The myth of creativity at work

Paper presented at the Annual Symposium of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations (ISPSO), Elsinore, Denmark, 18–20 June

This presentation explores concerns arising from a doctoral project on the vicissitudes of creative practice in design teams. While the project has been carried out in the context of architectural practice in particular, some insights may be generalized to organizational settings.

I will start by telling you a story.

> — 'Rosie', asked the teacher, 'how much does two-times-two make?
> Rosie frowned, thought, and answered:
> — '75'.
> — 'Rosie', the teacher repeated slowly, 'two-times-two'.
> — '347!'
> — 'Rosie… two-times-two …'
> — '8,529!'
> — 'Rosie! … two-times-two!'
> — '125,423!'
> — 'Rosie! Two-times-two!'
> — '43,591,819!'
> — 'Rosie! Two-times-two makes FOUR!'
> — 'Oh ... is that all?'

I shall propose that the conception of creativity at work in Western culture may be as problematic as the motivation for Rosie's response, and shall be considering the way in which creativity is first reified – that is, made into a 'thing' – and then exalted as extraordinary.

I intend to pay particular attention to the construction of creativity, in language, examining the connections between notions of inspiration, risk, excitement, art and madness. I shall explain and illustrate a number of relevant concepts, will provide examples from different contexts, and will then reflect on the implications of the phenomenon on our working practices.

Creativity is associated with innovation – both terms refer to bringing something into existence – but innovation points to making changes to something established and therefore producing something new. There are many competing definitions of creativity and I propose to settle on 'the use of imagination in the production of new things (whether

ideas or objects)'. And will consider imagination as 'the capacity to form new ideas, images, or concepts of objects not present to the senses'.

During pilot studies in the project I interviewed a number of graphic designers and asked them whether and how did they stimulate their creativity, that is, how did they fuel or feed their imagination. Only later I realized that my question implied models of the mind. 'Fuel the imagination' – imagination as a mechanical contraption. 'Feed the imagination' – as an organic model of the mind. Using a model may be inevitable, and one may remember Wilfred Bion's comments on the usefulness of a model of thinking derived from the emotional experience of the digestive system, to assist speaking of 'undigested facts' [1].

The human capacity to translate (re-present) concepts into symbols and to articulate thoughts in language is what gives humans the ability to think. We do not think and then translate our thoughts into speech and writing – thinking itself is structured through language [2]. This lead me to observe and record discussions of design decisions within groups of architects, analyzing the verbal exchanges where creativity is said to occur, paying attention to the dynamics of discourse and talk-in-action in the construction of reality [3], trying to ascertain any linguistic determinants of the creative moment, that is, when a new formulation takes place.

I began to ponder whether the design group produced the creative act as a string quartet, where an instrument may take a solo part but it is the ensemble – together as a whole – that produces the result, and therefore considered the phenomenon from a systems psychodynamic viewpoint but also from a linguistic perspective. I wondered, is there a discourse of creativity?

The term discourse does not refer just to the manner in which we speak, but to the fact that the way we speak constructs what we perceive [4]. In the traditional discourse about creativity, the creative act has been described as the moment in which the practitioner finds himself or herself taken over by inspiration. As the word implies, inspiration comes from outside – the magic stuff is breathed in. This idea can be traced to classical Greek thought [5], which formalized the belief that emotions have an independent existence from human beings – as evident in the fuel and feed for the imagination I mentioned earlier. Emotions are around, as it were, and come into the mind with the in-breath, taking hold of the person. This belief continued into the Jewish-Christian tradition. In the last book of the Christian Bible [6], St John tells of when the Spirit came into him and an angel dictated the text that became the Book of Revelations (another term associated with creativity).

This separation between external and internal domains (and the self as a vessel) is very present in current everyday language, in expressions such as

- what has got into him?
- … she was out of her mind
- … bursting with anger

• … full of doubt

• … filled with laughter.

Perhaps because of the concomitant notion of fullness that these expressions imply, creativity appears so attractive, against the fear of being empty. To be possessed by the gods; to exist, even if for an instant, in the 'fullness of being'.

We should notice that 'possession' has a sexual connotation. And, like conception in sexuality, the intimacy of creativity is exciting and it is also frightening. Since in the creative act the creator feels exposed, it may be the experience of a manageable risk which makes the creative predicament pleasurable, as a representation of the ability to survive existentially threatening situations. This may partly explain the pleasure that humans derive from horror and action films. As anyone who has taken a roller coaster ride knows, the pleasure resides in the anticipation of the fear of annihilation and disintegration, followed by the relief of making it through. The physical excess of the violence – of an almost free fall that is survived – has an orgasmic quality.

Just as it happens with violence, madness poses another, in this case, psychological, threat of disintegration. And it is particularly in relation to creativity that madness has traditionally been associated with artistic practice. To be creative one must be 'out of one's mind', a state to be cultivated and which has been enshrined in the concept of the artist as the heroic sufferer [7], the one who risks his psychical and physical integrity going into madness to serve his or her muse.

Considering creativity as rooted in the practice of art restricts the perception of its occurrence across all other areas of human experience. Donald Winnicott stated the necessity of separating the idea of creation from works of art, proposing that 'creativity belongs not to the manufacture of artefacts but to the engagement of the individual with external reality' [8]. This engagement is mediated by the human capacity to translate (re-present) concepts into symbols and to articulate thoughts in language. While some authors [9] have cogently argued that the creativity of artists and designers is the consequence of a particular type of personality, it is language what gives humans the ability to think. Creativity results from this innate capacity, manifested in every human endeavour – in art, science, education, industry and trade – towards improvement and transformation.

Art, on one hand, may be an outcome-centred high-unpredictability practice – the maker may not know in advance what they are aiming at – and therefore it does not require a brief or description of the expected features of the artwork, as these will emerge in the process of the making. Organizational consultancy, on the other hand, works by design, which may be defined as devising 'courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones' [10]. Both design and consultancy require an explicit brief, that is, an account of the problem and of the desired outcomes of the intervention, beyond the production of pleasure. The brief, in order to be operative, will identify the criteria that the solution must necessarily fulfil to produce an effective transformation of the original situation into the preferred state.

However, it will be useful to consider the difference between effective and efficient. If an effective intervention is what delivers an intended result, an efficient one does the same without waste or excess and is concomitant with a particular aesthetic experience of order and elegance. In fact, there seems to be something beautiful in the elegance of creativity, as the experience of beautiful simplicity lingers. We may wonder with astonishment, how could not I/we/someone think of that solution before?

But a difficulty becomes evident – our species are prone to transform abstract notions into concrete objects, paradoxically disowning their own experience, confusing function and object. Thus, like inspiration, creativity becomes reified as a consequence of the predisposition to

> 'apprehend human phenomena as if they were things, that is, in non-human or possibly supra-human terms; […] as if the products of human activities are […] facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will. […] The reified world is, by definition, a dehumanized world.' [11]

You may remember the original title of one of the themes in this symposium: 'Creativity in crises', later changed to 'Risks, creativity and destructiveness'. While the original may have also referred to creativity at times of crises, this problematic formulation also pointed to creativity itself as the subject or object undergoing the crisis, a someone or something to which things happen.

Reification and this misplaced concreteness are two necessary conditions for the emergence of commodities. And it may be useful to explain what I mean by the term commodity. You will be aware that goods (fabric for clothing, clothing itself, crafts, food stuff) were initially produced for consumption within the immediate social group. However, as production increased, any unused surplus began to be exchanged for other stuff, and this gave products, above their use value (what they were needed for), an exchange value (what they could be traded for).

Simple commodity production was the economic system of early societies, bartering products with one's neighbours, at a market or place for exchange. But, when owners/producers made profit and grew in size, they were able to buy the labour of those who did not own the means of production and whom they might now employ. Thus, labour itself became a commodity.

The value of a commodity is determined by supply and demand, which causes the exchange value to fluctuate. Monetary systems removed some of the difficulties of a barter system. For example, if a farmer wished to get a pair of shoes, he had to find a shoemaker who wanted wheat. But when money became the norm, he could exchange his wheat for money with anyone (selling it) and use the money to exchange it for shoes (buying them) from any shoemaker.

In the culture of commodity production that gave birth to capitalism, creativity, the same as labour, knowledge, and any other social product, has become commodified, and like money, taste or status, it is offered as a product for exchange. This is in evidence in contemporary design practice. A cursory look at design group websites and publicities [12]

shows the proliferation of statements offering creativity as the object of consumption, misleading both designer and client into believing that creativity can be turned into something to be consumed and therefore subjected to power and possession. At the last check Google listed almost 40,000 entries for 'creative consultancy' and about 3,000,000 entries for 'creative design'. This is also in evidence by the proliferation of 'designer objects', that is, consumables which are presented as having the added value of being the product of creative practice. Creativity has become a commodity and is consumed as a brand, just like clothes and cars. And branding has affected all areas of our social lives, including politics and governments. [13]

Creativity – as a generic brand – is also used by business and management organizations. In effect, organizations do not just engage in the creative production of services – they also (and sometimes, primarily) sell the creativity of their approach as that what is sought by the client beyond the solution to a particular problem. At the last count, Google listed 13,000,000 entries for 'creative business solutions'. What consumers consume, therefore, is the notion of creativity as a brand, where the value is imagined to reside. Brand and product are two different objects. Say I was able to offer you (as a gift) either the secret recipe of the drink made by Coca-Cola, or the copyright to its brand – which one would you be best advised to chose?

A similar dynamic occurs in education in art, design and the humanities, when both the student and the teacher are under the illusion that creativity is an external essence or gift, unconsciously experienced concretely as an item that the course or the teacher actually have. The teacher can then be seduced by the student's desire and flattering belief that it is in the teacher's power to offer this gift. This idealization of the teacher's role by teacher and student, by designer and client, by analyst and analysand – or by organizational consultant and client – needs to be grappled with and processed by both, as this expectation is a mirage born out of the subject's desire, that cannot be fulfilled.

I referred to the notion of crisis earlier on, a term that comes from the Gk. krísi 'decision', as the 'turning point in a disease when an important change takes place, indicating either recovery or death'). Like climax, crisis refers to this critical apex as the location of excitement, the anticipation of the release of the accretion of stimuli.
At the root of this there is an 'imaginary' (rather than imaginative) engagement with the nature of creativity. By imaginary I refer to what Jacques Lacan described as one of the registers of the mind, the other two being the 'symbolic' and the 'real'. Zizek has explained the relationship between the three registers using the game of chess as a metaphor. The rules one has to follow to play it are its symbolic dimension – 'knight' is defined only by the moves this figure can make. This is different to the imaginary, which concerns the way the figures are shaped and coloured (knight, queen, bishop, etc.). And the real is 'the entire set of contingent circumstances that affect the course of the game: the intelligence of the players, the unpredictable intrusions that may disconcert one player or cut the game short.' [14]

The imaginary cannot be dispensed with or overcome. It is the dimension of the human subject closest to animal psychology, and mammals show evidence of the imaginary as instinctual. The Darwinian 'struggle for existence' is not staged amongst different but near relations. As Lorenz described [15], aggression manifests itself on sight of a member of the same species because the animal perceives the other as a likeness of the Self, that is, someone who has the same cravings and from whom they have to defend, and will therefore attack [16]. As a complex mammal (ruled not only by the imaginary but structured by the symbolic, that is, by language), human beings have the capacity both to create and to destroy, sometimes even indistinctively, 'bursting' impulsively into action as when in basic assumption fight/flight [17], shifting positions with great speed, unable to imagine (that is, to form a mental concept of) an Other that is not an imaginary Self.

It is only by the development of an ego-based reaction-formation [18] that an other can be conceived as someone different, with whom the Self can identify and empathize (understand and feel their feelings), allowing for ethical regard. These contradictory impulses make up a complex species, having to balance the tension between individual gain and common good, assisted by their unique capacity for imagination.

The imaginary (rather than the imaginative) aspect of creativity can be explored with reference to desire, which Lacan described as a continuous force that cannot be satisfied and is to be found at the heart of human existence [19]. (Unconscious) desire does not refer simply to the sexual drive or its evidence in the sexualization of culture. Desire is an early (primitive) configuration that may be explained thus: the need of the child may be nourishment or security (and he or she makes demands by calling or crying). But because the need is satisfied by someone, the presence of this Other who gives the nourishment soon acquires importance by itself – this presence symbolizes the Other's love. So after the need has been satisfied (the infant has been fed or appeased) what continues to exist and remains unsatisfied is the craving for love. This left-over that cannot be satisfied is desire. Therefore, beyond the efficient solution or decision (the nourishment) regarding the design or business question, creativity is what is still unconsciously and inevitably longed for (the Other's love) and the solution/decision, even if effective, can never be fully satisfactory.

Thus, creativity becomes a fetish, a term that we can consider from both political and psychoanalytic perspectives. According to Karl Marx, capitalism fetishizes commodities, for 'as soon as [an object] steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent' [20] and they are believed to contain value, neglecting the effects of labour in their manufacture. Richard Krafft-Ebing applied the term 'fetishism' to a form of sexual behaviour, as a perversion in which sexual excitement is dependent on the presence of a specific object (the fetish), such as a shoe or piece of underwear [21].
A function of perversion is the denial of reality in order to avoid or master anxiety because engagement with reality requires the recognition of differences. As a fetish, creativity is the location of perverse and naïve attraction as distinct from the desired outcomes of

production. In that respect, creativity is an ‘aspiration’ (that is, the power or spirit ‘to be taken in’, made flesh, to become one with) that can never be attained, because it is an instance of the surplus meaning, a remnant or left-over, the object of anxiety, as the cause of desire rather than that towards which desire tends. That is to say, creativity is ‘the feature on whose account we desire the object’ [22]. We don’t just want an object on its qualities, but for being ‘creative’; we do not prefer a drink for its flavour, but by the illusionary promise it appears to deliver.

For Lacan, ‘the fundamental impasse of human desire is that it is […] desire for the other, desire to be desired by the other and, especially, desire for what the other desires.’ [23] Furthermore, ‘… desire is a social product [as it is] always constituted in a dialectical relationship with the perceived desires of other subjects.’ [24]

It is my contention that creativity, rather than being an attribute of the capacity to play, to invent, to engage with reality, tends to be ritually considered as a disembodied essence that only some individuals (artists, designers, managers, leaders) and organizations have or excel in – rather than a quality intrinsic to human nature. Considering that creativity is limited to the few is a myth, a social construction that naturalizes a narcissistic, power-driven discourse.

The myth of creativity at work proposes that there is something magical, ineffable that others may have, obscuring the fear of our own barrenness, of emptiness. The wish to make the creative extraordinary is a consequence of a limiting cultural discourse that emerges to cope with the impossibility of satisfying unconscious desire. As a consequence, one of the tasks of the organizational consultant is to address the hollowness of an individual and organizational pursuit of creativity as a reified concept enshrined as a (cultural) myth, by exploring the workings of desire in the group, attending to the use of the symbolic (that is, of language) to ‘dislodge the disabling fixations of the imaginary’ [25]. The aim is to reclaim the commonality of creativity, which is to be found in any exchange, in any action with the potential to transform our experience, exposing creativity as ‘ordinary’ in the way that Raymond Williams proposed in respect of Culture, stating that 'the system of meanings and values which a capitalist society has generated has to be defeated in general and in detail by the most sustained kinds of intellectual and educational work.' [26] The objective is to expose that creativity, like

> culture, is ordinary. [...] Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. […] The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is a constant debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact and discovery, writing themselves into the land. [27]

These common meanings are to be developed through the innate human capacity for dialogue (that is, reasoning with an other) towards transformation, effected within the boundaries of an actual, virtual or imagined group, constructed by its conscious and

unconscious discourse(s). In effect, the practitioner is in both an actual and an imagined conversation – a term whose etymology is ‘turning things over with others’.

I have argued in this paper that the wish to make the creative extraordinary is a consequence of a limiting discourse with the intention of coping with the anxiety arousing through the impossibility of satisfying unconscious desire. However, creativity is indeed extraordinary, whether in procreation, in art, or at work – when devising, planning, and managing transformations. The Jewish story of the two men in a train seems appropriate here:

> — ‘Where are you going’, asks one.
> — ‘To Warsaw’, responds the other.
> — ‘Listen’, says the first man, ‘You tell me that you are going to Warsaw so that I will think that you are going to Lodz. But I happen to know that you are actually going to Warsaw. So, why do you lie?’

Why say that creativity is extraordinary – when it actually is extraordinary? This is a paradox that remains open and should not be closed, at the danger of simplifying the complexity and richness of the concept. But, how can we engage with the notion of creativity as simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary? Furthermore, how can we acknowledge another aspect of desire, that of the teacher for the learning of the learner, the analyst’s desire for the growth of the analysand, and the consultant’s desire for the transformation of the organization? It has to be left open rather than resolved. The myth of creativity has to be seen as managing that which cannot be managed in any other way – a simplification trivializes it, its exaltation reifies and therefore erases it.

I can now end by returning to the title of my presentation to remind us that the myth of creativity at work in Western culture is rooted in the inevitability of dissatisfaction that drives us (and Rosie) to value that which is imaginary (in Lacanian terms) because of the lack which cannot be experienced in its distressing full dimension. Only when the impossibility of satisfying an unconscious totalizing desire enters the process of mourning, this will foster a more efficient (that is, elegant) transformational engagement with the creative ordinariness and extraordinariness of our actual working practices. ■

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