

Anne M. Cronin

“Gender in the Making of Commercial Worlds: Creativity, Vitalism and the Practices of Marketing”, *Feminist Theory*, 9 (3): 293-312.

Abstract

If capitalism is being increasingly understood as performative and processual, and if these understandings are being folded into capitalism's production of itself, what place does gender have in performing the commercial world? This article argues that the significance of gender as genre or type has been overlooked in the recent literature on the performance of the market or market relations. While the role of economic theories and management practices in making markets has been examined, and the place of women in organisations has been explored, little attention has been paid to how gender as a productive *process* marks the creation and maintenance of market relations. Using material from a recent ethnographic study of the advertising industry, I examine how advertising practitioners incorporate vitalist understandings of market relations and of knowledge-producing activities into their practices. Framed as ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’, these discursive practices perform what practitioners understand as a reproductive function in commercial life.

Keywords

capitalism; commercial autogenesis; reproduction; vitalism; creativity; innovation; market; advertising

In feminist work, there has been a long-established concern with analysing the relationship between sexual reproduction and social reproduction, for instance in understandings of the heterosexual nuclear family as an economic unit of production (and today more as a unit of consumption) (e.g. Hennessy 2000). Such analyses centre on a framing of gender as a form of *making* or as a technology (de Lauretis 1989), and most influential in this area has been Donna Haraway's work. She argues that gender can be considered a 'grammar' which articulates with other differences (Haraway 1991: 147). Here, gender as kind or type *performs*; it makes and remakes relationships across a range of bodies, objects, signs, and materialities. These relationships are often commercial in that the proprietary 'marks' of capital (brands, trademarks) function both to denaturalise kind and type (including gender), and also to renaturalise those brands and trademarks through their attachment to reproduction and new forms of life such as the trademarked OncoMouse. This is a relationship in which capital's 'syntactical' marks of © and ™ signal 'the syntax of natural/social/technical relationships congealed into property' in which brand names act as genders, 'that is, generic marks that are directional signals on maps of power and knowledge' (Haraway 1997: 7, 8). As Franklin, Lury and Stacey (2000) have demonstrated, gender as type or grammar performs across a range of sites including the local and global, life itself, and materialities such as commodities.

But while brand names and commodities *as genders* work upon the discursive fabric of contemporary life in striking and protean ways, gender as type, kind and process also performs other complex commercial relationships. This work of gender has been central – if unacknowledged – in Foucault's analysis of a 'bio-politics of the population' (Foucault 1990: 139). While Foucault famously paid scant attention to gender, his conceptualisation of the new discursive framing of people into 'populations' was premised upon the ideal of the reproduction of the social or collective body tied to physical reproduction. Power, he argued,

‘is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomenon of population’ (Foucault: 1990: 137). In turn, understandings of people-as-populations were reliant upon ways of classifying and manipulating the resulting data (Rose 1999). These modes of representing human life (statistics, taxonomies, metrics) offered new means of governance, potentially rendering people as populations more calculable and amenable to subjection (and, indeed, also offered new modes of subjectification). These means of classification formed a kind of grammar which had the capacity to organise. As Bowker and Star argue, ‘a “classification system” is a set of boxes (metaphorical or literal) into which things can be put to then do some kind of work – bureaucratic or knowledge production’ (2000: 10). In marketing practices, the classifying processes pivot around myriad conceptualisations of people as (a population of) consumers. But whether in marketing or in bureaucratic processes, genre and type play a central role, tied as they are to gender as a fundamental understanding of the (sexual) reproduction of the (social) body. In the dissemination of means of governance through taxonomy and ideas of population, gender as grammatical or syntactical plays a significant role in the division and ordering of the contemporary world. This idea of life and power has been most intensively examined by feminists in the area of health, science and technology, and there has been far less attention paid to how gender as genre or kind helps shape the processual or performative character of the commercial and organisational world.

This analysis of ‘life’ in all its forms has recently taken a new focus with debates on vitalism (Fraser, Kember & Lury 2005; Kanamori 2005; Lash 2006)¹. Here, capitalism is understood as performative, experimental, adaptive and organised around innovation or ‘planful opportunism’ (Thrift 2005: 9). Capitalism as ‘a vital intensity’ is thought to engineer new forms of governance through novel means such as organising affective responses (Thrift

¹ See also special issue of *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2007, 24 (6).

2005: 16). Alongside a Deleuzian emphasis on becoming, frameworks such as complexity theory analyse ‘complex (“vital”) matter’ (Urry 2005: 1). Such systems are often seen as autopoietic or self-generative, demonstrating adaptive features as they self-organise through time. Analyses of such systems emphasize ‘a sense of contingent openness and multiple futures, of the unpredictability of outcomes in time-space’ (Urry 2005: 3).

In parallel to this interest in process and autopoiesis, recent debates on commerce take as their starting point an understanding that markets are *performed*. Markets are not seen as given structures within which commercial practices take place; markets are understood as performative, made and remade by practitioners’ actions (Callon 1998; MacKenzie 2006; MacKenzie and Millo 2003; MacKenzie, Muniesa & Siu 2007). They are processual and the performances that constitute them are often organised through flows or exchanges of knowledge (Knorr Cetina & Bruegger 2002a). Such studies challenge conventional economic models of processes and structures such as price mechanisms by highlighting their performative and contingent production and by integrating an analysis of the interaction of things and people (Knorr Cetina and Preda 2005; Law 2002). Many of these debates focus on the performance of markets in economics and the financial industries.² They take as a particular concern ‘how “abstract” or “virtual” assets are brought into being and made tradable’ (MacKenzie 2007: 357). But the insights of such analyses can be usefully imported into other areas of study such as marketing. Thrift (2005) notes that one key feature of contemporary society is a feedback loop in which capitalism processes understandings of itself, understandings such as those developed in management theories and in consultancy firms. For Thrift, the development of business schools, management consultants, management gurus and the media constitutes the ‘cultural circuit’ of capitalism (Thrift 2005: 6). This is a

² See special issue of *Economy and Society*, 2007, 36 (3).

form of knowledge economy with a driving emphasis on innovation, adaptability and creativity. It is a form of capitalism that has been,

conjured into existence by the discursive apparatus of the cultural circuit of capital which, through the continuous production of propositional and prescriptive knowledge, has the power to make its theories and descriptions of the world come alive in new built form, new machines and new bodies.

(Thrift 2005: 11)

The knowledges that the world of capitalism produces about itself form a recursive, self-generative network. For example, MacKenzie and Millo (2003) demonstrate how option pricing theory operates performatively, albeit in ways that are contested and could not be considered to constitute a self-fulfilling prophecy. In their study, derivatives markets gradually altered to fit an emerging theoretical economic model and even participants who were unconvinced by the model were forced to adopt it as more and more participants came to orient their practices around it.

But in this literature on the performance of markets there is almost no focus on marketing, either as a practical discipline in which most firms engage internally or as a specialist knowledge service which clients buy into (although see Cochoy 1999). Equally striking is the lack of attention paid to the role of social difference in the performance of capitalist knowledge networks or the work of gender as genre or type in processes of taxonomising. My recent study of the outdoor advertising industry in the UK attempts to offer a corrective to this and open up debates in this area.³

³ The research was supported by ESRC grant number RES 000221744. The project involved 28 in-depth interviews of 45-90 minutes with practitioners in a range of London-based media owning companies, media agencies, specialist poster agencies, trade associations, research companies and one client company. In addition,

Outdoor or ‘out of home’ advertising is a sub-field of the general advertising industry which is dominated by broadcast advertising such as television and, increasingly, internet advertising. The outdoor sector trades in space, offering to potential advertisers segments of time on sites such as roadside billboards, panels in pedestrian zones, train and underground trains and buses. Media owners such as J.C.Decaux, Clear Channel Outdoor, CBS Outdoor (formerly Viacom), Titan and Primesight own and maintain these poster sites and have contracts with local councils whereby they construct and maintain bus shelters or other amenities in return for the right to sell advertising space on them. They sell advertising to clients via the intermediaries of media agencies or specialist poster companies. To facilitate this task, and to compete with rival companies with similar portfolios of advertising sites, the media owners commission market research companies to produce data on their sites and on potential ‘target markets’ who will be ‘hit’ by advertising on those sites.

In the terms of this analysis, then, ‘the market’ is constituted by multiple elements: the clients that the media owners or media agencies are pitching to; ‘the consumers’ on the street who are the ‘target markets’ for outdoor advertising; and the sets of relationships between media owners, media agencies and client firms. The industry is constituted by a set of carefully maintained commercial relationships and is framed by various forms of calculative and promotional action. Central to these relationships is the generation and circulation of

data such as briefs, research questionnaires, research project results and PowerPoint presentations was collected from these companies. The project also involved a two-week ethnography in 2006 with one media owner including observation of directors’ meetings, brainstorming and creative sessions, construction and presentations of pitches, visits to clients and media agencies, staff training, and a range of in-depth interviews with staff. Other parts of the project involved a case study of the visual impact of outdoor advertising in Manchester. A more detailed discussion of the empirical data appears elsewhere (Cronin 2008, Cronin forthcoming). This article focuses on one element that emerged from the study – creativity and its articulation in the industry as vital and autogenic. While there was ample evidence in my study of this phenomenon, and vitalist commercial understandings have been identified by other studies (e.g. Hassoun 2005; Knorr Cetina & Bruegger 2002a), it is important to stress that this characteristic is but one of a range of commercial articulations, and may not necessarily be present in all commercial sectors.

various types of marketing data. The media owners engage in a continual process of creating ‘pitches’ in PowerPoint presentation form, trading on claims about their ability to produce ‘expert knowledges’ of consumers and advertising sites. These pitches are presented to representatives of media agencies or specialist poster agencies and aim to persuade these intermediaries that the outdoor medium is appropriate for their clients’ needs and that a media owner’s sites – such as in train stations or on bus shelters – are most appropriate to target a particular audience. Media agencies then selectively reconstruct the media owners’ PowerPoint presentations, cutting and pasting data from a range of sources, and use them to pitch to potential clients. Within these relations, there is a tension evident between the need for market stability in which market relationships ideally cohere in a recognisable format across time (achieved by a certain predictability in the framing of commercial relationships between media owners, media agencies and clients) and a requirement for innovation in order to secure competitive advantage (and ensure the continued profitable existence of the firm). In orienting themselves to these duals goals, companies *perform* both these markets relations *and* a set of conceptualisations of ‘consumers’ and consumption practices.

‘Working knowledges’ of gender

In my study, knowledge practices – particularly those involving the classification and reclassification of consumers – were central to the everyday working patterns and acted to structure relationships between media owners, media agencies and clients. Gender played a key role in these practices in several inter-related ways. Firstly, I found that as claims to knowledge and practices of knowledge exchange are central to this industry, typologies such as ‘female consumers’ – the group most strongly associated with consumption and purchasing

decisions – were centrally important. Secondly, these taxonomic practices are used as ‘commercial experiments’ in order to make and maintain commercial relations between the different economic actors in the field. As noted above, markets are performed; they involve a set of practices that act to constitute market relations and the knowledge practices around gender act to stitch these relations together (albeit in provisional and shifting ways). And thirdly, gender as type or genre *of process* is key for generating new classifications and producing new knowledges that are used as promotional leverage or ‘point of difference’ as various companies compete for business. This gendered processual form of knowledge production is then woven into the performance of market relationships between media owners, media agencies and clients. As I argue in later sections, such a production of classifications is a form of commercial *reproduction* framed by the industry as market innovation. This form of reproduction is seen by practitioners as commercial survival through competition. These three sets of practices combine to perform market relations within the outdoor advertising industry.

As part of these knowledge practices, consumers are ‘made up’. Indeed, the figure of the consumer, itself segmented into minutely differentiated social classifications, is a relatively recent invention which was created by commercial enterprises in the nineteenth century as a means of generating stability and predictability for the market which was plagued by vagaries (Cochoy 1999, 2002). By making people ‘knowable’ and calculable in such taxonomies, models of consumer identity offered new modes of subjectification in a culture intensely oriented around consumption (Miller & Rose 1997). In effect, the very conceptualisation of the customer who might buy a product, and the typologies of the consumer that were then generated, acted to perform and maintain certain market relations – relations which sought to ensure the stability of profit-making relationships (Cochoy 2002). In marketing practices (and indeed in academic marketing analyses) gender is one of the most

common ‘segmentation variables’ used in surveys (Catterall, Maclaran & Stevens 2000: 6). But on a more fundamental level, the generic typology of ‘the consumer’ is widely assumed to be female (*ibid.*). This strong association of the consumer with women is well represented in academic studies of the development of consumer society (Bowlby 1993; Nava 1991; Rappaport 2000) and in ethnographic studies of contemporary consumption practices (e.g. Miller 1998). But there are tensions within marketing practices about this generic view of the consumer and those firms’ claims about their ability to identify and target very specific demographics or niche markets. This is nowhere more evident than in the outdoor advertising sector which, due to the nature of its sites, has the potential to reach a very wide range of ‘target markets’. In its self-promotional activities, the industry attempts to present this characteristic as an advantage, emphasising that outdoor advertising is one of the few ‘mass media’ left in an age of intense media segmentation. As one practitioner described to me, outdoor is ‘one of the last broadcast channels’ which can reach ‘50/60% of the population within 2 weeks’. But at the same time, the industry offers various highly specific modes of classifying consumers into very finely calibrated segmentations based on various social classifications, consumption preferences, attitudes and activities.

Within this range of classificatory activities, the consumer segment of ‘the housewife’ is alive and well, although there is scepticism in the industry about this classification’s conceptual coherence as well as pragmatic concerns about its traction with clients. There also exists a slight embarrassment about what practitioners realise must now be seen as an outmoded and perhaps offensive classification – ‘I can’t believe we still use that term’. In a promotional pitch by one media agency on ‘how to reach housewives with kids’ it is claimed that ‘housewives with children are a gateway to a range of purchasing decisions’. Part of their PowerPoint pitch claims that:

- H/wives with children travel around but not very far afield
- Appear to be seduced by immediate call to action, especially relating to their children
- Recognise the importance of OOH [out-of-home] advertising to tell them about new products and offers
- Respond to ‘price’ advertising for themselves and their children

Despite the range of existing taxonomic marketing tools, and hence the scope of segmentations available to practitioners, it is not surprising that there remains a strong focus on the figure of ‘the housewife’ (although these claims now include qualifications about a shift from life-long status to lifestage and career trajectory, career breaks and part-time work).

If, as Foucault (1990) argued, power is exercised at the level of defining and managing ‘populations’, gender and sexual reproduction must be seen as central to these processes.

Marketing’s classifications of consumers and attempted commercial management of market relations can be seen as part of this power–knowledge project in which the heterosexual nuclear family is (still) seen as the key site of social reproduction and an important force within economic life, particularly in terms of consumption. Gender is thus central to such classificatory projects although in my study, ‘the housewife’ was presented less as a determinate social status than an aggregate of practices: what women with children *do* and how they do it. Gender is thus characterised by a set of practices that shift according to market pragmatics (new products launched, perceived shifts in consumption patterns, new competitors). It is not that bodies marked by gender, age, ethnicity or other social status have no place in the world of marketing knowledges, but rather that they are not the starting points for those knowledge practices – the marketers start from people’s perceived practices (or more precisely, what they can know about these practices) and selectively produce knowledges that are transferable and malleable for their specific purposes.

For obvious commercial reasons, the practices that form the focus of classificatory activities tend to be consumption-oriented. For example, media owners may commission research or interpretations of wider research projects that examine how people commute to work and what they do whilst travelling. One specialist media planning company, for instance, engaged in a research project in which women with children were given a camera, asked to photograph their activities on a typical day and then annotate the photographs. The results were selectively used in that company's promotional materials to emphasise how much time women spent driving their children to school and going to the supermarket, and thus how many times women were exposed to outdoor and 'point of sale' advertising sites. This time was then segmented into various typologies that appeared most commercially saleable such as 'golden time' or time just for themselves – moments of relaxation when women might be most receptive to advertising messages about leisure products such as magazines.

Gender is of course only one variable that is tracked and only one classification that is highlighted in the industry's promotional pitches. In addition to commissioned research projects, practitioners use a range of standard marketing databases such as TGI which correlate acts of purchase with a vast range of typologies such as age, sex, ethnicity occupation and with other consumption patterns, for example the purchase of a certain brand of car with how many foreign holidays that consumer may take a year. They then bring these rather abstract classificatory aggregates to life in PowerPoint presentations with *vox pop* – highly selective video clips of research subjects articulating saleable soundbites or what they call 'nuggets'. This is a strategic and contingent process. One practitioner described the process of researching for a PowerPoint pitch in which he would use standard industry databases but would also require a nugget or interesting 'hook' or angle to make the pitch appear convincingly attuned to the *zeitgeist*: 'if you want a real nugget you still have to go back on to Google and type in "housewife.pdf" and random research things to try and find

that nugget'. These diverse knowledge production processes generate a set of shifting understandings that is used by media owners as promotional pitches. But the production of classifications of gender based on women's consumption practices is only one way in which gender is significant in these market practices.

Innovation, creativity and point of difference

The fact that all classifications are seen by practitioners as mutable, contingent, and strategically-oriented, and that their manipulation and circulation is performative of these particular market relationships, marks an important characteristic of this market – the performance of its own 'life' or the reproduction of its viability as a profitable and relatively stable set of market relationships. As I will go on to argue, gender is framed not only as a classification but also as a mode of classifying. As such a classifying device, gender is performed here not just as kind or type (e.g. type of consumer) but as a *process*, a process of making difference and generating classifications and classificatory systems. Gender here performs a commercially reproductive process.

As companies must compete for business in an industry based on knowledges of consumers and expertise on how to target them using that companies' particular assets, the production of commercial 'point of difference' is crucial. The continual production of proprietary taxonomic systems, or new ways of understanding consumers, is thus a key structuring element of the performance of these market relationships. On one level, this emphasis on change, creativity and innovation mirrors the rhythms of capitalist product innovation. Thus, companies stress the significance of classifications such as 'early adopters' (people who first take up new products on the market such as fashions or technologies) and

‘opinion formers’ (seen as people who influence trends). Indeed, this stress on ‘newness’ and innovation is stitched into the fabric of the industry on all levels. As one practitioner described to me, the corporate ‘memory’ of the advertising industry is short as commercial incentives are focused on change and rebranding, not just of products but of media agencies’ and media owners’ claims about means to reach target markets. For instance, when he worked in television advertising 7 years previously, the ideal marketing ‘conversation’ with the consumer was framed in terms of ‘attentiveness’ whereas it is currently being framed as ‘engagement’. It is not that one conceptualisation is more effective than another in targeting consumers but that the industry’s competitive nature requires constant innovation and ‘re-packaging’ of marketing approaches. This repackaging of very similar ideas often goes unnoticed because the average length of time a brand manager at a client firm will stay in that fairly junior position is very short. So the brand managers are ‘looking at the next rung of the ladder. They’re not going to challenge [repackaged ideas or dubious claims made about data] because they’ve only got to keep it together for 18 months, maybe less, and they’ll be on the next one’.

Within this context of innovation, these strategic knowledge-producing activities are neither stable nor framed as long-term but are intended to perform convincingly into the moment and maintain market relations. Elsewhere, I have argued that these knowledge practices can be understood as commercial experiments (Cronin forthcoming). Just as scientists have created worlds and regimes of truth through scientific experimentation (Haraway 1991, 1997), so too do commercial experiments create worlds – worlds made of market relationships. These experiments include developing and pitching new modes of classifying consumers (using new database technologies or new qualitative data) which are ‘tested’ according to their level of commercial efficacy, that is, according to their

functionality in persuading the media owner's immediate clients (often via media agencies) that they should buy advertising space from them.

The commercial worlds that I saw created in the outdoor advertising industry centred on innovation and creativity and it appears that these characteristics are becoming increasingly significant in the practices of a wide range of other sectors. It has been noted that corporate ideals and discursive practices within such organisations have long been oriented towards an idea of the future (Munro 1998). Now studies have developed an intensified interest in idea of 'the possible' or 'the potential'. For instance Lazzarato (2004: 192), drawing on the work of Gabriel Tarde, argues that the operation of firms today often centres on 'the production of "possibles"' with a focus on 'invention, the ability to organize, to combine, to make happen'. This involves a valuing of the ability to anticipate and 'demands learning from uncertainty and mutations' (Lazzarato 2004: 192). There is seen to be an emphasis on people's *potential* ability (Sennett 2006), alongside a shift in managerial emphasis to the entrepreneurial, to the valuing of initiative and movement, and to forms of knowledge production that are 'flexible, proactive, and able to deal with uncertainty' (Hinchliffe 2000: 588). Within this shift to movement, futurity, and responsiveness in management rhetoric and practice, 'history vanishes, with its implied effects and causes, as the more mystical notion of "Change" steps in to replace it' (Wright cited in Hinchliffe 2000: 580).

This stress on innovation and responsiveness may be perceived as new in some areas of management and commercial practice, but it is long established in the advertising and marketing sectors. In its practices of generating constantly evolving images, texts and associations for brands and products, the advertising industry in particular is associated with creativity (Nixon 2003). But within the sector of the industry I was analysing – traders of space and practitioners of media sales – that creativity and innovation takes a rather different

form. Change, and innovation as the creative management of that change, is central to the practices I observed and the ways in which respondents described their work.⁴ More broadly, the conceptual paradigm of ‘creation’ and creativity – the capacity to engage effectively in such a process of generation or invention – is tied to the performance of ‘possibles’, of potential commercial futures. Studies have noted how practitioners can relate to the market in which they operate in what could be seen as vitalist ways. Knorr Cetina and Bruegger (2002a: 164) argue that in their study of foreign exchange market traders the practices of ‘exteriorization, assemblage and contextualization of “the market” on screen’ acts to construe the market as an ‘external “life form”’. The traders talked about the market as a ‘greater being’ whilst engaging with ‘it’ cognitively and emotionally, variously inhabiting that commercial world or reacting to it in an adversarial manner (2002a: 169). Hassoun’s (2005: 109, 112) study of traders also revealed such understandings where the traders described the market in human or animal terms - ‘the market is jumpy’, ‘it was healthier’ – and indeed, in sexual terms: to ‘feel up’ or ‘stroke’ the market, ‘get the pussy’, ‘give the market a screw’. Intertwining symbolic and material practices, the traders’ modes of understanding the market framed and directed their commercial actions. This ‘commercial vitalism’ was also evident in my study.⁵ While there are significant differences between financial market traders’ practices and traders of space in the advertising industry (most notably the financial traders’ engagement with ‘the screen’ as embodiment of the market), there are important resonances. In my study, market relations are enacted as ‘vital’ by practitioners in three key ways.

Firstly, the market was framed in practitioners’ accounts as unpredictable and difficult to manage. Outdoor advertising is generally recognised within the industry as a poor ‘sales

⁴ Indeed, it would be interesting to speculate about the relatively recent emphasis on innovation and creativity observed in organisations’ practices and rhetoric and whether this has been learnt from the long-established practices in the marketing and advertising sectors.

⁵ I have developed the concept of ‘commercial vitalism’ more fully elsewhere (Cronin forthcoming).

driver', that is, not efficient at creating a positive impact on sales figures. Instead, it is promoted as a medium suitable for creating or maintaining 'brand awareness' or changing people's perceptions about a brand. Due to its purportedly 'soft' role in persuasion, practitioners argue that, 'it's very difficult to track effectiveness of how outdoor is changing people's perception in terms of bottom line sales' and that 'it's very difficult sometimes to isolate the effect of a particular medium within what it's doing overall to their bottom line sales'. This ambiguous effect of advertising on sales is well-recognised within academic studies (Miller 1997; Schudson 2003). Within the industry, this ambiguity is a key factor which shapes the particular character of the performance of market relations. As one practitioner put it, companies would like a calculative 'machine' into which they could input sales data and advertising spend and which would then produce verifiable, statistically sound answers to their marketing queries. But the reality is that even complex modelling tools cannot separate out the variables sufficiently effectively to make such figures fully reliable for commercial assessment and market prediction.

The indeterminate impact of advertising on sales, combined with the highly competitive arena in which media owners and media agencies operate, means that commercial practices are oriented towards producing *good enough* pitches of data or ways of understanding consumers and advertising sites which practitioners describe as 'convincing' and 'compelling'. Indeed, no belief in the validity of the marketing pitches is required, only an ability to convince other actors in the field of the strategic short-term utility of the data in the pitch. These are 'working knowledges' whose efficacy is defined by practitioners as a need work into the moment. They need only to convince the next person in the chain of market relationships of their immediate 'workability', and in a more future-oriented sense, of their ability to create virtual consumers and ultimately facilitate the smooth operation of market relations between media owners, media agencies and clients. As the direct effects of

advertising on sales ‘up-lift’ are recognised within the field as at best ambiguous, the onus on these pitches’ status as verifiably accurate is lifted. Clients respond to this unpredictability in a range of ways, and media owners and media agencies must manage those responses. One practitioner describes how some clients selectively use research on advertising effects as backup for their intuitive sense of their promotional activities while others experience the ambiguity of the figures and the unpredictability of the commercial world as far more unsettling:

Some clients are quite intuitive and they sort of sense – they sort of know – they know what’s going on and they look for bits of evidence just to help support what they already hold as a belief. Some clients are literally open-minded and don’t know. For the open-minded clients they probably have more anxiety about this because they think, shit, we still don’t know so much of what’s going on out there.

This vital unpredictability is thus seen by all parties as a commercial problem in one sense but it is also framed as an opportunity for the production of competitive ‘point of difference’ for those who can manage it creatively.

Secondly, the market was framed by practitioners as vital in how the relationships between media owners, media agencies and clients were seen as organic – as fragile and contingent, and requiring constant maintenance. In what is seen as very much as ‘person-to-person industry’, these relationships are key. For instance, I observed how one major media agency’s offices were centred around a large well-lit space filled with tables and chairs in the style of a café. Representatives from media owners would regularly visit their contact person at the media agency in this meeting space where they would pitch their latest research project, data or information about their new advertising sites. The media owner’s representative would

talk through a print out of a PowerPoint presentation and then give their media agency contact a CD containing the full presentation. It was generally acknowledged that the primary function of these informal meetings was the maintenance and development of the relationship between the media agency and the media owner. Each meeting relied on having a new angle or new material to present, thus integrating the principle of innovation – often taking the form of a flexible and creative relationship to data – into the very organisation heart of these market relations. The framing and use of research data is fundamentally tied to these relationships as a practitioner describes:

What we're trying to do with research and learning and the tools and systems is to give more credence to those personal relationships, to give more ammunition effectively to somebody here to be able to convince an agency or a client that outdoor is the right route to go conceptually.

The third and related way in which the market was seen by practitioners as vital is in how interventions in the market were understood as needing to be creative. The ideal of creativity manifests itself at the level of producing classifications and modes of targeting, managing client relationships and in terms of innovative ideas for advertising content. This is based on having ‘a dynamic strategy to deliver a client’s requirements’ that is creative: ‘so although it’s initially done on gut feel, you then sort of prop up your argument with relevant information and information can be twisted, manipulated in whatever way you need to actually justify [your pitch]’. Thus, the market and the effective management of market relations is seen as something that is reliant on creativity. So when asked about recent attempts by trade bodies to introduce a central database of research data as an industry standard, practitioners reacted

with scepticism and claimed that this would kill off creativity. Creative research and the market were seen as living things:

It's life, isn't it? That's what research is – it's like life will find a way, life changes, everything's organic, everything changes all the time... you can give the same piece of research to 10 people and they'd all give you a different answer or a different opinion.... That's great because that's what drives business it's a liveable, breathable thing. You may as well let it organically grow and change while still trying to consolidate, learn and take it forward.

This understanding of market relations as an organic, living force frames the production of difference as classifications are animated by the need to 'make innovation'. This was seen as a vital process that is not fully within the control of its creators, but its organic or feral force could be tapped. Industry practitioners understood this as a kind of commercial reproduction that relies on the creative potential of *gender as process* to make distinctions or generate difference. This produces classifications and new modes of classifying. It also enables the production of 'point of difference' where companies compete for market share through pitching various tools for understanding the market. Making market relations and 'making innovation' through gender as process are here tied together in the making of commercial life of not just one organisation but of broader market relationships.

These understandings of consumers and of the operation of the market function performatively; indeed, practitioners need to perform research findings quite literally in order for them to have certain desired commercial effects. On one level, this works through the circulation and feedback loops of the trade press and industry conferences. One practitioner described how at conferences the trade press such as *Media Week* will pick up on a 'well

'packaged statement' about developments in the media and will circulate it as news. This then becomes part of the fabric of understandings that is woven out of client and practitioner discursive practices and becomes a self-reinforcing truism:

I think there's always a sense that clients will think when they hear a quote or they hear some sort of expression or sort of packaged piece of information, they often assume that it comes from some sort of very intelligent place and therefore because it sounds intelligent and because they've heard it before, it's right (as opposed to questioning the logic of it).

The practices of the industry contribute to this feedback loop on another more mundane level. As part of the cultural circuit of capital and capitalism's feedback loop of discursive production – of gender, of consumers, of market relations as vital – these marketing knowledge practices create understandings of the world that are virtual but which have material effect. Through their recursive circulation, they perform market relations and their 'soft' discursive production is folded into the 'hard economics' and bottom line of companies' balance sheets.

But what I wish to explore in more detail here is the gendered quality of this *process* rather than just the gendered nature of specific market classifications. In their study of financial market traders, Knorr Cetina and Bruegger note the sexualised and violent language in which the traders describes their work practices: "I got shafted", "I got bent over", "I got blown up", "I got raped", "I got stuffed"/"the guy stuffed me", "I got fucked", "I got hammered", and "I got killed" (Knorr Cetina and Bruegger 2002b: 940). Knorr Cetina and Bruegger emphasise how this language reflects a visceral engagement with the screen as market, but what is equally striking is its gendered and sexualised character. It is unsurprising

that financial market traders should articulate their work practices in this way as it has been established that gender is an ‘organizing principle’ in the managerial workplace (Kerfoot and Knights 1993: 660; also see Alvesson and Billing 1997). Many studies have noted the masculine character of corporate ideals, work practices, and workers’ subjective orientation to work-place cultures (e.g. Chalmers 2001). The masculinity of such organisations is ‘technically rational, performance-oriented, highly instrumental, devoid of intimacy yet preoccupied with identity, and driven by rarely reflected upon corporate or bureaucratic goals that are presumed inviolable’ (Knights and Kerfoot 2004: 436).

These corporate or bureaucratic goals are currently thought to be shifting in response to a perceived need for rapid organisational response and agility, and a parallel need for new ‘fast’ subjectivities. These are ‘calculating subjects, able to withstand the exigencies of faster and faster return’ whose personhood is built upon ‘potential for innovation and creativity’ (Thrift 2000: 676, 688). More broadly, these subjects are thought to require highly developed communication, inter-personal and self-presentational skills and an ability to work upon themselves as a form of project. But while this enterprising subject may be seen by some as entirely new, Ann Gray (2003: 500) argues that ‘many of the characteristics of this subject are shared with those of the ideal feminine subject of modernity’. This subject is engaged in a project of the self that requires aesthetic, corporeal, physical and emotional knowledges and skills that women have acquired by ‘inhabiting femininity’ and engaging with the plethora of popular culture forms that offer templates for making and re-making female subjectivities (Gray 2003: 500). As an ever-shifting set of gender performances often centred on consumption practices, this is a subject that is literally built from innovation and creativity.

While these gendered knowledges and skills may be acquiring new value in contemporary corporate culture as Gray suggests, there is ample evidence that women are not necessarily benefiting from this new development. For instance, Ros Gill’s study of creativity

and new media workers shows how the features of and skills required for project-based work – ‘informality and flexibility – are the very mechanisms through which inequality is reproduced’ (Gill 2002: 86). Indeed, in the gendered performances of creativity that are now emphasised in corporate culture, women’s gender performances may not be recognised as performances and may thus go unrewarded (Adkins 2001, 2005). While my analysis complements this interest in work-place gender performances, my focus is directed at the gendering of corporate *processes* of innovation and creativity.

Making innovation – gender as commercial autogenesis

I am arguing that gender as genre or type is implicated in the very performance of market relations and specifically the knowledge practices that form a feedback loop and materialise virtual understandings. This is a conversation that capitalism seems to be having with itself, and gender and genre form key syntactical orientations in these understandings. Various classifications of the female consumer are centrally important to the industry as consumption is still so strongly associated with women. On another level, this gendering of the market in my study took the form of an animation by creativity and intuition of the market relations between media owners, media agencies and clients. But more fundamentally, the very process of securing, maintaining and reproducing market relations was itself gendered. This is not just an animation of the market – although there is evidence in my study of practitioner understandings of market relations as a life-form – but a form of reproduction. Here the reproduction of people as populations of consumers in processes of marketing taxonomy is linked to the reproduction of market relations (as profit-making, relatively stable and to some extent amenable to prediction or commercial forecasting). As a means of ‘sorting things out’

(Bowker and Star 2000) – whether products or classifications of consumers – such taxonomising practices make the commercial world more stable and manageable.

Tropes of vitalism and organicism have long been evident in conceptualisations of society and market relations (Foucault 2000; Gibson-Graham 1996). And as O’Neill and Gibson-Graham (1999) point out, corporations include a range of ideals of stability and progress in their self-narratives, and are organised by a number of different logics of reproduction. The specific logic I have highlighted here is an idea of reproduction as a kind of autogenesis, and the performance of this ideal is characterised by a productive recursivity. This ideal of autogenesis organises a future-oriented set of practices and ideals which aim to ensure the continued life of commerce by ‘making innovation’ or constituting and maintaining the creative processes whereby market relationships cohere and subsist. Reproduction is here framed and enacted by practitioners as competitive commercial survival. In this industry, creativity is framed by its practitioners as a vital force that has the capacity to create ‘the consumer’ as classification; it understood and acted upon as a force of calculative power and of creative potential. This is linked to persuasion – not just of consumers to buy commodities, but of actors in the market to continue to engage in commercial relationships.

In their important work on economics, J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) argue that we must not produce an essentialised and universalised idea of ‘the market’, and should not mistake the ideas of a ‘reproductive dynamics’ that circulate within corporations and within academic analysis as evidence of an ontology or essential ‘structure’ of capitalism, the market, or of specific market relations. Indeed, in working towards an ethical stance which facilitates alternatives to capitalism, we must look for contingency and possibility, and we must develop a style of thinking ‘that tolerates “not knowing” and allows for contingent connection and the hiddenness of unfolding’ (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxxi). I agree with and hope to take part in this intellectual project, but I think it is also important to recognise that

practitioners in corporations also share similar thinking styles and orientation (if not the political ideals).

I am not suggesting that market relations or capitalism are vital in the sense of having some form of living ontology, or that they have some underlying structure that replicates itself across time and space. I am highlighting how market practitioners' understandings of the market and their own practices *as vital* or enlivened, and specifically as having reproductive capacity, facilitate specific market relationships and offer corporations productive narratives or self-representations that enable them to imagine and work into commercial futures. The recursive nature of the circulation of these representations – representational performances of taxonomies of 'the consumer' and representations of market relations as vital and alive – function to *make worlds* in the manner suggested by Lazzarato's analysis.

These are commercial worlds in which gender functions as genesis or the capacity for reproducibility. This capacity for genesis is crucial for the production of difference in the ever-shifting classification of consumers driven by the pressing need for 'point of difference' and competitive advantage between firms. In their aim to 'make innovation' and ensure the ongoing, future-oriented existence of their market relations, the practitioners in my study are engaged in projects of making difference through an ideal of *pure commerce*. This is an ideal of commercial autogenesis. The vitalism that is performed in the market relations of the outdoor advertising industry, and perhaps in other corporate organisations, is a commercial 'life' of creation and creativity made by masculine ideas: a kind of reproduction without women. As suggested by recent studies of the workplace, these ideals and practical manifestations can be inhabited most successfully by men. This is significant because it matters who has the power to define 'life' just as it matters how we conceptualise society in order to develop a politics of hope (Gibson-Graham 2006; Thrift 2008).

But these are uneven and perhaps unpredictable processes: there are tensions in the implications of these conceptualisations of life. In the commercial world I observed, there is a messy cohabitation of various working concepts and also a valuing of whatever is seen as most creative at the time or what can ‘make innovation’ in the most commercially productive way. From an academic perspective, the tensions offer interesting conceptual challenges. The trope of reproduction or commercial renewal observed in the industry draws on, and perhaps reinscribes more firmly, notions of gender as a male–female duality in the manner suggested by Gibson-Graham (1996). This may have the effect of framing capitalism as a wholeness or totality in ways that encourage economic deterministic thought. But at the same time, the ways in which these ideas of vitality or organicism *circulate* in commercial practices, commercial thinking and academic analyses suggests a more promiscuous scope of what can counts as ‘life’, as male/female, as agentic, or even as politically positive.

As well as highlighting the work of such concepts, the study raises issues about tensions between representational and vitalist approaches. In the industry, gender as kind or type operates in representational terms to frame classifications or taxonomies of consumers, but simultaneously gender is articulated as generative *process* and is acted out in terms that are more vitalist. These differing understandings are performed in the industry according to a pragmatic rationale of what can be made to work at that moment and what can perform commercial futures in ways that can be profitably inhabited. For academic analysis, broader issues are invoked as well as questions about our investments in those issues. The tension between representational and vitalist approaches – at least in relation to this study – revolves in part around questions of referentiality and I am restricted here to merely signalling these as significant themes for further discussion. As Bell (2007) notes, vitalism as discussed in recent academic debates is defined as self-organising, self-generative and references nothing outside itself. It is internally differentiated and differentiating. In contrast, we could say that

representational approaches are founded on difference that is in some way ‘external’ but constitutive: as many feminist accounts have argued, difference is the condition of representation. This issue of referentiality raises important questions about the work of gender and about the nature of contemporary capitalism, particularly in relation to their apparently performative character. These questions are just beginning to be thought through and as Bell argues, it is important not to see the introduction of vitalism to academic discussions as a paradigm shift for, “‘life’ does not *replace* ‘performance’ or ‘the social’” (2007: 117, original emphasis). One of the key challenges now is to think about their relationality.

Haraway (1997) shows how gender as genre, type and brand articulates the very idea of ‘life’ tied to capitalist relations of property. This understanding of gender is certainly evident in my study of the commercial practices of the outdoor advertising industry. But I have argued that alongside this understanding is a performative articulation of gender as a *type of process*. This is characterised by innovation and creativity in which the creative power of genre or type is enacted in performative practices which organise a reproductive process that at once makes the future and makes money. If some industries are organising (in part) around vitalist understandings, we need to ask about the conditions of production of such understandings and about why such conceptualisations are found useful at this moment in capitalism’s history. And if a key characteristic of contemporary capitalism is its production and circulation of multiple knowledges (LiPuma and Lee 2004), alongside new ways in which capitalism is processing understandings of itself (Thrift 2008), then questions are opened up about the relationship of academic and commercial knowledge-producing activities. What does this mean for conceptualising capitalism, the role of gender in the corporation, and the possibilities of thinking as a political practice?

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