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## Towards a Sociology of Fashion Micro-Enterprises: Methods for Creative Economy Research

### ABSTRACT

This article argues that the emerging field of creative industry studies, for reasons of its interdisciplinary origins, has tended to sidestep questions of method. Sociology can play a role in rectifying this deficit for three reasons; first, the long-standing attention to qualitative, interview and observation-based research is useful, especially for scholars investigating the experience of work and labour in the creative sector, second because recent sociological attention to the whole terrain of big data has repercussions even for small-scale studies such as the one outlined here, and third because well-known sociological studies of creative professionals offer value and insight into the conduct of re-differentiated cultural sectors, in this case fashion design (Becker, 1984; Bourdieu, 1993; Born, 1995; 2005, Molotch, 2003; Thornton, 2008, 2014). By providing details of a funded study of this sector in three cities (London, Berlin and Milan), the article also proposes a utilising of the recent role of the so-called entrepreneurial university as creative hub, so as to develop a more radical idea of 'knowledge transfer'. In addition, the paper encourages a two-way exchange between sociology and creative industry studies to develop a better understanding of cultural goods, items and works of art. Such a focus on the material object or outcome of creative practice also opens up the possibility for a more collaborative exchange with the cultural producers.

**Keywords** ....*auteur*, creative economy, event research, fashion designers, knowledge transfer, micro-enterprises.

## ***Introduction***

What has the sociological community got to learn from a series of critical reflections on the methodological issues which have arisen in the course of a study of urban fashion micro-enterprises in London, Berlin and Milan? This is a project which has been conceptualised within the terrain of creative industries studies, a field which has flourished in recent years, but has not as yet produced a great deal of work which considers its own methodological underpinnings. Perhaps this is because it has developed very much out of various governments' initiatives to support the creative economy and this has drawn in academics from far and wide: from urban studies, economic geography, cultural policy, business and management studies as well as sociologists and cultural studies scholars. With such an inter-disciplinary remit, it is difficult to map out a shared set of methodological priorities. Despite the plethora of books, articles and specialist journals which have appeared in the last 15 years on topics that include cultural entrepreneurship, creative labour, precarious work and so on, and despite the prominence of work which focus on questions of cultural policy, there has been very little debate about the actual doing of research in this field (for exceptions see Born, 2010; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Schlesinger and Waelde, 2012; Schlesinger et al., 2015).

This is in sharp contrast with contemporary sociology where questions of method have recently come to occupy a position of key importance. Two *tour de force* articles respond to what we might call the mathematicisation of everyday life. These are relevant because one of the aims of this paper is to generate more of a dialogue between the current mainstream of sociology and creative industries studies, while another aim is to consider how we can indeed kick start an animated debate about methods within the latter. Lury, Parisi and Terranova point to how a proliferation of devices for numbering, calculating, listing, monitoring and comparing, all which have been created with the rapid rise of new media technology, now accompany us in our daily life (Lury et al., 2012). The authors make the point that these technical devices, as material objects, have a performative effect

on the field of social life. The methodological capacities of big data generating devices shape how we act, and we adjust our habits accordingly. At the same time the volume of numerical data, like the volume of images available almost instantly during any single important event, challenges to the core modes of sociological analysis and explanation. Mike Savage likewise shows how 'questions of method have now become central to social and cultural debate' (Savage, 2013). Echoing Appadurai, Savage bestows life on what have often been seen as neutral techniques for carrying out research, showing how they also now create 'lively data'. Researchers are constantly re-framing their data by undertaking minor adjustments to the devices or pieces of software which they are using. Even the most seemingly authoritative data becomes more contestable as a result of the rapidly developing tools and instruments available. Data is febrile, animated, speaking back to us on a daily basis. And this is not just how it is for professional researchers, the same holds true for everyone, from patients, to fashion shoppers, from athletes to academics watching movements in their citation indices. Complicated algorithms accompany us across the landscape of everyday life and to this extent the very idea of methodology has become popularised. Savage refers to the agency of methods and, following the influential work of the anthropologist Strathern, he makes the point that that what has often been implicit in the doing of research, be made explicit, for the reason that methods are so deeply inscribed within modes of power and domination.

There is a sizeable gap between this realm of mega-data collection, and the rather sedate, conventional qualitative methods which have underscored the current small-scale study. Handfuls of interviews, some repeated a few times with key individuals, seem paltry by comparison. And it is these vast reserves of knowledge and data that give rise to the kinds of dilemmas I outline below. Big fashion companies can now conjure up data at the drop of a hat, producing mountains of secondary source material. Our own efforts pale by comparison while the question of how to manage or interpret even some of this existing data becomes imperative. 'How' to extract 'what' from these

constantly expanding data-banks? And once extracted, how does one begin to analyse the material? This question came to the surface in the current research context as we noted the disparity between our efforts to pin down designers for interviews, and the proliferation of highly relevant business interview material now made available by the large brands, and carefully placed, on a seemingly daily basis, in leading publications such as the online magazine <http://www.businessoffashion.com>.<sup>1</sup> Instead of doing interviews ourselves we could have spent some months analysing this library of recent (i.e. in the last 2 years) interview material, something we were not to know actually existed at the outset of the project. So overall, by offering this kind of reflection on our current research project we hope to encourage greater methodological debate in creative labour studies and cultural studies while simultaneously raising some interesting questions for sociology. One further strand of argument is that as university teachers and researchers alike are being called upon to foster longstanding relations with 'industry', (often simply to demonstrate a concern with the employability of students) the rise of the creative economy actually offers opportunities to develop a new kind of post-industrial sociology with the university as hub and entailing research collaborations with professionals and creative practitioners. This possibility also makes viable the idea of re-functioning the currently favoured governmental concept of knowledge transfer for more radical purposes. We could then envisage a bridging of the gap between creative industry studies and a new sociology of creative professionals.

For the last two years, albeit with a small budget, we have been building a profile of the range of business models adopted by a number of independent small-scale and mostly young fashion designers in London, Berlin and Milan. These enterprises are driven by designers, most of whom are female, wishing to set up their own fashion labels. We have interviewed not just designers but also policy-makers and experts, and a few senior designers in London, Berlin and Milan, and we have had a particular interest in how designers view their own IP and what they do to protect it.<sup>2</sup> Both this

idea of the business model alongside that of IP/copyright are fundamental to the larger research project of which ours is just one small work package (WP).<sup>3</sup> It is not surprising that this couplet of concerns is high on the agenda of government and funding councils (in the wider context of recession economics) for the reason that the creative economy promises capacity for innovation across the sector and for IP value, and hence for growth (Schlesinger and Waelde, 2012). Indeed, one of the lines of connection between the early moments of the creative economy in the UK under the New Labour government, and the present day Conservative government, is the emphasis on innovation and intellectual property. Although in the days of New Labour a good deal of publicity was accrued through the promotion of the creative economy as the space for celebrating individual talent in pop music, fashion and the arts, and while this also gave rise to various initiatives such as school-based creative partnerships and programmes in cultural leadership, the underlying principle was more akin to an instrumentalism effect. This comprised four elements, a shift away from reliance on state support and subsidy, an encouragement of entrepreneurship, an emphasis on innovation and the exploitation of intellectual property. This current research seeks to investigate how these forces come into play in the working lives of young designers. From the start we wanted to include a European dimension, but we queried, following Ulrich Beck, the status of the comparative study, for the various problems of 'methodological nationalism' (Beck, 2002). The question is raised then of how we define a non-comparative European three city study? Our choice of cities reflected the existing map of known activity in the field of creative economy and in particular fashion, and was also informed by the expertise of the team.

While the words creative industries are used widely in governmental language as well as in the academy, in the last decade there has been a concurrent move, mostly from insiders and professionals, to disaggregate this homogenisation and to focus on specific sectors. The driving forces and leading spokespersons in sectors such as broadcasting, fashion, popular music and film,

seek to consolidate, and argue that the distinctive features of each of these spheres be addressed separately.<sup>4</sup> The sectors wish to bolster their position by addressing the unique character of the field, while at the same time re-assuring government of the more professional identity that has been achieved in recent years. Nowhere is this more apparent than in fashion which until recently was considered as relatively unimportant, (from the manufacturing point of view a 'sunset industry') even trivial, until the era of the DCMS under New Labour.<sup>5</sup> Since the early 2000s the British Fashion Council, along with organisations such as NESTA (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts) and the London College of Fashion, have demonstrated the high value of fashion not just to GNP but also a source of employment (British Fashion Council, 2012). There has been a surge of interest in reviving UK manufacturing in textiles and wool, there are jobs in retail, and more recently in e-commerce as well as the graduate jobs in design and design-related activities, not to mention media, journalism and public relations. This process of re-differentiation (in our case of fashion) within creative economy inadvertently bolsters the case made in the course of this paper for a stronger post-industrial sociology of professional life, for the reason that creative industry scholars are indebted to sociology for the wealth of sector specific studies in existence. We need only think of Arlie Hochschild's research on flight attendants, Born's studies of classical musicians and also of BBC creative professionals, and Gina Neff's study of start-ups (Hochschild, 1984; Born, 1995, 2005; Neff, 2012).

### ***Multi-mediated Methodologies***

A relatively new and challenging issue for this kind of research emerges from various developments in media, technology and in the sophisticated brand marketing strategies which large well-known fashion labels are able to invest in, something which then has repercussions for even the smallest fashion start-up. I am referring to the way in which a proliferation of material can be made available in a film or TV, online or indeed Instagram format, which, in providing privileged insider accounts of

the industry, far exceeds what any reasonably well-funded sociological research project could hope to achieve. The recent documentary film *Dior and I* serves as a useful illustration.<sup>6</sup> This is a standard documentary film made for cinema distribution and then for broadcast on television. Viewers are able to see the celebrated Belgian designer Raf Simons at work on a day-to-day basis. We are given insight into exactly what it means to produce a new collection. We see the decision-making process close-up, the delegation to the craftsmen and women in the atelier, the delegation even of the drawing stage and the storyboard aspects, all of which also demonstrate the highly collaborative nature of the creative process, thus reflecting the classic sociological work of Howard Becker (Becker, 1984). However, from a research point of view this close observation of the designer at work reminds us how difficult it is for academics to gain the kind of access that would be needed to develop anything like this insider-view. Only someone personally connected to a designer, supported by a prestigious film company or TV channel, could embark on such a project. At the same time the quality of the material contained within the film becomes a valuable informational resource for researchers. It is unusual for a social scientist to have a well-known or successful creative person, let us say an artist or a musician, at the heart of a research process.<sup>7</sup> While it is rare for a highly successful creative to take part in a sociological study, the 'aura' of the star nevertheless shapes how those further down the creative ladder position themselves in relation to an interview situation. Most creatives aspire to *auteur* status. And for young fashion designers, including those at the start of their careers, this means that granting a researcher the time for an interview or a studio visit is already understood according to these rules of the game, often with a set number of issues or topics which can be accommodated. This has implications for creative economy research. Important people will be few and far between, or else their participation will be tightly controlled and anything more would rely on such a high quality of insider connections as to skewer the research. But being reliant on this unexpected bounty of secondary sources also raises questions. For the purposes of the project we are reflecting on here, we would need to position *Dior and I* as relevant secondary source material, giving rise to the question of what kind of analysis would be appropriate? This was never



intended to be a project with an analysis of the fashion media, but, for the reason that fashion culture has become even more multi-mediated in recent years, we have found that designers will refer us to their own websites for more material than they are able to impart in the interview. The boundaries between what they say in interview, and what they may have already said in an online space are now definitively broken down. They constantly use the mainstream press and media as well as social media to speak about what they do. In the course of our work several designers referred to other interviews they had done with well-known magazines or with the local and national press. They pointed us in this direction to augment what they were able to tell us in the timeframe we were allocated. Thus we are confronted with the downgrading of the 'authenticity' of the primary sociological research material. We are also challenged by the question of how to analyse data where the line is blurred between primary and secondary source material, in a context where a surplus of secondary source material threatens to dwarf and overwhelm what seems in comparison like a substantially reduced volume of original data. Such a scenario is presumably not confined to researching the fashion sector but must be noted across various domains of professional life. With new online media technologies now so dominant there needs to be discussion which draws together social media methodology experts with those more used to working offline with more traditional qualitative procedures.

Not only does a film like *Dior and I* provide key insight into the design labour process, it also feeds into the increasing 'informationalisation' of the creative economy, as well as consolidating the dynamics of brand-building. The stronger position now commanded by fashion in general in the UK means that there is a lot at stake when government as well as key high street retailers agree to offer support to 'emerging talent' in a variety of different ways.<sup>8</sup> There has been a proliferation of more detailed and information-led interviews with designers than would have been the case in the past. The designers make themselves available at key strategic moments in time, usually before the launch

of a new collection. Doing a lengthy interview allows the designer to get his or her own distinctive brand-image out into the public realm, while also carefully controlling the conditions and the content.<sup>9</sup> Even taking into account this editorial control which the individual designer or art director is able to exert, the point here is that a detailed interview with someone like Isabel Marant (the French designer) is still going to provide more material than could be expected from an academic interview. Now that it has the stature of being big business, the fashion industry is forced to study and understand its own working practices, especially with the move to e-commerce. This means that it is undertaking what Mike Savage and Roger Burrows have referred to as 'commercial sociology' (Savage and Burrows, 2009).

### ***Doing Fashion Research.***

We hoped to achieve insight into a range of different design practices. In London this would entail interviews with established independent (i.e. own label) designers who have gained a reputation in recent years through successes with British Fashion Council support. We had to target this group in London for the reason that we knew how difficult if not impossible it is for totally unsupported micro-designers in London to set up, given the high cost of space and overheads. In Berlin it was precisely this small-scale sector of independent fashion designers and producers, able to survive for reasons of access to subsidy and affordable space, that we were interested in investigating, and in Milan, knowing there to be little or no start-up culture, and no government-sponsored forms of support or subsidy, our aim initially was to interview the relevant people inside a few of the larger fashion houses to establish how design teams work and how IP and copyright are protected. The first six months of the project required some adjustment to this plan. The key reason being busy schedules of designers, awareness that academic research promises no immediate publicity effect, hence a sense that time is money, and therefore some reluctance to grant the interviewers access. In London the intense cycle of design process dictated by shows and by the search for sponsors, slowed

down the process of carrying out interviews especially because the research plan was aiming to reach a sample of designers who had come to prominence in the last decade and who had benefited from the various schemes introduced by the British Fashion Council (i.e. they have already become quite well-known with established reputations). Few designers will respond to an email of invitation and a formal accompanying letter. Instead the project has had to develop a more flexible approach relying on word of mouth, existing networks and academic connections.

In Berlin access was facilitated with the help of three fashion professionals in the city who were able to open doors and smooth the process of securing interviews and getting the time required to look round the studio spaces and see some of the recent collections. Overall we found the designer scene in Berlin outward-looking and people were keen to participate in inter-city dialogue. In Milan the time needed for gaining access to the big fashion houses, many of whom, as we discovered, tend only speak with fashion editors of magazines like *Vogue* and who in any case still project an image of secrecy and exclusivity, resulted in only two such designer brands taking part.<sup>10</sup> One thing we learnt for sure is that for major fashion brands like those with headquarters in Milan, the only way to gain access is to be part of a dense network of high calibre professionals for whom participation would be an aspect of 'network sociality' (Wittel, 2001). However, in the light of the severe economic recession in Italy there has sprung into being a network of self-employed, small-scale, Milan-based, young fashion designers often working from home, and producing goods for sale in market places and online. These items include silk scarves, dresses, tops and blouses i.e. things which are simple to make. Taking into account these factors, the initial instinct that flexibility may be important for a study like this one, permitted the researchers to quickly access these networks through social media and carry out a series of face-to-face (later followed up with Skype) interviews in Milan through July and August 2014. The methodological lessons learnt from these initial obstacles tell us that interviewing professionals in the creative sector and gaining access to their design studios to view

the work and to see the work process is an activity which almost confounds standard qualitative research strategies (from sampling to snowballing). We had to work incredibly hard to meet our target number of interviewees. But this also forced us to reflect, and we came up with ideas about collaborations with several of our respondents, and this also showed them that we valued the idea of reciprocity, we could conceivably give something back in return for their co-operation.

It is now a standard part of the training that to build the brand the fashion designer must project his or her persona into the work itself by means of an aura or 'halo effect' (Benjamin, 1973). In being approached to take part in an academic research interview, designers will typically have some sort of magazine feature in mind. In such circumstances the idea of interviewee anonymity becomes absurd. Thus we have had to reflect on the challenge of openly referring to the actual companies, labels and individuals by name, which in turn meant being concerned about a self-promotional element creeping in. How does the social researcher analyse material which is produced under these conditions? The remainder of this paper will offer some reflections, bearing in mind all the necessary adjustments referred to above. First we will consider event research, second 'methodological individualism', along with the aura of the artist and what he or she is producing, and third we will conclude with some comments about 'methodological nationalism', advocacy roles and policy, as well as what an up to date sociology of creative professionals might look like, one which also has a focus on the work itself; art objects, design items, fashion collections and so on (Beck 2000, Beck and Gernsheim-Beck, 2002; Thornton, 2014; Entwistle and Slater, 2014).

### ***Event Research***

Event research tries to solve some of the dilemmas mentioned above. It is not new for sociologists to ponder the vicissitudes of doing research with people from high status groups or professions, where the time factor as well as the pressured environment of the research interview must be factored in. But in our case with a younger generation of hopefully up-and-coming designers many of whom remain connected to their former art school networks, an incentive had to be made available and we found this best managed in the form of an afternoon seminar or workshop hosted in a university. Event research thus brings together, under the auspices of the academic hosts, a group of professionals who are willing to attend on the promise of an exchange of ideas (knowledge transfer), contacts, and to a certain extent new opportunities. The format is that of an open forum following a number of brief presentation papers or comments by invited speakers. The value for the people who have attended is that it widens the net of opportunity in the creative sector. We have found that the work of putting on an event or seminar, pays off in that afterwards we have the ensured cooperation of those who have attended. Event research has proved the best way of widening and sustaining the conversations with the *auteurs*, for the additional reason that a connection with a well-known university had some appeal and maybe some possible future value. The brand names of the universities helped, and, ironically, we found ourselves somewhat indebted to the entrepreneurial aspects of current university policy for the reason that the knowledge transfer dimension meant that hosting such events was welcomed and thus supported by the administrations in all four universities we have involved.

### ***Methodological Individualism, the Aura of the Artist and the Work Itself***

Howard Becker's ethnography remains something of a gold standard for the sociology of art and cultural production, in this work he avoided naming his subjects, and instead focused on the collaborative nature of artistic production, which in effect meant demystifying the *auteur* role (Becker, 1984). Nowadays it makes little sense to disguise the names of respondents. When creative

people across so many categories of work post, publicise and upload and podcast their own material for anyone interested to access, the idea of anonymising respondents seems particularly unwieldy. A related question is how important it is for the social researcher to engage with the actual outcome, the objects, the items and the collections, especially when it is upon this that the *auteur* depends for his or her reputation? As anyone who has worked with artists or designers will know, the work is often considered a kind of prosthetic extension of the self. The artist being interviewed will firmly request that it is the object that speaks, everything he or she has to say is there, embodied in the thing, art work, collection, piece of music, and all else is secondary or peripheral. Georgina Born has recently offered the most persuasive argument for developing an analysis which takes into account the multi-layered aspects of cultural production, from the historical and structural features which shape the kind or genre of work that is made (for example through commissioning practices in television production), to the formal aesthetic elements, and their socio-cultural genesis, e.g. the 'school' to which they belong or adhere to (Born, 2010). Born relies on both Foucault and Bourdieu to help her formulate a theoretical framework for the study of cultural production. Nevertheless, there remains some degree of opacity in relation to the actual vocabulary to be deployed for the analysis of the cultural forms themselves. Born gestures to the possibility of a precise analysis of the object but defers to the idea of genre and its socio-economic and cultural determinations. Herein lies an obstinate problem about the status, meaning and role of what is actually being produced. We can call these objects, things, works of art, images, pictures or items of clothing, but without fully confronting their material existence, the analysis remains one-sided. What examples do we find in sociology that fully encompass the cultural and historical features of, let us say, the fashion collections of Vivienne Westwood? What methods could be employed in such an endeavour? Hebdige's seminal work on subcultural objects comes to mind, as Born reminds us (Hebdige, 1978, 1987), but that style of cultural studies scholarship is less prevalent now, having morphed into art and design history, or the field of 'visual culture'. And more precisely the very idea of a text (be that a dress, or a scooter or a hairstyle) as a kind of bounded object somehow set apart from its users and

from its place within a set of ongoing multi-mediated social relationships, has been contested and replaced by the more recent sociological studies of material objects, or things. Latour has argued famously that things are 'disputatious and variegated' and that they are 'unfairly accused of being just 'things' (Latour, 2000). Instead he sees them as 'assemblies' and 'non-human actants', they have the capacity to create a 'social order', a definition which certainly helps us to understand the ordering ability of the influential 'thing' I referred to earlier as the online magazine [www.thebusinessoffashion.com](http://www.thebusinessoffashion.com). We can agree then on the need to reflect on the consequences of this sociology of the object for future creative industry studies, and, following Latour again, that we must embark more rigorously in preparing precise and detailed description of their 'thingness'.

In naming the interviewees, we must also be able to properly name their works. Why is this so important? Two kinds of answers to this question spring to mind, the first and easiest one, which also brings us close to the field of cultural journalism or reportage, is that the researcher needs to be adroit with the kind of vocabulary typically used within specific fields of creative activity in order to have any sort of rapport with his or her respondents. The second answer forces us to engage with our endeavours in regard to the 'situated knowledge' (Haraway, 1982) we hope to retrieve. In short our own, implicit and explicit, feminist approach to the fashion sector has resulted in an interest in the politics of independent or 'indie' fashion (often a space of female labour) as something which to an extent circumvents or even subverts the domination by the major fashion houses, especially the conglomerates such as those owned by LVMH and the Kering group. Thus we needed to be able to explain how independent fashion differs aesthetically from its haute couture counterparts.

The researcher must be adept with a critical and conceptual language about the work itself in order to be able to take part in the reciprocal social relations referred to above. Howard Becker of course made this point in his well-known writing on jazz musicians, he could not have done the work had he

not himself been a jazz musician (Becker, 1973). The researcher must be able to speak in a professional manner about the work in order to show himself or herself as a competent interviewer (Thornton, 2008, 2014).<sup>11</sup> This requirement comes to the foreground in the event research workshops we have already referred to. There invited designers will show (via powerpoint) their recent collections and will expect a meaningful dialogue to follow. We have already seen how the identity of the designer and his or her oeuvre are so intertwined and this becomes even more apparent in these presentations. But how to theorise this in terms of methodology? Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Gernsheim-Beck as well as Zygmunt Bauman all write about the powerful de-socialising and de-institutionalising currents in contemporary society, with the effect that there is an aggrandising of the 'self', as Bauman puts it, the individual becomes his or her own 'project' (Beck and Gernsheim-Beck, 2002; Bauman, 1990) The individual now has to create for him or herself the (social) structures which have been eroded in the last decades, or as Beck says, he or she must find 'autobiographical solutions' to systemic social problems. Does this mean we must pursue a more biographical pathway in research projects such as the one outlined here, must we also begin to undertake biographies of objects as they circulate in and across different social worlds (Lash and Lury, 2007)? If we agree that artists (and fashion designers) stand as exemplary figures of individualisation process, the idea of the carefully managed self of the designer is not merely a sign of the ego of the artist, more a recognition of the economic need to project a commercially viable sense of selfhood, the artist as human capital (McRobbie, 2015). In times of Facebook where everyone has a story to tell and where personhood relies on narrating the self into the public domain, there is no apparent logic to anonymity, if almost everyone is traceable. Where subjects are now so self-reflexive, especially across professional worlds, the whole process of agreeing to be a respondent in a research project requires much more discussion and negotiation than would be the case in the past. Even though they might be working in a design company doing commercial design, or perhaps they are in the fast fashion studio translating items off the catwalk, nevertheless, the ethos of the designer is pretty much akin to the ethos of the fine artist; what they bring to the job is



something totally distinctive and it is for this that they wish to be recognised. They will therefore expect to be named and expect a serious discussion about the work itself. Doing this kind of research therefore means that the interview is more similar to the art world ritual of the 'studio visit' (Thornton, 2014).

### ***Advocacy and Policy***

Alongside the consequences of individualisation in creative economy research there is also some expectation through these personal encounters, to act as an advocate, lobbyist, in-house social scientist for the sector or to write the kind of catalogue essay which artists need for the publications which accompany any significant show or exhibition, and which fashion designers increasingly look to for their websites. This seems to be part and parcel of the idea of knowledge exchange and it involves some work of 'cultural translation' as the researcher works hard to fit with the needs of the creative actor. What then are the consequences that this advisory or advocacy role has for methodological considerations? To advise or arrange connections means stepping outside of the role of research investigator and becoming something of a professional player in the fashion world. Perhaps there are also conflicts of national interest. Why should the British Fashion Council willingly give time and offer advice to Berlin designers? The flows of creative and managerial personnel across the fashion scene in Europe are a defining feature of corporate culture, key figures are poached and headhunted and these moves are reported in detail in the press and especially in [www.thebusinessoffashion.com](http://www.thebusinessoffashion.com). Further down the fashion chain, European or indeed international cultural exchanges in the form of mentoring and advocacy for young designers exist within the framework of the university and art school systems, something which is fully formalised within the various Masters courses in these subject areas, or through ERASMUS exchanges. Indeed, it is important to note that it is the Masters route which is the most popular and established way for students outside the UK to gain the kind of British Fashion Council or equivalent awards (e.g. New

Generation) as long as they find themselves within the groups of prize-winners at the end of year degree shows, a daunting task for even for the most ambitious.

Ulrich Beck has written at length on the sociological limitations of 'methodological nationalism' as nation states continue to undertake research, create data banks and formulate policies which are intended to reflect the economic and political needs of the nation state, while at a supra-national level there are constant flows of people and cross-border economic exchanges which defy these rigidities (Beck, 2000). This point makes great sense in relation to studying the creative economy. For example the inhabitants of the work-spaces in the fashion social enterprises like The Trampery or the Centre for Fashion Enterprise comprise many non-UK nationals, reflecting the same global populations which also now make up the great majority university populations for Masters courses in creative industry studies in most, if not all, UK universities. Indeed these fledgling designers ensconced at a desk in the Trampery are usually recent graduates from the Masters courses who are aiming to use a few years after graduation to extend their London connections and hope for a major success. In this regard Castell's notion of the 'space of flows' characterises the shifting geography of fashion worlds and creative personnel as it does other sectors of the new and old economy (Castells, 1989). This final point surely justifies the role of what Beck would call cosmopolitan sociological research which makes an effort to transcend the narrowness of policy-making based on national interest in favour of inter-cultural dialogue. So inscribed is fashion within the space of flows that any narrowly British policy debate seems quite out of kilter with the global population of aspiring designers who constitute such a significant presence in London and elsewhere in the UK. For this reason policy-makers might consider more fully internationalising the concept of 'knowledge transfer'. Overall once again in comparison with cultural studies and also creative industry studies, sociology is in the lead in these debates, at both a critical level, and from the viewpoint of active involvement in public policy (Bauman, 1987; Giddens, 1998). For creative industry studies, despite the animated arguments which have taken place around the enormous influence of Richard Florida (Peck, 2005) only a few figures, notably Schlesinger, have taken up this mantle, providing reflections

on the advocacy role and its antimonies (Schlesinger, 2009). There is little material which considers the day to day obligations on researchers and academics to support the work of the creative practitioners, and what this means when it is part of funded research projects.

***Conclusion:***

This article has considered the value of a greater degree of exchange on the topic of creative labour, between sociology, the inter-disciplinary terrain of creative industry studies, and cultural studies. This has become apparent in the course of the current project we have been referring to. When we planned the study we had no real sense that, thanks to new social media, there was such a recent mountain of secondary source material which would almost overshadow the original interview material we were endeavouring to collect, nor did we have any idea that creative professionals, in this case fashion designers, had become so self-reflexive, so used to giving talks or doing presentations of their work where the talk or the presentation, maybe already available online, expands on or extends the kind of information or opinions that would be provided in the interview situations which we so laboriously engineered.<sup>12</sup> This forced to the surface complicated questions as to how we move between primary data generated by the research and the secondary material which is now part of various new media online archives. Of course we could be expected to spell out the specific format of the semi-structured interviews, and to highlight the precise nature of the inquiry, such as, what exactly did we want to find out? But even here the terrain was muddied, for the reason that when one is interviewing *auteurs* the well-prepared questions are often de-railed, something which also raises questions about how we analyse such interviewee-led material? There is nowadays a heightened set of expectations in regard to reciprocity, collaborations and 'knowledge transfer'. This comes about where working lives are more defined by 'network sociality' than was the case in the past, but it is also the product of the universities opening their doors in this field of creative entrepreneurship to encourage more dynamic participation from creative professionals themselves. At the same time many of the creatives find themselves drawn back into the world of higher

education, wanted as teachers and lecturers on the basis of their industry experience and welcoming the opportunities to teach and also welcoming the strand of income generated from this activity. All of this finally puts paid to the idea of somehow doing research 'on' a specific sector of professional actors (Entwistle and Slater, 2014). We enter instead a different kind of space of research collaborations or partnerships. This proximity of the academic sociologist with his or her respondents, as so many people gravitate to the newly entrepreneurial university, offers a perhaps more interesting question about knowledge transfer than has been so far aired. And given some of the difficulties of access outlined above, the creative university also provides something of a stable frame, reflecting Born's focus on 'institutional ethnography' as in effect more manageable in the otherwise fluid space of flows (Born, 2010).

Let me conclude with some further thoughts on the doing of creative economy research. I have indicated how in a world of big data one cannot but be aware of how shrunken a modest collection of interviews with about 50 people in total appears, and yet because we are called upon to be more immersive and more intensive in these research encounters the quality of qualitative data can only be enhanced, or at least this is what we might reasonably surmise. The extent to which this is to be realised is yet to be seen, given that the analysis of our data is still a work in progress. What can be said with some certainty is that the need to build relationships with respondents entails so much more in the way of meetings, discussions, emails and participation in events than would have been the case in past, and that all of this eats into the research time while also, we hope, enriching it. We could almost say that what creative professionals expect of the research situation is more akin to the kind of relationship an arts or humanities scholar or an art historian might wish to develop with the artist or writer whose work is their object of research. If for example one was an expert on a living artist or a film-maker one might want to engineer these kinds of relationships, dealing with an archive for example, or working with the artist in various guises perhaps to include curating shows. It is this kind of role which has emerged most forcefully in the course of our methodological strategies,

meaning that this research becomes more like a humanities project involving close one-to-one relationships with a small number of players.

To sum up, these findings point the way to a renewed sociology of professional lives in the hugely expanded creative economy. There is also potential for the development of partnerships and collaborations with creative industry professionals which could conceivably radicalise and give greater meaning to the universities' current entrepreneurial clichés about impact and working with industry. Not least would be the focus on working conditions of creative labour in times of so-called precarity. Given the centrality of the universities nowadays in regard to knowledge economy work, urban renewal, and creative economy, such exchanges and partnerships also configure a new critical mass and a more dynamic idea of knowledge transfer as re-politicisation process. And finally, by allowing the object to occupy a central place within investigations such as these, we have the chance to develop a methodology which replaces the rather arid idea of artist or designer biography with the more dynamic biography of the things themselves and their entwinement in a complex set of media technologies and social relationships. For the purposes of developing a sociology of fashion micro-enterprises, the actual clothes and the stories behind their production promise to circumvent without altogether denying the centrality of the *auteur*.

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<sup>1</sup> We could surmise this online magazine as a technical device itself, with the capacity to reconfigure the upscale or high-end fashion industry. It does this by foregrounding finance and executive culture as well as by covering leading stories from across the world, emulating the journalistic style of newspapers such as The Financial Times.

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<sup>2</sup> Our plan was to interview and visit the studios of 8-10 designers in three cities, London, Berlin and Milan.

<sup>3</sup> Placed within Theme 4 of the larger AHRC funded CREATE project: 'Creators and Performers: Process and Copyright', with our WP titled 'Fashion IP: From start-up to catwalk: A Four City Investigation'.

<sup>4</sup> This is most apparent in the events organized under the heading of the Westminster Media Forum, comprising regular half day conferences with talks from up to 20 leading figures in the various fields of the creative economy and attracting audiences of over 200, see <http://www.westminstermediaforum.com>

<sup>5</sup> The Department of Trade and Industry was responsible until the Department for Culture, Media and Sport took the reins for the creative economy in 1998.

<sup>6</sup> *Dior and I* directed by Frédéric Tcheng 2015.

<sup>7</sup> See Bourdieu, in dialogue with the artist Hans Haacke (Bourdieu, 1995), see also Thornton 2008, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> *The Centre for Fashion Enterprise* and *Topshop* both support new generation designers.

<sup>9</sup> In less than five years the online journal, [www.thebusinessoffashion.com](http://www.thebusinessoffashion.com), has accumulated huge readerships (of more than one million) on the basis of just these kinds of features.

<sup>10</sup> Arranged thanks to a fashion consultant based in Milan.

<sup>11</sup> Thornton's influential work draws on sociological frames and methods while undertaking research on artists and their practices, for publication in books designed for a wider readership.

<sup>12</sup> But maybe this is not so surprising since many of our cohort of designers are also doing some teaching and so used to the lecture format. Of course the popularity of the TEDTalk also accounts for this ease with the idea of the lecture or seminar.

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