such a numbers game (if you make 75 calls a week you'll make enough sales). The sales interaction has become a unique one, which requires individual personal imagination alongside the traditional sales skill of persuasion. It has been personalised and to an extent also mystified. It is because of this that the role is presented as demanding so much more from a person – more personal confidence, imagination and perception.

Interestingly, Dan's new approach makes a good sales performance harder to measure for a manager. He is now emphasising the support in his role, over the need to monitor and chase his team. This shows that different types of self require different kinds of governance: 'if there is a perceived layered self, liberal forms of indirect governance are possible' (Skeggs 2004:176). Creativity and autonomy are interlinked because at the same time as emphasising creativity, Dan alters the working *conditions* for the sales execs. They gain the freedom to be 'themselves' and manage their own work because these are the conditions that will enable them to add the value that Dan envisions. When sales is transformed into a qualitative creative project, with freer working conditions, there is a concurrent demand for someone 'better':

**Dan:** I would argue that you want to get involved in editorial and sponsorship and that sort of thing and therefore you'd want somebody of a higher calibre than someone who's gonna come in and do straightforward selling... At the moment I'm really upbeat about it. I think we've got some really, well, ace players.

Interview 30/11/00

The consultative sell has turned the sales team from workers into consultants. In the same way that the conductor transformed himself from timekeeper to an artist, so the away day began the process of transforming the salespeople into creatives and as a direct result they

become 'ace players'. What this also represents is the elevation of sales work in class terms. They are no longer technicians concerned with the effectiveness of their sales techniques. They are true professionals – autonomous individuals concerned with whatever business they decide is important. I have shown that this mobility is important, not purely for prestige, because class mobility also improves their working conditions. As sales people they will always have financial targets, but the constant monitoring that was so wearing on their confidence no longer seems appropriate. In the switch from a quantitative to a qualitative emphasis, the sales team are able to gain some breathing space, and more autonomy in the *how* of their work. They gain autonomy from general sales techniques and expectations precisely because the role has been personalised.

#### **Adding value and the fear of becoming a cost**

This representation of sales as a creative role means that a sales executive could explore the identity of a unique individual and demonstrate character at work. So far this aggrandisement has been shown to be useful in improving the status and conditions of work, but I will now move on to show how it affects an employee's chance of survival. This relates to the second part of Sennett's conductor's strategy to play down the service element in paid creative work.

The need for Epic's workers to 'add-value' was communicated through the organisational structure itself. Each product (website or magazine) had to be viable, self-sufficient, and self-financing. People involved in the products were encouraged to think of each core product in this way because this was how the finances were presented. Some products were known to 'carry' others and this was considered a problem. This was something that could only tolerated in the short term until products were up and running. Products that were not achieving the expected profit margin (people seemed unclear on the exact figure, quotes given to me ranged from 16-24%) were believed to be in real danger of

closure. Because the precise criteria regarding vulnerable status were unknown, none of our websites had any sense of security.

At Epic employees' pay appeared to come directly from their product's revenue. In this way the need for employees to 'add-value' was connected to a heightened awareness of their own cost on the product's bottom line, and an understanding of their dependency on the product's success. After the restructures (in March and October 2001) Dan found himself struggling to prove the value of the tiny department that was all that remained of the digital division I had observed.

**Dan:** It's all about proving us as being value for money. I mean so far this year we've sold I think just short of 650 magazine subscriptions on the web but we've got to continue doing that because they're not going to underwrite digital costs anymore.

**Emma:** Mm

**Dan:** In fact I think it's gonna get tougher in that respect, not easier. Even though we've gone from thirty-five people down to five I still don't think we're home and dry necessarily... You know, when we lost the sales force that was probably the right thing to do because they wouldn't be sustainable now.

Interview 06/02/02

Dan has to paint a picture of his department as self-financing and self-sufficient. It is certainly not enough, at Epic, for your department to be useful. In the process of arguing for his department's contribution, Dan comes to justify the redundancies. He had taken on board Epic's regime of self-sufficiency. This was why Dan had begun to put pressure on himself in the new scaled-down department.

**Dan:** I'm sort of a semi-account manager as well as running the unit but I'm trying to do – which is ridiculous – you know, I'm also trying to do the marketing and sales – all the things we had in a bigger department.

Interview 06/02/02

Again insecurity poses a great threat to the creative persona and the power that is communicated by a manager's optimism. He describes his new role as that of an account manager, because his department was focusing on web projects that were undertaken for the magazines, rather than projects they developed independently. As he knew they

would be expected to cover their own costs, he was also trying to carry out sales and marketing work at the same time, even though this was an unrealistic workload. Dan planned to compensate for a lack of resources with his own time and effort, not because he was naïve, but because this was a matter of his survival (and his team's). Without evidence that his efforts brought in revenue directly, Dan and his team would not be perceived to be 'adding-value'. Instead their work would become an internal service. An account manager's role that faced inwardly was not a valued one so this made Dan extremely insecure.

**Emma:** The way you're talking about it, it's more like it's a service team. This is the first time you've talked about it in this way. How do you feel about that?

**Dan:** Well I think it's my biggest concern, wanting to be publisher rank and profit responsible. Yeah, I saw this coming from our restructure in the Autumn when we lost people and my worry is that we turn into a production house and you then ask the question, 'is it better in or is it better out?' And the [creative] studio here went and that's what I'm sort of fearful of. Although [one website] went back to the magazine I would resist very much the archives going back to the magazines because then I would lose all revenues and I just become a cost.

Interview 06/02/02

Dan was struggling to avoid being labelled as 'just' a 'cost' to Epic because this label impacted on his seniority. Dan needed to keep hold of the revenue streams that came under his jurisdiction in order to have a chance of maintaining his 'publisher' rank. His identity as a responsible and creative manager depends on being able to convince others that he holds a revenue-generating function. However, his comments above demonstrate the fragility of this situation. Who did these revenues rightly belong to; the magazine they were branded with or the small technical team that invented and built them? These issues were related to the structure of the company and how it was represented financially.

This shows how restructuring, even apart from redundancies, had such devastating potential at Epic. The restructures involved moving products among departments and onto different balance sheets. For this reason restructures had the ability to suddenly turn a department or a product into a 'cost'. It was therefore impossible for the product teams to make their products appear profitable when this was a matter of presentation, which

they did not control. For the chief executives at Epic PLC, the constant restructures and the huge number of products and divisions at their disposal meant that the possibilities for presenting areas of revenue generation or loss within the company were infinite. But despite their lack of control, the divisions and departments of Epic were evaluated and managed according to this phantom goal so they all worked hard to prove once and for all that they were self-sufficient and therefore indispensable. Although they could not control whether they would appear to be adding value, it did not stop them trying.

Workers at Epic tried to avoid appearing as a cost to protect the value of their own expertise and skills. Although Dan wanted to present his team as a knowledge base, it was difficult to maintain the status they had enjoyed when they had been operating as a stand-alone business within Epic.

**Dan:** The magazines wanted lots of little incremental things done that built us up as a knowledge base.

**Emma:** And help them in everyday ways

**Dan:** And of course I suppose I brought us more into a service department but, you know, we survived it.

Interview 06/02/02

The crucial point to glean from this situation is that at Epic, status does not come purely from expertise. It ultimately comes from appearing to be self-financing and profit-making and for this reason depends entirely on organisational positioning. By integrating with the magazines Dan's team incurred a loss of status. His department was suddenly just a small part of the magazine's balance sheet, and became a cost that the magazine might not be willing to carry.

The web workers, before the restructure, were seen as having exciting skills and expertise and looking forward to a bright future. After the restructure, the same people with the same skills, had started to look like a burden. They had 'enjoyed' internal competition with the magazine teams for audience and advertising. Suddenly they were cap in hand to

their previous competitors, working *for* as much as with. Although they retained their knowledge, the 'incremental' things they were doing cannot compare with the inspiring creative visions that Dan had discussed at the away day. In losing their entrepreneurial projects, and becoming a service team, they lost face.

**Dan:** But you've also got to remember that the task was to integrate the web into these titles and we know that we've done more in this area than anybody else. But of course the price is that we end up being subservient rather than being sort of a unit in ourselves.

Interview 06/02/02

The 'shame' in being a service department was connected to this fear of being a cost in the new structure the fact that 'dependence is considered degrading' (Sennett, 1999:27). At Epic, support services were not core sections of the business, because they were not bringing in revenue. This explains why even those services that were central to both the functionality and offer of the product (such as the technical, customer service or financial departments) were not recognised in the same ways as the 'creative' departments. 'Creativity' at Epic had come to signify revenue generation and entrepreneurial flair. The result of this was that there was no rationale to explain how some departments that were purely costs were nevertheless worthwhile to the organisation: anything that was presented as a cost was downgraded in some respect and vulnerable to outsourcing.

When 'creativity' is connected to the generation of revenue, it is more attractive than being in a service role. It appears to offer a more secure kind of insecurity, at least providing opportunities to prove that your department adds value. With the organisation structured in this way, and departments evaluated in these terms, creative workers understandably see their own positions as superior to support workers. Identifying with products need not be interpreted as a matter of an 'over-keen' mentality, for in this context it can be read as an attempt to ensure survival according to Epic's logic of self-sufficiency.

This structure of 'independent' product teams meant that an individual's willingness to take responsibility was both desired by the organisation, and also generated by its structure. This relied on finding workers who wanted to take on a product as a personal project, and of course, the prestige in a creative identity was useful in this. A creative identity helps to present individualised responsibility as appealing and rewarding, making Epic's offer of responsibility generous rather than demanding or unrealistic. Creative freedom can sweeten the pill of individualised pressure, providing opportunities to celebrate individualised responsibility and reducing opportunities to acknowledge and explore collective responsibilities. For example, Dan's sense of dependence on his product diffused any sense of indignation at the redundancies, and he accepted the conditional nature of his team's employment while he worked day and night for an expansive international PLC.

Dan worryingly interpreted the intensity of his work at Epic as evidence of his personal passion. He could not imagine that in recessions more general company funds might come to his team's rescue. It did not occur to him that Epic could give new products more time (Yourbaby.com was not even a year old when it was closed). Epic's investment meetings (where teams presented their bids for money to improve their products) also served to position the team as entrepreneurs approaching independent investors, rather than their directors in a hierarchical organisation.

Looking at Dan's struggle to prove the value of his contribution it is possible to see how individualised creativity is not a matter of natural talent but an indication that workers, departments or products have been recognised by Epic's directors as adding-value.

Playing down the service element improves survival chances for workers at Epic though I have shown that ultimately workers do not control the evaluations of their contributions. Dan's rocky trajectory at Epic reveals that creativity, entrepreneurial flair, the ability to

add-value, all depend on your structural position within Epic and the organisational interpretation of your department's contribution as 'core' or support. In this chapter we have seen that creative identities at Epic are both powerful and fragile at the same time. This is because power at Epic does not derive from personal charisma but is rather bestowed according to your allotted position within a highly volatile organisational hierarchy.

### **Dividing the market**

So far I have explored Dan's efforts to transform a sales role into a creative one showing how he could draw on the possibilities of the internet medium and how creativity represents a defence mechanism when dealing with internal volatility and the threat of outsourcing. However, Dan's descriptions of the markets in which he worked, also supported his creative emphasis. This is because there was always a section of the market that Dan described as 'innovative'. Here Dan talks about the users and advertisers on the website *Health Management Today* and how this affects his recruitment decisions:

**Dan:** The users are career-minded managers working their way up, not particularly innovative. Um [the advertisers] are quite innovative but finding it difficult to talk to that market. You want someone who's got some of the gravitas of the market in terms of understanding that it's a serious business delivering healthcare. But you also want them to have some of the buzz of the innovation.

Interview 03/11/00

Dan attributes innovation in this market to the advertisers, rather than the web audience. This is important because the advertisers would be the clients that Harvey (the eventual sales executive) would be working with. Earlier we saw that when the sales role was reinvented this part of the market took on greater significance. Working as consultants the workers were able to relate to the more 'innovative' companies and become 'ace players'. In Dan's team the new sales approach, rather than concentrating on the needs of the web users, or looking at these managers to predict the market's direction, was directed towards

the suppliers. This was not only because they were the advertisers and provided revenue, but because they were presented as innovative. By being innovative the advertisers supported the internet medium and the new version of sales at the same time. They represent the higher league that Harvey can operate in. In this extract from my field notes, Harvey expresses the same idea:

In the meeting with Harvey and Sol we talked a lot about Harvey's market [senior management in health]. Harvey said they feel like the internet is a whole lot of hype. They like books. They feel internet marketing is disloyal to books. Disloyal to their whole culture. That's why they prefer to advertise in print. He says the public sector is stuffy middle-aged guys in suits. The other part of his market – telecommunications, big drug companies – is more mixed.

Field notes 25/09/00

In Harvey's description of his advertising market, the idea of the innovative and not so innovative sections takes even more of a cultural tone. Harvey divides his advertisers into those from the public sector and those from the private sector. The public sector is characterised as bookish and 'loyal' (or fixed) in their way of thinking – interestingly this is older and male. The private sector, in contrast, is presented as mixed in terms of age and gender – additional proof that the companies in the private sector are more modern. When Harvey talks about the big drug companies being less stuffy, this is partly in terms of how they want to advertise, and partly in being more progressive about whom they employ. So selling advertising on the internet is innovative both because of the medium and the people you will be interacting with.

The importance of the audience being dynamic came up again in a meeting about lan.com the website *Local Authority News*. Michael (the sales executive) was desperate to rescue his audience from the 'stuffy', 'corporate' image. Dan wanted the audience to be seen primarily as powerful and senior, but this didn't hold any appeal to Michael; for him, 'senior' and 'interesting' were mutually exclusive values. During the meeting the team

was putting together a sales brochure. It was presented as a genuine creative problem – could they produce something that looked both exciting and corporate?

Had a particularly bad lan.com meeting. Dan talked about the market. He said they used to be plodders but they're not now. They are much more dynamic than they were, only their hands are still tied. They still have to play it very safe. Even though some of what they deal with is trivial 'Can people in Cornwall paint their houses different colours?' They also deal with very high-profile controversial things like this nightmare in Portsmouth about paedophiles. It was a bad meeting because they couldn't decide on anything – no strap line, no concept, no idea of the image. Dan just wanted it to be a corporate look because they are so senior and the product is expensive. It felt very flat because Michael thought it was dull. 'If they're so dynamic, they're not gonna like something corporate are they?' I felt for him because he doesn't seem very into it and he's only just started.

Field notes 21/08/00

It is interesting that Michael struggled to get 'into it' if his audience was 'corporate'. This is perhaps surprising because, as I have mentioned, lan.com was the only one of the sites in the division to have made money, and it was still making a profit. Surely one would expect Michael to be seeking both security and kudos in this fact? It is only when considering the effect this would have on his role, that we can understand why not. As a salesman in the internet medium, the glamour of the job relied on dealing with the dynamic sector of the market. This enabled him to work on dynamic projects, and produce exciting brochures. Even though he had an opportunity to operate at the top of a lucrative market, Michael preferred to be operating at the cutting edge of a changing one. This had nothing to do with the advertising revenue, and everything to do with the kind of work he wanted to be doing and his desire to move in the world of 'new' professionals rather than 'old' ones.

This portrayal of the public sector is marked by a sense of frustration. It is an arena of power and potential revenue but it is not dynamic enough. Dan is disappointed by their lack of commitment to new technology and Michael is disappointed if they do not have a preference for more modern aesthetic styles. Unfortunately for the 'new' professionals at

Epic, the managers in the public sector find their 'hands are tied'. In their professional sphere they have to operate with caution. Of course this reflects their accountability to elected councillors, and their constituents. They are slowed down by public (and democratic) decision-making processes. Dan's frustration is obviously supported by recent political and press campaigns presenting bureaucratic and administrative costs in the public sector as evidence of inefficiency and incompetence rather than the operational costs of democracy (Du Gay 2000).

In each of these examples, splitting the market into stuffy and innovative, public sector and private sector, corporate and dynamic, was something that could help in the reinvention of sales as a creative role. Rather than gravitating towards the advertisers for purely economic reasons as might be expected, the manner in which the advertisers were constructed had profound effects on how the sales people envisaged their own work. Because sales had been redefined as a qualitative project appropriate for 'new' professionals, the status of sales work was no longer focused solely on the money.

Interestingly the one market that was not initially divided in this manner was nursing. Nurses and advertisers were largely considered to be one and the same. Additionally nursing was portrayed by Dan as a vocation, which was offered as something simpler to deal with than a 'profession'. The business of selling products to this audience was also portrayed as something less complicated:

**Dan:** With nurses care is the essence of it. So if it's effective, if it *worked* is all that counts here. If a dressing doesn't actually work it will never get anywhere. You need to understand that nursing is a vocation and they're driven primarily by that. And the thing never to forget is that the advertisers will be full of ex-nurses. So if you understand the users, the advertisers are there as well.

Interview 03/11/00

The nurses who read *Nursing Week* and visited the website were imagined as nurses and not managers. The *Nursing Week* audience was considered to be less senior, although nurses *at all levels* bought the magazine. Dan's description draws on classed values where use-value (a dressing must actually work), 'care rather than exchange,' and also possibly the notion of a vocation, indicate investments that are oppositional to the values of aspirational classes (Skeggs 2004:185). The magazine was funded by the recruitment crisis in the NHS: most of its content was recruitment ads. Its audience and revenue was much bigger than *Local Authority News* or *Health Management Today*. The audience was so big that people tended to think of it in terms of a consumer magazine.

However, Dan's description of nursing as a vocation was certainly out of date as the introduction of the nursing degree is one among many trends indicating the professionalisation of nursing work. The magazine team believed they were losing readers to specialist nursing titles. Nurses even then had begun taking on more of the work formerly done by doctors. Nurses running agencies or working for them could be seen as entrepreneurial and embracing portfolio careers. Nurses going into management or specialist areas were more likely to be viewed as senior health professionals. There were also differences between nurses' interests in the public and private sectors.

Despite all these changes, the magazine team, and Alex the web editor, were keen to hold on to the idea that the magazine and its website was speaking to nurses en masse. The size of this audience gave the product prestige so the team were reluctant to start carving it into niches. *Local Authority News* and *Health Management Today* were already perceived to have niche audiences, as they were magazines written specifically for managers but this was not the case for *Nursing Week*. This suggests that any project to upgrade the sales job on Nursingweek.com by finding a dynamic section may have been thwarted by a general reluctance to divide this audience to maintain its almost-consumer-title status.

In my third interview with Dan, he talked much more animatedly about nurses. This was because a sister publication (a specialist journal) had just gone online, and he had been in charge of organising the site. This journal was a peer-review publication and not a magazine. Dan had managed to get it online fairly cheaply, by using a site template from another magazine. He was proud of this, as it was the first project to test some software that would convert the content of magazine pages into web content more quickly. The site was also to be a subscription service. This meant that his project combined technological innovation *and* revenue generation.

**Dan:** The reason we're also offering a web-only subscription option is because we're trying to attract business from nurses in America and Australia who wouldn't be interested in a magazine if they could get all they need on the web. So all the illustrations, tables and graphs are available on the site as well as the references. So it's quite different to most of the content in the building, which is newsy, very light information and it's very different as most public sector is all UK only but this is an international project. It's new for us.

Interview 06/02/02

Finding a niche was essential for Dan's enthusiasm about the nursing market. In part this derives from his view of how online revenue is best generated. His experience on *Local Authority News* had given him the utmost faith in the 'subscription to specialist information' route to profit. But at the same time, it also enhanced his work. Dan started to get his teeth into the concept of the international nursing market – they were a truly web-literate group, and as such they offered him the chance to produce a product for a discerning audience. Also these nurses were probably more ambitious, working freelance, taking their pick of international opportunities, or working across the private and public sectors. David uses class to re-present the nursing market in a way that differentiates a small and hyper-mobile middle class. He is 'turning that lifestyle into a commodifiable object' that could potentially be sold to advertisers (Skeggs 2004:160). Dan might be seen to have created it and if so, this would represent revenue *he* had generated.

Whereas Alex the web editor was looking to bring information to everyone, Dan was more interested in the serious business of specialist information. It is interesting to note that Dan was not simply driven by a need to deliver an audience that had been requested by advertisers. The qualities of the audience could impart crucial qualities to his project and at the same time enhance his workplace identity. This is not the same as the ‘conductor’s’ relationship with his audience, which relied on the audience’s lack of knowledge. At Epic, creative prestige was supported by the existence of a niche market or elite audience. Nevertheless, the same relation exists: the audience and the product it ‘needs’ are imagined in terms of the kind of work this would require. It reflects exactly the same desire to see the audience in terms that will confer the most authority on the creative persona. In the construction of the audience, there appears here to be an investment in hierarchy. This hierarchy is preferred in part as it corresponds to a model of economic potential that comes from Dan’s experience, but it also has the additional benefit of being able to enhance his role.

### **Constraining creativity and talent**

Having de-mystified three key elements of the creative persona it might be supposed that it would be possible for anyone at Epic to achieve one. Sharena’s situation showed that it was not possible for just anyone to assert a creative identity and claim creative work at Epic. In this section, I will demonstrate how non-creative personas were also constructed at Epic. Not surprisingly, the non-creative worker’s role is defined in terms that contrast to the ‘conductor’s’. Their work is not personalised, but routine. These workers are clearly positioned in a service role and their relationship to the audience does not enable any expression of their authority. Also in contrast to the fact that the construction of the creative persona can be seen as a mobility project (Dan and his sales team were able to raise their status), a non-creative persona proves to be trapped.

Sharena and Millie were taken on early in 2000 to upload recruitment advertisements onto the *Nursing Week* website. In the three months I worked at Epic, I didn't see much of them. This was because, although on paper Sharena and Millie belonged in our digital division, they sat upstairs with the magazine team. They came down occasionally for announcements, but they socialised more with the people who sat near them. For this reason, I didn't get to know Sharena well during the time of my observation and she does not appear in my field notes. What I know of her is based on how she came across in our interviews. She described herself as a 'woman of colour', and had lived in London all her life. She took the interviews seriously, asked to read my work, and in between interviews noted and remembered things she wanted to discuss with me.

Sharena was interested in film and television: these were the subjects she had studied at university. She was pleased to get a job at Epic as she wanted to have a media career. She was officially part of the technical team in our digital division, despite the fact she wasn't sitting with the 'techies'. At first she was keen to expand her role and improve her technical skills. She hoped to get more involved in website design and development. After a year doing the same job she gave up hope of progressing at Epic Digital and started looking to move to Epic's radio divisions or TV stations. However she also found herself thwarted in this. By the time of our last interview she had completely given up on achieving a media career at Epic and was concentrating her energies outside work, setting up an export business with her friend.

Sharena's role at Epic Digital was not considered to be creative; uploading recruitment adverts was a routine technical task. But uploading the adverts only filled three days a week so at the time of her recruitment her manager, Carmella, was able to describe the position as an opportunity in these terms:

**Carmella:** I mean the role is quite a tedious, mundane role ... it could be quite a bit more interesting because you have the other two days where you can actually do other things and develop your role in the direction you want to. And Sharena and Millie latched on to this.

Interview 30/10/00

**Sharena:** She'd mentioned room for progression also the idea of training in other departments because our role was supposed to be concentrated on three days a week and then we were supposed to be ushered into other departments and get a feel of how they operate, maybe develop an interest somewhere else along the way.

Interview 11/01/01

However the development potential mentioned in their interviews did not materialise, which meant that Millie and Sharena were left in the strange position of not having enough work to do. This was perplexing, for they belonged to a production department where other members were regularly working late (and even crying over their responsibilities). Their job however, was rarely pressured, challenging or changeable.

**Millie:** Myself and Sharena have both got degrees and you're sitting there doing a job, which you know probably an eighteen year old could do.

Interview 03/10/00

**Sharena:** Once you've learnt that job then you've learnt it – there's nothing special, nothing comes up and bites you every now and then.

Interview 11/01/01

Responding to the idea that they could develop the role, Millie and Sharena asked at their review and regularly during meetings with their manager to be given more work and expressed an interest in taking on more technical projects. When I asked the question "Do you think there is a type of person who does particularly well at Epic?" they both realised that taking on work was certainly behaviour that was recognised.

**Sharena:** Zoe, I suppose you could say she was like a perfect Epic person. She did whatever it took to get the job done and even a bit more.

Interview 11/01/01

**Millie:** Looking at the digital people, they are very hard working... and Carmella and Lindsey both seem very dedicated and they'll stay longer hours until they get all their work done.

Interview 03/11/00

However, because Millie and Sharena were never given more work, they were unable to demonstrate the commitment levels the organisation rewarded, despite their initiative in asking for work. As they were not given more work than they could handle, they were prevented from demonstrating how they could succeed against the odds. They were also prevented in this way from behaving like people who had pressing responsibilities, as most days they could leave on time.

What is interesting is that Carmella did not see it as her responsibility to help Sharena and Millie find more things to do. Carmella suggested this development was something the employee was responsible for when she described it as "a role you could make more of". But Sharena imagined that management would initiate this as she said "we were supposed to be *ushered into* other departments" (my emphasis).

When Lindsey became her manager, Sharena did manage to pick up some more interesting projects redefining the search facility, writing specifications for site changes, reporting faults and producing mock-up pages for advertisers. Then, when she was moved to sit with the technical team after the restructure, there were opportunities to produce mini-sites for conferences. Sharena enjoyed these projects because they provided some variety, but she also enjoyed the feeling of being tested. Neither this extra work or proof of her initiative altered her position within the team.

**Sharena:** I've been given some extra responsibilities but I don't feel as though that means I'll be developed. We've just been given the extra stuff that needs to be done it doesn't mean we're going anywhere in the team.

Interview 02/08/01

For some reason, despite visible evidence of her willingness to get involved, Sharena was not once given the impression she had a future at Epic. On one occasion she had been asked by the sales manager to think of new ideas to improve the recruitment section. She had come up with many ideas, most of which were based on her own experience navigating the site and her knowledge of users' problems, but she was never certain whether her ideas had even been discussed. Sharena's experiences answering user queries positioned her quite close to the market, yet her ideas were never perceived to amount to market *knowledge*, and she was never given the opportunity to express her ideas publicly to gain credit for them.

During the autumn of 2000, Sharena took on an extra job in a video shop. Initially this was to help out a friend at a busy time of year, but she stayed on because she liked it. After a day's work at Epic she would go to the video shop and work there, while it was closed, continuing work that the manager of the shop had started during the day. She told me:

**Sharena:** I do it for variety, and because I know it is appreciated. I'm looking at things from a different, fresh angle. Sometimes I can come in and sort things out quickly that have been bugging him for ages. I rarely see him, hardly ever, but he'll always phone me to say thanks. I know it makes a big difference to him.

Interview 02/08/01

She stayed at the video shop for almost a year. Bearing this in mind, in addition to her pleas to her managers, Sharena could not be described as lacking in initiative. In response to her situation, Sharena had decided that to obtain the feeling of competence and importance that that was absent at Epic, she would get it somewhere else. Sharena's situation illustrates the ideological limits of a work environment that requires initiative as the price for autonomy. Her manager, Carmella, imagined the role could be developed if individuals were willing to push the role in the direction they wanted. This was clearly not the case. Should this situation be interpreted as a crisis in the ideal of initiative or an example of its intrinsic usefulness as a way of convincing managers that they are not

responsible for people's development and inclusion? Dan who also managed them for a while, repeated the same patterns as Carmella:

**Dan:** I mean quite frankly, it's degrees of repetitive work as you work down the scale.

**Emma:** Mm

**Dan:** So I'm not sure you want a very ambitious person in some of those roles.

**Emma:** Mm

**Dan:** We're talking to them about career paths, rightly we are but they're not the natural. I mean sales people are naturally proactive in terms of where they're going and where they want to be. It doesn't seem to be quite the same with the technology people.

Interview 06/02/02

Here, once again, the situation of Sharena (and by this time Kim), is interpreted as a matter of unambitious people versus 'naturally proactive' people. Working in a sales role encourages people to think in terms of their own development. As it is all about setting targets and trying to meet them, a sales role has elements of a self-development value system written into it. Whereas repetitive work such as uploading data does not – it is the same every week. But Dan did not make the leap to recognise that the roles would generate different behaviours. People in non-professional roles are invisible at Epic. They are read as lacking in ambition and the desire to develop as being absent even in the face of repeated demands for more and different work. Sharena's own behaviour at Epic, her work for the video shop, the ambitions she shared with me in our interviews, the fact that she set up her own export business and belonged to an investment club, all demonstrate that she wanted more responsibility, yet two years on, her ambition had not been recognised by at least five consecutive managers at Epic. This indicates that it was not a matter of individual bad management but a more general cultural perception within Epic that people in non-creative roles without much responsibility were there because they lacked ambition. The key lies in Dan's phrase 'I'm not sure that you *want* a very ambitious person in some of those roles' (my emphasis).

Sharena and Kim appeared to be uncreative people, though their roles did not enable them to come across as creative. They were not entirely invisible because they were seen, heard and read by all their managers. Their behaviour in a mundane role was seen as evidence that they were not 'naturally' proactive. Their presence and their potential were conflated in such a way that it was actually their potential that was invisible. This was because it was not useful for their managers to see them as ambitious. Dan and Carmella did not want the responsibility for their development because there was no development intrinsic to the role. This suggests that the concept of management at Epic was not about a general duty to develop all the people in your team. They did not see it as their duty as a manager to enable or develop people who had been allocated dead-end roles.

Contrary to expectations, it would appear that an administrative role in a 'relaxed', 'creative' company such as Epic, is not necessarily a good place to begin a career. In the absence of opportunities for development that are intrinsic to the role, you will be hard pushed to find a manager at Epic who thinks it is their job to create a concrete plan for your development. You are thwarted on the one hand by being incapable of demonstrating interest and commitment in your work and on the other, by managers who persistently conflate personalities with roles, and in the process deny some people a future. As Sennett and Cobb describe it, 'the employers act on non-verbal, intuitive grounds: you tried, and your performance was not condemned; you simply failed to be noticed' (Sennett 1972:157).

Sharena did not have a different disposition for she embraced responsibility, was willing to try new things, enjoyed the feeling of being tested and had the confidence to take entrepreneurial risks. Neither had Sharena and Millie been socialised with a markedly different work ethic. They both wanted their work to be fulfilling. Sharena describes her ambitions here in terms that are fully in keeping with Epic's values:

**Sharena:** If in three months' time nothing happens then I will be looking outside digital to pursue my interests because obviously this is just a job and I would like to be doing a job where I have an actual real passion or at least an interest in the actual content.

Interview 02/08/01

Sharena and Kim knew they had severely limited opportunities for developing and demonstrating the preferred disposition within their jobs. They understood that their only options were to accept the lack of opportunity or leave. This reflects the fact that they were trapped. The roles they were given limited their opportunities to show themselves as individuals that could take responsibility, add-value and be creative. They had seen that verbal assurances of their personal abilities were uninteresting to their managers. They were trapped because in the creation of work roles as creative or routine, the unequal distribution of talent is manufactured. Discrimination here is not a process of judging between candidates' characteristics to decide who is talented, but to decide who is to be given a job and who should be offered a media career.

### **Different recruitment strategies**

Within Epic there are clearly some roles in which it is possible to develop a creative persona and some roles in which it is not. This leads managers to use different recruitment strategies for creative and non-creative jobs. Dan described interviewing for a sales position:

**Dan:** I took Alyssa into the other two to show them something she'd brought with her... I wanted to observe how she showed them what she was doing... and they were very upbeat and enthusiastic and as she got that reaction she in herself became much more confident and so I can see then that there was the germ, the kernel of something... she couldn't sell but I was pretty sure that I could help her sell.

**Emma:** Yeah.

**Dan:** The opposite to that is just having someone in who has that caution but really there's no spark and I think you can find that by questioning specifically and you find the answers get shorter and shorter and what you're looking for is

someone who opens up... You're looking for the person who's got enthusiasm in whatever it is and can convey it to you.

Interview 03/11/00

This extract illustrates the specific demands that arise when a role is seen to require a particular set of self-attributes. It seems obvious enough that for a sales role you would need someone to be able to convey enthusiasm. But what is interesting is how Dan set up a situation where he could observe Alyssa with others. This shows he was looking for social skills that could not easily be gleaned from a traditional interview. In this way Alyssa was able to demonstrate her propensity for the social aspects of her role, meeting and lunching with clients, selling at conferences and social events.

Webb and Liff have argued that even before the interview stage social preferences are communicated in terms of the recruitment advert (Webb and Liff 1988). The qualifications and conditions the role is said to demand (particularly the part/full time distinction) can be used as a means of gendering a role. They argue that this is how apparently superficial prejudices translate into major organising principles in the workplace. Bearing this theory in mind, Carmella's description of recruiting someone temporarily for Millie's role is interesting:

**Carmella:** The reason also that we placed it in the local paper was that we, I suppose, were eager to take on perhaps a mother-returned to work and so that's why we made the hours quite flexible. 'Hours to suit' we put in the advert.

Interview 30/10/00

The qualifications and conditions for this role were part time and suitable for a 'mother-returned', that is, for someone who had been outside the labour market for a while. This imagined person was clearly gendered but also classed. This conclusion is prompted by Carmella's decision to advertise in the local paper. For creative roles managers used internal emails, national papers, recruitment consultants, and Epic's staff magazine. The local paper was a significant departure from usual recruitment methods. In no other

circumstance during the interviews or during my observation did anyone in the division use a local paper for recruitment. This strategy suggests that they did not need the applicant to have specific experience or know anything of Epic's culture. The choice of recruitment method can be seen as a practical expression of the fact that working class women represent the 'constitutive limit' of cosmopolitan space (Skeggs 1994: 23). This practice is an expression of the desire to recruit a general, non-specialist, local person without a media background, without necessarily recent work experience, precisely because they know this role will never lead to a career.

In telling contrast, when Lisa was recruiting a marketing assistant (for a three-month contract) a surprising amount of consideration went into the selection. Lisa wrote an advert to be put up in the college where she had completed her own marketing degree. Despite the fact that it was an assistant's role, she told me she wanted them to have a marketing degree. In conversation she called this future colleague 'her graduate'. On one occasion she told me that she was looking forward to having someone to whom she could give 'small phoning database projects' but later the same day it was revealed that:

She doesn't want anyone with a 2:2. She asks me if I think that's mean. Alyssa told her it was mean. Lisa says you should work for a 2:1.

Field notes 28/09/00

The qualifications required appeared to be excessive for an assistant role involving simple database work. The following week when Lisa was working through the applications she discarded an applicant with an extremely expensive education.

She had someone from [one of the UK's top public schools] apply and we all took the piss out of his CV. The covering letter was written in the most formal language imaginable. He was the president of the Cocktail Society at University and a prefect at [school]. "This is reverse snobbery in action" said Lisa.

Field notes 05/10/00

The fact that this application became a general group conversation is illuminating. Lisa did not do this with the other applications. We were all invited to look and comment on the way he expressed himself, his public school background and his 'hobby'; and I presume she chose to show us all this application in particular, in part, for its humour value. The question seemed to have nothing to do with whether he would be a good marketing assistant (though perhaps his elite education and the low-level of the position are hard to marry) but it seemed to be a question about whether we, as a group, would like to have someone like that around, and Lisa looked for the group's approval before she discarded his application, because this case had become a social decision.

Even for a position at the most junior level, and for a short-term contract, the criteria were extremely specific. Candidates should have a 2:1 marketing degree, but not a public school education. As I have shown that the most junior creative roles represent an opportunity for recognition and promotion, we have a better understanding of why so much was at stake here. Although on the face of it the role seemed to be a junior and temporary position, is clear that it had career potential at Epic in the way Sharena's permanent job did not. This conversation followed the interview of the graduate who was given the position:

Lisa asks Dan if he thinks she should keep looking. Lisa says "He's young; I think he'll work out. But he didn't strike me as an internet type – like he'd be on the internet all the time. You know, he wasn't wearing Firetrap<sup>1</sup>. He uses it a lot but he wasn't the type to build his own website". Dan said "It was bad that he hadn't even looked at our sites. But the others agreed with whatever we said and had no comments about the banners whereas there was a lot of talking from him". Lisa said "Do you think we should interview the others anyway?" Dan says "No, he's what we wanted".

Field notes 06/10/00

It is Lisa who has the doubts about the candidate's suitability. What is consistent in Lisa's ideal is the notion that the person must demonstrate their (read, her) work ethic.

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<sup>1</sup> Firetrap is a youth clothing label with an urban, informal, unisex style.

“You should work for a 2:1.”

“He wasn’t the type to build his own website.”

Lisa was interested in finding someone who appeared to have made an effort at university, and who had expressed the strength of their interest and their ‘self-development’ work ethic by building a website themselves. Lisa put the onus on the individual for their qualifications and skills. Also for demonstrating in their appearance that they were an ‘internet type’ by wearing the right clothing labels (Firetrap). The 2:1 degree appears to be so important (even for a junior position) because of Lisa’s more specific requirement for evidence of *self-directed* learning, and to Lisa the 2:1 degree represents this.

However, for Dan (who was the more senior) work ethic was not the main issue. To him, the important thing was that the candidate had a lot to say for himself and was forthcoming with opinions about web adverts (banners). Even though this particular candidate had not looked up the sites he might be working on – which seems far from conscientious or enthusiastic – Dan did not think this mattered as much as having opinions about banner ads. Dan was not seeking a rigorous person instead he ‘appeals less to a strict, and strictly assessable competence and more to a sort of familiarity with culture’ (Bourdieu 1984:63). This idea of familiarity is important. Dan suggested that for a junior role there was no need for the candidate to be too knowledgeable. But it was nevertheless essential that he should be talkative about advertising – being able to talk about it readily and with ease – which is, according to Bourdieu, the most esteemed relation towards culture, within an ideology of natural taste (ibid.:68).

To Bourdieu the matter of the degree is secondary outside academia (ibid.:134). He suggests that this is particularly true in ‘relatively unbureaucratized areas of social space (where social dispositions count for more than academically guaranteed ‘competences’)

(ibid.:147). In this particular graduate's case, his degree did operate as a marker of competence to get him the interview, but it was certainly his disposition, even in the face of minimal preparation, that got him the job. Creativity then, or at least the propensity for a creative career, is judged not so much on what you can do, but on how you *talk* about culture. The lack of formal professional boundaries in the creative sector does not necessarily reduce the relevance of cultural competence.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have de-mystified the creative persona by exploring the three elements that Sennett's conductor used to establish himself as a worker expressing unique personality. Of course, these were elaborated within the specific context of Epic PLC so the need to avoid routinised work tasks was reflected as a process of delegating routine work to support workers. In examining the transformation of the sales role, I showed how creativity could be used to transform the status of work. Creativity was used to transform sales from technique (i.e. the work of technicians) to create space for the individual personality (i.e. the freer space of the professional). In this way I showed creativity as a value that is implicated in a professionalising process. Building a creative persona cannot be separated from the struggle to achieve managerial power, and more autonomous working conditions.

This process also involves defining those in routine work as uncreative and unambitious. This amounts to justifying dead-end jobs and denying the people in them personalised potential and actual career progression. I presented Sharena's situation as a trap because her managers had the power to make their negative talent judgements of her personality come true. Sharena was forced to take her managerial and entrepreneurial abilities elsewhere, and in doing so remained uncreative and unambitious within Epic.

In this chapter I also linked the need to avoid service relationships to the specific structure of Epic (communicated most strongly in their representation of product finances). In making this link I showed why creativity proves to be so crucial to survival.

Entrepreneurial flair and creative talent were dependent on structural positioning as part of a stand-alone business or at the very least a self-financing product within Epic.

Creative work does forge space for individual character and this is why it appears to promise new ways of working and new kinds of professionalism. I have problematised this assumption. The process of building a creative persona has been shown to be a struggle for survival and managerial status. Attempts to redefine work qualitatively have had profound effects on judgements about other workers, and also about external markets. I showed how the representations of audiences were used to support the professional role as was the case for Sennett's conductor. So the professional space has not been destabilised as much as we have been led to expect. The managers at Epic control talent evaluations and have means at their disposal for constraining creative talent.

The desire to find different 'kinds of people' was reflected in the practices of using different recruitment methods for different kinds of work, and in judging some recruits on how they talk, rather than what they have done or have made. This is extremely profound when we think that creative work always involves *making* some kind of creative product, but instead what Sennett has called 'the language of potential' was mobilised.

'Potential talent falls into a different category; it is a much more personal assessment, entwined with questions of motivation and will as much as of facility' (Sennett 2003:35).

The language of potential emphasises flair over craft, taste over experience and natural gifts over practice. In this framework, talent is entirely personal. When judging talent at Epic, the managers used the language of potential because they attributed creative ability

to personality and their recruitment activities represented attempts to reveal the personalised disposition they most desired.

In this chapter I described sales manager Dan's reinvention and compared his role before and after he framed his project in creative terms. I also compared different perspectives concerning employees' potential. This comparing process has revealed mechanisms (particularly useful to managers) that create and legitimise workplace hierarchies. In the chapter that follows I do something very similar but in a completely different context (a small design agency in Soho). The next chapter deals with more explicitly creative workers and focuses on two designers. Again I work with apparently conflicting perspectives concerning employees' potential, and I am able to interrogate the workplace applications of creativity as persona even further.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Selling the creative self**

In the last chapter I argued that we should understand the creative persona at Epic in terms of a managerial project. The creative persona is a rendering of a specific kind of manager – the ‘new’ professional. In this chapter I will follow two of the Epic employees as they move into a different work situation and explore the professional project in more depth. In this chapter I reveal more about how the creative persona depends on a managerial structure but is always interpreted using the individualistic language of personality.

#### **Creative services**

Mirroring Dan’s experience, designer Guy also struggled during his time at Epic to prevent his department from being labelled as a service department. Guy was the manager of Creative Services. His department produced all our marketing materials. Like Dan, Guy was white and in his forties – although he had thick red hair and only looked about 30. Unlike Dan, he wasn’t camp or flamboyant. In one of our interviews he stressed to me that he didn’t want to act differently, and didn’t rate a camp manner as appropriate workplace behaviour. Though he was gay and successful he didn’t approve of the stereotypes about gay men being more creative or think they were worth utilising.

Creative Services (which Guy preferred to call ‘the studio’) was an in-house department of 10 designers and a print buyer. The creative services department was unique within Epic. No other division had a ring-fenced creative team. Other divisions within the

building used the studio, so this greatly expanded the kinds of products they worked on. This put Guy in a significant position. He worked closely with the directors and marketing staff on all of their new products and knew what everyone was up to. Despite this power, Guy knew that as a service his department would be seen as a cost, and Epic would be eager to disband or outsource it. Eventually this is what happened, although Guy managed to protect it for a long time:

**Guy:** Every year I had to go into battle to justify it. What they were doing every year was increasing marketing, though staff for studio were hardly increased. It was a conscious decision to squeeze us. Studio was a football for everyone then – for everyone’s budgets. ‘You can have studio and we’ll cut your marketing budget’. Or ‘we’ll give you a new PA instead of studio.’ No one was ever defending studio. And we were never given any credit for any successes, because the marketing teams took it all.

Interview 11/05/01

Guy describes Epic as a company where investment and recognition were very hard to come by. Guy’s description of his attempts to keep the design studio show the intense competition he was involved in at the time, which he felt as an ‘us or them’ situation against marketing. Guy was completely on his own in this matter: as he said, the way in which the budgets were presented, made it hard for him to get people on his side.

At Epic, Guy used the importance and relevance of creativity generally, as a means to increase his own involvement in everything. He became the protector of brand values and the guarantor of consistency across all the titles. He had to campaign throughout his time at Epic to prove the value of his contribution. In order to do so, he would regale marketing managers with stories about near marketing mishaps on other titles – “luckily I spotted they were using the old logo.” He was the rescuer and marketing workers should feel grateful he was there. They had the wrong attitude – always rushing and always making painful mistakes in their lack of attention to detail. It was against their ‘incompetence’ that Guy hoped to prove he was adding-value.

This was especially important as it was the marketing teams who persistently made the mistake of treating the studio as a service department. In this way, it was they who were disrupting Guy's attempts to prove he was adding value and undermining the status of his own creative identity as well as the security of his department.

**Emma:** [the design studio] do feel like they were giving a good service.

**Guy:** Yeah.

**Emma:** Well that's the main thing.

**Guy:** Yeah, but we don't like the word service.

**Emma:** But they feel like they were doing good work.

**Guy:** Yeah, but it is being called a service department, is a horrible connotation.

**Emma:** Mm I know what you mean about that.

**Guy:** And these are important things. If you went out to an agency and said we want a design team and you said "Right, you are the best designer. OK, I want you to put a service team together", this guy wouldn't work for you. But in Epic that's acceptable!

Interview 02/10/00

In the spring of 2000, an independent consultant came in to assess how the design studio worked. She concluded that the studio should expand to offer design services to Epic divisions across London. According to Guy, the managing director of his division brushed this report under the carpet. They did not want the responsibility for an even bigger studio. They thought it was too big a risk – an even bigger cost on their division's balance sheet. Guy read this as a vote of no confidence and decided to resign. Guy saw himself as a victim. He felt that the managing director and Epic's board were incapable of seeing his team's commercial contribution.

**Guy:** I think there's discrimination against creativity.

**Emma:** Right.

**Guy:** I think that it's a very sad thing. It's like for me I've reached a glass ceiling – nowhere for me to go apart from the board and there's no way they're gonna put a creative person on the board in this company.

**Emma:** Because it's not commercial enough?

**Guy:** But it is.

**Emma:** But do you think that's what they think?

**Guy:** That's what I'm saying, they misunderstand what we supply. If you think of the jobs I do with you and the money that I bring into this company. But I don't know if they'll ever understand. You see if you're gonna go into this area I think

this is something you've gotta think about and question is costs and what does cost actually mean and how relevant is the cost?

Interview 02/10/00

Like Dan, Guy had struggled to protect his department from being labelled as a cost. He lost the battle to prove the value of his contribution. He came to the conclusion that value was a question of the interpretation of the finances. Guy left Epic to set up his own design agency. He took with him Chloe, a senior designer, then later Imran, a designer, and finally Kevin, a trainee designer. He started operating from his home – all of them using their mobile phones to do their work. Within a couple of months, they found themselves some space in Soho. Within just six months, they had business from a prestigious film distributor, two record companies, a film production company, two property companies as well as some ongoing business from Epic. Guy was in his element. The experience of establishing a successful agency was just the thing to restore his enthusiasm for work.

### **Creativity as a thought process**

As might be expected for a man who had run an in-house design team and set up his own agency, Guy was able to talk at length about what made a good creative. Guy had an indispensable narrative about creativity being a matter of thought processes.

**Guy:** For people who design a movable arm the creative work is actually the science behind it. They don't make the arm, even so. We're probably the only culture in the free world that doesn't link science and creativity together. And yet they're both the same. We do the same things by elimination. The same creative thought process. You throw all these things up and start paring them back. It's the same as scientists and that's what creativity is.

Interview 11/05/01

Guy downplays the creativity involved in making and constructing things, in favour of the 'thinking' that results in the design. He suggests that the design of a false limb is less a project for someone with practical skills or experience, than for someone with the right

mental approach. He is able to intellectualise the work, and at the same time affirm his role as manager. His managerial work is the most significant aspect, taking the most time, requiring the most talent.

**Guy:** There's a massive difference between creativity and design. If you think about it we might spend more time talking about the concept and then the design end of it is very fast. A good designer is someone who asks questions. Getting under the skin of something. A freelancer would probably just sit at their desk and bash it out.

Interview 11/05/01

The role of the freelancer – their ability to design quickly – seems then to be a negative thing, although we can well imagine that in the face of a deadline it would be a gift. However, in Guy's view this is not *real* creativity. Creativity is not the ability to *do* anything but a way of thinking and especially questioning; this is where real talent is required, which unsurprisingly is to be found within his role as manager. The crucial element of design work is in its conception and not in its production. This is again emphasised in Guy's description of how he recruits designers:

**Guy:** You tend to look at the portfolio of work, but that's not always the best way because someone's portfolio could be as good as their manager or as bad as their manager. I mean like for us, some of our best work would be completely trashed because of the inconsistencies of the marketing team.

**Emma:** The amount of people changing it.

**Guy:** Yeah exactly, so you've got to judge on how this person comes over.

Interview 11/05/01

Here Guy acknowledges the importance of context and perhaps groups in generating creative work. However, this is precisely why the portfolio is not seen as a trustworthy indicator of individual creative talent. Although it shows what the designer can do, it cannot show Guy their creative talent because it is not seen to reveal enough about their personal attributes. Guy believes that creativity is something that is to be discovered within them, and so not something necessarily demonstrated in their commercial design. The process of producing the work is problematised further. Not only is it less important

than the original concept, but it is potentially corrupting of the idea: Guy has first-hand experience of the ruination of his ideas during production stage. This means that Guy must talk to someone to assess whether they are creative. Not simply to guarantee their authorship but in order to find out whether they are able to question things, and ‘get under the skin’ of a creative problem. In a discussion about a current recruitment project Guy explained:

**Guy:** I want someone non-conventional. I want someone who will actually challenge Chloe and I and say “No, that’s shite.” Coz that’s creative and it’s really good for us.

Interview 11/05/01

Creativity then, is described by Guy, not as a defined practical skill, or even a disposition that facilitates the making of aesthetic products, but as a very specific way of thinking and talking. Creativity is demonstrated by a certain rebelliousness, a desire for things to be different. It requires a willingness to challenge the way things are and the way they are perceived. In Guy’s example it includes the willingness to challenge authority and the confidence to put people out. In the next extract, we learn that people without this particular ability will never make good designers.

**Emma:** How d’you know they’re gonna be good?

**Guy:** Well it depends on what you’re using them for. Some people ... will never be great designers.

**Emma:** No.

**Guy:** There’ll be a level they can achieve but they’re not creatives and we find that.

**Emma:** But if they are young how can you know what level they might reach?

**Guy:** Just the way they think through problems. To be creative, excellence is just a kind of natural thing. It’s inbuilt. It’s how you challenge things.

Interview 15/01/02

To demonstrate ‘real’ creativity Guy insists on this general questioning disposition. Herein lies the real puzzle – if in Guy’s own terms, creativity is about asking questions and learning eliminatory thought processes, then surely this can be achieved by anyone

with enough practice or guidance. If creativity comes from an inner desire to change things, can't this desire also be taught? Why is this a "natural thing"?

### **Dividing creative work tasks**

One of the most notable points about Guy is that he always used his descriptions of his own creative talent to elaborate on what he was not good at, what he was not suited to. This was very important to his identity at Epic, and eventually led to his resignation. The only promotion they could give him (apart from a place on the board) was a publishing director role, which would have involved a lot of administration and 'number crunching'. Despite the fact he might have been promoted he didn't want that kind of work. He felt it would have been too limiting. He wanted a 'creative' role, and they had none to offer him.

**Guy:** One of my greatest talents is being creative, you know, cross-brand thinking – thinking wide. So putting me in a managerial role signing forms, it's a waste of everyone's time and money.

Interview 11/05/01

Once he had set up his own design agency, Guy's descriptions of his talents were even more significant. He continued to express what he was good and not good at, but his descriptions were connected to (if not dependent on) his definition of the talents of his other employees. Talking about his own weaknesses can be seen as a means to define his own role, and at the same time offered an opportunity to 'praise' his team.

**Emma:** So how do you divide all that up then?

**Guy:** Well the sales is 99 percent me.

**Emma:** Right.

**Guy:** Admin we share only Chloe's far better than me. It's not my strength, I'm very slow. I don't know if it's a sexist thing but I tend to find women are much more focused when there's all the noise around us. While maybe that's her as a person, I tend to think women are far better at shutting out what's around them or listening to a dozen things at once.

**Emma:** Mm.

**Guy:** So what we tend to do is I kick the stuff off because I've got the inner knowledge. So I might kick off the quote and map it out, Chloe'll then take over and structure it put it into grammar so that's a nice team way.

Interview 11/05/01

What Guy describes as a 'nice team way', which suggests the active participation of equal (if different) members, is actually a nice hierarchical way, in which Guy is able to avoid work he doesn't like, or feels is beneath him. When Guy describes the things he is not good at they are always set against his thinking role ('kicking off ideas', 'inner knowledge'), so that even when others have high status skills, they appear to be low status. The best example of this was Guy's interpretation of designer Imran's technical skills. While Imran was very proficient in creating video and web animations, he was required to set-up the computers in the new agency's office. By default he became the in-house technical support, for all their Mac and email problems.

**Imran:** Basically I'm more or less the techie support

**Emma:** Are you?

**Imran:** The IT person yeah. I set up everything, the emails and telephones and all the computers.

**Emma:** How d'you know all about that?

**Imran:** That's a good point, I mean I find it all common knowledge.

**Emma:** You can just figure it out?

**Imran:** To be fair I've learnt a lot from mistakes because I've messed it up so many times, unplugged it all and you find out things. I never read the manuals but I put it all together. I think we would've been in trouble if I wasn't around.

**Emma:** Mm.

**Imran:** Guy is impressed he always says "I don't know something like that – it's not common knowledge" but to me it is, it's just like working a telly or a radio or a washing machine or a dishwasher.

Interview 11/05/01

Although Imran's technical abilities in terms of their design potential were highly valuable, Guy encouraged Imran in this perception of having more general technical know-how, which diluted and channelled Imran's abilities into an office dogsbody role (albeit praised highly). Guy did this, not to avoid using or recognising Imran's skills, but because he always defined other people's skills as doing/practical skills, against his which were thinking skills – his creative mental approach. These casual discussions about his

strengths and weaknesses always validated his position as thinker and manager. They also subtly recreated the very service relationships he himself was so frustrated by in his career at Epic.

This begins to point to the reason why – in Guy’s understanding – although creativity is a way of thinking it must be presented as if it is a natural attribute that cannot be taught. For if creativity (and admin skills concurrently) could be taught, this would raise serious questions about his allocation of work tasks. In his definition of talent, Guy is constructing a very straightforward (in fact text book) Fordist division of labour, separating the thinking elements of work, from the doing elements. It is the separation of the work of task defining and task executing, that creates hierarchy in the Fordist work organisation:

Removing design, decision and autonomy as much as possible from the work process, making the latter only the execution of tasks directed by others, cheapens labour, makes it amenable to automation, and tightens control over workers – all of which contribute to increased exploitation (Young 1990:219).

### **Naturalising inequalities**

Guy’s Fordist division of work tasks can be seen as an established discourse expressed in many contexts. It was revealed in Guy’s descriptions of the type of work he was best suited to at Epic; in his explanations of why he was not involved in the admin, production or technical maintenance tasks at his agency; and again, here, in his description of how creative designs were put together day to day:

**Guy:** The work you’ve seen I might kick it off, Chloe might work on the typography and Imran might then finish it. And I think that’s really important in terms of owning our work because that means everyone owns success.

Interview 11/05/01

Again, just like the “nice team way”, Guy’s phrase “everyone owns success” simultaneously communicates equality with hierarchy. Everyone in the agency is

creative, but crucially he does not see them as being creative in the same way. He separates the different stages of the work and defining their relative value he ultimately establishes dependence upon his thinking skills. This leads him eventually to express dissatisfaction with the word creativity – as a value that is seen as a universal good, it is too embracing of difference.

**Guy:** Creativity is probably the wrong word because it boxes and pigeonholes straight away. There's degrees and levels.

**Emma:** We need more words?

**Guy:** Pretty good exercise would be to think of new words. Let's change the world and let's use words that are a bit more accurate. Coz I would say I use my creative *intellect* to design. I'd say Chloe uses her creative *design skills* to pull that together. And Imran uses his creative *techniques* to make it happen. So in fact there's three different thought processes there. Like yesterday we had a client up sitting with Kevin to get this job out. Now I'm working away and I'm listening and the two of them are gonna go *nowhere* coz what she was asking just couldn't be done.

**Emma:** Right.

**Guy:** But it was impossible. So eventually I had to go over and say you know "so how's it all going? Ha ha ha". And then say "well actually you can't do that, but what about this or this?"

(my emphasis) Interview 15/01/02

Guy's discourse about the levels of creativity in his company puts everyone neatly in their place. This should generate doubts about whether a creative ethos necessarily disrupts more traditional company structures and notions of professionalism. Even within a team in which everyone is creative, Guy has developed a completely convincing means of establishing a traditional workplace hierarchy. Although the work produced is creative, the work organisation is not. It is also a telling example for use in a discussion of what a 'post-Fordist' workplace would actually look like. This is not Epic PLC, this is Guy's tiny design agency employing four full-time workers in Soho. This is exactly the kind of micro start-up organisation McRobbie suggests might be organised in 'new' ways, allowing greater possibilities for 'self-actualisation' because the 'doityourself labour market' also has a creative emphasis (McRobbie 1998:148).

What is also clear is how successfully this post-Fordist Fordism naturalises inequalities. These are presented not as the Fordist roles we can see they are, but as personal capacities. Hence Kevin is apparently incapable of coming up with something new for the client, not because it's outside the remit of his role and he's never done this before, but because he is personally inadequate. The problem again with Guy's definitions of creative talent is that he conflates personalities with roles just like the managers at Epic. Even though Guy uses the notion of 'thought processes', which suggests a transferable skill, people are portrayed as being naturally suited to different thought-processes that are arranged in a hierarchy. In fact it is useful for him to divide the agency's work in this way. While work inequality has long been naturalised, in a large Fordist manufacturing company at least these divisions have the weight of institutionalised roles and practices to secure and operationalise them. What is interesting here, is that personality is the main means of ratifying inequality. Guy's 'creative' talent proves to be the same as the talent of those privileged by Fordist work organisations i.e. a talent for avoiding productive work.

### **Being a *successful* creative**

To be fair to Guy, he was under considerable pressure in starting up his own agency, and at Epic his creative identity was intensified by a need to avoid seeming like a cost. In his new role at the agency, Guy was still concerned with survival and he was doing far more sales work than before. His new sales role only confirmed his beliefs in the importance and superiority of his personality.

**Emma:** So do you think when a creative company is successful d'you think that's just a fluke then or accident?

**Guy:** No, no I think it's personality. One thing I have noticed is there's so much networking.

**Emma:** Mm.

**Guy:** I'd say one thing slightly. It's quite class oriented and that's been a big issue. And I get away with that being Scottish because people can't place you in the class structure so I get along with builders or architects.

**Emma:** Yeah.

**Guy:** Which is great but I'd say that when we've been dealing with [exclusive hotel and restaurant group] all the people I've met there and all the people I'm going to meet this afternoon are gonna be public school people.

Interview 11/05/01

Guy's success at winning so many prestigious clients in just six months seemed to Guy to be less about the agency's creative output, and more about his own networking skills and his special ability to cross class boundaries. In running his own company he was relying on his personal charms as he could no longer rely on the Epic name to impress potential clients or suppliers. In this respect he had to manage the impression he gave out more carefully. In the third interview, he talked again about mobilising his Scottish accent:

**Guy:** The boysy construction guys, they hate slick advertising types, you know, they feel I'm more authentic. Well we know this from research in call centres. Scottish accents – people believe it. So that's great in sales obviously. But honestly, I tend to use it more now as a kind of softener. If I feel conversations are going the wrong way I turn it on more. I can throw in Scottishisms, people laugh. People think 'ahh', it's cute.

Interview 11/05/01

Guy's ideal creative persona is elaborated within the context of his own struggle to make himself known. He believed that a creative person should be able to make people sit up and take notice. It is also interesting that he is pleased to be able to present himself as 'authentic' and avoid the slurs of 'strategic' or 'manipulative' especially when his presentation of self is so artful. His Scottish accent helps his creative case because it communicates that he is sincere and down-to-earth when establishing commercial relationships. At Epic, and even more so at the agency, Guy felt that his ability to produce wonderful design was nothing without his ability to impress people with his own personality, so it is no surprise that he equated creative talent with an ability to conjure a dramatic social impression. The need for self-promotion was taken for granted:

**Guy:** One thing I do really enjoy now is having less internal politics and people used to say I played it well at Epic but you play it because you have to because if you don't play it you're out of the game completely – you're a Paul in this world. You know, Paul's lovely but look where he is now!

Interview 15/01/02

This quote shows us that Guy was involved in Epic's corporate politics only because he felt he needed to in order to get on. Company politics was the label given to inclusion; a project that seems independent of his creative abilities. But as it was the arena in which reputations were made and people were noticed, it was not. In Guy's experience, unless you moved in such circles you could not move up the hierarchy. And in his agency, just as at Epic, his view of creative potential merged with his view of social survival.

This means that Guy's view of who could make it as a creative persona was coloured by his commitment to his own trajectory. The more successful his agency became, the more it made sense to conflate his social climbing strategies with creative talent. His view of creative potential moved closer to his view of the kind of people who were likely to get on socially. This brings with it a concurrent judgement that those who are not getting on must be uncreative. It also makes it harder for him to imagine a creative persona that is not the same as his. Though the tough economic climate that Guy was succeeding in can explain his commitment to sophisticated social abilities, it does not excuse his judgement that some people can never learn these skills.

### **Glamorous markets**

Again, like Dan, while Guy was at Epic he had difficulties with the nursing market. As the nursing market did not confer status, it could have threatened his creative identity.

**Guy:** Who wants to be a designer and say you work in health? I don't say I work on *Nursing Week* when I get asked. I say I work in a marketing or design environment and I support a vast array of titles... It's not glamorous enough. The stuff that we do here has a kind of buzz to it but we make it much more exciting than it is. We rise to that.

**Emma:** Yeah

**Guy:** It's always troubled me in all of the eight years I've been here, marketing and studio do it to make their own lives more exciting not always for the customer.

Interview 02/10/00

Guy implies (as I have been arguing) that creative workers choose how they view and communicate with the audience because of the way they want to view their own work. They try to make their products and campaigns more exciting – whether or not the audience has expressed a preference for this. Guy argues that the efforts involved in glamorising markets change the nature of the work into an intellectual project.

**Guy:** I think that's maybe why we end up with such great stuff. If you and I were working for say Epic Lifestyle we would just stick a sexy bloke and sexy woman and you don't have any intellect behind it. But in the job we're in, the world is constantly changing. If you think of personal finance it's more sexy for us now than it ever was for our parents' generation. Most people don't notice but if you look at the advertising and design concepts, there's some of the most groundbreaking stuff in the IT side of finance. Incredible really. And that's a good thing for us to remember.

Interview 02/10/00

**Guy:** The problem you've got as a creative person, there's a lot of snobs, like people are more interested in the stuff I've done for [film clients] which could be crap really than say some stuff I've done with you. And the stuff I've done with you is probably far more thought through, far more educated ... but it's a poor end of the market – nurses.

Interview 11/05/01

Guy presents the work in unglamorous markets as more intellectual and with the potential for reinvention, more interesting. If creative professionals can change perceptions of an industry then they gain a bigger, more significant role: they make a difference. So although the market they work in affects their job status this can clearly be negotiated by the way they communicate with the market. The prestige of the work is protected by

keeping the design work 'exciting' and making sure the marketing is 'thought through' and 'educated'. This effort ensures the work involved is considered professional even when the audience is not.

When Guy set up his own agency, he had to expand his repertoire of clients. The impetus that the film work gave to attracting other clients made 'glamorous' markets more appealing to him again. The 'snobbery' he talked about affected how his agency was perceived and therefore its real economic value in the market. As soon as the agency was up and running, Guy and Chloe wanted to limit their involvement with the health market.

**Guy:** Our portfolio has now moved. We just didn't want to be seen as that *Nursing Week* or whatever... We might end up saying let's just niche ourselves into the film and music business. Awards too, they're kinda glitzy and sexy and good fun. Incredibly demanding group of people they just demand, demand, demand. But very rewarding as well and they have no hesitations about inviting us to a bash.

Interview 15/01/02

Guy has accomplished a complete turnaround. He had previously told me that working on less glamorous markets was more involving, challenging and rewarding. He had described working on already glamorous projects as 'obvious' in design terms. Now he establishes the importance of his role by presenting his audience as demanding instead: it is a mark of their sophistication that they have such high standards and he is able to rise to them. The reward is also that far from being bored by the design projects, he has the added bonus of being invited to parties. He is even able to *live* some of their glamour. The attraction of these extra-curricula activities even led Guy to feel anxieties about whether it was affecting his commercial judgement.

**Emma:** Is that a pressure then, to get work [your staff] will enjoy or clients they'll think are cool.

**Guy:** Yeah, and I've been thinking that's probably a bad business thing. It's one of my nightmares. Of course they love the film and music but the property business that we're in, is the high end of property. We're talking about the

biggest players in the UK and Europe. It's corporate ID, sales brochures but actually at the moment we're putting together an idea for a part of London.

**Emma:** An area of London?

**Guy:** Yeah, we're gonna come up with a name, a concept, and that's quite exciting.

**Emma:** Is this about what they are or what they want to be?

**Guy:** Both. They need to tell us. Is it going to be for young affluent people? Should they be advertising in the *Evening Standard* or the gay press? Do they want it to be cutting edge? Do they want to get a name for it? Because it could be quite sexy if it's got kinda gay connotations, especially in London at the moment. And I'm not saying that because I'm gay. I'm saying that because it came up at a meeting and they got quite excited. All these straight men got quite excited. Not negatively, not in a horrible way at all. So that was quite interesting to me.

Interview 15/01/02

Here again, Guy does an excellent job of reinventing what might be seen as a dry market. These property characters are not glitzy film people; in fact, they are literally straight as well as being corporate. In this way, Guy has a similar dilemma to Michael's in the previous chapter: how to re-present a high-value corporate market as dynamic? How to fashion it into an appropriate arena for a 'new' professional? Guy's story about his client's willingness to explore a gay-village concept fulfils this function. They might seem conventional, but they are certainly interested in the cutting edge.

Guy knows that these property businesses would be a sensible commercial direction for his agency, but he doesn't want to produce corporate ID and glossy sales brochures because he also has to sell *the work* to himself and to his team. To do this he introduces the London project with the idea of gayness, which is perhaps a bit rebellious considering the context. And also the idea of 'making a name', and breaking new ground. He has to introduce rebelliousness, personality, and transformation in order to make the project more 'creative'. This is in order to challenge his team's assumption that this work is dull and formulaic compared to the work they do for their film clients.

The efforts of Michael in the last chapter and Guy above, confirm Frank Mort's arguments about creativity in the advertising industry. Mort drew attention to the

professional motivations behind imagined markets. He argues that the cultural niches that began to arise in the 1950s, were largely due to a new commercial formula in advertising, marketing and retailing, led by 'the large clothing multiples' (Mort 1996:133). The growing body of marketing professionals wanted people to understand their purchasing decisions as lifestyle statements (so less constrained by price and function). If consumers could do this, they would buy more often for an infinite number of situations. The marketers had to imagine all the exciting ways people could see themselves that would encourage this dynamic spending. It was at this time that creativity became more important in advertising as workers were expected to initiate *for* the market and inspire the market rather than analyse and follow consumption trends or elaborate on the 'rational' benefits or use-value of the product.

Mort explores the resulting tension among the advertising professionals, about whether their skill is speaking to existing audiences in the language they understand, or educating audiences and in the process, creating new ones. Mort describes how this tension still runs through the professional and political debates in the advertising business. When it came to dealing with feminists who criticised the portrayal of women in advertising, the industry spokesmen denied any abilities to change public attitudes. In this case they chose to fall back on their aim to appeal to the market, rather than their capacity 'to actively initiate social change' (ibid.:114). Obviously, when pitching to clients, advertisers would emphasise their ability to influence or even set the market's tastes and aspirations.

Frank Mort explains the important marketing notion of the 'taste pyramid' with innovators at the top, who experiment, buy from the 'best' designers and lead, followed by early adopters who notice trends quickly, and then by the rest who just follow (ibid.:111). An article on the fashion designer Marc Jacobs shows this model in action:

“...he recognises that high fashion is not so much a rarefied world as a parallel universe. Example: he and his staff have a name for people they see in the street,

people who don't work in fashion or go to fashion parties. They call them "humans". 'The other day, I saw a guy wearing a Luis Vuitton coat, and Camille saw a girl wearing one of the jackets. We were so excited! Humans wearing our clothes.' Patronising or astute you decide." (Jess Cartner-Morley 2002:72)

This is not simple snobbery because it corresponds to an economic model used to predict a product's life cycle. A product's life cycle can be presented as a graph that curves steeply at first and then gently before it plateaus. This graph represents a situation where a few customers notice the product immediately and buy it in order to have the most fashionable or most high-tech product. As it is out in the market longer more consumers will buy it fairly quickly but then demand will remain static for some time. This model gives the idea of the taste pyramid a kind of universal credibility. It appears to be a truth with all products – a model for predicting sales and consumer behaviour that can be universally applied.

The motivation for imagining the market as a hierarchy, or at the very least two-speed, comes in part from this understanding of how people consume. It is assumed that part of the market must be 'dynamic' to be open to new ideas and products and to accept high-speed product replacement. There must be people who are the fastest moving, fastest thinking, and fastest acting. They are found at the top of the pyramid rather than the bottom, so style direction is assumed to be found in a small place.

"What is being held in the top sphere, and contained there as far as possible, is creativity. Alternative ways of doing things may be glimpsed, alternative kinds of knowledge may be hinted, but here in the privileged circle of top-rank super consumers, decisions are made about sponsoring ... reallocative possibilities are scanned, naturally from a strictly interested point of view." (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:108)

It also helps the creative professionals to expect a mass of slower consumers as this implies that there might eventually be immense sales. This hierarchy, has important effects on the workers as Mort notes:

“The rhetoric of commercial dynamism made particular sense for creatives, as it did for the style leaders, because it reinforced a notion of themselves as professionals who were at the cutting edge of cultural as well as artistic change.” (Mort 1996:118)

So dividing the market into dynamic and non-dynamic sections creates elites in the market *and* inside the workplace, who are supposedly in tune with cultural change. It supports individualism in the workplace, as new style ideas come from the ‘ideas people’ who can invent new looks and those with ‘commercial flair’ who can create the products and audiences of the future.

The dynamic elite is not necessarily based on differential spending power within the audience. There are many different ways that it can be achieved. McRobbie describes how the British fashion magazine ‘*The Face*’ used designer fashion to try and position itself as art against ‘mass culture’ (McRobbie 1998:173). During the period in which I worked for fashion retail magazines, the menswear market was described as a ‘two-speed’ industry with a small elite who wanted to be innovative and a larger group who chose to stagnate with the dying mainstream. In these examples, the desire to be knowledgeable or original differentiates an elite as much as their spending power.

The process of making a product, with an elite market segment in mind, is changed. This provides the rationale for distance, exclusive knowledge communities and strict aesthetic criteria for inclusion, ‘all these things seem virtually defined to prevent profane use, or to socially delimit use within prescribed norms of consumption’ (Willis 2000:54). Any definitions of a ‘mass’ audience would be likely to draw on class-based representations as historically working class men and women have rarely been represented ‘in the singular’ (Skeggs 2004:163).

A recurring pattern is clearly emerging – markets appear to be divided into dull and glamorous sections variously described (innovative, stuffy, corporate, dynamic, cutting edge, mainstream). The ideas around ‘new kinds of professionalism’ have proved to be extremely important in these descriptions; for the imagined market can profoundly alter the nature and standing of a professional’s own work. The models that are used are as cultural as they are economic and they also justify work-place hierarchies. Mort’s observations suggest a professional motivation amongst creative workers to invent or support such hierarchies. Yet on the other hand, Harvey’s suggestion that innovative sections of the market were more mixed in terms of gender and age, as well as Guy’s suggestion that they are far from homophobic, might perhaps lead us to conclude that this division is not quite so bad, or even that it could amount to progressive preferences among ‘new’ professionals.

### **A creative player**

When I first interviewed designer Imran at Epic he was 21. He had worked for Guy for four years already – having been taken on for his college placement. Guy always selected his new talent from the same university department. Imran described himself as Asian but wanted to emphasise the fact that he did not consider his ethnicity to be relevant in his career.

Initially, Imran had not felt good about starting his career in publishing – within the design world, publishing work was not considered exciting. However, he was grateful to learn design on a Mac in a professional context. With the launch of the *Nursing Week* and *Your Baby* websites, Imran was involved in some design for the web. He especially enjoyed making animated advertising banners.

When Creative Services was dismantled, Carmella offered Imran a job in the digital department, which he accepted. For a while Carmella and Lisa were extremely buoyed up by the prospect of Imran joining the division. Carmella and Lisa's discussions about Imran illuminate his positioning at Epic. They did not seem to imagine that his role would be autonomous or that his contribution would have much authority.

Lisa is talking about how great it will be – she'll be able to give Imran work whenever "without Guy stepping in and saying – get your hands off my boy." Later Carmella was talking about the work Imran's going to be doing for her and Lisa says, "What are you on about, he's mine, you've got plenty of boys already!" and they both laugh. I hope Imran knows what he's let himself in for.

Field notes 29/09/00

However, in the end neither Lisa nor Carmella were to have their way, as Guy persuaded Imran to leave Epic and become part of his fledgling design agency. During his time at Guy's agency, Imran's confidence seemed to grow and grow. He told me that he no longer felt like a 'junior employee'. He had more responsibility and described how he had learned to become client focused. He was proud to be working for several prestigious clients (especially in film and music). Although he was doing less animation work, he was able to overcome this disappointment using Guy's discourse about design work. The way Imran articulated his creative identity shows that he felt included in the work process, and also in Guy's elite position as the thinker:

**Imran:** I enjoyed doing web stuff so much at Epic so I do miss that but it depends how you look at it because I'm a designer. I could still design a website and get a techie to create it for me. Like Guy says, he can't do all the technical stuff that I did but it was him that designed the *Nursing Week* website – the layout.

**Emma:** Even though he couldn't actually make it.

**Imran:** Yeah, he couldn't make it but it's techie work. It's like fashion designers they design the clothes. Calvin Klein, he doesn't stitch it up does he?

Interview 11/05/01

Apart from art and design, Imran also had a huge passion for playing football. At 17 (when he had just started his college placement at Epic) he went for a trial at a top

London club. He was accepted. However he turned his place down. He told me this was the biggest mistake of his life. When Imran told the story of his near football career he came across as an incredibly mature person. At only 22 he had faced up to what was probably an irreversible loss of his own making. He said “I regret it, yeah, I regret it big time.” He never downplayed the gravity of it, and yet at the same time he was not bitter. He handled himself with dignity. To an outsider, it was difficult to accept that someone who had already faced a massive mistake and come out the stronger, should be allocated a place at the bottom of the career ladder, yet his enthusiasm seemed untouchable.

**Emma:** Where do you think your ability to design comes from then?

**Imran:** Without being bigheaded I think as person I think I’m creative. It’s not just like design OK also [I’m creative] on the football pitch. That’s why there’s creative players, tactics players. I’m the creative player. I was also really decent at painting and other crafts as well. I’ve been creative about most things I do so it’s not just design. It’s the same with Guy and Chloe. You see, they’re creative people. It’s not that it’s just design work. We all approach things differently.

Interview 15/01/02

So at the agency Imran had his own self-confident identity as a creative person. He felt included in Guy’s definitions of creative talent, and did not feel that his talents were being described differently. The advantage of Imran’s creative identity was that it took the sting out of his loss. As he was a creative person, despite losing football, he could still be the person he was meant to be. He had not wasted this talent, for it could be applied anywhere. While the positive and healing effects of Imran’s self-image must not be underestimated, it is important to analyse why it was not enough to fuel his career progression. Despite holding the same values, Imran did not fit into Guy’s definition of creative potential.

Part of the problem was that Imran separated ‘politics’ and selling from his creative abilities in a way that Guy did not. Guy always rated the need to sell his own creative

persona so these abilities were inseparable to him. Imran on the other hand had never been attracted to selling:

**Imran:** I never would want to do what he does... I like action. What Guy does is too much politics and I *hate* politics. I don't want to get involved in that. I like hands-on stuff and I can't see myself in Guy's position... We've got so many different clients here and it's 'quick quick we want it now!' so Guy's like a politician and we're the designers.

Interview 11/05/01

Imran describes that he likes 'action' and 'hands-on stuff', and this would clearly fit into to Guy's delegation of the production work. This can be compared to the 'self-building' involved in the mental/manual division that Paul Willis observed in young working-class men (Willis 2000:42). Also, Imran loved making animations, genuinely enjoying the craft satisfactions in the work. This was beneficial for his personal sense of accomplishment, but probably not so good in terms of his mobility. As Sennett writes in *Respect*, the pleasures in craft work are 'individuating' and can distract people from their social environment (Sennett 2003:86). Bourdieu would explain this orientation as a work ethic appropriate to (and ingrained by) inhabiting a certain position. Imran's perspective can be understood as the 'old' petite-bourgeois work ethic where 'seriousness and hardwork' are offered to institutions as 'moral guarantees' instead of material guarantees (money, social connections) but which leave people vulnerable to exploitation and self exploitation (Bourdieu 1984:337). Imran opts to keep his head down at work, taking pleasure from doing a good job. In the second interview, Imran again differentiates design from sales and dismisses his own selling abilities.

**Emma:** What do you think of the idea of pitching then? Is it something you want to do in the future?

**Imran:** I can't see myself doing it because I'm not a good sales person.

**Emma:** Not yet.

**Imran:** Well yeah not yet and I could learn a lot from Guy. He should've been a sales person.

**Emma:** You think?

**Imran:** Yeah, he's the best sales person I've ever met.

**Emma:** In what ways is he the best?

**Imran:** Basically, the way he talks. He brings in so many clients and sells the job we do. You have to see it to believe it. It's the reason we've got so many clients in such a short space of time. Because his word spreads around, like Diddy Records I mean his friend works for Diddy but now everyone knows about Guy in the hierarchy and that's really why we've got Diddy Records now.

Interview 15/01/02

This is extremely interesting, bearing in mind Guy's thoughts on the value of talk. Imran explains that the way Guy talks sells. It is not only that Guy knows people at the record company but that he can use this small springboard and create an impression right to the top of the company. We know that for Guy his ability to sell was an intrinsic element of his creative persona. To Imran this was not connected to creativity, and yet these were precisely the terms by which Guy judged the creative potential of his employees.

In describing why Guy and Chloe had kept him under their wing for so long, Imran acknowledged that he felt shy. This can be seen as another expression of the same discomfort with the idea of selling himself.

**Imran:** I'm quite shy. I used to be helpful as well. When I was younger I was *really* shy. I never got on anyone's bad side so they always looked out for me. Not only from a working point of view but as a friend. So that helped me, having that kind of relationship.

Interview 15/01/02

Imran's strategy to make friends with Guy and Chloe probably backfired against him. While he felt some security in it, his desire to please could only prevent him from demonstrating the 'challenging' nature that Guy believed to be the mark of a true creative. However as in Sharena's case, I would argue that Imran's tactics are not to blame for his frustrated position. The reason being that Guy's commitment to the Fordist division of work tasks, meant he encouraged and rewarded Imran for fulfilling his position and the helpful personality he displayed. On no occasion did Guy tell Imran to be more outspoken. Why would Imran believe that with all the praise and positivity about

his work, he wasn't doing the things that would help him get on? Why would he make a fuss about doing the technical support when it was always praised in the context of his general (and innate) technical capabilities – the very same capabilities that won him the animation work he loved?

Practically speaking, how could Imran question things, when in his role he was responsible for getting the jobs finished and out to the clients? Furthermore, questioning Guy would go against the history of their relationship (as trainer and trainee) apart from contradicting the point of his role. Exactly like Sharena, the data processor at Epic, Imran's potential was overlooked because he had not demonstrated something that he had no realistic chance of demonstrating in his role.

What complicates the situation further for Imran is that in his position as a doer rather than a thinker, any attempts to outsource the technical support work would have seemed awkward and pretentious. The mark of Guy's superior position was that he could avoid work he disliked *gracefully*. He said he didn't 'do admin' because he wasn't that good at it. In this way he suggests he is doing everyone a big favour in avoiding administrative work. But the people who were doing it, do not have this option. It was much harder for people lower in Guy's hierarchy to avoid menial tasks as there was no one for them to delegate to and this was compounded by the fact it was such a small company. This means that if they tried to delegate they would inevitably appear difficult or obstructive. Guy's assessments of creative talent were extremely sophisticated in this respect. He was able to praise and support Chloe and Imran's creative identities while denying them the space to develop a persona that could rival or share his place. This was achieved by creating subtle *service* dynamics within his tiny company. Imran became technical support service, and Chloe admin support service. This should lead us to review common assumptions about discrimination. Guy has no need to be offensive or aggressive yet his hierarchy was secure.

Imran was unconfident that he would ever be in Guy's position because of his discomfort about sales work. Although he respected Guy's abilities, selling was something that conflicted with his own values. In this way, his own subjectivity appears to be hindering his career progression.

**Imran:** I dunno how to put it. I mean he convinces people and to me there's been times where I would've said he's lying. Sometimes the client doesn't like the idea but he sells it and gets away with it. Sometimes you have to say things differently in sales but I don't say things like him.

Interview 15/01/02

Lisa also, in a conversation about Guy's leaving deal with Epic, expressed admiration and frustration about his promotional abilities.

She said "I look at Guy sometimes and think I should be more like him – self-promoting and vocal. But I don't want to be that type of person."

Field notes 24/08/00

In both these examples, an acceptance of intrinsic talent locks Imran and Lisa into their positions. These examples illustrate how personalisation can lead people to *prefer* positions with relatively less power. Once this skill is personalised, success appears dependent on being boastful or dishonest *in person*. In conflating personality with success, Imran and Lisa do not view what Guy does as strategy or technique. They are prevented from imagining different ways of doing the same things without compromising their morals or their own notions of who they are. This personalisation contributes to the lack of creativity about work roles. This demonstrates the value of what I am trying to do in this thesis – the need to de-construct different dispositions, break them down into elements, and make skills explicit – particularly the skills that win the highest social rewards.

### **The 'new' professionals**

At this point it is worth summarising the nature of the creative persona, or at least the 'new' professional, encountered so far. Interviews with both managers and workers, and their descriptions of their markets have revealed much about 'new' professionals. First of all 'new' professionals must be talkative. In Chapter 3, Dan was most concerned that the marketing assistant was opinionated about popular culture and able to talk freely about it. Guy insisted that creatives were questioning and able to challenge authority. They were to have confidence in their opinions and expression. They were never quiet, soft, shy or humble. This manner of speaking was considered by Guy to be more important than their portfolio of design work. To Dan it was more important than whether his recruit had looked at the websites before his interview. Imran attributed Guy's success to the way he said things.

Also a 'new' professional has to be able to sell. Their confident manner of speaking reflected their abilities to sell themselves and demonstrated their ambition. Of course they had to be able to sell their products. This ability to sell and enthuse might also protect them from being interpreted as organisational costs as they have a disposition that could generate revenue. It proves their drive and demonstrates that they are not 'plodders' (suited to getting on with standard tasks) and not technicians (looking for pleasure in quality).

Lastly they were glamorous. They can be distinguished from bookish, stuffy public sector types and narrow-minded corporate suits. If they are ever to be found in a sector such as nursing they will be the freelance specialist nurses working across international boundaries. They will not be caring. This glamour is realised because 'new' professionals

are always more than just 'technicians'. Their glamour reflects the fact that they are leaders and innovators and this demands an open mind and the willingness to challenge conventions. They are not homophobic. They are not even straight in character or interest. They are young and potentially feminine as they offer a refreshing contrast to 'middle-aged men in suits'. They represent a new era and feel themselves ahead of traditional business and public-school, old-boy networks breaking out of inherited structures of privilege.

These 'new' professionals certainly seem to be morally opposed to social exclusion on the grounds of 'race', gender and sexuality as well as suspicious of upper-class privilege. We saw that it was companies including women, young people, and people who were not homophobic that were assumed to be peopled by 'new' professionals. Guy's description of his clients in the property industry was especially interesting because although they *looked* like old professionals (male and suited) they showed by their open-minded attitude that they were not. This liberalism, and an enthusiasm for difference and newness is apparently a crucial part of what sets 'new' professionals apart from the 'old' ones. This is why racism, sexism, homophobia and class elitism must be actively shunned in the process of constructing this identity. This is why equality is celebrated. The idea of any kind of exclusive closed shop is at odds with their overt efforts to appear open.

But this does not guarantee that the 'new' professionals are interested in working for social equality. The intended outcome is to ensure that 'a representative middle class is positioned at the vanguard of 'the modern'' (Skeggs 2004:92) and when attention is focussed on what 'new' professionals are *not*, the picture is not so inclusive. The definitions of talent the managers use works for them and against those below them. Historically, the work of women (especially working-class women) has been in caring or service roles, the work of ethnic minorities and the working classes in production or public sector roles. Facets of racism, sexism and classism combine to justify the

allocation of different kinds of work. Rather than working to make a mundane role more interesting, Carmella in the last chapter, decided instead to recruit a ‘mother- returner’ for the position. The implication was clearly that the nature of the role was not the problem, and only had to be given to a working class woman because apparently she would have less capacity or desire for interesting work. Chloe was given day-to-day administrative work in the design agency on the grounds of an explicitly gendered capacity to multi-task. The labour market and the weight of its history sometimes seem to reflect the reality of these aptitude judgements and task allocations. Symbolically, these service/support positions are the very antithesis of the creative and ‘new’ professional identities. This represents cultural and historical baggage which is likely to affect how the work of the ‘new’ professional is gendered, racialised and classed.

On Imran’s part, he told me he had never encountered racism and he never thought about it. Guy also told me he never thought about ‘race’. He said:

**Guy:** I think it’s down to personalities. Imran is quite soft. I don’t really think in terms of ethnic balance and think he’s Asian.

Interview 11/05/01

When Guy described Imran as ‘soft’ here, his tone definitely suggested he meant gentle rather than the more derogatory meaning of pushover. To Guy, the fact that he sees Imran as ‘soft’, quiet and best suited to lower level production and support work, has nothing to do with him being Asian. This is simply a matter of his personality. This may be so, and yet it is worth remembering that in the 1980s following the uprisings in Brixton and Toxteth, press reports were prone to compare the ‘natural’ rebelliousness of Afro-Caribbean men to the ‘natural’ subservience of Asian people (Gilroy 1992a). In this country, apart from more general notions of racialised production work, there is a recent and popular discourse specifically painting Asian men as submissive or conformist. Obviously, growing Islamophobia has generated other more aggressive pathologies of

young Asian men (Alexander 2000) and I would argue that since the time of the interview these have completely eclipsed the submissive stereotype.

Perhaps this observation seems to be tenuous and Guy's comments superficial, especially as Imran has described himself as shy. What I hope I have communicated is that this is not superficial when we consider how much is at stake creatively in avoiding a *service* role. Secondly, when managers' views of potential fit neatly into cultural stereotypes it always deserves attention.

This is not to say that Imran and Sharena are excluded *because* of their 'race'. In both cases they are excluded alongside white people. In both cases, class-based definitions of what talent looks like are used (talent/ambition, plodders/innovators, thinkers/doers, etc.) It is certainly not my desire to argue that racism gives Imran's and Sharena's exclusion something extra, a more solid aspect. But it is to say that in the *managerial* project, discourses of racism, sexism and classism are often so compatible, if not the same, that they can work together or interchangeably, extremely well. Take, for example, Guy's comments about Chloe's ability to shut out noise and distractions in the office. This gendered ability has been part of the popular debate on the feminisation of the workforce and the idea that women are better at multi-tasking. It has seemed to be a discourse aimed at naturalising women's *success* at work. Yet my example shows how easily Guy used this very argument to naturalise Chloe's extra responsibilities for admin although she is employed as a designer. Even this apparently positive gender stereotype was used to justify giving Chloe tasks that are devalued in class terms.

While my evidence suggests Sharena's exclusion works through discourses about class, sexist ideas about women's propensity for technical work may have accentuated the manager's lack of urgency in finding her more interesting things to do at Epic Digital. And equally her 'race' is probably not irrelevant. We have to wonder whether her white

managers' lack of concern about her situation, while certainly enabling their managerial position, also indicates that they were better able to tolerate seeing a black woman in a dead-end job.

Ultimately, as all these judgements are achieved using a framework of intrinsic personality, managers are able to make negative talent judgements freely – without any anxiety or, in Sharena's case, much thought. It seems perfectly acceptable to say that someone lacks ambition or isn't very outspoken. What is wrong with observing that someone is shy or quiet? (See also Skeggs 2004 where coded references are also used instead of explicitly naming class difference). These labels are not considered offensive or overtly political. These types of statement are ordinary. Employee's positions or 'natures' can be constructed without any recourse to overtly politicised language and yet I have shown how these dispositions have major structural implications. Dispositions work as codes relating to suitability for different kinds of work tasks and working conditions.

Within Epic, Sharena and Imran's complex backgrounds and unique personalities had to be constrained in order to allocate production work to them. However, it is important not to conclude from their experience that all people from ethnic minorities will have thwarted careers at Epic. While 'race' and gender can intersect with class in quite limiting ways, I do not want to leap from this point to being deterministic. As Ang writes

“In too much cultural studies work understanding of hegemony remains at an abstract theoretical level evoked rather than analysed, by alluding to basic concepts such as 'class', 'gender' and 'race'. We need to go beyond these paradigmatic conceptualisations of hegemony and develop a more specific, concrete, contextual, in short, a more ethnographic sense of the hegemonic” (Ang 1995:142).

It is important to remain focused on the *specific* constraints that I have identified in media work. The workers at Epic and in Guy's agency are required to frame their work, their

personality and their audience within a limited set of vocabularies and repertoires. Gender, 'race' and class, are relevant to this project in important ways, but not as determining forces. The complexity of 'personality' is managed within the context of the 'new' professional's class struggle so that wherever people are coming from and whatever their talents, their experience and disposition will fall into what seems like an infinite number of work roles, but which in fact belongs to a wider picture which is split in only two parts; the innovative and the dull.

It is the process of positioning work against the 'old' professionals and the non-professionals that turns personality into a political (or class) project. This is why even those who had secured a 'creative' job had a struggle on their hands if they found themselves in a lacklustre market. Different 'personalities' have been shown to have differing economic values where they correspond to the values mobilised in this class struggle. Sexism, racism and classism, with their ancient and varied means for de-personalising the 'other', have a very specific use in the process of winning creative and managerial positions in Epic. They are unlikely to be mobilised for bullying or harassment in a class fraction that must be seen to be open. However, they may be occasionally useful and symbolically powerful for the project of developing creative personas against those who do not seem to have quite enough personality.

## **Conclusion**

In Chapter 3 I explained how the process of building a creative persona could be read as a class project, a means of achieving professional status and positions of leadership. The concept of creativity is primarily used by Dan and by Guy to win and secure *managerial* power. In this sense the creative project at Epic is less about artistic expression and more about career progression. Managers are prepared to constrain some people's talent so that

they can continue doing more interesting work and move up, or even create, a career ladder.

I have illustrated how the 'new' professionals are involved in a constant struggle against 'old' professionals and non-professionals. The effect this had on the approach to markets was to exclude or downgrade certain areas of the market. Of course, within the language of targeting, there seems nothing much wrong with this, but I have been exploring the connection of the imagined market to the labour process and I have shown how this investment in hierarchy for marketing practice contributes to supporting the hierarchical structures within the creative workplace. This then is not simply a matter of artistic or aesthetic snobbery as it can appear to the outsider, but is a more general professional investment in hierarchical workplace, market and social structures.

Work roles are persistently conflated with people's abilities and personalities.

Importantly, Guy uses the idea of 'natural' ability when he talks about success. It is precisely the skills that Imran would need to *progress* that Guy regards as natural, while the skills which Imran needs to produce fantastic creative work, he can teach him. This confirms my argument in the last chapter that 'natural' talent is used to support managerial (hierarchical) structures and their control of career progression. In this chapter I showed that naturalising the ability to sell and sell the self was an effective way of blocking Imran's mobility. This suggests that it is unhelpful to believe that success and mobility will arise from the quality of creative work. Gaining managerial status depends on a very specific style of social competency.

The language of intrinsic potential is limiting because in this view only one ideal way of being deserves recognition and long-term investment. It is exclusionary because it defines potential so narrowly (closing down countless other talents as well as the possibility of improving on capacities over time). Because it is the skills important to progression that

the managers naturalise it is much more difficult for the people who are not getting on to imagine the success that a quieter personality could own. Of course, the credibility of disposition is supported by the workplace structure (different work roles). However, owning a disposition demands moral investment that a work task need not. The discussions concerning Imran's creativity show what can be personally gained from embracing your own innate disposition, while his distress at the thought of selling himself show what can be lost.

While both Dan and Guy were successful in building creative personas to achieve managerial status, they did not survive at Epic. Although they were conscious of what they had to do, neither Dan nor Guy managed to avoid appearing (with their departments) as organisational costs. They struggled to prove that they were generating revenue, and this was exacerbated by the fact that neither of them seemed very close to their markets. The revenue they were generating did not contribute to their own department's bottom line (although this was, as I showed in Chapter 3, a question of presentation). To survive at Epic a creative worker must avoid positioning as an internal service and remain outward facing in order to claim credit for revenue. So in the next chapter I will examine what is practically involved in being close to markets, and I continue to look at the impact of these workplace demands on Epic's logic in terms of recruitment and promotion.

## Chapter 5

### **‘Knowing without ever having learnt’**

In this chapter I will be looking at passion as another important facet of the creative persona. This is the expectation that creative workers should be passionate about their work and the markets they work in. So I continue with the theme that creative work at Epic is constructed as more than ‘just a job’, and I continue to look at the ways that jobs and markets are constructed together.

In order to look at passion, I will be discussing some meetings that were arranged for all the employees at Epic Digital. These meetings were established in order to give people more ideas about web strategies and to give the new company a sense of direction. The meetings were designed to inspire people about the creative and economic potential in web work. It is in this chapter that I look more closely at what Epic, as an organisation, gains from promoting individualised notions of creativity.

The meetings were called ‘Big Wednesday’ meetings after a surf movie. The first of these meetings was in a night club and they were quite an organisational feat in themselves, with people coming from all over the UK to attend. They were also a unique opportunity to see the board members and senior executives at Epic. The descriptions of these meetings are presented in italics.

## **The Big Wednesday meeting: passionate dispositions**

*This Big Wednesday meeting is in [a plush London Hotel]. The chairs are all arranged in rows and there are no tables to lean or write on. Instead it is arranged like a theatre audience. On one side of the room a row of arches separates us from where we will all be 'mingling' later. This will be an opportunity to catch up with old colleagues and potentially, make connections that could prove useful to career moves. With MDs and chief execs also 'doing the rounds', the people who chat informally are always aware that they too may be called on to perform at any moment. There are well over 100 people present. Before the presentation starts people are fairly quiet but are busily looking across the audience nodding and smiling at people they know. I am sitting next to Tom (the publishing director of my division) and I'm uncomfortable about writing here, because I think it will make him hyper-conscious of everything he disagrees with.*

*Phil Delaney (the chief exec of the newly formed Epic Digital) opens the meeting. Phil Delaney is an important figure because although he is only forty he has moved up the ladder extremely quickly. He is generally spoken of as inspirational, energetic and enthusiastic but he is also known to pick favourites, to walk off mid conversation, and to have affairs with women he works with. He tells us that today we are focusing on content and creativity. He introduces Martin Holmes. Martin has been around in Epic for 20 years helping to launch a whole list of the biggest youth, film and music magazines. He has also been a radio DJ and Phil tells us that he resigned live on air "when some oik announced 'from now on we'll choose the music'". Martin is now a member of the digital board. It is clear that with these credentials the audience lay-out is for him. Phil tells us that he has heard Martin's presentation before. He has a smugly excited expression communicating that we are about to hear something he perceives to be ground-breaking. Martin gets up and speaks. He is small and energetic. He spends much of his talk discussing the kinds of people who are best suited to work on websites. He muses:*

*“What is the appropriate set of skills for web work?” Martin would like to suggest to us that, in the media, skills are not transferable as is often made out to be the case. “News is about revelation. Magazines are about celebration. Radio is about filling the passing minutes. TV is all about people. Digital what is it about? Is it really about shopping, as the city would like? No, actually it is about conversation and things that even Rupert Murdoch cannot control. TV is not analytical. Radio is not factual. Magazines cannot do news so well. Digital has no noise and no drama. Radio attracts talkers. Newspapers, gossips. TV, showmen. Magazines, romantics. What does digital attract? Obsessives?”*

*Martin tells us all about some sites he thinks are really good. Sitting in the audience, it is hard not to feel the more criticised the more he enthuses. He also tells us that we must protect the brands the magazines have built, and as these brands are precious it is good for us to be precious about our work.*

*Martin is convinced of one thing – the big corporate sites lack soul. They are there because somebody somewhere needed to make an investment. People are doing things that really don’t need doing. To Martin, they are like the Millennium Dome: late, expensive, and designed by committee. You can’t get people in and when they come they wonder why they went in. He looks at us, pauses, and puts the question – “Have you harnessed the power of enthusiastic individuals or are you running your sites by committee? Forget marketing, it just needs to be a good idea.” In my head I start working out what proportion of the audience might be employed for marketing work. I try to quantify exactly how provocative this injunction is.*

*After Martin’s talk, Phil Delaney gets up slowly, grinning. He looks at us all as if to say, ‘Wow – what did you make of that?’ He says when Martin first gave this speech everyone panicked, thinking – Oh my God are we thinking about these issues in Digital? Phil doesn’t want us to be depressed but Martin has issued a challenge – he has just raised*

*the bar. Editorial quality really does matter and we must start putting it first. We can only do this by hiring the best people – people who are really passionate about the medium and passionate about their passion.*

Martin had started off his presentation talking about skills that are needed for web work, but actually his conclusions had nothing to do with skills and were about dispositions: “Radio attracts talkers. Newspapers, gossips. TV, showmen. Magazines, romantics. What does digital attract? Obsessives?” He is talking about what kind of people have the appropriate kind of disposition for the medium. And he suggests that these are types of people who have an affinity with the work and are therefore attracted to it. Hence, Martin tells us work in magazines attracts ‘romantics’ and not that work in magazines is the business of romanticising life.

Martin’s presentation also champions the individual. He derides the Millennium Dome as a project “designed by committee”. Phil Delaney agrees, stating that web work demands individuals who are “passionate about their passion”. Martin attacks sites that are too corporate for lacking ‘soul’, and he spurns marketing. He rates personalised commitment over this particular professional discipline and expertise. The talk is meant to encourage web workers to value heart-felt enthusiasm over formalised or organisational knowledge, driven by commercial goals.

In this chapter I will be looking at the ideals expressed at this meeting. What are the effects of expecting that workers should be passionate about the internet and “passionate about their passion”? Do the workers really have an emotional involvement with a website or is this just a fantasy among the senior executives? And what are the effects of understanding enthusiasm at work as a question of intrinsic personality?

One worker in our division who certainly seemed enthusiastic was Mario. He had only recently got his A-levels and was on a three-month contract in my division. He had been working at yourbaby.com for less than a week when a PR effort that resulted in BBC coverage generated so much traffic that part of the site crashed. Mario put the web pages onto his own server – that is a server he pays to use with his own money. His editor was over the moon about this. She must have told the publishing director for the following day he made a comment during someone’s birthday announcement about Mario “saving the day”.

A month later, Mario was working on some animated fireworks to put on the site for bonfire night. He had to work at home, because the company did not have the software he needed to do it. The software arrived on 31 October and the publishing director joked, “Now you can work from work Mario – that revolutionary concept!” But importantly, Mario’s efforts were exactly the type of behaviour to win the attention of the publishing director. Mario can be seen to be ‘adding value’. He doesn’t wait for the company to buy the software he needs. His main concern is to make the best possible animation, deliver the fireworks on time, and to protect the site from lost visitors and page impressions when it crashed. His work ethic is demonstrated in the ‘above and beyond’ attitude towards the product. Doing the work in your own home is a marker of your enthusiasm but is of interest for its potential to become ‘added-value’ that is extra skills, extra work time, extra commitment. Mario who was 19 at most, and working on a temporary contract, already had the enthusiastic disposition that Martin was enthusing about – his efforts at home proved he was not ‘thinking like an employee’. However in this example, Mario’s hobbies were useful to Epic in part for the creative products he made but also because as it had been his hobby he gave more of his time and energy to Epic’s website without a second thought.

## **Back to the Big Wednesday meeting: bedroom business**

*Martin has warmed up now. He wants to tell us about some sites he thinks are good and he doesn't care if we've never heard of them or never hear of them again. They are all done for love, which is (apparently) a difficult notion for anyone in a public limited company to grasp.*

*He explains his three favourite websites. One is a site that is simply a collection of tiny little drawings of pop stars – it is, he thinks, truly unique. Then there is Airdisaster.com – This is a site run by only two guys. They are air disaster 'enthusiasts'. They are always first with air disaster news and he claims they are often ahead of the BBC. Lastly, there is a site put together by a group of audience testers for films. They excitedly network to disclose and discuss the possible endings of forthcoming cinema hits. "What is similar about these three sites?" He asks us. They have credibility. They had no marketing budget at all. They never intended to make money (and they didn't). They are much better than commercial sites because they are done for love. Their mates will like them more because of their site. He goes so far as to say there is no point in a website unless you can be sure that someone would be doing it from their bedroom.*

*"And users do not like forests of billboards. People are more cynical now. A site where the most prominent offers are from advertisers is insulting. Are you telling them things they don't know or are you bombarding them with marketing spam? The magazines resent what you are doing to their brands. The magazines have always concentrated on being popular first and letting the advertisers follow. Whereas you are just letting the advertisers have anything they want." This feels pretty close to the bone. Firstly, most of the people in the room see themselves in direct competition with the magazines for advertising and for audience. Secondly, every site has an optimistic advertising target that has been set by Digital Central. I can feel the audience shifting uncomfortably as his*

*tone becomes more accusatory. By now Tom has lowered his head and is wincing and squinting into his own lap attempting to hide his displeasure.*

*In the break, feelings were running high. Tom said little though he was obviously depressed. Dan was furious. He was frowning constantly. “Why are they so against e-commerce? What is the point in raving on about these things that make no money? We have to make money – we need ideas about that. This is a total waste of time.” This was the most negative and aggressive I ever saw Dan about anything. As the sales and marketing manager he is on the end of all the self-congratulatory posturing about ‘forests’ of banner ads and marketing spam.*

*During this break, the anxiety and tension experienced in the audience could be released by humour, helping to digest the reality that Martin had just provided a full rationale for pairing down the web teams at the next ‘restructure’. There were jokes about Lisa being made redundant. “I’ll just leave now then,” she said. She put on her disgusted face about it. She was genuinely put out that the marketing discipline was being repeatedly rubbished and the insult to her own efforts. Dan showed his ability to bring the conversation back round to a positive by conceding that Martin was right about emails. “Alex [a site editor] should be writing the emails. We should use Alex more. He is exactly the right sort of person. He has his own nursing news network. He’s into all those online groups in his spare time, but we’re not using it at work”*

So, though the managers were unimpressed by Martin’s anti-commercial statements, the need for the passionate disposition of workers was not an element of the talk that was rejected. Dan had taken on board Martin’s view that marketing language was not the most credible. He argued that because Alex (the editor of the Nursing Week site) expressed his interest outside work, this made him just “the right sort of person.” His emails could be offered to the market as something more interesting than anything the marketing

department would put together. To Dan, Alex's disposition fits with Martin's ideal web obsessive. The sort of person Alex is would be reflected directly in the qualitative nature of the product. And like Mario, his extra work, time and networking is seen to be going to waste if the company does not lay some claim to it.

### **The status of passionate work**

What is also being promoted at the Big Wednesday meeting is the kind of knowledge that Martin feels is most effective for work in websites – a knowledge that derives from closeness to the subject matter. The knowledge that comes from grass roots leisure interests is positioned as a more genuine interest than the professional interests of marketers or official committees. In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu argues that defining what counts as knowledge is an important element of class identity and promotion. He describes that for the 'new' bourgeoisie this is a matter of creating a space for themselves somewhere between intellectuals and the petit bourgeoisie, creating 'the economic or polytechnical culture of 'modern managers', which sees itself as action-oriented but irreducible to the triviality of mere practice' (Bourdieu 1984:315).

Celia Lury describes struggles between the media and the academy as a struggle over whether authority comes ultimately from 'experience' or 'intellect' and as a struggle for power and status between competing fractions of the middle classes (Lury 1996:92). The personal experience and commitment of the 'bedroom entrepreneurs' prevent this knowledge from seeming trivial or ill-informed, and challenge the abstract nature of academic knowledge while rivalling its depth. Martin promotes authenticity in knowledge coming directly from everyday experience rather than expertise that comes from specific training.

What Martin is also able to draw on is the Renaissance view of work as the expression and satisfaction of an inner need or drive rather than a means of meeting material needs. Work for the web is portrayed as an arena of individual expression and development. As I explained in Chapter 1, the social prestige in this definition of work lies in the history of the mechanisation of work, where thinking and designing were 'removed' from the production work (Young 1990:220). This has had profound consequences for the cultural meanings of work and our understanding of what constitutes an individual, 'personality', and talent.

If relatively few work roles enable people to show the ways they are unique, this creates a culture where 'emerging from the mass' becomes the social definition of talent (Sennett and Cobb 1972:246). Low status work has been specifically designed so that it can be done by anybody, where a personal approach will make no difference or perhaps even interfere with the work process. High status work is designed so that everyone is able to see that a unique individual has created the products and services. As people of a higher class consequently have more opportunities in their work to develop their capacities and express their judgements and tastes they can appear to be more 'developed' individuals (Sennett and Cobb 1972:25).

It is this prestige in the demonstration of personality and individual interests at work, that enables Martin to present the efforts of these 'bedroom' entrepreneurs as admirable whether they make money or not. When Martin suggests that your own interests, tastes and background are a genuine and positive foundation for your career in new media, he is positioning the work as culturally middle class. Whatever the status of the original hobby, to be free to develop and explore your own interests at work moves you into the professional league. By downgrading marketing technique, Martin is making sure the audience understands that the best web workers are above the level of mere technicians. In this way a hierarchy in web work is introduced.

At the same meeting, this is how Phil Delaney communicated that the editorial workers' roles are more significant than those in the fulfilment centre: "People will trust [Epic's biggest music magazine] to tell them about rock music but not to send them a CD in the post." Phil Delaney is elaborating on what he sees as Epic's core competency – subject knowledge that translates into editorial quality. In positioning this as the most valuable skill he is reinforcing a hierarchy. It is the editorial team's music knowledge that sets the product apart so he suggests that quality in other areas is less important, perhaps irrelevant. He picked a powerful example since efficiency and customer service provide stark contrast to rock and roll.

The Big Wednesday meetings show that Epic's directors and board members wanted to encourage and praise in-depth knowledge and social engagement with the audience and marketing was not the only discipline that was downgraded in this process. The workers in distribution and fulfilment, who were already positioned in a supporting capacity, found their roles disconnected from the brand identity. This is significant, as these workers are the first point of customer contact. As they hear customer feedback day in day out they could just as easily be positioned as knowledgeable about the market. In downgrading the significance of quality in this area, Phil is also breaking the psychological connection that is essential for satisfying craft work. So he implies that customer service is not a function in which workers at Epic should necessarily expect to find job fulfilment.

### **The value of subcultural capital**

The way that Martin presents the work of web entrepreneurs is interesting because it can be seen to be upgrading the work in class terms. Drawing on romanticised notions of the poverty-stricken artist in the lonely garret, he validates humble beginnings with Epic's ability to spot talent. The stress on creativity annoys the managers in the audience

because they would rather hear about commercially successful sites to see if anything about their model or their market may be relevant. The gambling sites, porn sites, financial information and travel sites that are all doing well must be too commercial to be put forward as 'authentic' cultural products.

Martin's promotion of creativity and authenticity seem to offer an optimistic picture in terms of recognition and success. If personal interest is all you need then a level playing field exists at Epic. There are no limits to the opportunities in web enterprise as everyone has something unique to offer. The cultural industries are presented as a more likely space for social mobility and free expression. McRobbie has emphasised that in the subcultural economies of music, art and fashion, people are creating their own jobs (admittedly often insecure and not always financially successful) and carving out an existence which is creative (McRobbie 1998). This has been used politically, to generate optimism about the economy. The ethos around 'Cool Britannia' in the late 1990s celebrated a version of British creativity with urban, working class, home-grown roots, owing little to education, a genuine cultural capital of the British working class (McRobbie 2002:100).

This optimism is fuelled by the fact that subcultural capital does not seem to require too much financial investment. In the case of black music, McRobbie argues that the value is not in the economic value of a group but in its 'aesthetic seriousness', creating groundbreaking work in music and technological terms (McRobbie 1999:17). This kind of cultural innovation is typified by the desire to avoid commercialisation, which can take away the community ownership of the sound. This music production also takes place outside of colleges and universities which means that many young black musicians are deprived of the resources they could be getting from record companies or the academy (unlike art, fashion and journalism students) so black music has much deeper associations with the street and can claim an added authenticity (McRobbie 1999).

In positioning web work as if it depends on subcultural capital, Martin is able to mystify the skills and knowledge involved and locates them outside the organisation. This is because subcultural capital is often valued as a product of a unique life experience rather than sophisticated craft skill. If subcultural capital comes from *belonging* to an excluded culture then joining the establishment will dilute it. If subcultural capital refers to a particular skill, then corporate or establishment interest could provide investment and development of that skill. In presenting subcultural capital as an elusive resource, always at risk of being engulfed in the mainstream, its value is enhanced. Subcultural capital potentially has value in publishing for the cultural intermediaries who work in the youth market, but this depends on perceiving the knowledge as mysterious and rare. Writing about *ID* and *The Face* magazines, McRobbie says

‘Everything within these magazines has to be translated as a kind of secret, insider knowledge about what is ‘cool’ and ‘hip’ to which only they, as editors and journalists have access and which they can then sell to the big companies in exchange for advertising revenue by providing them with knowledge of ‘the street’ and of black youth culture and urban life’ (McRobbie 1998:173).

These exciting and glamorous opportunities for celebrating subculture appear to be disrupting (even sometimes reversing) class hierarchies. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, it is implied that for an expanding consumer economy, notions of taste and talent are no longer ascribed within a rigid social hierarchy. As new kinds of moneyed classes arise with new industries (say, web innovation), creativity can also be used to express class mobility as a victory for style and aesthetic strategies as much as commercial nous, and help to avoid the negative evaluations associated with being ‘nouveau riche’. Martin’s talk draws on these promises positioning web work in terms of authenticity versus commercialism.

## **Back to the Big Wednesday meeting: accidental audiences**

As Martin began his talk at the Big Wednesday meeting, he referred to his recent experiences (as a member of the board) evaluating Epic websites at investment meetings. The publishing directors in the audience had attended these meetings, bidding for money to develop their sites. This is a likely reason Tom was looking uncomfortable. The investment meetings had been stressful for everyone. Most people in the division had put everything on hold to prepare the proposals, which were fraught with anxieties over what would really impress the board. Tom had been the one to present the sites for Wellbeing and everyone in the audience was still waiting to find out whether the bids for their sites had been successful. This gave every word that Martin and Phil uttered extra impact.

*Phil had just finished the part about the great things that can be achieved by people who are enthusiastic. He introduced the next speaker – Neil – as one of these people, a ‘nutter’ who runs things from his own bedroom. Phil tells us that, as well as working on a site about gadgets, Neil also has his own project. Neil is tall and trendy and tells us all about his hugely popular sideline with a surprisingly earnest expression and tone.*

*Neil explains how since December he has been working in his spare time on a pop-gossip email community. He is simply amazed by how easy it has been to create an online brand that is talked about. There was absolutely no planning and no marketing, people have just asked to be added to his mailing list. This week he has hit 10,000 recipients. He has spent so far just £240. He spends only eight hours a week on it. If you send people good stuff, he tells us, it just grows naturally. The users tell all their friends and do your marketing for you by word of mouth. He believes that web ideas thrive as tiny niches and relationships are their ‘rocket fuel’. He tells us we should remember the internet is a very human medium. Even if you create something very cheaply if it’s pitched at the right level, it will have ‘runaway success’.*

*At question time the audience are aggressive. They fire questions at Neil about how long he can keep it up without it costing anything. Will you ever generate revenue from it? A young man asks Phil Delaney about the share price. What's the view in the City of Epic? Why has the share price taken a dive lately? The young man says this in a cynical tone of voice. The questions expressed a lack of patience with the 'all you need is a good idea' philosophy and a desire to bring the talk to practical and commercial matters. Even though the layout of the meeting was not conducive to much audience participation, the audience used this opportunity to demand the recognition of commercial constraints.*

Again this speaker champions a creativity that comes from grass roots interest that is contagious because it is authentic. Paul Willis argues that cultural producers have to work to 'de-fetishize' commodities if they are to sell their use-value and authenticity (Willis 2000:56). However, Epic's particular brand of creativity can never be anything like the vision put forward at this Big Wednesday meeting. Epic is commercial and professional and all its employees work towards to ambitious targets sometimes within highly competitive markets. It is not surprising this presentation did not impress the employees. As this meeting took place shortly after the investment presentations had gone to the board, it was actually insulting to be told *after* the competition what the board were looking for. There was resentment at the timing of this presentation, the lack of recognition of commercial constraints and also the lack of commercial ideas (which is, after all, the main reason people went). The bidding process appeared suddenly, not as an occasion where the company could grasp opportunities to develop sites in exciting markets, but a means to reward individuals with the right amount of passion. Those who thought the competition was about presenting a solid business plan were made to look like they'd missed the point.

Since Epic is a PLC and exists for the shareholders and is a million miles away from these inspirational ‘bedrooms’ of obsessives, what can possibly be achieved by promoting the value of subcultural capital within Epic? Neil used the idea of word of mouth to suggest that these sites ‘accidentally’ make an audience. The accidental audience is where Martin’s notion of the ‘obsessive’ worker contains economic promise. It is actually a business model. It is a model about audience creation that is reliant on the worker’s individual personality (rather than investment, strategy, or their professional experience). In other words it is an inappropriate business model for Epic. This model about audience creation is normally applied to individual ventures. It is mobilised to flatter entrepreneurs by explaining their success without reference to their financial capital, or help from other people. Take for example this description from the *Sunday Times Magazine* of the man who opened the Atlantic Bar and Grill restaurant.

‘Peyton, an energetic Irishman who looks a bit like a young Gabriel Byrne, is a nice guy – the sort of guy it would be fun to hang out with – and you can’t help feeling that it’s this that’s at the root of his success. Rather than simply filling gaps in the market, he has consistently created places that he and his friends would like to spend time in’ (Hollweg 2003:12).

Here is precisely this denial of strategic thinking – he had not even considered gaps in the market. And yet ‘accidentally’ the kind of place he and his friends wanted to be, turned out to be popular and to offer something different to a wider group. Peyton apparently becomes successful without consciousness of the value of his unique cultural capital. He just does what he wants to do (how he attracts the money to back his idea we are, of course, never told) and people are simply drawn to his business in a way that directly mirrors the way people are attracted to his winsome (Irish) personality. Similarly, take this explanation for Bill Gate’s success that appeared in the *New Statesman*:

‘Gates, it is true, engages in displays of vulgar materialism – it is said that you can choose the display of electronic Old Master paintings to be projected on the walls of his house and that he can select the temperature of his bath from his limousine. But these very manifestations of excess demonstrate that his real love

is not money but computers. It must be so: otherwise, a man with \$50bn to spare would not still be working in an office in Redmond.' (Kay 2003: 24)

These explanations for success are usually inspiring because they present opportunities as a level playing field. Anyone can make it if their interest is genuine. Wealth is not a goal but a by-product of passion. Cultural capital seems to be disconnected from financial capital and has a life of its own. The limited fields of interest firmly connected to economic structure that Bourdieu describes in *Distinction* are replaced by 'A multitude of consumption activities from salsa to sailing where skills and enthusiasm not economic structures are the foundation of reference groups' (Boyne 2002:119). If this is the case then all you need is love.

We can see why Martin would use this vision to try to inspire people at Epic but instead this model creates an unrealistic kind of pressure for an Epic employee. By denying the relevance of their commercial context and ignoring the importance of professional experience, Martin creates an extra layer of anxiety. However well your site is doing and however much experience you have, you may not be producing something truly authentic. Success at work is read as a direct reflection on whether or not you are an interesting and inspiring personality. By positioning web workers outside companies, Martin hides differences in investment and downplays Epic's responsibilities for their strategies by heaping it upon the editorial workers.

Of course, this flattering vision of how audiences are made also draws on values that are not unique to Epic. Bourdieu has written that an important element in the work ethic of the 'new' bourgeoisie is the desire and the willingness to 'glorify their own lifestyle' (Bourdieu 1984:153). Bourdieu attributes this to the function of the 'new' bourgeoisie in the consumption economy. So this suggestion that other people might share your interests or admire your tastes and would then generate a little market for 'yourself' is one of the king pins in the ideology and social appeal of cultural production work. I am arguing that

while they may offer real inspiration for the career trajectories of artists, it has extremely uncomfortable ethical implications when applied to a large corporate organisation.

### **Passion and ownership**

The company's verbalised faith in individual passion fits the devolution of responsibility that I described in Chapter 3. The investment meetings in which teams had to present their bids for more money to improve their products, served also to construct the product team almost as independent entrepreneurs approaching investors rather than the people above them in a hierarchy. Workers were given the impression that their salaries were taken from their product's revenue and knew they could be made redundant on the basis of this representation. The sense of responsibility that workers were meant to feel for the products was significantly referred to as 'ownership'. This was a popular buzzword like 'adding value'. The term 'ownership' was used to suggest responsibility, personal investment and the right to take credit for success rather than any relation to actual purchase or possession. When Dan described the closure of Yourbaby.com it was a feeling of ownership that generated their feelings of disappointment.

**Dan:** Yourbaby.com closed which was a great disappointment. We felt, you know, we had some ownership there. It was very bad.

Interview 10/07/01

It is interesting that this sense of responsibility for the products can be described as ownership. The workers have freedom to create spin-off products and define the direction of the magazines or websites, and this encourages a connection between their sense of ownership and their level of creative control. The bedroom entrepreneurs also have ownership of their products because of how much of themselves they put in to them. Ownership is something that is associated with your real interest in the subject, and your willingness to take personal responsibility for its quality. Ownership is then experienced

as ‘passion’ for the product rather than an actual stake in the company or a say in how long the product survives. Ownership is how you *feel* about your work. If you are anxious it is because of how much your work means to you personally. Through creativity, ownership and investment can be read *and experienced* as qualities of individual ‘specialness’. Yet taking ‘ownership’ of a media product entrenched the creative workers in the role of product and market ‘specialists’ separating them from the higher level of the owner/managers who were concerned at the macro level with how all the product units perform economically.

At Epic PLC, this sense of individual responsibility, combined with a recognition that company resources are not likely to come to your rescue in lean times, is perhaps a more realistic source of this ‘passion’. Of course Epic is no charity, but workers will behave as if it is as long as the product’s existence appears to be fragile. Dan described after the restructure “there is that sort of feeling that we’re on the edge of a volcano and something’s about to happen.” The fact he has no say in the future fuels the urgency and the intensity of his work. It could be enthusiasm, but there is plenty of room for slippage into basic anxiety and self-exploitation. Passion can be read as a marker of the intense commitment that seems to be necessary to survive. Take, for example, this statement from Carmella:

**Carmella:** We’ve got to move fast on these things. The hosting migration has got like a three-month schedule, it should be a nine-month project at least. Part of the reason behind that is because you know in three months’ time Epic might change their policy completely.

Interview 10/05/01

Carmella’s logic at first seems ridiculous. Why would she push so hard to finish something in a third of the time? Her sense of responsibility seems totally out of proportion here. Why is she not content to work as if it is a nine-month project and change it if and when the policy is changed? Why is she working faster to protect herself

from changes that she does not control? The reason is that if she doesn't, she will lose out on the recognition for completing this huge technical project. When the terrain changes so rapidly, you are more likely to be judged on the success of your last project as one of Sennett's respondents experienced during her time in an ad agency:

“Look, these gentlemen have very short memories. Like I said you're always starting over, you have to prove yourself every day” (Sennett 1998:84).

This is why I understand that passion arises not directly from a fear of losing a job but also of losing a product, losing face, losing the story on which future work is based – basically losing the appearance of the worker who 'adds value'. This is why workers at Epic will want the product to survive and do well. They take on responsibility because it is the key to status and survival in this industry.

Epic's unrealistic demands are exacerbated by the historical impression that middle-class work is fulfilling. This means that feelings of passion about work are more likely to be read as evidence of power, status and freedom. Workers are keen to feel this sense of intense personal commitment. Both Sharena and Millie (the data processors we met in Chapter 3) were desperate to move into roles that they felt passionate about. They wanted to care more. This need to find fulfilment in work supports Martin's vision of the ideal worker as an obsessive. It then becomes a marker of privilege to find that the product, its quality and success reflects directly on you.

The company's responsibilities and propensity to exploit are easily pushed into second place by this emotional investment in the product. Epic promotes a work ethic that emphasises what workers are *giving* of themselves to make sure their output is unique. It is certainly partly a privilege to be judged on spectacular individual performance but Epic's employees are also encouraged to forget that they are doing the work of an organisation. There remains this contrast between the huge amounts of trust,

responsibility and knowledge creative workers are given concerning the product and the tiny amounts of trust, responsibility and knowledge about the company's wider and longer term economic strategies. The responsibility of directors to create decent long-term business plans and demonstrate long-term commitments to their employees is conveniently eclipsed. This reveals how an inappropriate economic model, based on the value of subcultural capital, is incredibly useful within Epic for deflecting attention from the organisation's responsibilities towards its own people.

### **Passion and career development**

The company's enthusiasm for individual self-development creates more opportunities for workers to bring activities they enjoy into their work, but the onus on individual development entails individual investment. Designer Imran had come into the company at the age of 17 on a college placement. Because he came from an art background, all of his training in design with computers had to come from Epic. He started off doing design for print but gradually moved into design for the websites. I asked him about this development.

**Imran:** I used to go home and practise on my computer and think 'that's what I wanna do, I wanna do animation, web work'. And one day I came into work and I brought in a disc which I'd done at home, created a little movie, showed it to Guy and Guy was impressed, and that's when he said I think you should do this kind of work.

Interview 02/10/00

In this case, Imran is following an interest, but at the same time taking on responsibility for his own inspiration, development and training. The argument would be that it works for the employee and the company at once. He enjoys working with moving designs; they don't need to spend so much on training him or buying in a more expensive web designer. Imran's development at work is self-initiated and it is also self-funded. This is

particularly significant in this case, because Imran is trying to develop skills in higher prestige design areas with greater technological content and status, which would for that very reason, be more expensive than further training on the packages he knows. At what point does the hobby that enhances your work become privately funded training? Are the people 'who put hard work even into play' playing at all (Beck 2000:62)? Actually Imran is obliged to adopt the bourgeois' 'proprietary relation to himself as bodily property' and so he must invest in this property privately (Skeggs 2004:9).

There are two dangers in this, firstly the emphasis on self-development is more likely to benefit those who are already privileged, particularly where expensive skills are concerned. Secondly, aside from reducing organisational costs, management also downplay their own responsibility for developing staff. Imran's manager is not required to develop Imran's skills, only to notice that he has them, once he has taught himself. This contributes to the same story that Carmella was using to avoid her responsibilities for Sharena and Millie's development in Chapter 3. The reification of self-development contributes to a managerial approach that is unconscious of any duty of care and for this reason unaware of their own ability to invest in staff.

Epic's acceptance that personal interests add something to your work certainly helped some people to mould their jobs in ways that suited them. Ned is an interesting case in point because in the time I was there observing (i.e. in the space of three months) he managed to change his job from basic admin to technical project management to web journalism. This is Carmella, his manager, talking about him:

**Carmella:** His job's just been redesigned because he actually quite enjoys it and he's done work on the editorial side of things. There was not a vacancy there because it hadn't been advertised but Susan was looking for somebody to help on the editorial side so he mentioned this to me and we sat down and talked about it.  
Interview 30/10/00

Carmella took an active interest in the work that Ned enjoyed. It was important that Ned was very vocal with his manager about his 'passion' even though it was not related to the work he was doing for her. This shows his willingness to risk the possibility that Carmella may be annoyed by his short stay in her technical department. But it also meant that it wouldn't be such a shock to Carmella to imagine him in the role that hadn't yet been advertised. He was presenting himself as over skilled for administrative work, which he proved by his activities outside work. Rather than appearing disloyal, Ned was able to present himself as having something extra to offer.

I described in Chapter 2 that I had found Ned's attempts to get involved in my own work irritating and insincere. He was also volunteering to facilitate online chat sessions in the evenings. He claimed to really enjoy staying late, all on his own in the office, chatting online with new mums. Again, I found this unconvincing at the time, but from Carmella's vantage point he was demonstrating his genuine interests. In this way he won part-time work in the editorial team on Yourbaby.com.

**Emma:** Is it not something quite unusual to have someone on production doing editorial?

**Carmella:** No because he'd already started doing a few bits and pieces and it's not like he hasn't done editorial stuff. He does, mainly in his own spare time, but he has got the skill.

Interview 30/10/00

At this point, Ned has no professional journalistic experience. There was office gossip that Ned was having an affair with the editor of Yourbaby.com, although this may actually have been a detection of the covert activities involved in planning this career move. What I am interested in is Carmella's reaction, because as his manager, she is the person who can facilitate or frustrate his progress. In embracing Epic's ideal of personal passion, Ned's lack of experience is less of an issue to her. Carmella does not mention the quality or nature of Ned's journalistic output, it is simply important that it is a genuine

interest. From his position as part-time editorial he was later to move to a full-time reporter's position on another website. The restructure that closed Yourbaby.com and made him redundant proved to be another opportunity for Ned to get a better job that was never advertised.

It seems obvious with hindsight that Ned was not interested in working for the technical department and used this as a stepping stone towards his editorial career. What is most interesting about this is the quiet and speedy way he moved. There was no sense of a big departure; he never had any leaving drinks. No attention was drawn to it and no announcements were made. In no way did the move appear special or unusual. Neither did it appear to be a big effort on anyone's part. This is a fascinating contrast to Millie and Sharena's difficulties trying to increase their share of technical work in an over-stretched technical department. They were also managed by Carmella and they also claimed they had more to offer. Ned's technique to rely on personal interests, to communicate this informally, and Carmella's total acceptance and encouragement of this as 'natural', enabled an unusual career move to take place quickly without creating any fuss or hard feelings. Carmella believed she should nurture natural talent rather than invest in everyone who reports to her. This meant Ned was able to progress without any public announcements or any public evaluation of his talents.

As Skeggs has argued, 'the binary between nature/artifice is mapped through hidden/apparent labour' (Skeggs 2004:101). This means that understanding 'natural' talent, will always involve making hidden labour visible. In this example the labour is social, and its visibility exposes the organisational hierarchy. People must progress invisibly in order to maintain the impression that the organisational structure is 'flat'. Carmella has to hide the work involved in investing in people, so that promotions at Epic appear to be based on natural talent.

### **The most esteemed relation towards culture**

This kind of 'natural' move was not possible for everyone. This is an extract from my notes on the evening of my last day at the company, where Elaine was using a leaving do to make new contacts and attempt a career change.

Elaine was talking to Lisa about how she wants to get into something more technical. She has spent £900 of her own money on a computer course. She said "My computer is always the most played around with – with the latest of everything, and all the most recent upgrades, I love computers completely." She is interested in getting into Digital. Lisa said, "why don't you come and shadow Carmella for half a day?" ... At the meal [later on], Lisa brought up Elaine. Harvey, Dan and Tom all agreed how good-looking she is. They were enthusiastic about getting her over to talk. Lisa told them about her course and how she was really keen. Tom was really keen too.

Field notes 14/11/00

This extract describes an occasion, when (like Mario, Imran and Ned) taking individual responsibility for your career development and direction is noticed at Epic. It shows how this can be demonstrated in the amount you are willing to invest privately, but also in your day-to-day behaviour. Elaine expresses her love of the subject by improving her computer even though this is not necessary to being a PA. It is in doing more than just her job that she is able to demonstrate her 'real' interests and 'real' commitment. As we saw in Chapter 3, for those who do not have creative roles, anything within the parameters of the job cannot be interpreted as evidence of these things. Things that are already in an administrative job are not read as expressions of individuality.

Also, though Elaine picked the wrong person to talk to (Lisa is a marketing not a technical manager) she picked a good person to speak to because of Lisa's valuation of 'self-development' (that we saw in Chapter 3). Lisa enthusiastically went to the rest of the team (and the publishing director) to promote Elaine and saw her behaviour as real evidence of being keen to change direction and deserving a more interesting role.

However, the fact that the men in the technical team were more interested in her looks suggest that her course did not impress them as much as it did Lisa. And it is interesting that Elaine was never offered a technical position unlike both Mario and Imran.

When we compare the routes of Mario and Imran we can see that formal qualifications were not actually the most 'convincing' markers of knowledge among the team (Mario had just finished A-levels and Imran had no computer training from college). With the 'boys' it was the work they did in their own time, on their own home computers, *on their own* that was impressive. This is a specific kind of knowledge attributable to self-discipline; a knowledge that develops over time, through trial and error, rather than being taught formally.

This can be interpreted as a preference for Bourdieu's esteemed relation towards culture that results in 'general familiarity' rather than a strictly defined knowledge (Bourdieu 1984:265). Mario and Imran's method of learning enables them to keep their knowledge hidden and unobvious most of the time, but it comes to light when necessary, when they make a little video for a leaving do, or when the site crashed. This means their knowledge is evaluated on what it has enabled rather than how it has been acquired which according to Bourdieu, is crucial:

“the cultural productions of the petit bourgeois habitus are subtly discredited because they recall their acquisition in matters in which, more than anywhere else, the important thing is to know without ever having learnt” (Bourdieu 1984:330).

So the 'boys' have a relation to technical knowledge that is more akin to the most esteemed relation to culture. The very fact that Elaine has to declare her love of superior software and cannot demonstrate this casually at work, in her own work or even for the social life of the office, means that her need to declare it, discredits it as Bourdieu

suggests. Lisa's work ethic is not quite the red herring I at first thought, because the emphasis on individual responsibility for knowledge development is the most important value at Epic. What makes it useful is that it presents a level playing field and hides the fact that casual familiarity is always more successful than other kinds of knowledge.

Epic's portrayal of worker passion supports Bourdieu's 'ideology of natural taste', which promotes this 'familiarity' not as the result of a different environment or different means of learning, but as the marker of intrinsic propensities for culture (Bourdieu 1984:331). So although Elaine tries to communicate that IT is her own interest and passion, by telling us all about how she has modified her own PC (which benefits nobody else at Epic), the course (which shows it is acquired knowledge), and her need to talk about it (instead of demonstrate it), communicate that this is a dramatic change, rather than an expected and useful expression of her 'natural essence'. Rather than a demonstration of the strength of her passion it almost backfires, and illuminates how far she has to go. The team's emphasis on her looks now appears as a fixation with her femininity which contrasts with technical knowledge, only exaggerating the divide she must bridge.

In this example, the 'ideology of natural taste' supports gender differences at work. As a general preference for socialised knowledge, it is a criteria for judging worker contributions that could work to naturalise any kind of social difference. It supports cultural accrual over and above acquisition. The organisational desire, expressed at the Big Wednesday meetings, for people whose interests are passionate and personal, fuels this essentialist view of knowledge and culture.

Bourdieu's theories in *Distinction*, are based on the idea that elegance in expression is best achieved by living a life of luxury or at least a life 'freed from urgency' and anxiety about money or status (Bourdieu 1984:376). These conditions enable an approach to life that is characterised by ease, assurance, and entitlement and ultimately results in this

esteemed casualness. Bourdieu's theories seem to be at once refuted and confirmed by the acceptance of Imran, Mario and Ned, and the discourses that were mobilised at Epic to embrace subcultural capital.

This offers us an opportunity to look at the liberating potential in subcultural capital. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the reality of black, Asian and working class people setting new terms of creative excellence appears at one level to have disrupted the boundaries between high and low culture that Bourdieu describes in *Distinction*. However, the examples in this chapter show us that, while Epic may recognise many kinds of knowledge as useful and exciting, culture which is tense, uncertain or recently acquired remains less attractive. Whether the knowledge is about hip-hop or hosting migrations, at Epic they want it to be displayed casually. This amounts to respect for knowledge that comes from belonging to a social group for a long time and generates a suspicion of upstarts – people who want to cross social categories and cultural definitions. Unfortunately, this includes people like Elaine, who just want to try their hand at something new.

By privileging cultural accrual, managers at Epic are demonstrating disinterest in precisely *how* talents develop. They would rather see talent fully formed than witness or manage Elaine's work-in-progress. They maintain their esteem for cultural expression that seems natural, and this demands minimum managerial input, investment and coaching. In this representation of knowledge, every cultural world remains impenetrable to an outsider because no one will make explicit the 'small steps' they took or the particular kinds of experience and assistance that enabled their own cultural acquisition (Sennett 2003:36).

### **Back to the Big Wednesday meeting: embodying your market**

We saw in Chapters 3 and 4 that Guy, Dan and Imran had status issues about working on *Nursing Week*. They were all keen to work in exciting and elite markets that would reflect well on them. The ideas we have seen promoted at the Big Wednesday meetings encourage this. It is not only right but fruitful to align yourself with the audience as much as you can. This could also provide a rationale for recruitment. So when I asked people about the gender make-up of the company I was told repeatedly that the employment of women simply reflected the magazine audience.

**Dan:** 'I mean [Epic] employs women you would expect it to employ women – in women's magazines'

Interview 03/11/00

**Sharena:** Obviously on like your more female-oriented titles, say like *Your Baby*, you might expect a lot more women just because of the subject matter and I know it's probably quite dodgy to say that women will know what they're talking about, but the fact of the matter is they probably will do.

Interview 11/01/01

As I discussed in the previous chapter, 'the market' can be used in debates as a neutral and abstracted explanation of the way things are (Skeggs 2004). It is used to imply the status quo must be accepted despite the fact that workers at Epic try to intervene in markets all the time. This notion that workers are at Epic because they are following their passions also puts the responsibility for the make-up of the workforce back out in the labour market. Epic relies on this widespread assumption that workers involved in cultural production reflect their audience. This could be observed in one of the Big Wednesday meetings, where three site editors were asked to present their sites in a competition. We, the audience, were to vote on the site we thought would be the most likely to make money.

*The second presentation is by the editor of Automax.com designed to 'strike fear into the heart of middle England and middle class people'. Aimed at 'guys who drive past bus queues and pull moonies', their strapline is 'the definitive guide to arsing around in cars'. Modifying your car is now called 'maxing' your car which shows 'how much we own this market.' The audience are 'would-be outlaws. They are anarchic and feel they are picked on by the police, insurance companies and their mothers. We help them indulge their fantasies, achieve 33MHz and tell them where the speed cameras are.' The users send pictures of their cars and their half- naked girlfriends to the site.*

In the presentation of the AutoMax website, the publisher positioned the market as young, male and working class. Even more than this he has caricatured his audience as suburban aggressive types, and implies that they are still living at home with their parents. He tries to gain kudos by showing the editorial team's influence on taste in terms of the extreme macho culture they promote. They boasted that to modify your car with sound, speed and lighting accessories was now called 'maxing' your car and evidence of the site's regard in the market. Extreme love of noise, technology, speed and women was reflected in the audience's willingness to invest in their cars. Dynamic consumption that could have been portrayed as 'cheap' or 'down market' was simultaneously portrayed as manly and high tech.

Equally for the editor of the AutoMax website being accepted by an ultra-masculine market gave him the opportunity to present himself as macho. The market that has accepted him as authentically macho, reflects back on him. Because the market reflects on you and you on it, market-making is about the aspirations, prejudices and insecurities of the market makers. The meanings that are made can never be plucked out of thin air as they come from someone with a very specific place in society. Products and their markets should not therefore be described as disembedded in this context.

This is why it is so important to be careful amidst the celebration of a brave new world of interest groups. The interests themselves are often gendered, classed and racialised and in this commercial setting, these aspects are then incorporated in the quest for professional status. At Epic, they are not just interested in the middle classes by any means and, of course, there is always the sense that social identities could be repositioned. However, as the workers are positioning themselves at the same time, they are limited in how far they are willing to do this by their need to protect and enhance their own status as 'new' professionals.

### **The market as dynamic community**

At the same time as exaggerating the expectations on 'creative' workers, Epic is also promoting a specific view of the ideal audience. In Chapters 3 and 4 I looked at how the workers were keen to divide their audience hierarchically in order to identify a dynamic section. I argued that the need for a dynamic section was important because it elevated their own work. The Big Wednesday meetings express a similar fixation with dynamism in the audience only here, because they are concentrating on web audiences, the market is represented as a dynamic community. This dynamism works to reassure workers that their audience fits an economic model which guarantees loyalty and spending.

While the editor's need to elevate his market as macho and high tech, can be seen as an attempt to elevate his market culturally, it also ensures it fits a desired economic model. The audience was working class and young but their technical knowledge and the intensity of their passion implied their spending was both sophisticated and reliable. Their passion was meant to make us confident that the money they have, and probably some they don't, will go on this hobby. Epic looks for passion in audiences at the same time as looking for passion in the workers. They are drawn towards social groups whose enthusiasms can be easily identified and are spending conspicuously. Passion in the

audience is important for both Epic's revenue streams. Passion exhibited by a social group is something that will be attractive to advertisers. Secondly, the audience have so much passion that they might well subscribe to a magazine or website. The dynamic community can also be seen in the presentation by the team who worked on the site called [Mobile-in-manchester.com](http://Mobile-in-manchester.com).

*Last up are Jamie and Andrea, the creative and commercial directors of Mobile-in-manchester.com. Though this site does not come from a magazine, Epic has several mainstream youth radio stations. They re-launched their site in July with the aim of becoming the 'total digital experience' for the typical 18-24 year old. They focus on event listings exploiting both local and national ad revenue. They are excited about Wap phones and their appeal to people who want to stay out all night. They are also excited about SMS messaging and the potential to 'exploit kid's mad, mad thirst for communication'. Mobile-in-manchester will offer free text messaging.*

Interestingly, and as in the Automax case, the passion in the audience is not for the website. The economic model used at Epic is definitely not based on functional consumption. The model depends on an anthropological approach to social groups that share the same enthusiasms, belong to the same scene and therefore buy the same kind of products. The interest itself is independent of the media product though it might be *enhanced* by a website or a magazine.

The strength of feeling and 'passion' that Epic seeks for economic reasons, does not fit well with definitions of community that emphasise temporary, strategic alliances or diverse needs. Within academic debates, the difficulties with pinning down the media audience have been recognised. Ang describes the diverse audience that 'is not made up of fixed, original differences, but is an ever-fluctuating...a fluid diversity emanating from constant cultural traffic and interaction rather than from the persistence of original, rooted

and traditional ‘identities’ (Ang 1996:155). Although the fractured and fluid community is likely to represent audiences more accurately, an intangible audience does not amount to a very convincing story of economic potential or return on investment for an advertiser. Despite the fact that the Big Wednesday presentations appeared to be anti-commercial, Epic is commercially interested in the idea of committed, excitable, social groups with homogenous tastes.

What Jamie and Andrea are interested in is the young people’s “mad, mad thirst for communication”. Like the Automax audience, passion is rooted in their culture and social relations. Cultural producers are interested in all the ways of making social meaning that can be ‘worked through commodities and commodity relations’ (Willis 2000:48). New products will be spread around the group by word of mouth and brands and products will become integrated in their cultural identity and social activities. Their purchases support their participation in a specific social scene. The young people’s dynamism is expressed by wanting to be at the cutting edge, having the latest technology. They are not followers in taste terms. So despite the fact these young people listen to unsophisticated ‘mainstream’ music, and probably wear mainstream clothes, they will nevertheless be the very first to embrace Wap phones, buy ringtones and celebrity ansaphone messages, etc.

The construction of the audience is not the controlling/colonising force that it is sometimes made out to be in discussions about globalisation and the media (Ang 1996:162-180). Neither do professionals have any intention of fixing the market permanently as they want it to be dynamic and willing to up-grade its level of consumption. The anonymous web audience must nevertheless be made into a *tangible* object (our market) so it can be sold and sold to and it is fixed temporarily for this purpose (Slater 2002). ‘New’ professionals don’t want to control the audience, but they do want to find and encourage dynamism within it on their own terms. The possibilities in the market are limited by their ‘cultural expertise’, their perception affects how, where

and by whom they can imagine dynamic spending (Slater 2002:70). If, as I've shown, workers are even expected to represent the market, they will also be limited by what they can imagine being, liking and doing themselves.

### **Cultural evaluations**

Epic's economic model (comprised of the passionate worker, the accidental audience and the dynamic community) is certainly cultural as much as it is economic. It provides a compelling rationale for evaluating workers on the basis of their disposition in terms of their enthusiasm for the product and their affinity with the media audience.

For example, there was one market that was racially or ethnically mixed and this had a predictable effect on the ethnic make-up of the workforce in that team. While I was a participant observer at Epic the team from *Local Authority News* magazine moved into the building. Sharena describes what a difference this made.

**Sharena:** When I joined, you know, as a person of colour, I think the first thing you do is look at your surroundings and when I joined there was one other black girl in classified and there was Girish in accounts and I thought OK great (laughs) two people in the whole building!

**Emma:** Really?

**Sharena:** Yeah, but I feel more comfortable now.

**Emma:** So since you joined there's been an increase?

**Sharena:** Yeah, well quite a few people came with *Local Authority News*. There's quite a few black girls and some Asians as well down there. So it's getting there. It's a comfortable amount for me now. A comfortable amount! (laughs) That sounds terrible! (laughs) But you know what I mean, it's not, it's not um...

**Emma:** Intimidating?

**Sharena:** No, that's it.

Interview 02/08/01

As a trade publication for public sector managers, the *Local Authority News* market is celebrated as ethnically mixed. The public sector employs more ethnic minorities because of a mixture of adopting equal opportunities policies (advertising all vacancies) and racism (historically recruiting ethnic minority workers for the lowest level positions in the

NHS, transport, etc.) This is why it is telling that Sharena feels more comfortable when this magazine team is moved into our building. This would confirm the impression that because of the idealisation of worker/audience affinity the racial perception of the market was affecting the people who were recruited at Epic.

The link between temperament and economic results, and personal interests and product authenticity allows managers to evaluate workers culturally. This is why I see cultural evaluations as institutionally legitimated within Epic. Alexandra Ourossoff who studied two very different work organisations also concluded that different kinds of temperaments were given different economic values (Ourossoff 2001). The managers in a manufacturing company she observed were fixated with a model of a 'tough' manager who could make 'tough' decisions and they used stereotypical views of femininity and masculinity to play this out. As long as actions were carried out boldly, without hesitation, 'It was taken for granted that the effect was in alignment with the company's economic interests' (Ourossoff 2001:44). She concluded that despite evidence to the contrary, managers were keen to promote this tough temperament as most likely to achieve a more productive factory. In this manufacturing company, gendered personality was elevated above professional experience or strategy. There was limited interest in judging other managers on their factory results. Economic models based on impressions of temperament displace alternative means of measuring contribution that might be more appropriate or at least offer the possibility of public review.

I have argued in this chapter that at Epic affinity with the market was understood not only in terms of a capacity for empathy but in terms of direct personal experience and embodied knowledge. Even when she was recruiting *freelance* designers, Lisa was keen that they appeared to embody of the qualities of the audience they would be designing for:

We had meeting with Dave at 6.00. He has a really flash PowerPoint presentation and Lisa is impressed. Afterwards she says she thinks he will be better for *Health Management Today* and *Local Authority News* – he’s professional, more B2B than consumer. Actually he’s done loads of stuff for [a consumer film magazine] but everything looks quite dark and heavy on his lap top. He talks very seriously about it. I went for a drink with him after and he told me he’s joined a design cooperative. Also he talked about being a designer – always bracketed into exciting or boring. Wished his work was judged against the brief and nothing else.

Field notes 10/10/00

We had a meeting with Paul. Paul showed us none of his stuff at all but asked loads of questions and wrote everything down. Lisa said she thought he was really nice and laid back.

Field notes 13/10/00

Despite the fact that Dave did have experience designing for consumer magazines, he was offered work on the trade titles because he came across as professional and serious in person. Paul who had, amazingly, shown us nothing, was offered the work for the lighter (but much more well known) *Your Baby*, because his personality seemed lighter, when compared to Dave’s. Because he asked so many questions he seemed open and interested and ‘nice’, if less professional. Ironically, Dave’s comments in the pub indicate that he *knew* he was likely to be judged on these terms. This is understandably depressing for someone who wants to be judged on their portfolio of work.

So far in this chapter, I have revealed the economic rationale behind Epic’s interest in subcultural capital and worker/market matching. By looking at several examples I have begun to suggest how this model maintains social differences. I showed how difficult Elaine found it to move sideways within Epic and I argued that it was hard for her to present a convincing display of ‘natural’ interest in IT. I discussed the widespread assumption within Epic that workers ‘naturally’ reflected the audiences of their media products. While Dan, Guy and Imran had status anxieties about working on nursing products, this chapter revealed how much macho kudos was gained for the editor of the Automax website. Bourdieu’s observation that cultural intermediaries are obliged to sell their own way of life, helps us to understand how the ‘common or garden business’ of

selling is reinvented into a passionate calling only for those with ‘genuine’ cultural familiarity.

### **The limits of subcultural capital**

I interviewed Jasmine because she told me that she got her job at Epic from her brother’s girlfriend’s brother. As a freelancer, Jasmine was especially reliant on her social connections to get work. At the time of our first interview she was on her second three-month contract with Epic. She was not strictly speaking a freelancer as she did not contract out specific skills to several companies or work from home. She was more of a contract hopper. By contract hopping she was intending to increase her pay and status, so she spoke as if she was on a career ladder. She said she loved working on a temporary basis and felt no anxiety about it. In fact, she said that she only felt anxiety at the thought of being ‘stuck’ somewhere. Over the year, with each interview her confidence grew. Every interaction included the assertion that she didn’t have trouble finding work, a statement which gained more authority with each new job she won.

As well as her personal connections, Jasmine was able to capitalise on her ethnicity to get work. Jasmine’s parents were South Asian, from Kenya. After leaving Epic, Jasmine found out from her cousin about an interesting job in the Midlands. She got work as a journalist for a press agency writing about the Asian community. The agency paid for her accommodation in various flats and B&Bs all over the Midlands. They sold her articles on to local newspapers, magazines and to local government bodies. Her articles ranged from community profiles for tourists, to more ‘gritty’ social problems coverage. Occasionally, Jasmine was given the general theme by her manager but, more often than not, she had to produce articles from scratch. This meant that when they recruited Jasmine, the agency was looking for someone who would have prior understanding of ‘the community’.

When the sixth-month contract in the Midlands came to an end, Jasmine came back to London to live with her parents. She heard an advert for a newsreader on the Asian radio station that her parents listened to. She applied and got the job. At the time of our last interview, this was where Jasmine was working, although she was to hand in her notice the next day. She had mixed feelings about this work. It had brought her a kind of fame within the Asian community (the station had 300,000 listeners). She received fan mail. She described awkward conversations with family and friends in which they seemed deferential towards her. Her mother was extremely proud. Jasmine found the admiration difficult to deal with as it was not prestige journalism to her. The people who owned the station were arrogant and controlling. She contrasted the culture to Epic negatively in being hierarchical. Her pay was the worst she'd had since graduating. Despite the obvious social prestige, she didn't feel like a 'somebody' while she was at work.

Jasmine's experience gaining work might lead us to interpret 'race' or 'ethnicity' as a kind of subcultural capital. On two occasions, she felt she had been employed because of her cultural background. Both jobs were seen to require more than a journalism degree, and needed a sensitivity to Asian issues and politics as well as the likelihood of being accepted by the community. I even worried when looking at Jasmine's trajectory that she was in danger of being pigeon-holed into working on Asian media products. I asked her about this in our last interview but she didn't feel as concerned as me.

**Emma:** Looking back on it d'you feel it was a good career move that Midlands experience or were you worried about pigeon-holing yourself or being pigeon-holed by other people?

**Jasmine:** I think there is a worry of that but at the time I was just really into it and I knew it was helping me to think coz you have to formulate, and analyse, and find patterns from nothing. It's hard and it develops writing, thinking skills which transfer into straight forward news writing. Also it was a great career move contacts wise. And being a bit more independent working on my own, being disciplined, helped me grow up maybe.

Interview 06/09/02

While Jasmine is aware that she has got this job in part for her background, she evaluates the experience in terms of the professional skills and contacts she has gained. Her ethnicity is cultural capital, but the main identity and skills that are being developed in Leicester are those of Jasmine the journalist. This also comes across clearly when she describes that she found Leicester very different from London. She said she felt that in London the ethnic communities were more dispersed and less intense and she preferred that.

**Jasmine:** [Leicester's] very close knit. It's not 'gang culture' but you know what I mean. It's cliquy. It made me think that I don't want that.

**Emma:** You were rushing back to London.

**Jasmine:** I was a bit yeah. It opened my eyes but it made me want to be more what I am here.

**Emma:** Was it perhaps different attitudes to your work?

**Jasmine:** Definitely. There's not many and what there is is all local newspapers, local BBC – Midlands stuff. People don't see it's a popular career choice. In Leicester they think you're really important because there aren't so many of them.

**Emma:** It's a bigger deal then.

**Jasmine:** Well it is but I think I'm in danger of sounding a little condescending because it's not like they're country bumpkins.

Interview 06/09/02

Jasmine is drawn to a particular identity which she feels is easier to make as a *London* journalist. Without wanting to patronise, she finds that people in London are not in such awe of journalism. In her description, Asianness and journalism are both softened by London – neither feels so different or so defining. London, and its media scene are vital to Jasmine's professional identity. It is through this lens that she can present her ethnicity as an important *but limited* part of her professional identity. Jasmine chooses and prefers the identity she finds in London, because she likes the work and the living conditions that come with it. This is not assimilation but it is an identity shaped by ambition and the reality of how you get on in a classed society. Skeggs makes an important distinction.

‘Gender, class and race are not capitals as such, rather they provide the relations in which capitals come to be organised and value’ (Skeggs 1997:9).

In this sense, although Jasmine’s ethnicity worked as cultural capital, (expressed in her extra language, her social networks and her approachableness – her colour can be seen as a marker of these things) her ethnicity only becomes Asian cultural capital because media work was viable within specific racialised contexts. The value of her Asianness as capital was dependent on the growth of the race-relations industry in the Midlands and the recognition of the Asian community in London as a distinct media audience with a market value. It would also be wrong to interpret Jasmine’s ethnicity as straightforwardly Asian cultural or social capital when her disposition and contacts were so dependent on a classed and London-based media scene. Even though her Asianness was cultural capital, nobody would be given those opportunities simply because they were Asian.

Her cultural capital also includes her analytical skills, the way she writes, her ability to work independently and speak authoritatively on the radio. This is ultimately what she wants to nurture and how she evaluates her work. She is ambitious so she is primarily concerned about the kind of journalism she is doing. She is particularly unhappy about being stuck, bored and underpaid. Whenever she leaves a job, it is because of one of these things. Her contract-hopping career depends on her nose for a ‘nowhere’ job. This brings consistency and an element of career certainty to the many decisions and unknowns in her freelance work.

**Jasmine:** Like I said, [Epic] did offer me a permanent job, brilliant salary, and brilliant perks but after I came back from India I think I really started thinking this is a bit mundane. Bobby [the editor] had started giving us different kinds of jobs and swapping us around but I was feeling this is mundane, mundane, mundane.

Interview 06/09/02

Even in her high-profile job at the Asian radio station, that her family was over the moon about, she was desperate to leave. She spent much of our final interview talking about

this. It felt wrong, to be quitting what other people thought was a dream job. But she was bored and was being paid poorly. She knew there were no prospects there and didn't spend any time at all hoping this would change. She sensed quite early on that minute-to-minute news was limiting. Despite the fact that it was tense and edgy, it was repetitive and relentless. In other words it had the characteristics of low status work. This shows the limits of evaluating work on the basis (using Martin's expression) that 'your mates will like you more because of it'. Jasmine's mates were very positive about this job, but if you are ambitious like Jasmine, it only makes sense to evaluate work in terms of class status.

In London Jasmine found it easier to adopt a specific kind of Asianness – the identity of the cosmopolitan, outward-looking, middle-class, Asian professional. This affiliation affects her expectations and enables her to *move* without awe in the media. Her main and most consistent commitment was to avoid mundane work. Some roles in the media have kudos without the autonomy, variety and pay that connote real status or represent a 'good' job. Jasmine's experience illustrates why we need to limit our expectations of the tradability of subcultural capital. Cultural capital that comes from belonging to a minority community has to be combined with the education, skills and social contacts if it is to lead to a professional career in the media and generate the sense of entitlement and drive that is needed to approach work as something you use for personal development.

## **Conclusion**

During its boom the internet was promoted as a sector where one good idea could generate wealth without demanding the capital or human resources of big companies. This was the same vision promoted at the Big Wednesday meetings arguably several years later. Martin was impressed by the quality individuals could achieve through their commitment to their hobbies, generating his notion of 'the obsessive'. At these meetings the obsessive web worker became an institutionalised ideal. By this I mean that this

disposition (although attributed to individuals) was presented as generally economically valuable for Epic's web work. By linking the passionate disposition to success stories and promoting what I have called 'accidental audiences' the speakers at the Big Wednesday meetings ratified the search for creative individuals with an economic model. I argued with Ourossoff (2001) that this inappropriate discourse with dubious economic promise is appealing at Epic because it supports its culture and structure of individual responsibility.

I argued that the emphasis on the authenticity of a worker's disposition amounted to a worrying preference for socialised knowledge ultimately providing a rationale for maintaining social differences. Paul Gilroy has called cultural intermediaries 'a hip vanguard in the business of difference' (Gilroy 2000:242). I argued that though subcultural capitals may disrupt definitions of high/low culture they have not disrupted *the way* that knowledge is evaluated and the social preference for cultural familiarity. Where 'intermediaries used to be the arbiters of highbrow taste (boundary maintenance), their role is now the *translation* and *evaluation* of other cultures' (Skeggs 2004:148). However, by applying 'authenticity' as a general basis of evaluation, the cultural intermediaries maintain boundaries between a greater range of markets and social groups.

Epic's organisational fixation with authenticity gave managers permission to evaluate workers culturally. It meant that people whose cultural capital was newly acquired were more likely to be excluded or thwarted in their career trajectories. It also worked to mystify talent and cultural accrual. This privileged workers with other available environments in which to develop their 'own' interests leaving workers, like Elaine, who depended on the company to provide a learning community, at a disadvantage.

As the basis of Epic's discourse about talent, authenticity was also deflecting attention from many other important factors such as professional experience, strategy or financial investment. Judgements were personalised and generated a harsh climate in which to

work. Expectations of individuals in terms of their commitment were high, and there were limited alternative or collective explanations for success or failure. The picture of a ready-made personality with talent mystified skills and protected their value but contributed to a managerial culture lacking a sense of obligation to invest in everybody. At the same time, it severely constrained imagined markets, generating a preference for dynamic web communities that could be thought of as enthusiastic.

By looking at Jasmine's career trajectory I showed that despite its obvious symbolic power within Epic, the value of subcultural capital should not be overstated. Subcultural capital never operates as a general benchmark of competence in the way that degrees and middle-class markers of cultural capital do. Subcultural capital is always a specialist knowledge and this is only accentuated by overt efforts that distance it from commercial and formal knowledge communities. Also, in promoting conceptual and intuitive elements over technique, Martin was never actually promoting anti-professional work values. He was simply reiterating a traditional hierarchy between those in editorial (with self-directed passion) and those in marketing (with only technique). Ned mobilised a traditional career trajectory from administration, to technician, to creative. It was Jasmine's firm aversion to mundane and repetitive work tasks that was driving her success and not her unique personal interests or cultural heritage.

Passion is valued at Epic for many reasons but for the workers, it is clearly a mixed blessing. While offering fulfilment and prestige, I argued that this discourse created extra pressure, personalising the terms of their evaluation and privatising responsibility for skill development. The need to be interested encouraged specialisation that worked to exclude employees from the commercial strategies made above their heads. I will examine the problem of specialist knowledge again in the next chapter when I look at how the creative worker at Epic must be flexible to survive.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Colonising flexibility**

Richard Sennett identifies what he calls 'impatient capital' to explain increased pressure in late 20<sup>th</sup> century workplaces (1998:22-3). Companies are expected to deliver larger returns on their shareholders' investment and in a much shorter space of time, generating what Beck has called 'the reign of the short term' (Beck 2000:93). Directors use restructures to demonstrate their commitment to this regime. The workers at Epic were obliged to present themselves as flexible simply because Epic was restructured so regularly.

During the period of my study (18 months) the division experienced three major restructures and three office moves. The first time was when Epic Digital was created as a separate company. The Wellbeing Division of Epic Digital I worked in contained 24 people. Nine months later (as part of a much bigger restructure) five people were made redundant, three contracts were not renewed and seven people were transferred elsewhere. In October 2001, another Digital restructure made two more people redundant, leaving just five (though Dan was also made redundant in 2002, leaving four).

In this chapter I will explore the idea that seeming flexible represents the most realistic way of progressing at Epic considering the company's mutability. I argue that we should read flexibility as a marker of both power and potential power within the company's preferred conception of creative talent. I will continue to develop the argument that the creative persona, while being an individualised identity is at the same time a classed

identity of the 'new' professionals and one that ultimately works to support the managers at Epic.

### **The camaraderie of crisis**

Within Epic Digital the pace of work was driven by the fact that all the members of staff with spending powers were working to three-month budgets. All Epic divisions produced quarterly spend reports, however, other Epic Divisions were also working to a yearly budget. At Epic Digital the managers were not aware of overall yearly cost estimates. At the time I was there, they were not told until the end of September what they had to spend in the Oct-Dec period. On top of this, the figures they were given even at this stage were provisional and were still open to alteration until well into the quarter. These three-month budgets included the money that a manager spent on the wages of non-permanent staff. These uncertain and late-coming three-month budgets had far-reaching effects on people's work practices.

For those with money to spend there was pressure to spend the money quickly. For editorial, technical development and marketing, long-term planning was extremely difficult – if not impossible. Commissioned articles, advertising campaigns and new features of the websites were initiated as soon as budgets were known. This generated a kind of frenzy of adrenaline-fuelled activity. Too much planning time could jeopardise a project altogether so it was better to dive right in. Apparently minor obstacles also increased in significance, as delays were not something that could be easily factored in to projects under these conditions. This climate of decision making intensified the camaraderie between managers especially – camaraderie that was based on shared understanding of the drama of decisions and problems that would seem ridiculously exaggerated to an outsider.

Decision making pressures were, of course, on top of deadlines and demands thrown up by the customers and advertisers and intensified by the nature of the medium itself. Web work is not work in progress, or if it is, it is also live. If you are working on a magazine there is a clear line between your work before and after it 'goes to print'. In web work, information and adverts are uploaded all the time, are changing all the time, and disappear just as quickly. This means the audience is always there. It is not like when a magazine goes out to distribution and you wonder how many people will buy it. On a website you might discover in the evening that during that day you'd had your biggest ever audience. Had you put new features up? Could you have really impressed an advertiser if their ad had been up sooner? This is how Dan was able to articulate to the sales team that page impressions were like a stream of revenue that was pouring away as long as the traffic was not 'monetised'. In Chapter 3 I argued that these metaphors, which are uniquely applicable to the medium, created a more intense pressure on the sales team.

The demands on workers to react so quickly to budget announcements and to meet their targets were unrealistic so the climate was also one in which unrealistic expectations were taken for granted. Everyone worked with high expectations of colleagues and suppliers. Workers were intolerant not only of people who were slow or new but of anyone who was not willing to work in a rush, to work late, or who wanted to plan things. For example, I once sent a designer a brief by email on Wednesday evening and wanted him to have the first draught by the following Monday. On the Monday I discovered that he had not received the email because I had sent it to the wrong email address. In my field notes I wrote:

Anyway I had to ask him if he could do it by tomorrow – annoying to waste his weekend.

Field notes 16/10/00

Firstly, though it was my mistake, I felt I could ask him to do the work overnight rather than postponing the project. Secondly, I felt I had wasted his weekend – as if it was mine to waste. This comes from the assumption that everyone you work with will work at any time, or all the time, to meet your unrealistic deadlines.

This intolerance has important effects on how people felt about their colleagues but was something you had to apply to yourself as much as others. In meetings, Carmella (the manager of the technical team) would be asked when we could expect to have this or that. Her normal response was to agree a deadline and laugh raucously. She knew full well that what she had committed to was unrealistic and by laughing she made sure everybody else knew this too. It was usual to leave meetings wondering how on earth you would manage to deliver what you had promised. If you didn't make these promises you would be at odds with everyone else. The need to plan thoroughly would not make you look organised, it would make you look slow. Also, you wouldn't be part of the dramatic highs and lows so you would lose out on the camaraderie of crisis.

### **Irreverence**

Carmella was the manager of the technical team (seven people) and, as most of the division's work went through her team, she was very influential. She wore smart and masculine suits, but wore her long, straight hair down with a centre parting in a hippy style. Carmella was noisy in the office, often shrieking and laughing. She used to enjoy winding up Tom, the publishing director, by saying out loud things she knew he would want to keep secret. This irreverence was exciting. Her apparent lack of respect for Epic's secrets offered a hope to the rest of us that she might let slip what was going on.

Carmella had read some email from Digital Central. She pipes up, "Tom what does this mean 'rationalize'? They're going to get rid of all of us aren't they?" Tom immediately gets up and scuttles over to Carmella saying, "no, no, no of

course not,” whispering with her and looking worried and she just rolls her eyes and laughs at him.

Field notes 25/09/00

(In the pub) Carmella says to Tom that he is self-conscious in the office. “You’re twitchy,” she says. “I am not,” he says. “And self-conscious as a person.” “I am not.” “You’re paranoid actually,” she says. “I am not, I am not.” “See!,” she says, “like that, you’re paranoid.”

Field notes 20/10/00

Carmella relished challenging Tom’s authority and breaking Epic’s rules. This created an impression that she was outside or above any need to act the sensible, loyal manager. As I showed in Chapter 3, an important part of her managerial discourse was to emphasise the irrelevance of managerial interventions, arguing that people can make what they want of opportunities at Epic. This lack of awe concerning authority includes the implicit refutation of her own. At first sight, it might seem as if Carmella is willing to forsake her own power to sustain Epic’s ‘flat’ structure and create a climate of freedom and equality. I will go on to show how this impression actually makes space for her own discretion and is used to mask her own positional power as a manager.

### **Freedom at work**

I have mentioned that because of the financial pressures at Epic there was a low tolerance of slowness or extensive planning. Managers also had to evaluate their temporary staff as part of their product development decisions. In this sense, managers were obliged to treat people as product considerations. It was this context that made it difficult for managers to think long term about people, or to contemplate taking on people who needed support. Managers had to find people ready to take the baton and run with it. This makes sense of the demand for a certain kind of person – quick and decisive; dynamic. This is how Carmella portrays this as a matter of personality:

**Carmella:** Some people like to have a job well defined to them and say “look, this is what you’re gonna do to the n<sup>th</sup> degree”, whereas other people, you know, they can define how they want to proceed in the job ... For some people, it’s not a good thing because they do want more direction but other people thrive on it.

Interview 30/10/00

Carmella presents Epic as the kind of environment where people who like freedom will be happy and thrive. She contrasts this with more bureaucratic companies, where she believes people do not have so much freedom. She sees bureaucracies as a better environment for these personalities that have this need for direction. One of her technical team had formerly worked at Domesti Co purchasing and supervising the instalment of telecommunication systems. Domesti Co (an international chemical company with many household brands) was used as an example of a workplace culture that contrasted to Epic in being stiff:

**Carmella:** I think Lindsey has changed to some extent and she’s become much more fun. She had all this character that she must have suppressed terribly in her former job because they were all so stiff and she had to go into work wearing a suit every single day and it was bizarre actually because when she came for the interview she had these full-on synthetic nails (laughs). Apparently she’d spent two hours in the beauty place having them done to impress and that was the first thing that I noticed and I thought, ‘Oh God! There’s something strange here,’ (laughs) so obviously that backfired completely.

Interview 30/10/00

Carmella believes that Lindsey must inevitably have been suppressing her ‘true’ self at Domesti Co. Epic’s culture, according to Carmella, allows you to express yourself more freely and therefore ‘truly’. Lindsey’s fingernails are out of place, because they are too glamorous, or overstated and seem to clash with precisely the relaxed, informal culture that Epic is seen to have. Carmella’s discomfort with false nails can be seen as a middle-class problem with ‘excessive style’ (Skeggs 2004:99). In Carmella’s narrative the culture of Domesti Co restricts people, preventing them from being ‘fun’ and showing their character, and encouraging them to partake in ‘false’ and affected beauty treatments for the sake of stiff professionalism. The ‘true’ self is something that must come across as

natural, so if effort is involved in achieving it, it shouldn't be noticeable. An important element of Carmella's narrative is that she always describes herself as enjoying the workplace culture at Epic and being well suited to it even though she acknowledges that it is not always 'fun'.

**Carmella:** I've been given quite a lot of opportunity and freedom here at Epic and that's also coincided with working in new media as well and have been some of the most dynamic years of my working life really. I have actually really enjoyed all the stress and hassle.

Interview 30/10/00

Her own disposition not only thrives on freedom, but also on 'stress and hassle'. She assures me that she has the kind of personality that is suited to autonomous working. This notion of the self-directing 'personality' works to support an organisation that does not provide clear career paths that would be formalised in a 'bureaucracy'. This duo of freedom and individual responsibility are what Epic PLC can offer instead of security. This is why it is so important for the managers to contrast Epic to more solid and obviously hierarchical kinds of organisation.

In the last chapter I suggested that creative freedom at work and individual responsibility can link in such a way as to support a working environment that is more demanding and conditional than it may at first appear at Epic. The notion of 'freedom' is inseparable from the emphasis on what you give as an employee, while creative ideals frame this 'giving' in terms of personal passion and fulfilment. Self-determination must always be earned by the employee's valuable contribution:

**Carmella:** If you give people freedom and flexibility, they tend to pay it back by making more of an effort at key times and that's when you need it really.

Interview 30/10/00

**Carmella:** I think it's quite important that you have a nice fun culture. It's not something I do consciously, but it's just something I think is important if you're going to get the best out of people.

Interview 30/10/00

Importantly in Carmella's account, it is the 'fun' and 'free' culture that is given the credit for being able to extract 'the best' performance from the workforce, rather than the concurrent expectation that workers take on personal responsibility for their contribution to the product's success. I believe the two are inseparable. Contrasting Epic with bureaucracies works to draw attention away from the structural and cultural pressures existing at Epic. The contrast serves to present Epic as free of constraints when actually it has different constraints.

### **The importance of youth**

At Epic the emphasis on fun and freedom could be described as an effort to promote a youthful culture. I never failed to write down in my field notes any evidence of this culture. Entries included the amount of alcohol that was consumed in the office for people's birthdays or to celebrate achievements. Also the circulation of jokes and sensational photos on email and the regular banter about these.

Also on Monday Harvey and Joey went for a spliff after work in a secretive manner. I asked Harvey what he was up to and he said they couldn't tell anybody because they didn't want to share it.

Field notes 07/07/00

Rather than fear of discovery, these 'boys' are afraid that the demand for a share is too high for them to be more open about their illegal activities in work. This is perhaps surprising in a professional setting. Also on one occasion I noted that an evening do had been 'really highly charged sexually'. At this birthday celebration everyone had become very drunk, very quickly. The venue was busy, so about half of our group were crammed onto one sofa. All the people sitting on the sofa had different people on their laps at

different times. The conversation was also saturated with adrenalin-fuelled innuendo. The adrenalin was the result of an intense and emotional week. One announcement had stated that any money remaining at the end of the quarter could not be carried over to next quarter's budget. This sent all the managers into one of their frenzies of decision making. Then on the day of this party it was announced that the creative studio would be disbanded and this engendered a different, more subdued, kind of panic. This event, permeated as it was with a mixture of intimacy and abandon offered a dramatic contrast to a burdensome week.

What it seems I mean by the 'youthful' culture at Epic are all the things that one might traditionally imagine are considered unprofessional, or too informal for a work setting or work socialising. These activities can provide a welcome release from the pressures I have described – contributing to the merging of work and leisure as well as creating a space where relatively extreme expressions of emotion (panic, sexual banter, giggling fits, etc.) can be freely expressed at work. This could also be attributed to the middle-class, fun-maximising lifestyle that Lury writes about, though this is not actually reflected in a more relaxed attitude towards work (Lury 1996).

Michael was really out of order. He didn't get to Torquay until 3.00 pm. Alyssa had been trying to contact him all day. It was really stressing her out. He calls me and acts all coy about why he was so late. Says – "do you really want to know?" I told him I did. Then he said he "had the shits" – like that's supposed to faze anyone! It annoys me that he phones me, when he should apologise to Alyssa. It also annoys me that he thinks my embarrassment could get him off the hook. When I told Alyssa, Harvey said "he thinks if he's not in the office, he's not at work. He's just juvenile. He smokes too much weed."

Field notes 17 October

What this example indicates is evidence of team policing (I consider 'off the hook' as not telling Michael's *colleague* Alyssa, rather than not telling his manager). Hangovers and 'bunking-off' are not tolerated by team members as much as one might first suspect from the openness about drinking and drug-taking. None of the people in the extract above is

Michael's manager, but he has put us out, not because he is AWOL for most of the day, but because he has made Alyssa stressed. Nobody cared what he did unless it prevented us from getting on with our own work or meant we had to his carry work. I did not want to cover up for him because I expected him to take his obligations seriously. Sennett has described how fear of letting down the boss can be supplanted by a fear of letting down your team members (Sennett 1998). Team policing was needed to maintain the work structure based on individual responsibility when faced with new people who misjudged the 'youthful' culture for leniency. In a highly social workplace, withholding affection from colleagues is all the more powerful.

So this 'free' culture could actually be seen to demand freedom to work. The autonomy is only offered with the assurance that you pull your weight, and don't become a burden on anyone. It involved making sure you got all your 'own' work done, whatever it took and however long. Workers who were not able to work late became a threat in this arrangement. During my placement, I had to find two new flatmates for my flat share. This meant getting back to the flat in the evenings when people were coming round. Even though this was a temporary responsibility, Lisa picked up on it:

At 6 pm Lisa was giving me tons of stuff that was meant to be briefed in today or tomorrow. I told her I couldn't stay late as I had to get back to the flat to help my housemates show people round. She said, "It's like they're your family!"

Field notes 19/09/00

It's interesting that Lisa compares my flatmates to 'a family' because I have to leave on time. Lisa thinks 'family' is the usual reason people would be unable to work longer hours. 'Family' is her immediate thought when she sees a conflict of commitments. The extracts above show that anything less than total commitment causes mild panic at Epic. The seemingly 'youthful', 'informal' even unprofessional culture only goes so far because the standards of commitment remain so high.

It is because families symbolise a conflicting commitment that they are treated with suspicion, though there could be any number of other things that conflict. However, dope, parties, the Glastonbury festival, romantic weekends, home decorating, flat mates, are not as threatening as children or illness because you can choose not to do these things. It is because families and illness are perceived to make demands you may not be able to avoid that they become a problem for Epic's work ethic. Children also represent a lifestyle, where you the individual are not necessarily the centre of your own universe. The implications are that children or illness might pull you away from the company, where other childless lifestyles could potentially *add* something to your contribution say from your social circle or interesting subcultural capital. Carmella acknowledges that she is only able to keep up her position at Epic because the father of her daughter takes on most of their parental responsibility.

**Carmella:** You know I tend to work quite hard and sometimes err on the side of my work rather than Lizzie and obviously that's not ideal but in the back of my mind I know that she's got her dad so I've not seen that as my primary function being a mother really. It's not like I'm a real single working mum or anything like that, in fact, he does a lot of the sort of picking up and dropping off kind of stuff.

Interview 28/11/01

Even though Carmella is single and is a mother, she does not consider herself to be a 'real' single mum because she is able to work late, and is able to put her work first. So it is only 'real' parenthood, when the buck stops with you, that would create a conflict at Epic. Importantly, it only creates conflict where the more interesting and responsible positions are concerned.

**Carmella:** Me and Lindsey were sort of arguing coz Lindsey was adamant that there's people out there that do want a very boring mundane job that they don't have to think about. They can come in at 9.30 and they can leave on the dot and I do agree with her to a certain extent although I do think most people have a creative impulse.

Interview 30/10/00

Here, Carmella expresses the assumption that interesting work, and normal hours are mutually exclusive at Epic. Why is it impossible to have an interesting job that you can leave at 5.30 pm and not think about? Propensity to take responsibility is proved by putting in this extra time, and in one sense this 'buys' the interesting and autonomous work. This emphasis on youthfulness, freedom and spontaneous expression can be seen as another means of articulating the difference between professionals and non-professionals. The non-professionals are not as interested in expressing themselves at work and this is why they are able to leave on time. The fun culture is created by those who are at work to express themselves and find fulfilment. They have responsibilities and care enough to stay later.

#### **Against the bureaucrats**

Bourdieu has described how the 'youthful' culture is an element of the identity and the promotion of the 'new' middle class. As well as differentiating themselves from the non-professionals they also use youthfulness to differentiate themselves against 'aristocratic stiffness' and the "'up-tight', 'stuffed-shirt' rigour'" of the bureaucrats in order to claim the expanding sectors of the post-industrial economy as their own (Bourdieu 1984:311). Carmella articulates this herself admirably positioning her own identity as a worker against Lindsey formerly of Domesti Co:

**Carmella:** You have to also balance the department, because although she's maybe not as flexible as some of the other team members [Lindsey] pays a lot of attention to detail. She's very pedantic and, you know, sometimes verging on bureaucratic. But in a way, that does balance out some of the other people in the department like myself – because I tend to have other strengths and one of them isn't that pedantic and bureaucratic way of looking at things.

Interview 30/10/00

Carmella creates the impression that all skills are valuable in her team. She suggests that 'difference' can create balance in a department, but she relies on clearly demarcated contrasting personality types. Flexibility and other strengths are compared and contrasted to 'attention to detail' and the more negative sounding 'pedantic' and 'bureaucratic'. This extract of the interview shows how Carmella is constructing differences within the department while remaining positive about the team at all times. As I explored in Chapters 2 and 3 the pressure to 'add value' exacerbates the need for managers to talk positively. It is an element of the expectation that you will prove your worth and the worth of your department.

However, though this description can appear to be positive about everyone, it is still painting a picture of one worker as inflexible and different from both the manager and the other team members. It seems Lindsey has been employed for these very aspects and is a welcome contribution to the team. However, the role and Carmella's expectations could constrain her opportunities to demonstrate that she can be flexible, dynamic, or creative and all the things that are contrasted with bureaucratic are inevitably what Carmella is mostly interested in promoting. While Lindsey is welcomed into the fold for a specific purpose, and is (at this stage) spoken of positively, it is Carmella's own values, and own functions that will always be promoted to ensure their survival.

Bourdieu explains that as the tertiary sector expands, some people will need to substitute positions and their work ethic in order to benefit from this expansion (Bourdieu 1984). However, this situation with Lindsey illuminates how a worker's opportunities to substitute their work ethic or rehabilitate their skills could be constrained. Though Carmella thought that Lindsey had "become much more fun" her role still demanded that she pay attention to detail and try to implement systems. Four months after my first interview with her manager, Lindsey had been made redundant. This throws Carmella's cheery and affectionate descriptions of Lindsey's 'difference' into a new light and implies

that the differences were not markers of unique contributions but were always hierarchical. Though Lindsey's skills and disposition were downgraded, they were useful for a time. Useful not only for the work she was able to take care of (thoroughly), but also useful for Carmella's own positioning in the division. This is not because Carmella is manipulative or spiteful but because Carmella's representation of how skills are distributed is also painting an important picture of how movement is distributed. As Bourdieu observes,

“dispositions tend to reproduce not the position of which they are the product, but the slope of their individual or collective social trajectory” (Bourdieu 1984:333).

Bearing this in mind, exclusion appears not solely as a matter of day-to-day dominance (our way is the way work should be done round here) but as a presentation of your mobility against something 'stiffer', more rigid, more likely to stagnate (Skeggs 2004). Sennett has written that in flexible companies even 'stability seems almost a living death' (Sennett 1998:87). In this context, claiming adaptability is a means of progressing. Only adaptability can represent an upward trajectory in a structure and culture such as Epic's with no clear lines of promotion. Bourdieu's cultural analysis in *Distinction* (1984) reveals that the values of aspirational classes are preferred not for their intrinsic worth but for where they may help them to go. Excluding Lindsey represents a victory in this class struggle affirming that we 'the dynamic and adaptable' have the rightful claim to this work and are best suited to it though, of course, Lindsey had never been given the opportunity to put her hand to it.

Carmella's personal taste for a fun office environment and a relaxed management style can be understood in terms of the specific class project of the 'new' bourgeoisie, who promote the duty to have fun (supporting their consumption ethic) and 'velvet-glove' management and freedom (supporting their work ethic) (Bourdieu 1984:312). Bourdieu writes that 'the reason why 'intellectuals' and artists always tend to align themselves with

'youth' in their manner of dress and in their whole bodily *hexis* is that, in representations as in reality, the opposition between the 'old' and the 'young' is homologous with the opposition between power and 'bourgeois' seriousness on the one hand... and the 'intellectual' refusal of the 'spirit of seriousness' on the other hand' (Bourdieu 1993:105). Youth has always been an *embodied* style of the artistic classes. This preference for youthful dispositions may or may not be connected to a preference for young people for their lower salaries. Youthful dispositions are not necessarily limited to new graduates although Sennett also locates this preference 'in the realm of social prejudice' (Sennett 1998:93).

Lury expands on the idea that youth is a value that encourages the 'accelerating speed' of consumption, promoting a more experimental attitude to styles and products (Lury 1996:212). She describes how the meaning of youth shifted from symbolising social change to symbolising choice – people who are free from responsibilities seem to have more choices and so represent 'the ideal consumer' (Lury 1996:218). For Bourdieu, the self-promotion of this group of managers can not be separated from struggles about the art of living because part of their role in the economy is to create a whole social world that is fascinated by 'lifestyle' decisions (Bourdieu 1984, Featherstone 1991, Beck 2000). Accepting that consumption and work ethics are interdependent in this sector, I would add that people free from responsibilities are simultaneously used to symbolise passion at work, and choice about what they do with their interests. This is how youth surprisingly comes to connote 'new' professionalism. Interestingly, the issue of individual responsibility also appears in *Distinction* as value that supports a consumption ethic:

"The most important contribution of the new ethic may well be that it produces consumers who are isolated ... and therefore free (or forced) to confront in extended order the separate markets ('juniors', 'teenagers', 'senior citizens', etc.) of the new economic order and untrammelled by the constraints and brakes imposed by collective memories and expectations..." (Bourdieu 1984:371).

So the freedom of 'youth' and 'individualism' are values that appear concurrently. They are not only values that encourage the desired workplace culture, they are values that are written into the forms and purposes of cultural production. They are necessarily the values of this specific fraction of the middle class, involved in this kind of work.

### **The representation of technical work**

At Epic, where so much can be gained by being creative, technical work is in danger of seeming antithetical to expressive work. Carmella works hard to present her work and her department in ways that suggest her concerns are similar to those driving the creative departments:

**Carmella:** I want [my staff] to be conscientious but having said that I also want them to be quite fun and flexible as well because that's crucial actually in our job.

**Emma:** Why is that crucial?

**Carmella:** Because it's a changing environment constantly and it's quite a dynamic and demanding environment. There are new things all the time and no defined way of working yet. There's no set defined role that you can tell a person this is what you're going to be doing for the next six months because it just doesn't work out like that.

Interview 30/10/00

This strategy to describe the market or the business as demanding and dynamic is recurring. Carmella describes the environment just as designer Guy, sales manager Dan and the speakers at the Big Wednesday meetings have been doing. Of course, Carmella's picture has credibility because there are always new technical innovations and skills to learn. The editorial, advertising and marketing teams were certainly demanding new things from her department. In Carmella's picture, technical development is not something that people control. Employees must adapt to the pace of change. There's no sense that she will control how the 'new things' that come up will be handled; they will be reacted to. New developments will not be made to fit into her way of working, or be evaluated in terms of what they may add to her current approach. She is not committed to

any way of working. She needs to be as responsive as the advertising teams are to their clients, as the editorial team are to events. Rather than being in control, Carmella must be *in tune* with trends and innovations exactly like the creative workers.

Drawing on Bourdieu's work in *Homo Academicus* (1988), Scott Lash examines this notion that the 'new' professional's social and occupational positions are 'ill-defined' (Lash 1990:253). He argues that although they find their 'future surrounded with an aura of indeterminacy and vagueness' they quite enjoy the experience of their particular 'indeterminacy of social identity' (Lash 1990:253). For this particular class, uncertainty represents their ability to keep their options open and the possibility of breaking into new areas. But at the same time this vagueness and lack of precision also serve to mask their nominative or ascriptive powers (Lash 1990). This means we need to acknowledge that there are different kinds of disintegration (Boyne 2002). On the one hand, the symbolic and institutional disintegration which enables 'the fluidity of always being ahead of the game that marked the progressive fraction of the petit bourgeoisie', on the other hand, the social fragmentation experienced as suffering in the urban projects of Paris described in *The Weight of the World* (Boyne 2002:125).

So along with 'youth' and 'individualism' we can add the ability to deal with uncertainty in work as an aspect of the creative persona that demands a specific disposition.

Descriptions of the market in fluid and organic terms recurs as the means to ratify these definitions of creative people and dynamic workers. Furthermore it does so in a way that hides its nominative powers under a general impression that 'we have as little idea what's around the corner as the next person' and that the need for dynamic workers is the market's need and not an expression of the manager's preferences.

## **Epic Digital is shut down**

Just after Christmas 2001, all the people at the division of Epic Digital where I did my case study received a new contract in the post. They were asked to sign it and return it to Digital Central. Nobody signed it. The main difference in the new contract was a change in the redundancy terms. The new contract gave permanent workers a week's pay for every year of service (minimum statutory payment). After a few tense phone calls, Digital Central stopped hassling them to return their new contracts and the whole thing fizzled out.

Then at the end of March 2001, the restructure was announced. Yourbaby.com was closed on the day of the announcement. The plug was literally pulled on the whole website. The site that Carmella worked days and nights to build disappeared without trace at a moment's notice. This was a decision with a symbolic purpose rather than a genuine cost-cutting effort. This site only had two full-time workers on it and it has since been relaunched. At that point however, it would contribute to an illusion of hard-nosed decisiveness, as part of a dramatic sweep of product closures, for the shareholders.

The restructure was explained to everyone as a process of integrating the websites back with the magazine teams. So the sales and editorial staff were moved into the magazine teams they had been encouraged to compete with during the previous year. This policy reversal came from the decision that most of Epic's websites would probably not make profit as standalone businesses. Of the six people who were moved into the magazine teams, five left within six months. The digital division that remained retained responsibility for developing a few sites that were considered more likely to make money.

This restructure was an event that throws further light on the workings of hands-off or 'velvet-glove' management at Epic and the impact of their expectations concerning

individual responsibility. I will show how some people were subtly mentored by their managers and given 'leg-ups'. Chances to capitalise on this restructure proved to be greatly enhanced for some and reduced for others, Lindsey especially.

When the restructure announcement was made in March 2001 nobody was supposed to know about it. However, on the day of the announcement Carmella was already in deep discussion with Digital Central about a new role. Harvey told me that he was told in advance that his job was 'safe'. Ned had arranged to move onto another website straight away. Two other members of staff had already been told before the announcement that their contracts were not going to be renewed, though this was part of the same restructure. It seemed that almost everyone who was going knew in advance and even some who were staying.

Carmella and Ned appeared to have created new positions for themselves. Carmella negotiated a new role at Digital Central, quite different from her previous role, overseeing huge technical projects across a number of websites and account managing for Digital Central. In the way that she describes the move, it does not seem that she was promoted into a particular role, rather they decided they did not want to lose her and let her make a space for herself.

**Carmella:** You kind of think 'well how am I going to fit in here?' and 'what is my role going to be?' I haven't completely answered that I don't think. I mean I wrote my own job spec.

Interview 10/05/01

Carmella had the help of her manager Tom in ensuring she had something that could be announced instead of her redundancy:

**Carmella:** I mean Tom had to actually chase them all the time ... there was a time where I didn't really know because effectively my role was going to be made redundant. If they didn't sort it out before the announcement I'd be made

redundant also...I mean they wanted to take me on – John in a meeting today referred to the fact that they poached me ... it was part of the centralisation process.

Interview 10/05/01

Though it would have appeared at the time of the announcement that Carmella's move was all part of the centralisation plan, the extract above shows that there was work involved in creating and securing the position that was not initiated by Digital Central. Carmella depended on the efforts of her manager, and also on knowing in advance.

In contrast, Lindsey was one of only a few people who had no prior knowledge of the restructure. Lindsey (formerly of Domesti Co) was made to compete for a management position with Joff. Lindsey was at least 10 years older than Joff so had more project (and people) management experience. However, Joff was probably cheaper than Lindsey. Also Joff's dad was the managing director of Epic Wellbeing. It was impressive enough to have a member of your own family in such a senior position but it was even more significant considering the financial structure, as Joff's dad was quite literally subsidising our small division of Epic Digital by redirecting advertising revenue from the Wellbeing magazines.

In this context it would understandably have been difficult for Dan or Carmella to tell this managing director that they were making his son redundant. Joff got the management position (managing three people not just products) and Lindsey was made redundant. The managers were determined to ensure Joff didn't fall flat on his face:

**Carmella:** Joff has got a lot of managerial potential and he's progressed a lot since he's worked at Wellbeing. Before, he was quite quiet and was quite willing to take instructions from me... he seems to have changed in the last month and really come out of himself... I mean he would do lots of work but just didn't really interact that much with people but now he's forced to interact with people coz he has to attend a lot of meetings.

Interview 10/05/01

**Dan:** He's adapted very well. I mean Carmella helped me with that but he's really come on in terms of he's totally reliable.

Interview 10/06/01

Joff was promoted to fill the space of Carmella – an experienced manager. Without Carmella keeping a close involvement in what he was doing (which she did although she was now based in another area of London) it is hard to imagine that he would have known what to do or how to do it. What Dan and Carmella have said show that he had not demonstrated Epic's preferred disposition before he was given a managerial role but how he had to "come on" and "come out of himself" and Carmella and Dan had to support him in doing this. In fact he demonstrated a disposition that is actively downgraded – he was quiet, he didn't interact much and, even worse, he was happy to take instructions. Even without Joff's family connection, and assuming that he was preferred purely because he was cheaper, this demonstrates that people can be picked out to do well even if they do not demonstrate the most desired traits. This demonstrates the power of managerial intervention and investment at Epic.

Contrary to Epic's powerful ideology of natural talent, potential is not only about what you already have, but about what managers are prepared to invest in you. The people who managed to do reasonably well out of this restructure all depended on having some kind of mentoring. They were privileged in knowing in advance and were being quietly sorted out behind the scenes, before the bombshell was announced publicly.

### **Problems with competency**

I have been arguing that adaptability is important in a managerial disposition as it is necessary to create the impression of a confident approach to change. Because Carmella saw her business as fluid, fast and erratic, she evaluated technical talent in the same ways as the creative workers. She was primed to seek out people at the cutting edge and, by

implication, to overlook the support workers. In Chapter 3, I described how she was uninterested in helping Sharena and Millie to develop their skills so her description of recruiting Marco (a techie from Spain) offers an extreme contrast. In this case, Carmella was so concerned about developing his knowledge that she originally refused to offer him the job.

**Carmella:** In fact at one point we weren't going to take him on – but not because of that [language issues] – because he had worked in a very structured development environment before and we weren't going to be able to offer him that. Our main concern was that he would be an isolated techie. Within our department he wasn't in a learning environment which is essential for his job.

Interview 30/10/00

The fruitful learning environment is not actually essential for that job but is essential for Marco because he has previously worked in one. Carmella is somewhat in awe of Marco's technical skills and experience. She is happy to ignore the fact that his spoken and written English are both poor. Marco was very quiet partly because of his difficulties with English but he seemed to be conscientious and unassuming so his disposition was not 'fun'. So just as she did with Joff, Carmella had decided (in advance) that Marco was worth investing in. Carmella is willing to invest in men who do not fit her own idealised picture of Epic's workers. Joff was quiet and unsociable but nevertheless she felt she could groom him into a manager and a leader. Marco was extremely quiet but skilled and experienced so able to put his hand to many kinds of work. So these men are flexible in as much as Carmella is able to imagine them doing different and better things.

Despite Lindsey's logical approach, her managerial experience and her lack of shyness, Carmella was unable to recognise her technical or managerial potential. When Lindsey had been made redundant, Carmella offered her an administrative job in Digital Central. Given that Carmella expects people to shape their own jobs it is perhaps unfair to regard the offer of this role as her evaluation of Lindsey's potential. However, the offer certainly

reflects Carmella's evaluation of Lindsey's strengths (pedantic, bureaucratic, attention to detail, etc.) Carmella imagines that Lindsey could shine in this administrative role. So Carmella does not see Lindsey as talentless. Rather, she sees her as potentially brilliant at lower status work. To Carmella, Lindsey's disposition has no trajectory in terms of technical excellence. In contrast, because she can imagine this trajectory for the men in her team, Carmella worked hard to help them adapt to new work roles and situations making their upward trajectory a reality and confirming the 'truth' of her initial talent judgements.

This can be related to Adkins (1995) analysis of work organisation in a theme park. She showed that women's natural 'advantages' at work were not recognised as performance (emotional *labour*) and therefore not exchanged for rewards (praise, pay and promotion). It was not simply that feminised skills were interpreted as natural in the workplace but that their commercial and strategic use was also devalued in the process. The perceived demands of the 'dynamic' business justify Carmella's search for excellence. This means that women will not progress as long as feminised skills are positioned outside technical, managerial or entrepreneurial excellence. Competent feminised dispositions are not assumed to be going anywhere precisely because at Epic, competency is contrasted with talent. Competency is too earnest and consistent to be read as flair or dynamism. This explains why, despite her own success, Carmella continued to invest in men.

### **Reactions to the restructure**

For the announcement of the restructure, publishing director Tom gathered everyone together in a meeting room and read out a list of the positions that were to be made redundant. He read the list as job titles and the list included his own job title. This generated shock and outrage at the time. Although two people were made redundant with immediate effect, the others were informed that they were part of a 'redundancy pool' and

would be on notice in six weeks unless other jobs could be found for them in that time.

However, as Dan explains this was rhetoric, a way of softening the blow:

**Dan:** Lindsey was on the list for being made redundant but it was made out that we were in a redundancy pool. Lindsey just took it that there'd be another job. We had a situation where we had to sit down with her and say...if things don't work out you're leaving the company and it was only then (he slaps his hand down on the table) the penny dropped. That is pretty alarming coz she really thought that it was just a process and there'd be something else.

Interview 10/07/01

Lindsey was considered stupid for believing the company line about the redundancy pool although she hadn't been primed to doubt it as she was not party to advance information. Not 'getting it' was considered the worst possible reaction to the announcement. Even though Alyssa was extremely emotional and burst in to tears regularly for over a week, this was not considered as problematic as Lindsey's misperception that she would probably be OK. She was presented as if she was personally incapable of facing the music, rather than being treated differently, and for that reason less likely to be prepared for the news.

Sharena described the restructure as making you feel like "a cost", "just the work you do", "a statistic". In contrast, Carmella's understanding of the situation was that "they don't make people redundant they make positions redundant." She mentions this three times in the interview and on top of this is constantly correcting her own account like this:

**Carmella:** Both Lindsey and Joff were made redundant or their positions were made redundant.

Interview 10/05/01

Carmella attempts to present the restructure as logical, and impersonal. But only two of the redundant positions were on the website that closed. The other redundancies, including Lindsey's, all meant that fewer people took on more work. In these cases,

people were lost, rather than tasks or responsibilities. Nevertheless, because Carmella was one of the managers involved in the whole process, and Joff and Lindsey were both members of her team, this idea was useful as a means of playing down the impact of her own managerial evaluations. Again, this reveals the work involved in hiding Epic's managerial hierarchy and the impact of this hierarchy on relationships with other people. In my view Carmella is not just hiding the human consequences from me, she is also hiding them from herself (Ouroussoff 1997).

When Richard Sennett looks at some IBM worker's redundancies in *The Corrosion of Character* (1998) he implies there are three stages one goes through in understanding a redundancy. He argues that it is better and more healing to be able to take control of the narrative, and not place your own character as the passive victim of individual managers or global forces. The breakthrough, as he sees it, is when the IBM workers realise they stuck with mainframe computers at a bad time when they could have become entrepreneurs in the personal computer market or the internet.

“Being fired is no longer the defining event of the third version; the crucial action is the action they should have taken in 1984 or 1985. The defining moment becomes their own responsibility” (Sennett 1998:132).

He believes that it is healthy and healing to take individual responsibility for our lives, what has happened to us and what will happen: ‘The advice the engineers give to themselves consists of such locutions as ‘I should have known’ (ibid.:134).

I would not conclude that Lindsey ‘should have known’. Neither would I have expected any of the other people in the division to see it coming without a tip-off. What must be stressed here is that as information workers they know their markets particularly well. Information about the health of the market is coming in to the editorial team all the time and is shared with everyone as it is part of the daily conversation about the products and

their audiences. As I explained in the last chapter, a worker who has ‘affinity’ with their market is almost always thinking about it, reading the relevant magazines, picking things up on TV, when out shopping or socialising, discussing in chat rooms. As Dan said about Alyssa’s shock “She was doing very well in her own market place so why should she be concerned?”

Workers at Epic knew that the bubble had burst in the digital market but this had happened even before their division was created. I must emphasize the fact that, although media workers are more informed than most about the bigger picture, and certainly used to taking responsibility for the way they are faring, the restructuring decisions are made away from them in Epic’s hierarchy and in secret. The notion of the ‘flat structure’ is a useful and positive means of representing the creative worker’s detachment from decisions made over their heads. How can employees predict something that isn’t part of a public business strategy, which, depressingly, may not even exist at all? Even if you think a restructure may happen, you could never know when, precisely where or how big it would be. Aside from the classed agenda behind Sennett’s demand to ‘narrate one’s biography’ (Skeggs 2004:124), the people who were able to take responsibility and prepare themselves could only do this because they were forewarned. The call for workers to reclaim power in narration is unrealistic and contributes to the abdication of organisational responsibility because many companies operate like Epic – undemocratically, making these decisions behind closed doors, without consultation.

### **Creative or sloppy?**

Having realised that Lindsey was kept in the dark and then blamed for having the wrong reaction to the restructure announcement, I decided to interview her. Carmella had marked her out as different and when the events unfolded as they did, I wanted to be able to represent her in her own words. Lindsey was also very keen to talk to me about her

redundancy. It turned out that she had a strong investment in being (as Carmella would describe) 'bureaucratic'. Lindsey liked to be exact. Almost all her interview transcript read as if it could be written text. This is her description of her first day at Epic:

**Lindsey:** The desk that I'd been allocated just looked so unprofessional. It was filthy dirty and the draws were full of the previous person's possessions including this blonde wig, which was just so strange! In Domesti Co there was really good furniture and I was used to having a huge L-shaped desk and large screens and luxurious stationery so I just couldn't believe how scruffy Epic was and the computer on my desk was broken! But of course, at Epic, it was all left up to you. Even on your first day you were meant to find the IT department and get them to fix it! There was no induction. At Domesti Co you would be eased into the company, you know, so I just found it sloppy.

Interview 21/03/02

This extract shows how instantly Lindsey felt uncomfortable at Epic. Uncomfortable with her surroundings (scruffy, dirty, sloppy, broken, strange) but also an immediate feeling that she was on her own; no induction, no explanation, no assistance. She was expected to take the baton and run with it and this felt discourteous to Lindsey when compared to a company where recruits were treated with more seriousness. I consider this an example of what Bourdieu describes as increased reflexivity caused by a 'lack of fit' between Lindsey's habitus and field. Her habitus here refers to an environment with different cleanliness standards, well-maintained equipment and different ways of treating people that Lindsey felt comfortable with, partly for reasons of familiarity, but also because she had invested in the values that these differences challenged. The field refers to the environment and values at Epic PLC which Lindsey identifies as the dominant or at least prevailing norms, through the breadth of her description. From working at Domesti Co for seven years Lindsey had developed strong values connected to what she considered to be good working practices. Her heightened awareness of her own value-clash with Epic proves to be extremely valuable for my analysis.

**Emma:** Was the job as you expected it to be?

**Lindsey:** Nothing like. I found adjusting to this informal style really difficult. It

was strange.

**Emma:** What was so strange about it?

**Lindsey:** I felt that [the web developers] had Epic over a barrel. I was appalled by what I found, I really was. The site was full of code that belonged to them instead of belonging to Epic and it was clear that it would be impossible to move to a different development house however bad they were. In telecomms the investments are so huge they're taken slowly and seriously. If you buy telecomms equipment and services you will assume that they will be in place for a very long time so the spec and the contract have to be right. Carmella had a way of working with [the web developers] but I didn't want to copy it. I admired the speed she'd got site launched but I felt it had all been thrown together. The contract and the technical side of it had been put together in the fastest way rather than the best technical solution. The sites just weren't robust. I felt the situation between [the web developers] was unworkable. I used to absolutely dread phoning them because I knew they'd say "We don't have a maintenance contract." Mucking about on the end of the phone. It all just wore me down.

Interview 21/03/02

Lindsey uses dramatic language. She was 'appalled' and the relationship with the suppliers was 'unworkable'. She makes the different organisational values clear, Epic values speed while at Domesti Co operations were slower but more robust. Epic was prepared to work informally with people who "muck about" where Domesti Co took projects seriously and planned for the long term. Here, Lindsey polarises sloppy against professional organisations. Carmella used the same polarisation (in different terms) between the creatives and the bureaucrats. Harvey positioned the dynamic/commercial fractions against the public sector/bookish fractions. This positioning activity is just as Bourdieu describes in *Distinction* within the different fractions of the middle classes (Bourdieu 1984).

Lindsey's lack of fit wears her down because she constantly feels herself against the values promoted in her environment. She has high quality standards and she wants the whole organisation, all their agreements, all their products to fit with these. She finds it impossible, since she has gained these values at work and has found satisfaction in them before, to give them up even though she was conscious that she was not working in a way that would win recognition at Epic.

**Lindsey:** Carmella's way of working was to pick out the top priorities and just sort them whereas I tend to think everything's important. I just didn't feel happy letting things slide, but my approach didn't pay off there in the way that it would in telecomms. I think if I'd been very good at spotting what other people thought were the priorities, just concentrated on that and let everything else go to the wayside I'd've done better [at Epic].

Interview 21/03/02

Lindsey acknowledges that she did not have the ability to 'let things slide' or 'go to the wayside'. Though she implies that she cannot work like Carmella, in the previous extract she admitted she did not *want* to work like Carmella. Lindsey was making a choice about how she worked, and her choice was connected to her past experience. She preferred her state of being working in an industry and company that took things more slowly, planned thoroughly, and set up clear and binding formal contracts.

**Lindsey:** I became less confident working there because I got such a lot of praise and recognition at Domesti Co and I got far better management. I honestly didn't feel I had a manager at all. I was just left to my own devices to try and guess what was needed so that was what I was doing. I went from crisis to crisis without any sense of an overall vision or clear instructions.

Interview 21/03/02

Lindsey did not enjoy the independence and responsibility involved in working at Epic. She was expecting instructions and then praise when she followed them. It was very rare that she achieved anything she was confident that others felt was worthwhile. At Epic the individual is required to judge and decide where to apply effort, accepting that what they do not do themselves may not necessarily be done by anyone. Furthermore, the individual is required to help generate their own praise, it does not come automatically when tasks are completed. The accusation of 'sloppiness' is a value-laden description emphasising the negative side of leaving workers to fend for themselves, and putting speed above quality. Lindsey's observations have been useful because they have helped me to unpack Carmella's anti-bureaucratic arguments that present Epic as a free and creative work environment lacking in constraints. In reflecting on the restructure and her redundancy,

Lindsey makes an excellent job of identifying a logic that was not immediately obvious to her. She has come to see how Epic's managers are in many ways constrained by their logic of speed and 'hands-off' management.

### **The redundancy of control**

When Lindsey and I talked, I was shocked to discover that she believed that Joff *deserved* the management position more than she did. I was expecting her to rant about the injustice of the decision. Instead I heard a different story.

**Lindsey:** [Joff's] presentation was better than mine. I read it and it was better. The content of it was 'we can't know what's happening next so we have to be ready to develop in whatever direction is offered to us'. Whereas I'd actually put forward a detailed solution to the problems as I saw them. I said that I'd like to tighten up all the procedures and sort out the relationship with [the web developers] and get everybody working in an organised fashion, a bit more discipline around them and measure the work we were getting through. And they *hated* the idea! Fair enough. I think I probably was wrong and Joff was right looking back in that environment.

**Emma:** Mmm it's not the way they like to work.

**Lindsey:** No that's right but personally I think it's bollocks! To me flexibility means being able to change your procedures it doesn't mean having *no* procedures! (She laughed then as if she was shocked by the force with which she said this).

**Emma:** Well then you wouldn't have wanted the job anyway.

**Lindsey:** Probably not. This is it. Probably not.

Interview 21/03/02

All the words that Lindsey uses when talking about her presentation 'discipline', 'procedures', 'tighten up', 'detailed solution', 'organised', 'measure', are not the values or practices that are valued in an organisation that sees itself as creative and flexible. Also throughout our interview she'd used the term 'line-manager' again a title that people at Epic never use, since there are no lines. Lindsey appreciates that she came across as alien in her competition with Joff. This is why I argue that facing up to the redundancy comes from acknowledging the validity of her values and work ethic. Control in Lindsey's narrative is not dependent on predicting or initiating, and therefore controlling, events but

having an opportunity to define the value of her work contribution.

Lindsey is interested in flexibility, but remains committed to the values that she gained at Domesti Co. She has not tried to reinvent technical work as creative or to describe her work as a creative project. Lindsey is still describing work as a logical, rational arena, where there are methods that can be tested and where productivity and success can be measured. Technical web work for her is about building robust, stable, websites. It is also about *controlling* the quality of the sites and the relationships with suppliers. In this sense she believes that new technology can be managed, which is fundamentally different from Carmella's view in which innovations and demands appeared out of the blue and had to be reacted to. Carmella did not seem to care whether such control at work was achievable. This can be interpreted as a different *theory* of management. It was for this reason Lindsey was denied the possibility of managing at Epic. As bureaucracy was pathologised she was also denied opportunities to promote the benefits of her work style and influence the evaluation of her contribution.

### **Limited vision**

Lindsey's different view of her business, of technology, of her project led her to look for talent in different places. An expression of her limited vision is the fact that she noticed Sharena and Lou's talents that were invisible to everyone else at Epic. She also believed that the things that were needed in her business could *be learnt* and she had seen people learn over time whereas Carmella was looking for whiz kids (intrinsic excellence). My point is not to say which worldview is more accurate (we already know that Carmella's view, considering Epic's management structure, is certainly more *appropriate*) but to show where there are similarities and differences in how these two professional women recognised talent. In other words

“Attention is drawn thus not to the autonomous ‘universe of discourse’ and its logic of ‘true versus false’ but to the field of power and its logic of ‘friend versus foe’” (Lash 1990:264).

One of the ‘talents’ that Lindsey was able to see was Lou. Lou was web-designer employed on rolling three-month contracts until the restructure. She was extremely quiet.

**Lindsey:** I felt that Lou was such a talented individual and so undervalued by Carmella and Tom. They thought she was nobody and she was so quick.

**Emma:** Why d’you think they thought she was nobody?

**Lindsey:** Coz she was quiet. And Joey did an awful lot of showing off. Carmella and Tom *far* preferred Joey even though Lou turned out more work.

Interview 21/03/02

Lindsey was frustrated with both Tom and Carmella because as managers she felt they ought to notice people’s work, even if they were quiet. As I noted in Chapter 4, there were problems with quietness and humility when trying to establish a creative persona. At Epic quietness is too easily interpreted as evidence of an unappealing work ethic. This may be a person who enjoys getting on with tasks and doing them well – a person who may be more interested in their own quality standards than in selling to others. Both Lindsey and Lou’s approach is lending them an aura of competency rather than flair. It is because Lindsey values competency that she is able to see Lou as talented. She sees this kind of worker as the backbone of any company. Later in the interview she expresses the same frustrations even more forcefully:

**Lindsey:** Joey would walk up to very senior people he didn’t know and start clowning around in front of them and they’d know his name by the time they left.

**Emma:** And Lou never really did any of that did she.

**Lindsey:** Nothing. Very shy person. But at Domesti Co she would have been noticed because actually systems were evaluating people and how effective they were all the time. She was effective. In a more meritocratic organisation she *would* have been noticed.

Interview 21/03/02

Lindsey values Domesti Co’s systems because they appeared to be evaluating competence at tasks rather than social confidence. At Epic, prioritising a certain style of

social confidence (described negatively by Lindsey as nepotism and showing off) is appropriate. For many roles they need people who can sell themselves in social situations. It can be justified as a talent in its own right. Social boldness, even brashness, *is* in some circumstances more important than the other kinds of work you do. As I have argued throughout, the problem is not actually that social skills are valued, but that they are never identified as specific skills that can be learnt over time, rather they are fixed as possessions and workers are assumed to either possess them or not.

It is because Lindsey does not recognise this social behavior as a useful skill that she makes more effort to include non-creative workers. This is born out by her approach to managing the data processors Sharena and Kim. Her approach to their development is strikingly different from Carmella's.

**Lindsey:** Even though I was constantly trying to fight their corner for them I wasn't pushing myself forward as their manager. I didn't really think that was the point.

**Emma:** What was the point?

**Lindsey:** Well the point was to try and improve the team that we were in and make sure they were included. Their work was incredibly important – if they didn't do it well that site would've been a complete waste of time. What they did was firstly the revenue generating part of it, the advertising, and secondly the main reason the users visited it, so I had to make their job more interesting for them because I didn't want them to leave.

Interview 21/03/02

Lindsey's valued Sharena and Kim's work contribution very highly. To her it seemed incredible that they could ever have been seated separately when their work affected the economic success of the site. Her view of management included responsibility for development and inclusion and a duty to assess people's needs. Because she attributed value to the work they were doing she was willing to sit with them and talk with them for hours about the tasks they did, and tried to intervene to improve the quality of their work.

**Lindsey:** I've always thought the role of the manager is to nurture and help the

people underneath you to maximise their jobs. I know it's important to think about it but at Epic it's all so spontaneous, it's not thought about at all.

Interview 21/03/02

Carmella always described Lindsey as a certain kind of personality but here it is easier to see their difference in terms of conflicting philosophies. As Lindsey presents it, Epic does not have a theory about management and this is why managers do not intervene. This clash is not of essentially different personalities or even personal management styles but organisational approaches (which I have also been interpreting as class identification). At Epic, the organisational approach was never made explicit as these differences were personalised and diffused using the notion of managerial discretion. This meant the predominating management style was never identified as an organisationally useful way of thinking and acting that had certain effects. This impression that Epic had no preferred managerial methods or style was extraordinarily powerful in hiding organisational powers and preferences behind a veil of spontaneity and freedom.

#### **“Really low calibre staff”**

Although Lindsey is less likely to ignore Sharena and Kim, she is just as likely to naturalise their position. As a professional, Lindsey has a need to differentiate herself from non-professionals. Because of Lindsey's different opinions about management, her conclusions were not as final as Carmella's. Lindsey believed as long as managers were involved in people's career development, people could learn. Talking about a manager she had admired at Domesti Co she said:

**Lindsey:** She clearly wanted to develop everyone's potential and she had endless faith in what people could achieve so she could get amazing things out of people who were clearly very stupid. Because she believed in them, she made them repeat things for her so many times that she got results from really low calibre staff.

Interview 21/03/02

Tasks and craft skills can be repeated over and over but ‘talent’ can never be taught. In Lindsey’s picture, the confidence you have in your staff is closely connected to your own confidence in what you can do as a manager. However, when faced with the need to allocate work tasks Lindsey was forced to talk and act as if some people were total write-offs. It was important to Lindsey’s worldview that completely incapable people exist.

**Lindsey:** I’ve worked with switchboard operators who’ve been switchboard operators for 35 years and they’ve never ever wanted to do anything else. If you said “actually we’d like you to send faxes” they’d get really upset. These people exist ... they are mostly women and to them their families are their lives. The only thing about the job that matters is that it’s only 20 minutes away from where they live... Somebody’s got to do it so it’s better to give this work to someone like Kim who will actually think it is an interesting and challenging job because there are little decisions. She has two kids and *they* are her life and it’s nice for her to have something to do between bringing up her children.

Interview 21/03/02

Lindsey’s expression “somebody’s got to do it,” like Dan’s “you don’t want someone very ambitious in that role,” represent the professional’s commitment to proclaiming that some people are incapable. Again, in Lindsey’s account ‘quiet little jobs’ are seen to belong to a particular kind of person and this person is gendered as female as well as being a mother. Work, as it is divided into professional and non-professional work, creates only two options; your time is for important work, or your work buys you important time. Children represent a classed and gendered substitute for low status work. To Lindsey, women with children choose to find fulfillment outside work because this is what they want. This is because they are incapable or they prefer their family and not because there are no work roles of an in-between nature. As there are only these two options, women who work together in the same company are perceived to have fundamental differences from each other in order to avoid reinventing the work roles.

This shows how the parent-unfriendly environment is supported by dividing work into professional and non-professional roles. The work/home divide that was challenged by white-middle class feminists in the 1960s has overshadowed the fact that non-professional work has been feminised for a long time (hooks 2000a, hooks 2000b). Middle-class women's confinement as housewives and working-class women's employment in repetitive work have been justified using similar arguments – the idea that children can compensate for boring work and represent women's 'real' interests. While Lindsey benefits from the work that middle-class women have done to defeat such arguments, she is keeping them in circulation against working-class women. Middle-class women cannot think that by their own successes they are challenging sexism unless they also re-evaluate the way they gender boring work to protect their own professional status.

Although the cultural industries have expanded and new kinds of jobs have been created (web work is one of the best examples) in my case study this creativity has not stretched to disrupting the division between the professionals and the non-professionals. The 'new' professionals have many liberal and broad-minded values but they are still committed to constructing boundaries around their interesting, creative work. Importantly, the way that professionals exclude is rarely hateful. Professionals exclude by relying on the naturalised differences in motivation and aptitude that constitute talent economies. Talent economies are always presented as organic structures in which 'the best' emerge like bubbles to the surface and always obfuscate the interventions, judgments and powers of the talent scouts. Since professionals can turn to institutionalised work roles, and their own managerial investments to affirm the 'reality' of their talent judgments there is no need for them to be hateful.

### **The flexible disposition**

The professional's structural advantages mean that behaviours have different meanings in different positions. For example, Carmella's flirtation (with both men and women) could be incorporated in her creative persona. It could be read as yet another marker of her flexibility, openness and her willingness to experiment. It also reflects confidence or a sense of entitlement, because flirting involves an element of presumption i.e. that the other person will appreciate it or reciprocate. Work place games that can appear superficial or even immoral to an outsider, have specific meanings within their own context (Vaughan and Smith 1980). Work can provide opportunities for unique forms of subjectivity that might represent an integrating force, or be useful to create or disrupt hierarchy.

For Carmella, flirting with superiors can be read as an assertion: 'I belong in your league'. With underlings it can be a marker of her generosity and willingness to invest: 'We can be co-conspirators'. Most importantly, both these messages are dependent on the fact that she is the technical manager, one of the most responsible and knowledgeable managers in the division. It is because of her position that her flirtatiousness need not be read as sycophantic and can be assertive and playful. It can only be read as part of her expressive 'nature' because she is in a responsible and creative job. If she was doing admin work, flirtation would be risky – more likely to be read as technique, and an attempt to manipulate as it would not be part of a generally expressive work persona.

It is because flexibility means different things according to your position in the hierarchy that I must be careful not to assume the universal applicability of these idealised values within Epic. Flexibility for support workers usually means being available to work at different times. As she is a 'new' professional, flexibility is incorporated in Carmella's subjective identity. It celebrates her mobility as well as the variety in her work and proves

her suitability to interesting work with a future. We know that Carmella as a manager could control the definition of flexibility and presented Lindsey as inflexible, although Lindsey had her own definition of flexibility. In this context it would be Carmella who'd benefit from an impression that flexibility is generally valued at Epic. This confirms Young's argument that the precise values of the organisation are not actually as important as who defines them and who is consulted in the process of defining them (Young 1990).

We saw in the previous chapter that Jasmine said that she loved change and was flexible about her contracts. She was not quite so flexible about pay and completely inflexible when it came to doing mundane or repetitive work. Jasmine's outspoken intolerance of boring work ensured that in each role she was increasing her experience and developing her cultural capital. This inflexibility was actually the part of her 'flexible' disposition that drove her progression.

So the 'new' professionals are 'flexible' specifically in ways that enhance their own career trajectories and facilitates their claims to need variety in their work. Their own trajectories potentially demand different and less beneficial kinds of flexibility from support workers with their flexibility evaluated in terms of temporal availability rather than personality. This means that a culture where flexibility is promoted as positive does not necessarily result in more opportunities for everyone. Flexibility is most likely to be promoted by managers in ways that constrain support workers' attempts to be flexible in terms of variety in their work i.e. their mobility.

This complements Lury's work on consumption where she argued that lifestyle enclaves are seen as disembedded so that the middle and upper classes can exercise aspiration, experimentation and display their exclusive 'capacity to move between high and popular culture' (Lury 1996:230). Experimentation and freedom generate more consumption. Lury shows that these flexible subjectivities are more powerful and less subversive than

their experimentation suggests. The widening of middle-class experience now appears to be a goal in both production and consumption spaces.

The celebration of flexibility by the 'new' professionals actually represents their claim to increase the variety in their work experience. Celebrating flexibility at Epic, like creativity, amounts to the institutional backing of *managers* (and faith in their discretion) without any explicit or implicit institutional commitments to the support workers. Managers who are 'new' professionals have the power to pronounce on dispositions and need no recourse to overt classism, racism or sexism so can maintain the impression of themselves as open. It is this convincing portrayal of openness that protects them from questions about their discretion in matters of recruitment and promotion.

Guy, Dan and Carmella are only able to express their individual preferences as long as they have institutional backing. They can be left to their own devices because they have to apply the logic and the mechanisms of the organisation to protect the value and relative freedom in their managerial position. They are not powerful because they have personal power and charisma (Ourrosoff 1997). The idea of personal charisma works to maintain organisational hierarchy and the notion of personal discretion works to disguise the organisational logic and exclusionary patterns.

### **Re-evaluating the 'new' professionals**

The fractional class struggle taking place between Carmella and Lindsey has helped illuminate Epic's organisational culture in its specificity. I have positioned Epic's organisational values as those of a specific class fraction even though they are experienced by my respondents as personality. I have argued that abilities to see talent (or not) are shaped by class struggles, the need to protect and promote specific ways of

thinking, talking, judging and working. I have shown that judgements about talent are not universal but specific.

The endurance of class divisions relies on the human capacity to adapt to boredom (as Lindsey expected the switchboard operators to) or to tolerate a painful lack of fit (as she was expected to at Epic) or to leave for a more appropriate class fraction. This commitment to class reproduction makes it difficult to mobilise capacities to change the rules and reinvent work structures. In this chapter I have shown how creativity and flexibility reinforce old divisions between professionals and non-professionals while seeming to offer employees a new kind of flat structure. They do this because divisions are understood in terms of natural dispositions suited to different kinds of work role.

I do not look to the 'new' professionals to disrupt the ultimate hierarchy between those who do and those who think. I have referred to other important organisational uses for their progressive and irreverent spirit. The freedom and informality are always coupled with individualised responsibility and serve to glamorise it. Carmella's irreverence works to mask managerial power in general as well as her own power. Promoting 'youth', I suggested, helped to celebrate professional work in terms of the freedom to follow your interests. Bourdieu and Lury point to how crucial irreverence can be in creative workers' economic function (Bourdieu 1984, Lury 1996). The situations in this chapter suggest that we readjust our notions of conservatism and reject informality and reinvention as symbols of subversion (Adkins 2002).

Bourdieu observes that the 'symbolically subversive disposition' of the rising bourgeoisie (willingness to challenge the cultural order and traditional kinds of appropriate behaviour) is contrasted with the conservative functions in their work (Bourdieu 1984:366). I have also been examining this contradiction: Carmella's desire to be friendly and create a fun atmosphere, followed by her easy rationalisation of how she made her friend redundant.

The 'fun', 'informal' sometimes 'irreverent' culture is not as open, liberal or flexible as it seems because it is incapable of incorporating difference. As it is the basis of class promotion, 'rigour', 'bureaucracy', 'systems', 'efficiency', 'routine', etc. are always marked as different and are eventually downgraded. This was what happened to Sharena, Millie and Kim as non-professionals and Lindsey as an 'old' professional. The company is incapable of recognising this work ethic, or this disposition as a marker of a talent with a future. At Epic these are the dispositions with no trajectory.

I have also shown in this chapter that the term 'hands-off' management is misleading. Although the management appeared generally to be 'hands-off' and informal, at key moments (in recruitment, promotions, restructures) managers were highly influential. This was not only in terms of their overt activities in formal meetings, but also their hyperactive, behind-the-scenes networking. Rather than explicitly managing workers' development, their managerial power was used to give people 'leg-ups' at key opportunities. This chapter has explored the fact that 'informally' they were able to pick Joff for grooming and were determined he would develop the right disposition and "come out of himself". In the marking and eventual exclusion of Lindsey for her difference, management were able to constrain the reconversion and survival of a worker from a different industry despite her social achievements in learning how to be 'fun'. The company is never represented as a fixed hierarchy, however managers were working all the time on their own pictures of some sections that were moving and some sections that were still (Skeggs 2004).

I've also argued in this chapter that 'fun' and 'flexibility' are markers of Carmella's persona as a 'new' professional and as such they are not available (or necessarily desired) by everybody. As 'personality' traits that fit the company ethos their selective distribution among staff is crucial. This is to end up with what Adkins has called a politics 'developed around immanent and flexible subject positions' (Adkins 2002:80). In her discussions

about the possibilities of performative gender positions in the workplace she argues that

“many women may lose out on reflexivity not simply (as Lash’s analysis implies) because of processes of ‘ascription’ which operate independently of the politics of reflexivity. Rather it suggests that processes of ‘ascription’ – of being made immanent – are part of this very politics” (ibid.:82).

Adkins uses ‘immanent’ where I have been using ‘intrinsic’ and ‘natural’ but we can see instantly how her conclusion relates to Carmella’s positioning. Carmella presents herself as fun, dynamic and flexible. As a manager of several young men, she is also reflexive in her gender positioning, able to present herself as a woman succeeding in a man’s world. She is a ‘new’ professional, on the rise, challenging gender stereotypes on the way through her own mobility and power. But all the while her position *and her mobility* depend on her processes of ascription, which she needs to locate the non-professional and ‘old’ professional women around her with more fixed notions about femininity, and reward the men around her with generous assumptions concerning masculine capability. So although women have been assumed to be most likely to succeed in the cultural industries because of the emphasis on consumption, surface, style and image (Adkins 2002) this chapter identifies the specific kind of woman, or the specific style of classed femininity actually required to succeed at Epic. Indeed Carmella was the only one of my respondents to survive and succeed at Epic.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have looked at talent evaluations at Epic and the implications of an organisational logic based on dynamism and flexibility. I showed how Carmella was even able to reinvent technical work in creative terms – reducing her responsibility towards the people in her team in the process. At Epic, managerial interventions were easy to miss because they were exercised behind the scenes and success was instead attributed to natural talent. The events of the restructure however revealed clear preferences for

'youthful', 'fun' dispositions against competent dispositions, and managerial opportunities to constrain or enable worker's conversion. I revealed how the anti-bureaucratic arguments that support Epic's creative ethos facilitate secretive workplace practices, exclusion, and create haziness about Epic's management philosophy that made it hard for employees to recognise the actions and judgements of the powerful.

In the chapter that follows I draw my arguments together and look at some of the broader implications of my observation at Epic. Certainly the findings so far suggest that we need to curb our expectations of creative companies in terms of the expressive opportunities, knowledge sharing and equality they could engender, but what are we to make of an organisation such as Epic, that successfully masks its managerial structure and managers' interventions? How do we get to grips with organisational responsibility when it has been convincingly buried by individualism? How do we make sense of the way that talent was evaluated at Epic and use this to theorise inclusion and exclusion in this context? What would be the wider implications of a further expansion of the 'new' professional class?

## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusion: The anti-corporate PLC**

In this thesis I have been examining the way that talent is evaluated at Epic and in particular at how meanings about work and ‘creativity’ affect talent expectations and judgements. What was striking about the managers at Epic, when they looked for ‘creative’ workers, was their lack of interest in employees’ creative output. Rather they made effort to seek out cultural familiarity and specific ways of thinking, talking and questioning. They also had high expectations in terms of employees’ knowledge and commitment – looking for reassurance that recruits had a genuine interest in the product and market. In some cases, managers expected employees to display an embodied affinity with the imagined market.

One of the most important observations, which could only have been generated by a longitudinal study, was how work roles could be reinvented in order to more closely fit the preferences of the ‘new’ professionals. We saw how Dan, the sales manager, and Carmella, the technical manager, positioned their work using the language of creativity and that, in this process, expectations about workers’ independence and excellence increased. Creativity was shown to professionalise positions, and forge more autonomous work space. At the same time it was clear that imagined markets could also be altered to facilitate the preferred work tasks of the ‘new’ professionals. Guy was able to shift his descriptions in order to present his work as fun or innovative, to justify the work he wanted to be doing.

When evaluating their employees' talents, the manager's vision was limited by their imaginative capacity and preferred means of allocating work. Managers were able to constrain workers including Sharena, Millie and Kim by giving them uncreative work, which represents at the same time, types of experience. Managers were able to guarantee the mobility of others, including Ned and Joff, through their interventions and investments. My concern is not entirely with the fate of these individuals but with the significance of these managerial visions, judgements and investments. By way of concluding this thesis I argue that this pattern is the product of a specific form of managerial power.

### **An organisation in denial**

Epic PLC is an organisation rife with contradictions. Salaried employees approach the board of directors as if they are independent entrepreneurs. Workers take on responsibility for the profitability of products but at the same time are excluded from decisions regarding product closures and investment. Though there appeared to be no important hierarchies in the day-to-day project of making the websites and magazines, I showed hierarchies between different departments and different markets as well as managerial power. I showed that the 'friendly' managerial style, employed by Epic's more successful managers, ironically indicated that they lacked a sense of their mentoring duties towards their staff. The anti-commercial tone adopted at the motivational meetings was far from liberating and actually increased the pressures on workers to deliver spectacular individual performances. The directors attempted to encourage professionals with revenue targets to aspire to grass roots experimentation. They presented web work at Epic as if it was (and should be) driven by individual interests rather than infiltrating prospective markets that might prove to be profitable.

These contradictions reflect an ambiguous organisational relationship towards its own power. Power at Epic is never spoken of as power but rather called discretion, responsibility, leadership or talent. Power is both aestheticised and de-politicised in the glamorous work-style of the creative persona. From examining career trajectories within Epic, I have shown that managers have positional power. Managerial positions provide opportunities to judge people, when hiring and firing, when allocating different types of work and, through a variety of practices at their disposal, managers influence the meanings of products, markets and ultimately other people's contributions. At one level, managers at Epic do not appear to take themselves too seriously, attempting to produce a relaxed working atmosphere, yet they downplay their own accountability in the process. How would you challenge this kind of manager and on what grounds? Without recognition of their positional power you are left with 'a personality clash' – a concept that is morally and practically vacuous in an organisational context. Of course I am not arguing that any kind of sinister desire lies behind the urge to create the 'fun' working environment, only that it is managers rather than employees who benefit from it.

The managers' power is not inherently theirs; it is explored by them, and exercised by them, for as long as they undertake Epic's business. It is contingent on their organisational belonging and the specific purpose and responsibilities of their position. It is also relatively fragile, as none of the managers at Epic felt particularly secure in their positions – even without the threat of redundancy, they careered from budget to budget unsure of the scope of their interventions. However, because employees at Epic were evaluated qualitatively, the insecurity of managerial positions did not negate the fact that they had the power to judge and also to *allocate* dispositions to those who reported to them, determining their relative value.

It can be quite difficult to take in that this company operated as if disposition held more weight than professional expertise, systemic organisation or traditional economic

calculations of success. When presenting papers about Epic I always get at least one incredulous question pointing out Epic's inefficiencies. Certainly obsolescent work and high staff turnover were problems at Epic. I appreciate that authenticity and disposition appeared to be over-valued. However, I have argued that this reflected the conditions in which the company made their investment decisions. Creativity and authenticity were values that replaced economic efficiency in the drive for productivity and profit. It was through 'authenticity' that Epic hoped to convince investors, advertisers, workers and customers to buy in to their websites and magazines. It was authenticity that they hoped would deliver quality products and loyal audiences. It was authenticity that they used to explain the profitability of products.

Also for many roles at Epic an appropriate disposition *was essential*. The problem that I have explored is not that disposition is deemed important but that it is understood as natural and that privatised means of acquiring socialised knowledge are privileged. In both functions (recruitment and market-making) where disposition was believed to be naturally occurring it was also assumed to be something that had to be located outside the organisation. In other words, not something the company was in a good position to generate itself. Even with all the talk of encouraging creativity and dynamism, talent was something that was attributed to individuals and searched for in recruits rather than attributed to Epic's organisational structure, professional training or enculturation. Managers at Epic worked relentlessly to attribute responsibilities for motivation, skill development and success to individual workers. Talent was recognised at Epic in ways that did not acknowledge organisational patterns, systems, philosophies and investment. In this way, the organisation itself was not credited with the ability *or responsibility* for distributing and enabling the creative disposition they most desired.

Remember Dan was concerned that the marketing assistant must be able to talk casually about popular culture. Couldn't he learn this once in the role? Lisa was hoping that 'her

graduate' would be wearing the right clothing labels. His clothes could signify that he was a 'new' professional; both creative and passionate. Even though he had just graduated, he would already know what professionals were wearing in the world of new media. How could he know – unless he already had social contacts in that world? It was because the different subjectivities that were *enabled* by different kinds of work were then deemed the most suitable for them that these traits were sought in applicants. What Epic's recruitment processes amounted to was a desire to give more of the same kind of cultural capital to those who had some already. This is how the organisation avoided the responsibility and costs of bestowing cultural capital. The organisation preferred to assist accrual than acquisition because it saved time and money according to its economic logic and structure.

Imagining the markets qualitatively was another activity that emphasised disposition. The practice of dividing markets was also operating at the level of 'self'. Although they are organisational and abstract (they deal with markets, sectors, roles and social groups) at the same time imagined markets specify and judge 'forms of individuality' (Rose 1989:222). Incredibly, disposition was naturalised at Epic to the extent that the worker in the 'dull' market struggled to present it, their work and themselves as dynamic *even when their product was profitable*. Cultural capital presented as disposition rather than professional experience or technique also made it symbolically difficult for workers to move to radically different products and markets. This effectively prevented Lindsey (whose experience was gained in industry) from being able to convert her cultural capital to fit the media field. In recognising subcultural capital and obscure knowledges in terms of valued but highly specific dispositions, Epic also constrained the possibilities for workers to promote and develop more generalised commercial interests. This was examined in Chapter 5 in a lengthy discussion about the limited tradeability of subcultural capital.

At Epic the executives promoted individual passion as if it could compensate for (and therefore mask) different levels of financial investment in the websites: passion alone explained success. Web work offered the opportunity of turning personal interests into a professional role. In this presentation to employees, cultural knowledge was attributed to individual motivation within non-corporate spaces. This generated an intense *demand* for authenticity at work which was accepted by the managers in my study. An enthusiasm which is authentic cannot be learned in training, faked or even gradually acquired in the role. It should be a genuine, well-established and all-consuming passion. In presenting knowledge this way, Epic again showed a reluctance to take responsibility for the fact that its workplace was a site where people ought to have been able to acquire cultural capital. I argued that if workers are expected to be in a position to express enthusiasms and knowledge ‘naturally’ even before they work at Epic then the organisation is prone to reproduce cultural differences.

In Chapter 1, I explored some of the optimistic assessments of opportunity where workplaces are deregulated and work tasks enculturated. Certainly individual workers appear relatively free, powerful and expressive at Epic because they are given so much responsibility. But my study indicates that it is dangerous to assume that fragmented or changeable organisations have a less powerful organisational structure or culture. As work at Epic was constructed as a means to express your ‘true’ self rather than a space where learnable tasks and processes were completed, the relevance of differences in cultural capital was exaggerated. Culture is so significant because work *as an activity* is constructed differently in these spaces:

‘The worker is an individual in search of meaning, responsibility, a sense of personal achievement, a maximised ‘quality of life’, and hence work. Thus the individual is not to be emancipated *from* work, perceived as merely a task or a means to an end, but to be fulfilled *in* work, now construed as an activity through which we produce, discover and experience our selves’ (Rose 1989:103-104).

When work and self are merged, employees must embody creativity and it cannot be learned or performed. This work ethic intensifies the need for personal investment in the company's values and aims. The investments that result produce cultural effects in a flexible workplace that may well be as intense as those in stable or insulated organisations.

In the same way that one of Skegg's respondents said, "you can't turn off from caring" (Skeggs 1997: 69). Imran saw himself as creative in most aspects of his life. I showed that by investing in his creative persona (at work and football) he could claim style and panache at the level of identity and personality. But because this required total involvement, and could not be turned off, it also rationalised his unpaid labour at home and his own financial investment in his training. Furthermore, his confidence in his own creative abilities prevented him from seeing the other social skills that were actually more likely to be rewarded with promotion.

I showed the effects of Epic's organisational work ethic on the terms by which talent was evaluated. Different dispositions (dynamic and bureaucratic) served to regulate the acquisition of cultural capital and media careers. So evaluating employees on the basis of their disposition did not mean that workers were evaluated as unique individuals. Rather these dispositions were mobilised in accordance with Epic's reluctance to bestow cultural capital. This slippage (where attitude is taken as an indicator of valuable output) is just like the process that Paul Willis described in *Learning to Labour*, where different types of disposition (sensible and destructive) were institutionalised in accordance with a school's inability to facilitate the acquisition of cultural capital (Willis 1977).

So a creative company, with a flat-structure, relying on managerial 'discretion' exhibits this same institutional trait i.e. the reluctance to help people acquire cultural capital. My thesis can be summarised as a defence of structural analysis in an organisational context

that exhibits individualism, fragmentation, enculturation, internal competition and frequent re-arrangement. Why do we assume that a social organisation that is moving or loosely tied is not structured? Certainly Epic's departmental structure was always changing with 'announcements' at least twice a year. The individual managers in my study even seemed to be able to surmount structure with the capacity to elevate their own positions. However, they could only do this through the prism of the market (finding a dynamic or prestigious section) and the prism of work roles (claiming creative, autonomous space). These possibilities were easier in certain markets, and also in certain disciplines. This shows that the terms of inclusion for workers and consumers, were constrained by public meanings and social relations, and the stories my respondents could *reasonably* tell about their work and their markets. These structures, built primarily to divide the innovative and the dull, could certainly change, but they gained weight when they were used to allocate work, to decide where to look for employees, to chose how to interview employees and how to create aesthetic goods that would be appropriate to the market. In these ways the symbolic representations at Epic affected the choice of professional practices and the manner in which they were carried out, ultimately influencing and justifying different ways of treating people and different expectations about people's behaviour and progression, both inside and outside the organisation.

Epic's hierarchical structure, though shifting, and demanding trade-offs between the status of work roles and the glamour of different markets, was visible to my respondents. Although Sharena had not yet worked out how to manoeuvre within Epic, she expressed her frustrations in ways that show she could *see* Epic's structure. She could see that *in general* the administrative roles had no future and represented fixed positions at the bottom of a hierarchy. Furthermore, within Epic's vacillating structure, Jasmine and Ned's chopped-up careers replicated professional trajectories as they made use of hierarchies between work tasks, products, and markets. Even if these mobility strategies were unconscious, Jasmine and Ned obviously found it possible to detect and

comprehend a hierarchy. Certainly these particular workers weren't just 'muddling through' (Beck 2000:55). Careers may not be 'givens' in the sense that Beck describes for (in the main) men, full time, for a life time, yet they can still be *made* by those with the resources and a sense of entitlement (Beck 2000).

Admittedly structure is less obvious in a context like Epic because the Renaissance work ethic, the devolution of responsibility and the frequent re-structures all demand that the individual self-consciously manage their own career. The creative company has factors at its disposal to downplay organisational capacities and create an impression that power and promotions are up for grabs. In Chapter 6, I showed how 'flexibility' was useful in presenting Epic as an organisation free of constraints, when in fact 'flexibility' itself posed constraints, because only one kind of disposition was highly valued.

### **The creative disposition is institutionalised**

Cultural capital is socially legitimated knowledge that is therefore economically tradeable. The most explicit example is the educational or professional qualification which is traded as evidence of knowledge and competency and enables a rite of passage onto a certain career trajectory. However, in Chapter 4 I described how many kinds of knowledge were recognised at Epic. People's hobbies and personal interests were celebrated and economically validated. The Big Wednesday meeting demonstrated how willing the company was to recognise relatively obscure pastimes as cultural capital that could be traded for a wage and a professional career. I also demonstrated in Chapter 5 (the case of the freelance designers pitching for work) that even a relaxed or serious manner could represent cultural capital. While both designers were offered design work, they were offered work of different economic and social value. In this case, the relaxed disposition was cultural capital with a higher value at Epic. As Skeggs reminds us,

dispositions only become cultural capital once they have been institutionalised (Skeggs 1997).

I showed how the creative persona, or the disposition of the 'new' professional, was institutionalised at Epic. This has come from observing the ways that different 'kinds of people', ways of behaving and talking at work were being subtly but repeatedly coded in class terms. Subjective dispositions (relaxed, open, dynamic, serious, stuffy, bookish) were being hierarchically valued in their connection to differentially valued work tasks, work conditions and consumer markets. The labour process and the versions of different markets worked together to reinforce these hierarchies. This is the reason why the dispositions stressed in each empirical chapter (creative, self-selling, passionate, flexible) could be mobilised to claim increased autonomy, variety and power at work.

The disposition of the 'new' professional was used in the process of defining different kinds of work role. This involved coding working-class jobs and people negatively as well as other fractions of the professional classes. These codes ranged from the graphic 'bureaucratic' 'plodders' in the public sector and the 'not up to it' or 'low-calibre' non-professionals to much more subtle positioning of the relaxed and open against the formal and homophobic. This kind of value allocation is subtle because it appears to be impersonal description that is not particularly judgemental or prejudiced. Traits such as being talkative or shy appear to be highly specific character traits rather than overt class or cultural indicators.

However, creativity also connoted the ability to come up with ideas and make strategic decisions. In Chapter 3 I argued that the creative disposition became a code for a managerial (i.e. promotable) disposition in this context. My empirical evidence was able to show how much is actually at stake in these apparently superficial representations of character, work roles and markets. In Chapter 4 I argued that the implicit processes of

talking about some work or sectors as dry and some as glamorous or dynamic was loading dispositions morally *and economically*. Dispositional labels will obviously have profound effects once they are related to the organisation's profit-making aim. They have major implications because, although the structure was described as flat, I showed that the hierarchy at Epic was based on an institutionalised interpretation of which roles and markets generate 'their own' revenue. This is why passion also connoted greater productivity and the willingness to work longer hours. Flexibility also connoted speed. These character definitions worked to communicate economic potentiality unlike those who were, by contrast, interpreted as organisational costs. So the hierarchical structure indicated in the first place, by Epic's financials, was further realised by applying different qualitative descriptors to those in support roles and support departments.

These processes were shown to draw a certain amount of their validity from historical work values, which also associate the creative disposition with higher status positions, professional work and the personal pursuits of the wealthiest classes. In Chapter 3 I showed how creativity could be used to elevate the status of the sales role. In Chapter 6 creativity was used to elevate the status of technical work. I argued that creativity could be used to professionalise roles by forging the autonomous, intellectualised or intuitive space above (sales) techniques or technicians. It is because of the historical meanings in the term that the ideal of creativity is a particularly effective means to generate hierarchy within an organisation. A creative persona can open up a powerful space in relation to non-professionals, a freer space in relation to technicians, and a legitimate space in which to develop a work persona (vital to recognition). As creativity has also been championed by radical and humanist groups it simultaneously works to soften or conceal managerial authority, supporting an atmosphere that apparently gives everyone space to express themselves.

In Chapter 5 I argued that by incorporating flexibility, the creative disposition facilitated mobility at Epic. Flexibility was shown to be another means of classing work as it related to variety in work tasks and managerial power to change direction. Flexibility (interpreted as personal disposition) enabled upward mobility because it conferred an ability to manage change. In an insecure employment environment, flexibility was also helpful in surviving the frequent restructures increasing the likelihood of consideration for alternative roles rather than redundancy. It is important not to underestimate how much there was to be gained by adopting and forging as much space as possible to demonstrate the creative disposition. In this way workers gained status, autonomy, decision-making power and interesting work. This explains why sales and technical workers, Dan and Carmella, were so enthusiastic about generating their own creative personas.

The creative disposition must be seen as cultural capital that resulted in greatly improved chances of accruing even more cultural capital (as well as income) enabling a media 'career'. At the same time it was used as the explanation for success and mobility at Epic. The notion of the creative disposition worked to personalise and mystify talent recognition. Defining talent as disposition (and vice versa) protects its rarity value because of the implication that it cannot be taught. I showed that it was particular skills that warranted progression at Epic (self-selling, strategic socialising, self-directed creativity) that were mystified in this way. The creative disposition was cultural capital because it was recognised as tradeable and its value was enhanced by its mystification as disposition.

Dan, Carmella and Guy were not successful at Epic because they are more creative than everybody else. They were successful because creative dispositions are considered the most valuable and useful at Epic, and these managers had been given the space to develop their own. Neither were the managers more hungry for self-expression than Sharena, Millie or Imran. They simply had the power and work conditions needed to actualise this

expression. Of course Dan, Carmella and Guy must necessarily have a sense of entitlement to these roles and feel comfortable with this disposition. Our subjective interpretations do make a difference. We saw in Chapter 6 that Lindsey's commitment to different values contributed to her redundancy. This can seem to give validity to theories that personalise success. However, I asserted the fact that Lindsey viewed herself as flexible, passionate and effective, so ultimately, it is the organisational interpretation of her disposition that overrides her own.

The media job and person are ascribed using the concepts creative, passionate (both interested and interesting) flexible and dynamic. All these signify uniqueness. Innovation results in new output. Passion comes from unique personal interests. Flexibility confirms an ability to deal with new situations. The dynamic market demands more than professional expertise and needs input from a perceptive individual. It is for these reasons that Lindsey was assumed to be lacking personality or forced to repress it while she was at Domesti Co. This points to how creativity works as an inclusive binding mechanism since unique personality is only considered possible in a company such as Epic, for the creative work they do, within dynamic markets.

### **Practices of differentiation**

When cultural capital is institutionalised, spaces for developing it are, in effect, ring-fenced. I have been able to identify the *practices* of differentiation that allocate these positions. These were organisational practices and (socially legitimised) individual practices for judging and bestowing cultural capital. The processes that divide up work tasks distribute different kinds of capital. These differences are ratified in becoming formal positions, responsibilities and job titles. The practices themselves give credence to the idea that there are dynamic kinds of people and bureaucratic kinds of people. I have argued that it is impossible for the 'plodders' to demonstrate their uniqueness because

their work does not throw up unique situations for them to deal with and is not seen to demand the use of any unique character traits. The institutionalisation of cultural capital is realised in the isolation of creative tasks and effective distribution of creativity.

In particular I have highlighted the significance of the recruitment process. When a job is initially envisaged, the person who will occupy it is at least partially imagined. This imagined person need not necessarily be explicitly gendered, racialised or classed because, as I have said, different kinds of cultural capital and especially disposition are very subtly coded. In looking for an 'ace player', for example, Dan might be open to a person from any background but he has already reduced his chances of getting a range of people to interview. This is because different practices were used when recruiting for creative positions at Epic.

First of all, job descriptions were coded particularly using the full-time/part-time distinction and by the dispositions required. Secondly, different advertising strategies (internally, through a specialist agent or locally) represented outreach in different labour pools and indicated a preference for a media-comfortable disposition (or not). Then choosing precisely *how* to conduct the interview (formally as conversation, as presentation, over lunch) was another reference to the kind of social confidence these formats would ideally reveal. The practices employed for creative positions amounted to the attempt to uncover cultural familiarity and general disposition rather than a search for specified capabilities. This was observable in its extreme when both Guy and Lisa found it unnecessary to judge designers by looking at their design work (Chapters 4 and 5 respectively).

These apparently minor differences in recruitment strategy were shown to have longer term effects because the processes that ascribed work as creative were the same as those that ascribed managerial work. This is because creative and managerial roles contain the

autonomy, responsibility, variety and conceptual aspects necessary for professional status. This means that even the lowest level creative positions offered a certain amount of space to display a managerial disposition. The filler of the repetitive job is hard pushed to prove their creativity and responsibility, so these different recruitment processes shape and demand decisions about whose potential can be constrained. As I have argued, these processes (which have the power to construct talent) are diffused by the sense that they are presented as expressions of the manager's individual 'discretion' and as such reflect no organisational patterns or general policy.

The processes involved in imagining and segmenting the market also worked to institutionalise cultural capital and disposition. Defining the market as dynamic or finding a dynamic segment was absolutely essential in supporting the hierarchy of work tasks. All markets required an imagined sector that was fast moving and an imagined sector that was slower or stiffer. Imagining the market is particularly powerful in legitimising disposition because these characterisations are used to bring economic models to life and make the organisational purpose meaningful. Cultural descriptions flesh out and humanise apparently rational economic models and are then legitimised by their connection to abstract and impersonal success formulas. Imagining the market in qualitative terms was a social and individual activity in meetings, presentations, strategies and for communications. Because market segmentation and role definition draw on each other, the imagined market ratified recruitment and promotion decisions based on worker dispositions.

The passionate disposition related more specifically to the way that web markets were envisaged at Epic. The web market was presented as a dynamic community and this positioned the web worker at the centre of this community. As Epic relied on the passionate disposition to provide economic hope we would imagine that it would be legitimised when it was shown to generate sales and profit, but ironically evidence of this

kind was not necessary. This certainly suggests that this particular qualitative understanding fulfilled some other purpose and I have argued that it worked to support professional working conditions, in a new media sector.

Chapter 4 was important because in following designers Guy and Imran's trajectories, I was able to show that although the creative disposition is institutionalised within Epic, it does not require a large, complex or formalised administrative apparatus to sustain it. In Guy's agency there were only four full-time workers. In this context it was simply enough that he was able to conflate everyone's personalities with their work roles. This was all that was needed to present hierarchy as a matter of character difference rather than position.

This means that representation (of work, markets and individual workers) was a key site in struggles over creativity and dynamism. It also means that even when dealing with intangible assets, where issues of representation are central, I have been able to identify determining professional practices and institutional patterns. These practices are so important and so powerful because, as I have argued, they are tautological (they have the power to create their own truth). These practices create the roles in which different dispositions can materialise and the 'real' markets for which different dispositions are 'essential'.

### **Subjective constraints**

People at Epic were also constrained subjectively by their own values and their imagined future. Their cultural capital and disposition imposed limits on how they were able to take up a work role. Imran sought pleasure in completing tasks well and described himself as shy. Although Guy encouraged and benefited when Imran took refuge in a helpful disposition, Imran was also hoping to be able to avoid ever having to sell himself (or

indeed sell anything). Lindsey did not feel comfortable investing in strategic relationships over her knowledge, experience and willingness to work hard. This means that ironically, their values and dispositions (adopted with a sense that these would help them get on) prevented them displaying the questioning, independent, entrepreneurial, charismatic and flexible dispositions their managers regarded as evidence of managerial potential in a creative organisation.

Guy, by contrast, was able to mix selling and socialising comfortably. He enjoyed 'playing' with class in presenting himself as working class when he needed to avoid being seen as too slick, and as 'unmarked' when he needed to appeal to Oxbridge types. In using his Scottish accent I could say that he used his ethnicity to play with class (in a professional scene where knowledge of classed accents was, in the main, limited to the south of England). It is Guy's professional position as a creative manager that enables him to play with his social impression. But he can only exploit this position because he has knowledge of how different dispositions are valued in different contexts and an ability to perform. In this position it is vital that he feels comfortable with the idea of playing with his identity and is relatively free from anxieties about honesty or personal integrity. This is why Imran and Lisa are so put off the idea of being 'that kind of person'. Boasting and self-selling upset what are probably experienced as unshakeably positive values; honesty, meritocracy, competency, integrity.

This study has revealed two important and competing value systems in the conflicting valuation of (and therefore also pleasure in) personal competency at tasks against wider social influence. These represent two different kinds of work ethic, which I have interpreted as signifying affiliation to different class fractions (also expressed institutionally at Epic as categories of natural disposition). The ability to form relationships with superiors in order to use them is read by the 'old' petite bourgeoisie as sycophantic, underhand and unfair. They believe work quality should speak for itself. The

'head-down' concentration on quality and competency is read by the 'new' petite-bourgeoisie as an attempt to compensate for an unfortunate lack of flair. The danger, for example, in Imran's position is his commitment to the craft satisfactions in design and technical work. Acknowledging this means that we can see that commitment to values is constraining for some only because of the institutionalisation of cultural capital. These subjective constraints would not be an issue at Epic if it was an organisation that could incorporate, recognise and reward this difference.

### **Protecting managerial power**

Although the 'new' professionals appear to be disrupting traditional professional values by creating more informal working environments, I have argued that the disruption at Epic was minimal. In Chapter 6 I argued that workers were not freer because the expectations on individuals in terms of effort, commitment and results was extremely high. I argued that 'youth' could even be seen to support professional values by celebrating workers who were able to follow their own interests. The notion of the flat structure simply masked the fact that managerial power at Epic was still substantial. Managers were open about their product strategies and were able to behave irreverently to superiors, but they continued to colonise important talent judgements – in private. Their seemingly innocuous judgements about workers' dispositions were painting a picture of workers with and without trajectories at Epic. Their imaginative capacity to see other workers as managers determined the progress of these workers. Managers also maintained their power to invest in certain people. In using informal (i.e. private) conversations to do this they were able to hide their differential levels of investment.

This thesis has revealed the positional nature of managerial power specifically in contrast to the intensely personal way that it was interpreted at Epic. I see managerial power as positional because it is not their own, but represents the fact that managers act on behalf

of an organisation – sharing something of its reputation, trying to improve its product offer, spending its money (Ourourssoff 1997). Power at Epic amounts to institutionally legitimised ways of acting as well as specific practices that generate the most valued subjectivities, and gives managers reason to evaluate other people, greatly increasing their range of appropriate ways of treating people. Of course, at Epic, managers were encouraged to believe that their managerial power derived from their personal charisma and creativity and this appeared to be plausible precisely because only certain positions at Epic could cultivate powerful ways of acting and speaking at work (positively, decisively, passionately). Managers at Epic were powerful in being able to instruct and direct others, but had many other means of helping or hindering people. They had the power to allocate work, which according to the type of product, the prestige of the market, the autonomy and variety in the work, could have a huge range of possible meanings. They also had powers of ascription – able to decide amongst workers and consumers precisely who is dynamic.

Managers at Epic even held the power to prescribe the correct *means* of acquiring capital, and they promoted privatised ways of acquiring capital. This maintained the social stigma attached to the public and obvious acquisition of capital. The process of naturalising talent is a means of enabling the acquisition of capital for some and hiding it at the same time. I showed that the extra help Joff and Ned received from Carmella (in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively) was not stigmatised because they were helped privately on the basis of talent they supposedly already had. Although the effects could be observed, these managerial interventions were only revealed in their interviews with me.

Also Bourdieu's work shows us that capital acquisition is hidden if it is gradual. This is capital accumulation by stealth. In Chapter 5, the technical knowledge accumulated by Imran and Mario was valued because it was acquired gradually, at home. Again this is not only gradual but individual. Although men's technical knowledge is socially legitimised

their acquisition is actually respected because it is private – both self-funded and self-directed. So even when knowledge is socially legitimised the preferred means of acquisition is privatised.

By relying on behind-the-scenes networking to secure her own job at Digital Central, Carmella was able to present her promotion differently. She could describe herself as being ‘poached’ or ‘invited’ to her position even when substantial amounts of pushing and chasing (from her *and her manager*) had secured her new position. In hiding this social work, Carmella is not just covering up the fact that she was given information about the restructure in advance. She has also given herself the opportunity to mystify her career progression and attribute it to her natural aptitude for technical work if she wants to. Acceptance of (and space for) this privatised social work is essential within an organisation that wishes to erroneously attribute progress to individual talent.

As Carmella was able to offer private assistance to others this gave her the power to protect them from stigma. Hidden methods of progression also create their own truth as there is no ‘fuss’. In other words, they avoid opportunities for public reaction or dispute in a wider evaluation of talent. When Ned gained his position as a journalist, he appeared to have been picked on the basis of his ‘natural’ talent and interests. To an outsider his move would reflect the company’s recognition of his creativity when in fact it was his networking strategies that had been rewarded. He appeared the more talented, although he had, with his manager’s help, actually avoided competition.

### **Talent definition**

Throughout this thesis I have approached talent definition from several different angles. In Chapters 3 and 4, I showed how talent definition can be understood as an aspect of

professional mobility and exploitation. In Chapter 5, I showed that talent definition could be used to mark the boundaries and describe the authentic essence of a community. In Chapter 6, I used talent definition to explore the institutionalised preferences within Epic PLC. In all these senses, talent definitions indicate the terms of social inclusion. What is most significant is that naturalised talent deflects attention from the power, investment and interventions of the talent scouts. Their powers to facilitate inclusion and exclusion are hidden.

Managers at Epic always conflated their creative or managerial skills with an ability to socialise strategically. By naturalising this particular skill as an element of the creative persona, managers made it harder for some people to imagine their own progression. Of course it should be possible for different 'kinds of people' to present themselves as creative. Some of these may be quiet and unassuming (they might even be inflexible and anti-social). At the same time, why should those who have social abilities be assumed to have creative abilities or commercial awareness? Yet it is only those who can progress in this way, and, importantly, feel no moral anxieties about it, who benefit when these specific social skills and activities are naturalised. If strategic socialising was publicly identified and understood like other practical skills, people could be given the space, time and encouragement to develop the skill in their own way.

As these approaches to progression prevailed, people (such as Lindsey) who expected to be promoted on the public recognition of consistent work found progress eluded them at Epic. Her attitude of faith in hard work signified a downgraded disposition. Whatever Lindsey had achieved in the past, she appeared to lack the social skills of a true contender. This was particularly ironic in Lindsey's case because she was already thriving in the social life of the division. It was her strong moral aversion to socialising for personal gain that checked her career progress. She felt it would be unfair and wrong to take a job on any grounds other than her competency for the role. Reading these

successful social skills as part of an unattractive (sycophantic, narcissistic and pushy) personality she was obviously determined not to replicate them. Had she seen them as particular social skills that were an important element of any managerial role, she might have felt more comfortable about employing such skills to protect her job.

Lindsey's moral reservations were very useful to me in making the ethical implications of Epic's structure and culture explicit. Although social alliances appear to generate self-made talent-based careers they involve private effort and energy as a substitute for public evaluation. Lindsey's desire to be judged as competent can be interpreted as a belief in fairness in terms of open competition. This is very important for it is normally assumed that in the private sector, recruitment (along with everything else) follows the laws of the open market. Indeed this is one of the main arguments against Equal Opportunities measures – they are unnecessary since companies ignoring talent would be profoundly uncompetitive – an argument that it is important to interrogate (Gabriel 1994, Szymanski 1997). This faith in competition overlooks the problems in a private sector talent economy that I have identified and the fact that managers do not so much recognise talent as distribute it. Companies are not obliged to operate democratically. This creates an environment in which the workers who actively avoid competition when getting work ironically appear the more talented. The privatisation of talent evaluation fills the vacuum created by the lack of democratic decision-making practices at Epic.

My finding that talent economies naturalise and privatise social mobility is the basis of my moral preference for understanding all skills, including social skills, as crafts. This is not simply a reiteration of educational class values of hard work against commercial flair. This derives directly from my analysis of Epic and the knowledge that understanding talent in this way leads to actions and evaluations that are more likely to be just. I have mentioned this before but it is important to state it again here: only this understanding of talent will make visible the 'small steps' that always pave the way of social mobility

(Sennett 2003:36). Only this understanding of talent will create genuine opportunities for people without social privilege. It follows on from this that institutions and organisations that treat all skills as crafts would create opportunities for those who most need them. They would be more likely to intervene and invest in cultural acquisition rather than naturalising and mystifying cultural accrual.

### **The basis of inclusion**

In 1999 Richard Sennett wrote an article in the *New Statesman* in which he argued for a greater cultural valuation of dependent relations and dependent states of being. He points out that acknowledging relations of dependency is the first step in calling other social actors to account. His argument in this article is that social inclusion in the workplace has become weak. Of course, I would also stress that corporations make considerable efforts to avoid being held to account and de-regulation reflects this. Private 'creative' companies certainly profess no obligation to operate democratically but try to operate dynamically. Sennett argues that flexible companies change too quickly to nurture fruitful and reciprocal relationships between employers and employees. This is symptomatic of a pervasive lack of trust in the world of work.

“The political economy that rules us tries to put another value in place of social inclusion: autonomy” (Sennett 1999:26).

Ultimately concluding:

“Flexible workplaces are not viable communities, they are not forgiving”  
(Sennett 1999:27).

Epic PLC was indeed an unforgiving community. It is telling that the friend who proof read my thesis had felt unable to forgive herself for her frustrating and confusing experiences at Epic, even though five years had passed. Yet I see no evidence that social inclusion was weak there. Epic promoted autonomy as a value and still managed to achieve social inclusion. As Arendt points out, influence and action in the public sphere of meaning-making demand collective cohesion but she is adamant that this can be achieved for the short term, even in reaction to the 'inconsistent whims' of leaders (Arendt 1967:324). Her work on the bureaucratic personality forces us to question the assumption that job security is the most important basis for solidarity and employee commitment. Epic effectively used different organisational mechanisms to bind and focus its members. These mechanisms were the creative disposition and the dynamic market. These were highly individualistic mechanisms that nevertheless inspired and enabled group action.

A horror of dependency does not necessarily weaken the social bonds within a company for it can, as it does in Epic, contain its own rationale: each product sinks or swims according its 'autonomous' financial performance. This creates different kinds of loyalty and commitment and different grounds for exclusion *and inclusion*. Autonomy works as the basis for inclusion as evidence of the creative and responsible character of those included; more particularly their capacity for self-directed work. Arendt makes clear that a community certainly does not need to be forgiving to inspire loyalty and action (Arendt 1967). Members that are 'weaned from dependency' on their employers can be loyal to a product, a market or an even bigger project of bringing about something new. Even organisations that constantly change their products or markets are able to offer workers an appealing subjective identity through inclusion in meaning-making. Arendt powerfully illustrates the appeal of inclusion in institutional projects that safeguard and promote a worldview – even where that worldview is entirely fictitious (Arendt 1967). The creative

disposition and the dynamic market enables Epic to offer this project to workers in creative departments.

This points to the fact that we are dependent on organisations because the *meanings* of self and other can only be achieved in public, collectively. Companies or institutions that are fragmented or insecure often seem to have forsaken their power to protect and develop their workers for the long term. Yet organisations that are reluctant to own assets or labour in favour of using networks, still hold the power to legitimate activities, people and cultural objects employing the mechanisms that Bourdieu theorised in *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984). Even freelance workers are still dependent on the talent definitions of the companies that may require their services or decide to invest in them.

Whatever the precise structure of any company or organisation it must always work to maintain the value of the cultural capital it holds and nurtures. Constraints in meaning relate directly to this project of maintaining or increasing the value of organisational assets (which include their workers' knowledge). These constraints operate no matter how dispersed or transient an organisational structure appears from the outside. These constraints are expressed by mystification, selective recruitment and selective investment. Within organisations, hidden investments are likely to be privileged over public or explicit investments precisely because they help to mystify talent and success and therefore protect value. The arrival of the so-called knowledge economy will only intensify the struggles over the value of intangible assets (Skeggs 2004).

Commercial organisations are constrained by these pressures as much as state institutions. It is unwise to argue that organisations are most powerful when they are ratified by the state with their all-embracing bureaucracies and historical longevity. This perpetuates the myths about bureaucratic power that I raised concerns about in Chapter 1. It also affects our understanding of institutional exclusion, contributing to a hierarchy of racisms with

state racism as the most powerful and influential, followed by institutional, followed by popular racism. What happens in 'the market' or in corporations then, appears as 'laissez-faire discrimination' and prejudice (Bourne 2001:9).

It is important to acknowledge that racism takes many different forms and is context specific, but there is no need to put these in a hierarchy of influence. The claim that corporate and popular racisms are derivative of state racism is also dubious when we think about how hard managers worked at Epic to position themselves *against* public sector values. The concentration on policy and on institutional racism encourages the impression that 'really bad' racism and how to deal with it are public sector issues and supports a tradition of 'state-monopolised politics' that Beck has identified as particularly unhelpful for today's economy (Beck 2000:141). It also creates a danger that the organisational means and motives for exclusion described in this thesis will be overlooked.

I have identified the basis of professional inclusion and the practices this legitimates rather than looking for overt sexism or racism as bullying. In professionalised settings it is more helpful to identify what the organisation is looking for and where it is predisposed to look. Professionals are less likely to resort to aggressive exclusionary methods since legitimate professional practices do much of the work for them. Professionals concentrate their energies on demanding exaggerated or highly specific cultural capital requirements and mystifying the acquisition of their own knowledges and disposition. I have found Arendt's work instructive in conceptualising a kind of racism without hate. Her work on the Nazi regime is magnificent in showing how their support tapped in to idealism and ambition at least as much as it relied on hate (Arendt 1994). As Gilroy has argued, it is particularly problematic when racism is conceptualised as something divorced from all other social relations (Gilroy 1990). This was certainly not the case at Epic as racism, classism and sexism were entwined within the organisational search for excellence and

dynamism. The mechanisms of exclusion at Epic were extremely subtle and personal and, as managers had legitimate reasons to evaluate character, and the privatised space in which to do this, what would be the point of aggression in this context?

I have argued that the powerful coupling of the creative disposition and the dynamic market work as the basis for including only 'exceptional' people and excluding people who seem to require too much time to adjust. Many aspects of the creative disposition appear to rely on class privilege, depending on social connections, private resources, and alternative spaces in which to develop. Workers need another space (perhaps at home, in education or through leisure and consumption) to develop media familiarity and confident speech. Secondly, the workers need other spaces in which to develop 'authentic' personal interests and skills that prove relevant to Epic's products and demonstrate their passion. These 'passions' sometimes demand considerable financial investment and are interpreted as the 'natural' interests of gendered, racialised and classed groups. Thirdly, workers need other spaces in which to develop a particular work ethic (based on exploiting connections and playing with personal presentation) so successful in this field. Lastly they need to present themselves as unfazed by risk and uncertainty – a skill that is more easily learned in contexts where surplus resources ensure mistakes will not have disastrous consequences (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). All these factors point to an intense commitment to personal development and the middle-class socialisation and resources that this approach to life demands.

I have also argued that the search for dynamic consumption can too easily slip into a search for cultural purity and I suggested that Epic's search for authenticity is equally problematic in terms of 'race' and gender relations. Furthermore, the demand for racialised, gendered and subcultural capitals always intersect with class because I showed that the view of the market was established through the prism of the work roles and tasks that would be enabled. Classed codes were used to evaluate different kinds of work or

people within every market; bureaucratic, creative and routine. Markets would be represented repeatedly and in contradictory ways in order to protect the preferred work environment of the 'new' professionals. This is why in the discussion I had with Sharena about racism (mentioned in Chapter 2), she also articulated the problem at Epic as a problem of getting the jobs that have a future as opposed to overt racist bullying.

At Epic the public sector as a market, and as an alternative fraction of the professional classes, was imagined as racially mixed. This gains significance because the public sector was also repeatedly reported as struggling with bureaucracy and slow to modernise. This made room for the expectation that authentic knowledge of this sector was certainly not only to be sought in white people. Yet because of the understanding of markets in terms of subjective identities, this could easily lead to the conclusion that non-white people are especially located in this sector because their dispositions are suited to bureaucratic work and are resistant to innovation.

It was also clear that the non-professional role and disposition were gendered. I pointed out that feminising work amounted to down classing work using mothers and 'mother-returners' in a way that has not been observed for fatherhood. This is because motherhood is still seen as a primary identity and responsibility for women and, as such, can function as a compensation for work that is limited in responsibility, and also identity. It was specifically the mothers without resources for support that apparently did not need or want to express their individuality at work.

It is important to acknowledge that classed categories are particularly powerful because they are inexplicit in the sense that they are not politically sensitive in organisations. Class discrimination and stereotyping are not currently illegal. Class stereotypes are relatively inoffensive at this particular point in time because historically organised public struggles over working-class interests have been less concerned with questioning classed

subjectivities. I argued that class can intersect with 'race' in constructions of the non-dynamic, bureaucratic disposition. Also that class intersects with gender to paint a particular picture of a worker without a need for a career. Importantly, both draw on material realities, naturalise them and then recreate them in the contemporary workplace.

The creative job and disposition can also be seen as a version of the enterprising individual described by Richard Dyer in *White* (1997). Dyer shows how the white middle-class person represents the paradigm for 'improved and improving humanity' in popular culture (Dyer 1997:105). The notion of the individual appears to be universal but in fact depends on specific social conditions – freedom, the space to express the self and elaborate character in relation to others. Only these conditions enable the possibility of creating an identity beyond type (Dyer 1997, Scheurich 1997). He also emphasises that entrepreneurial spirit has long been championed in order to downplay the significance of structure, position and resources, and justify the control of others.

Certainly Epic appeared to be giving people careers on the basis of their self-directed subjectivity. They also professed that careers at Epic were self-made by entrepreneurial types. A media career offers the conditions essential to white, privileged identity – personal development. What's new about this particular version is firstly the discomfort about authority i.e. the need to appear open, friendly and fun at the same time as claiming power, and secondly, the abandonment of rationality, stressing intuitive skills, where the gift of spotting a trend and riding it surmounts scientific or systemic analysis. This points to how creativity might do the work of racialised individualism in a contemporary setting, protecting the professional positions that make space for individualised behaviour.

### **Rules, exceptions and social relations**

Because of my concentration on class relations (outlined in Chapter 1), I have been reluctant to classify my respondents absolutely in terms of class origin. I do not know Guy's background, and I would not want to ascribe one. Instead I have emphasised that he was able to claim and create a position for himself at Epic based on his disposition. The important thing, as far as I am concerned, is that this disposition was managerial as much as it was creative. His subjective understanding of himself as creative was crucial and his determination to build this up as a 'persona' facilitated his trajectory. I have argued that his specific disposition, wherever it comes from, amounts to real (i.e. tradeable) cultural capital at Epic not because he is special but because he exhibits traits that the organisation as a whole wants to reward and encourage. The organisation rewards these particular traits because of where it positions itself and its work, because Epic as a company needs to claim creative talent in its relations with advertisers and customers as well as against other companies, business sectors and class fractions. Even as Guy enjoys creative work, his disposition is oriented towards the organisation. The precise value of his 'talent', like his managerial power, is determined by Epic's public preferences and not by his own subjective efforts.

Guy may have built his creative persona on a version of the cheeky and sprightly working-class 'chappy' that Sean Nixon has written about (Nixon 1998). This kind of working class disposition is important because it can also enable career progression in a creative context. I must stress that this becomes cultural capital in its own right only because it fits the institutionalised version of creativity. At Epic the creative disposition is classed in terms of its values but there is space for this specific gendered 'exception'. Institutionalised dispositions if they are open to 'infiltration' will be open only in ways that do not actually challenge or distort them, as this might undermine their trading value. The 'cheeky chappy' does not disrupt the creative/managerial disposition as it contains

masculine assertiveness, irreverent confidence and expressive personality within the framework of 'authentic', unlearned, character.

Another example can illustrate this further. Cruickshank, reviewing the careers of 28 successful female lawyers, emphasises their determination and 'can-do' attitude. She is convinced that experiencing sexual discrimination is not entirely negative as this helps women understand how men behave and ultimately progress (Cruikshank 2003). She is impressed by the stamina of women who remain undeterred by the chauvinism and double-standards within City law firms – taking this on as a personal challenge rather than a broader injustice. This could be seen as an effort to diffuse a threat (in femininity and the recognition of institutional discrimination) to their tradeable tough disposition. As exceptions to a rule (women in a man's world) they prove the existence of 'natural' talent, using their success to imply that the environment is not discriminatory. There is no need for these firms to change as long as women are as resilient as her examples.

By discrediting what appear to be institutional investments in unequal social relations it is clear why every organisation would cultivate key exceptions to its general recruitment patterns. However, in claiming openness, Epic PLC potentially has even more to gain by recruiting people from a variety of backgrounds. I have explained that at Epic openness is promoted for reasons other than a desire to be open in terms of recruitment. Sean Nixon elaborates on Bourdieu's assertion that openness is a marker of a 'challenger class' (Nixon 2003). Challenger classes have to incorporate people from different backgrounds in order to prove they are not the old elite trying to reinvent themselves. A challenger class needs to be able to absorb and replace people from the establishment and create opportunities for previously excluded groups in order to win their support. This means that more open recruitment drives are not always liberatory in intention. Challenger classes need to bring about and represent change. However, as they are attempting to establish themselves as a new elite, they must necessarily be inclusive and elitist at once.

This can help us to understand why Epic embraces inclusive rhetoric at the same time as being elitist. The project of challenging the establishment demands both new faces and high standards. To compete with an elite they must strive to be excellent in a different way but still demand excellence and claim its rarity. I have shown how Epic demands excellence in many ways – entrepreneurial vision, commitment and depth of knowledge. However Bourdieu also stresses that the valorisation of openness reflects the function of the ‘new’ bourgeoisie in the economy – promoting specific work and consumption ethics that are possible with the expansion of the tertiary sector. Some occupations even seem to have been completely re-evaluated for the consumption economy. Gardening, interior design, hairdressing and cookery are all cases in point. Until about 40 years ago, these occupations were low-status occupations grouped at best with crafts or skilled manual labour (Sennett and Cobb 1972). They did not belong in sectors which could offer very many workers a professional ‘career’. They have gradually been re-evaluated because they have been re-presented as commercial arts. The celebration of creativity, with its political and media validation, has been essential to mobilise these ‘new’ careers.

Although careers have been enabled, this has not improved the status of all the work in these occupations. Creativity has instead been used to generate a more elaborate hierarchy within them. The hairdressers are stylists, the managers are now ‘art directors’. The work has certainly been re-evaluated but not in a way that threatens any of the traditional ways of evaluating work, skills and people. Creatives remain above colour technicians who are in turn above those who carry out the mundane tasks such as sweeping up. Traditional work values have been shaken up in some ‘craft’, skilled-manual and artisan sectors but the professional’s work values (creativity, autonomy, responsibility) have not been threatened with devaluation economically or culturally. I have shown how openness has been incorporated into a management style (i.e. disposition) diffusing the implications of openness as policy. It is important to remember with the advent of the knowledge

economy that work can be radically reorganised without disrupting the notions or structures of professionalism in significant ways.

### **Working conditions**

The longevity of workplace hierarchies could be attributed to the ways that contemporary managerial discourse (enabling and informal rather than authoritative) continues to downgrade mundane work. In this way a new discourse can be seen to create an old structure at least for the short term. So it is tempting to attribute substantial weight to managerial discourses because repetitive, binding work is always, and seems to have always been, downgraded (Douglas & Isherwood 1979). In Chapter 4, Imran's high-status technical design skills were effectively downgraded by being lumped together with routine office maintenance tasks.

At least there is room for manoeuvre when power is attributed to discourse (Gilroy 1992b). For example, Cezanne's 'obsessive preoccupation with the capture of nature' meant that even this great artist's work was repetitive. 'Not repetition of the same object or specific theme necessarily, but repetition of the same activity' (Osborne 2003:520). This suggests that creative work could be toppled from its pedestal by exposing that expertise can only ever be achieved by repetition. At the other end of the spectrum, perhaps workers close to the markets (such as on telephone help lines) could attempt to upgrade their role on the basis of their market knowledge?

Yet there are limits to reinventing work roles by stressing or downplaying the repetitive aspects. First of all the historical reiteration of the status of different tasks (particularly the mind/body, mental/manual distinction) gives workers in the creative sector a head start that those in, say, the caring sector do not have. Secondly, it is actually the work

*conditions* and not the tasks themselves, that primarily affect the status of work. The working conditions actually determine whether a task is binding or autonomous.

Conditions have to be negotiated through social relations and depend on workplace structure. Working conditions can only be repositioned with changes in social relations and organisational structure. Once Imran's skills were lumped with maintenance he was no longer applying these skills autonomously at the times, in the direction he wants or for the projects he enjoys. He had to respond to problems immediately whenever they happened. It was in the subtle, gradual transformation to a service function that Imran's self-direction and self-fulfilment were threatened. Jasmine realised that radio news was constraining because it required her constant attention. She worked for the clock rather than the story she was interested in. Work tasks can be made binding to the requirements of patients, spreadsheets, call-targets, call-scripts, computer failures, clients or broadcast slots. Alternatively responsibilities can be allocated with the conditions that maximise autonomy and therefore enable self-directed subjectivities.

So in a managerial (undemocratic) structure, managers can also define the value of other people's work tasks by prescribing the conditions in which they do them. This is why in Chapter 3 the status of the sales executives' roles was only improved when Dan, their manager, changed his managerial style – monitoring them less closely. The value of work is not intrinsic to the tasks or even the discourses about the tasks. It lies in how much freedom there is to decide when and how the tasks are completed and which take priority. The autonomy or lack of it will determine the credibility of any aggrandising discourse. It is easier for an artist like Cezanne to admit his skill derives from repetition, if he decides what, when and how often he repeats his painting.

It is social relations that determine who has the working conditions to realise self-directed creativity. This means that projects designed to encourage creativity in workplaces, or in

society more generally, have to be linked to struggles over autonomous working rather than obliquely connected to general fragmentation or devolution of responsibility. As long as managerialist structures and discourses are so highly valued, ability will be organised in ways that waste and constrain talent. This makes it necessary to theorise these relations more adequately.

### **The ‘new’ bourgeoisie; theorising enculturation and fragmentation**

In this thesis I have been using the theories of Bourdieu and Sennett in order to better understand the talent economy within one organisation; the departmental structure and hierarchies at Epic PLC would be arbitrary and nonsensical without class relations. Now I want to use the example of this organisation to inform theories about the ‘new’ bourgeoisie. As I have discussed, the ‘new’ bourgeoisie are a class with nominative powers. They describe audiences as difficult, demanding, unpredictable and discerning in order to manufacture their own sophistication. They need to hold on to the view that they can make a difference, and make dramatic interventions in the market, so they work tirelessly to reify the ‘common or garden business’ of selling. In the realm of markets and public meaning, their institutionalised authority was based on their ability to embody dynamism, their claims to work in dynamic markets, and to be able to judge between the dynamic and the dull. Most importantly I showed that that their classificatory schema were not loose. Their nominative power worked to promote workplaces that exhibit passion, and social groups that consume with relish. I’ve examined the ways in which the worldview they attempt to bring to fruition is both cultural and economic. However, when theorising the scope of these nominative powers it would be necessary to evaluate the competition amongst cultural producers. Furthermore, broader economic factors are as likely to constrain the realisation of the neo-liberal vision. Market making is an intervention in the social world so it never succeeds without changes in behaviour, social identification, and spending patterns. This positions the efforts of the ‘new’ bourgeoisie

within a highly competitive, materially delimited, and potentially poly-vocal public sphere which promises to take the edge off their nominative power. However, as they ardently promote familiarity as the 'authentic' and legitimate basis of knowledge and culture, they certainly have opportunities to constrain dialogue, reinvention and movement within the poly-vocal public sphere.

When looking at their operations within the organisation it is just as important to qualify their nominative powers. Locating managerial powers of ascription helped me to make sense of the fact that some areas and positions within Epic were moving, and some were still (Skeggs 2004). The struggle over the definition of character that I explored in the previous chapter, revealed the value of claiming flexibility as disposition. Yet the manager's opportunities to classify and label other people only had impact because their nominative powers were combined with the managerial authority to allocate work tasks and to permit autonomous working conditions. This is another reason why it is dangerous to overestimate the scope of nominative power when theorising the 'new' bourgeoisie. They had to work to create positions without trajectories and this involved allocating repetitive tasks, support tasks and implementation tasks, and creating jobs that sat uncomfortably with the organisation's celebrated values but provided 'the fixed lowest reference point' for those who were mobile (Skeggs 2004:108). Extracting the varied, creative and conceptual elements to construct non-autonomous work spaces, and generate classed structures, relied on making deliberate choices when employing a whole gamut of professional practices; writing job descriptions, recruiting, distributing work tasks, describing the creative project, monitoring and target setting, etc. These practices involve specific ways of treating other people as much as they rely on discourses or definitions of creativity.

As well as generating important insights about the scope of nominative powers, my initial intention to ground theories in the everyday, and the resulting attention to working

conditions, has enabled a broader definition of what constitutes professional space. Analysis of professionalism can be limited by a focus on an idealised version of the professional based formal, gendered and exclusive models associated with doctors, lawyers and solicitors (Nixon 2000). By exploring the historical meanings of creativity in Chapter 1, I showed that self-directed work was the consistent thread running through definitions of professionalism. This opened up the possibility that cultural elitism, exhaustive training, inclusion by introduction and formalised qualifications, which have undoubtedly been powerful mechanisms for ring-fencing professional space, may not be the only mechanisms available. In Chapter 3 I described how the sales roles were professionalised without calling on expertise or education. I have been illustrating how the creative persona, which is based on creativity and passion (art) as well as self-selling and flexibility (entrepreneurialism), achieves autonomous space for individual cultivation. Charismatic authority combines all three elements required in a 'new' professional – a claim to be capable of developing the self, a claim to deserve responsibility for other people, and a willingness to participate in privatised organisational politics – so it is not markedly different from bureaucratic authority. Although it is presented as personal charisma, the most important thing about this authority is that its precise nature, and the conditions of its implementation, depend on institutions, just as with bureaucratic authority.

The enculturation of work roles in the tertiary sector has already been documented, but my thesis offers an important contribution by documenting the enculturation of an organisational structure. In Chapter 3 I described the self-sufficiency logic behind Epic's structure in which managers were obliged to try and maximise their own value, and the value of their products, without information on the financial investment or profits achieved from other products and other workers. This meant that one of the reasons that value at Epic was perceived in cultural terms was because other routes to making sense of themselves as 'costs' or 'assets', 'core' or 'support', were actively hidden from them.

Financial data could have provided an alternative means of comparison, but instead difference, hierarchy and success were interpreted as issues relating to personality. Investing in the creative persona amounted to an acceptance of this limited perspective as it encouraged managers to operate as if they worked independently of a large corporate organisation. Rather than being made explicit, quantified or formalised, structure was personalised. These activities and responses can be theorised as a kind of enculturation of organisational structure that is conservative because of the way that it mobilises the 'poverty as culture' theory within an organisation. So while theories which emphasise the enculturation of work tasks suggest expressive opportunities in media work, my theory of the enculturation of an organisation explains the persistence of hierarchy.

I have also shown that within an encultured organisational structure highly personalised ideologies were used to explain mobility. At the same time only the 'moving' sections of the organisation (the teams and individuals perceived to be generating revenue) were able to influence the structure. For the managers this amounted to a position with considerable influence, supported by an institutional ideology. Furthermore, the uncertain climate, the lack of public decision making opportunities at Epic, forced managers to apply their skills in manipulating social dynamics. In the previous chapter, my analysis of the restructure showed that individual aspirations were inert without the social networks that suddenly formed to manage social hierarchies and recreate them anew. In the absence of clear routes of career progression the 'new' professionals were obliged to construct their own, and had to share knowledge *as a group* before they could do this. The fact that some positions were reinvented did not shake my view that power rests in positions and in 'occupational places' (Lash 1990:256), rather it reaffirmed that this must be so. While claiming openness, and actively positioning their environment against traditional 'closed' professions, the 'new' professionals created privatised space in which to exercise their discretion. They employed different kinds of ring-fencing strategies that were more appropriate to an organisation that was meant to be both dynamic and relaxed.

Achieving positions of authority at Epic relied as much on success in the arena of behind the scenes networking as it demanded specialist knowledge. I have been arguing that performative and inconsistent personality represents cultural capital in this field (Ouroussoff 2001). Although it provided the basis of their legitimacy, the arena of informal negotiation was private. Bourdieu mentions this aspect of the 'new' bourgeoisie in passing, but more attention is paid to the ill-defined nature of job titles and roles (Bourdieu 1984, Lash 1990). Yet these strategies are fundamental; producing the space for class reproduction and exclusion. One of the most important contributions of this thesis is to bring these activities to attention and to argue for their centrality in future analyses of the 'new' bourgeoisie. The managers at Epic worked hard to draw attention away from these specific aspects of their power. They deployed a casual, graceful, sometimes winsome articulation of difference. They invested in those who confided in them informally, and conformed to their preconceived notions of 'natural' talent. They gave people 'leg-ups' at moments when everything was in flux and somewhat blurred. They used friendship networks, internal email and the internal magazine to recruit. These kinds of behaviour connect culture and structure in ways that are essentially private. Their values (particularly flexibility) served these privatised empire building activities as much as they helped them to claim the work in cultural production.

The lack of stable structure, or formalised work roles, should not prevent us from attempting to theorise these strategies as those of a particular class fraction. The 'new' bourgeoisie for all their anti-establishment beginnings, should be theorised as a conservative force because their ideologies, strategies and practices are so effective in recreating hierarchies. My work also suggests that they should be theorised as a privatising force, in part for the way they respond to insecurity by galvanising their own secret social groups. My work started with an appreciation of the individualistic logic of consumption, but the picture is better understood alongside a recognition of the secretive

practices that are deployed in the field in order to recreate immediate professional hierarchies. This understanding of the 'new' bourgeoisie is useful, because it explains why opportunities for meaning making, for debate and for inclusion appear so much broader than even two decades ago and yet traditional managerial models of work organisation are so rarely challenged. Organisations operate in the public sphere, but at the same time they constitute the public sphere. These internal struggles to gain professionals space, to widen the scope of their discretion, to generate private networks, impact on the nature of our public domain culturally, politically, economically and socially.

Of course, this thesis has also drawn attention to the limited possibility for self-definition and invention within organisations that claim to be open. Even the managers who gained clear benefits from adopting the creative persona were constrained by the demands for creativity, positivity, speed and entrepreneurial flair. I want now to turn my attention to those who were excluded at Epic, or remained in support roles throughout my period of study. In my analysis these people are conceived as less than expressive individuals despite evident skills and talents. They have different kinds of personhood forced on them. They are also obliged to operate in a working environment in which other people evaluate their worth. As they are largely excluded from the conversations where these judgements are made I am not even in a position to argue that they are forced to *engage* with ungenerous evaluations of their potential. Instead they are obliged to suffer the consequences of judgements made out of earshot in the corridors of Epic PLC. Obviously Sharena showed great ingenuity in her out of work activities, and Lindsey worked to restore her self esteem by redefining the value of her contribution at Epic, yet in my analysis the position of the excluded is basically reactive. They are the victims in an encultured organisation where low status is understood as cultural inadequacy. I am well aware of the dangers in victimisation but constraints must be acknowledged. People in low status positions lack neither culture nor creativity, but they do lack recognition,

investment and autonomy at work. I am unable to generate the optimism of Paul Willis (2000) because although I have suggested that bourgeois powers of ascription should be qualified, I have argued that their organisational positions, combined with a license to apply their social engineering skills, gives them different, more immediate, and local opportunities to constrain talent.

Unlike Scott Lash, understanding the 'new' bourgeoisie in this way would not lead me to interpret a challenge in terms of oppositional values, especially convention (Lash 1990). On the contrary, a challenge would be more likely to come from the anti-managerial. In this sense it may or may not be couched in the language of convention but it is likely to challenge the legitimacy of managerial authority. This middle-class sphere of apparent tolerance and openness works to achieve an unquestioned organisation *of people* as much as a climate of idea-sharing. This means that a challenge is likely to draw attention to the role of talent scouts – attempting to make the agents of recognition and investment, the people who sanction progression, more visible.

In any case, the trend towards dematerialisation is overstated. Cultural brokers, cultural intermediaries and market-makers need to be theorised as brokers of people and talent as much as of culture or symbol. In other words, it ought to be impossible to theorise work involving intangible assets without taking into account the way that this class are employed to manage *tangible assets*; people, products and markets. Furthermore they are employed to make intangible assets (web space, cultural content, audiences) more tangible so they can be sold. The 'new' professionals invest in hiding their labour with tangible assets to achieve prestige. While 'the middle classes distance themselves from artifice and materiality' sociologists must examine the hidden labour undertaken by those who look good apparently without effort, and climb apparently without effort (Skeggs 2004:101).

## **Political implications**

As I pointed out in Chapter 1, pathologised bureaucracy is a king pin in the argument for de-regulating workplaces. George Ritzer draws on Weber's work, powerfully exploiting misleading presentations of the Nazi regime as rigid and regimented, and making emotive comparisons to bolster his argument against Fordist work organisation (Ritzer 2000).

Leadbetter chose instead to knock public sector organisations that he claimed are hindered by Victorian values and over-administration (Leadbetter 2000). Of course these arguments are supported by relentless press representations of the public sector as inefficient and bureaucratic – the context in which Paul Du Gay has attempted to reassert the value of administrative systems and workers (Du Gay 2000).

It is no surprise to me that these anti-bureaucratic discourses are so regularly given media space, since the respondents in my study gained so much from using bureaucrats to achieve their own distinction as media workers. The bureaucratic personalities in manufacturing and in the public sector were repeatedly described as slow, cautious, 'plodders', inflexible ('their hands are tied'), closed-minded and lacking the flair required for innovation. Equal Opportunities measures were not viewed as progressive but interpreted as yet more evidence of their different concerns and the drawn-out and constraining nature of the practices they use.

So apart from ascribing themselves as dynamic and passionate, pathologising bureaucracies obviously also protects their 'new' professional practices and working conditions. Managers at Epic were free to make decisions about the content and the direction of their magazines or websites and free to use their discretion in matters of recruitment. They had the power to effect with minimum interference or surveillance. Their main constraints were their budgets and disciplinary guidelines such as journalistic codes of conduct. Most of their control however was self-imposed. The 'creative ethos'

led them to focus on *reacting* to different opinions rather than making efforts to consult with their audiences.

Public sector workers are obliged to make decisions after consultation with constituents or elected representatives in order to claim they serve the public. They are slower because democratic consultation, organisation and action takes time. Wider society benefits if political leaders and welfare professionals are constrained by the opinions of others (especially service users). In downgrading this environment, media workers enhance the appeal of their own climate in which they feel free to make decisions. They champion work organisation where consultation is generally limited to their chosen group of 'opinion formers' and rarely widened. This is promoted because it gets results quickly but my study illuminates how the managers benefit as this climate also professionalises their working conditions.

Arendt's observations must be taken into account again here. Dynamic work organisation is attractive for those included as people have greater powers to make a difference, and they can see the results of their actions more quickly (Arendt 1967, Arendt 1994). This makes their work more satisfying as there is less restraining their vision and creativity. Managers at Epic were encouraged to see themselves as product responsible – free to decide on the content and look. However with this responsibility they were obliged to prioritise the needs of the product over people's needs and evaluate their temporary workers as production costs. Their freedom was coupled with a rejection of management as a responsibility for the development of other people. The frequent restructures demanded that they find yet more ways to avoid accountability towards the people they made redundant. They had to work hard to protect the legitimacy and scope of their 'discretion' and gregarious personality was essential in this. Managers promoted an informal and sociable work culture in order to claim they were open while demonstrating a preference for closed-shop decision-making specifically about other people.

The decline of the public service ethos and trust in public institutions have been dealt with at length elsewhere (Bauman 1987, Giddens 1991, Sennett 1999, Beck 2000, Monbiot 2000, Marquand 2004). Julian Le Grand has argued that commercial trading relations are the way to reduce costs and restore trust in the public sector – replacing the indifference and arrogance of welfare professionals with customer focus (Le Grand 2003). Yet for all its dynamism, Epic was no model of efficiency. If public sector institutions were to trim their administration costs in the name of dynamism, I wouldn't assume they'd be more efficient. Even more worrying, what democratic processes might be quietly eroded in the process? Beck has described the neo-liberal vision as 'a kind of democratic illiteracy' (Beck 2000:4).

My work also suggests that commercial relations are no guarantee of basic respect for the consumer. In the logic of the creative professionals, respect for customers is conditional on their dynamic consumption style. Customers who fall outside this definition are at best ignored and at worst pathologised. As a class, creative professionals show disdain for those who work or consume without passion. My study powerfully illustrates what the gains would be for public service professionals in swapping democratic ideals for dynamic ones. They would gain increased power and freedom to make decisions with minimal consultation. They would gain status with greater incentives and opportunities to ignore the service aspects of their roles.

Identity politics serve the creative sector and the service sector well because they reflect these managers' functions in the expanding tertiary sector. This study shows that if they were adopted in the public sector this would represent a worrying political shift as much as economic rationalisation. If creative professionals encroach on public services, I would predict that public freedoms will shrink. The authoritarian origins of PR and marketing discourses and practices have been acknowledged (Ewen 1996). As Gilroy states, 'the

practice of politics is first modified and then destroyed by the mentalities of marketing and advertising' (Gilroy 2001:151). My study illustrates how creative professionals might help to bring such a political disaster about while also being open, positive, gregarious and imaginative.

### **Implications for creative organisations**

Of course creative companies will demand certain cultural skills, familiarities and dispositions from their workforce. However, if they deny their capability to teach the skills they desire over time, they will continue to give opportunities to those who are already privileged. I have argued that organisations that treat all talents as crafts are more likely to operate justly. Value does not have to be maintained by selective recruitment. Value can also be protected by investment. From what we have seen this kind of investment would require quite a radical reinterpretation of organisational economics at Epic. A 'cost' can just as well be called an investment, an asset, an ingredient or a component. It is important to look at what is achieved by using the word cost instead of say, subsidy or cash injection. Different terms describing spend, communicate the different values of purchases and the relative entitlement of the recipients. The word cost communicates that Epic's workers feel their position is tenuous and conditional. It communicates the fragility of their belonging. It works as a question mark over the value of their contribution. At Epic it signified lower status, marking out certain functions as 'support' for 'core' functions. It also served to construct a false impression that revenue-generating positions were relatively safe. Costs are investments and guarantors of value when they are part of a creative plan. To change organisations in this way would require a huge struggle over value. In order to provide support workers with a media career, Epic would be forced to find new ways of presenting its finances.

Within a project that acknowledges organisational power, it is vital that academics continue to question knowledge evaluations. I have argued that the expanding cultural sector may have led to proliferation of styles but the terms by which we evaluate them remain just as Bourdieu described in *Distinction*. This is one of the main reasons that changes in the labour market, such as the enculturation of work, are not likely to disrupt social hierarchies. Sociologists must work even harder to challenge the interpretations of 'authentic' knowledge as arising from long-term socialisation. If this project is not taken seriously, social divisions of the past will certainly be recreated in new work roles.

In the meantime, it would be foolish to underestimate the value of socialised knowledge. The experience of Elaine and Lindsey confirm that acquiring cultural capital publicly is potentially painful and unsettling to the self. It is also socially stigmatised. This is similar to the stigma that people on benefits have suffered. There is stigma in claiming benefits publicly, while private inheritance can be kept secret and is not therefore open to questions about whether the beneficiaries 'deserve' extra financial help or are making 'proper' use of it. The idea of positive discrimination for example, stigmatises people as it involves public interventions read as extra help.

What I have discovered from looking at Epic PLC is that as long as extra help is offered in secret, people are open to believing social mobility is self-generated. In fact survival and mobility was impossible at Epic without the help of managers. This surely must be acknowledged as one of the reasons equality campaigners have had so many problems arguing for public assistance and the introduction of equality policies. People want progress to seem as if it were self-generated because this is currently read as 'natural' social mobility. In this context, equality initiatives inevitably appear to disrupt the 'natural' evolution of cultural capital.

It can be dispiriting to acknowledge how far democratic decision-making processes and equality measures are discredited by this social preference for 'authentic' cultural development. We cannot ignore the fact that privately accrued cultural capital is more successfully transmuted in part because it is gradual. Whatever its economic value, it is often appealing to individuals because there is less risk of personal humiliation in gaining it. It is more tradeable because it seems an authentic competence and is more convincing to employers and colleagues. It can also be mystified in relations with other social groups so it is easier to protect its value.

Accepting that at present, knowledges, competencies and talents are evaluated more favourably when privatised and 'natural' it is probably not strategically helpful to imply that the continuing problems for women and minorities in professional settings can be rectified by inclusion or access alone. My study shows it is also essential that you are able to accrue cultural capital gradually and privately once you have got in. Inclusion will not lead to social mobility unless it is into a position in which personal development is possible. Could we redesign institutions (schools, courses, companies) to enable genuine acquisition that is tradeable? Is this impossible or simply more costly? Can you ever enable private accrual fairly? Are mentoring schemes more realistic in this context? How could you help people acquire capital in ways so they could then present knowledge as always their own and not given? As Skeggs said, the women in the caring courses did well because they were formalising something they knew anyway (Skeggs 1997). How could the institution change the course and the ways of teaching so that the women could learn something they didn't already know, something more economically valuable, without experiencing pain?

Of course none of these issues is new to sociology, but what *is* new is to identify these problems in an organisation like Epic. Creativity and dynamism are widely hailed as the solutions to the closed shop and organisational stuffiness (certainly according to the

'new' professionals). This study shows quite clearly that a search for dynamism enhances professional elitism and that even if the age of Fordist efficiency is over, Fordist work roles are revitalised in the drive for authenticity. This is why I am attracted to Beck's arguments that the redefinition of work (which he sees as inevitable and impending) be incorporated with other struggles that aim to protect and promote democracy (Beck 2000).

Though subcultural creativity is often presented as the key to survival and a means to beat the system, Epic's fascination with grass roots energy show how this works to 'echo the restless credo of hypermodernity' (Löfgren 2001:78). We should be careful not read dynamism in an organisation, or in the cultural industries, as evidence of social mobility or subversion. Instead 'creativity is a value which, though we may believe we choose it ourselves, may in fact make us complicit with what today might be seen as the most conservative of norms: compulsory individualism, compulsory innovation, compulsory performativity and productiveness, the compulsory valorisation of the putatively new' (Osborne 2003:507).

My analysis of the anti-corporate PLC indicates that academic work on the cultural industries should not ignore the continuing relevance of managerialism which exists alongside and indeed is entirely compatible with notions of forced entrepreneurialism, portfolio careers and contemporary cottage industries. From Guy's tiny agency to Epic PLC, creativity is implicated in the survival of managerial discourses and structures. Creativity is used to valorise autonomous professional space and legitimise professional power in personal terms rather than as positional or organisational derivatives. Creativity should not therefore be understood as a neutral value as it is a tool used in social relations to achieve freer working conditions and replicate organisational structures that tragically constrain talent. Creativity, understood as an intrinsic and magical gift, also works to naturalise inequalities, paving the way for those who are already privileged.

Of course creativity, autonomy and passion are held as precious within academia too. The managers at Epic had a worrying tendency to elevate the creativity expressed in their product above the freedom and happiness of other people. Sociologists and cultural theorists need to work hard not to replicate this by fetishising the expansion of the tertiary sector – being seduced by the beauty or complexity of cultural goods or creativity as a progressive ideal. I want the anti-corporate PLC to serve as a reminder that an old and well-known wolf has found itself some attractive, irreverent and undeniably creative new clothing.

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confrontation. She invested a great deal in her work, in taking responsibility, in adrenalin, in tough challenges and long hours. She described herself as lucky to be able invest in this way because her parental responsibilities were divided unconventionally - she looked after her teenage daughter only some evenings and weekends. She had also 'ended up' at Epic when her previous employers were bought out. At the time of the restructure Carmella worked hard to secure a different role at Epic Digital and avoided redundancy.

### **Jasmine, freelancer**

Jasmine was graduating with a degree in journalism as I began my fieldwork. She gained her first unpaid placement in broadcasting by sending out 60 letters to employers. Her job at Epic Wellbeing was her first paid work and she was paid freelance rates. From that moment she considered herself a 'freelancer'. She had a strong investment in 'serious journalism' (investigative, factual, broadsheet, documentary) and was pleased to work on the Health Management Today site for the useful contacts and policy knowledge it gave her. She approached work as something you use for self-development purposes, in terms of market knowledge, social contacts, skills and initiative. Jasmine was ambitious and hopped between contracts in publishing, agency, and radio businesses, at an impressive pace, building up her experience. Although she was rarely out of work, Jasmine was able to embrace the risk in freelancing because she was living at home with her parents. Her parents were Asian, and Hindu, originally from Kenya.

### **Sharena, data processor**

Sharena's role as data imputer at Epic was her second job since graduating in film studies, from the University of North London. At the time of the first interview, Sharena had been in the role a full year and was feeling bored and under developed. Despite this she stayed in the role for a further two years and chose to invest her energies outside of work. For a full year she worked several evenings and weekends for a video shop over and above her full time role at Epic. After this she set up an export business with her friend and also joined an investors' club. Sharena was black, had lived in London all her life, and was disappointed that although she was bright, and a graduate, she was not 'getting on'. She was reluctant to make sense of Epic's lack of investment in terms of her 'race' but acknowledged that other black women in the company found themselves similarly trapped in support and admin roles. She took part in the interviews with me because she hoped that her comments would lead to changes within Epic. While trying to negotiate her position at Epic, and claim different, more interesting work, Sharena was held back by the fact that she relied on formal requests to her managers during review meetings. She did not try to get involved in new projects by making her requests informally, casually, or socially.

### **Imran, designer**

At the time of my first interview with Imran he had already been working in publishing for three-years but was only 20 years old. He had joined as part of a college placement organised to supplement his art course with some commercial design training, and he was trained by Guy. Imran invested a great deal in his identity as a creative person. He was especially talented at making online animations but took great pleasure in all the tangible results of his efforts (banners on buildings, video walls, etc.) Imran believed that he was so successful in his career because Guy had looked out for him, because he worked so hard, and because he had made sure that he was always helpful. Although he had never encountered another Asian designer in the five years he had been working, Imran was very

keen to dismiss the significance of his Asian ethnicity. He had grown up in London and saw this as his primary identity. He still lived at home with his Muslim parents who were keen for him to find a secure career. They were against him becoming a professional footballer although this was certainly an option for Imran at 17. By the time of my last interview Imran was extremely pleased to be able to tell me that his parents were proud of his career choice. When Epic's design studio was disbanded he considered joining Carmella's technical team but then decided to leave Epic to join Guy's new agency in Soho.

#### **Lindsey, technical project manager**

When Lindsey joined Epic she was in her early thirties and had previously spent seven years at an international chemical company, that I have called Domesti Co, with several household brands. She'd worked installing telecommunication systems, on year 2000 compliance, and also developed an intranet site. Although she had been successful at Domesti Co, and felt valued, she came to Epic because she was looking for something different, more sociable, more glamorous and more fun. She loved the social atmosphere at Epic – the drinking and celebrating – and threw herself into it with gusto. However she retained a work ethic which she had adopted at Domesti Co, and an unshakeable commitment to competency, efficiency, meritocracy and quality, which made her experience at Epic uncomfortable. She was unable, for moral reasons, to cope with informal supplier relationships or the low standards that were tolerated in the name of speed. She was made redundant during the restructure and did not wish to return to work for a whole year. She found the experience of working for Epic deeply unsettling and demoralising.

#### **Millie, data processor**

I interviewed Millie once. She worked as a data imputer, alongside Sharena, and had stayed at Epic for one year. I interviewed her as she was leaving the role. She was also a graduate and felt constantly insulted by the boring work, their location apart from the rest of the technical team, and the lack of development. Like Sharena, Millie had a strong investment in the notion of a media career, the importance of self-development, and a belief that her work ought to be fulfilling. She held on to these values while her Jewish parents tried to persuade her to retrain in the more traditional, and seemingly secure, professional discipline of law. Millie left Epic to find work in Australia but ran out of money earlier than anticipated and had to return to London. She came back to Epic on several occasions to cover when Sharena was sick, but did not want to take part in any more interviews with me while she felt her career was in limbo.