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Creative Accounting: Consumer Culture, the ‘Creative Economy’ and the Cultural Policies of New Labour

Jo Littler

In Tim Bewes and Jeremy Gilbert (eds) *Cultural Capitalism: Politics after New Labour* (L&W, 2000)

In Stephen Bayley’s book Labour Camp: The Failure of Style Over Substance, the former creative director of the New Millennium Experience shares his views on New Labour’s cultural policies and practices. As the title suggests, Bayley’s opinion is not exactly favourable; and this in itself is not particularly surprising, given Bayley’s dramatic resignation as creative director of the Dome and the general reputation of the ‘style guru’ for designer tantrums and waspish comment. What Labour Camp does, firstly, is to argue, through anecdote and invective, that from Cool Britannia to Lord Irvine’s wallpaper, from the Dome to the ‘branding Britain’ debates, New Labour manifests the triumph of ‘style’ over ‘substance’, has offered a cultural regime consumed by the superficial aspects of image. Moreover, this is not just any old ‘shallow’ image either, but an exceptionally dull and debased one: the second charge of the book is that cultural standards are being lowered. As proof, Bayley shudders, we now have in charge of the Arts Council former Granada chairman Gerry Robinson, the ‘caterer to Nescafé society’.ⁱ

Bayley’s account is structured by the belief that design or art or should not be ‘political’ and that it can somehow exist in a zone ‘outside’ politics. Similarly, the critique rests (somewhat incongruously, coming from the former director of the Design Museum) on the idea of ‘style’

and ‘substance’ as mutually exclusive entities, on the idea of a binary opposition between ‘image’ and ‘reality’. Consequently, the title Labour Camp figures in the text as if it were an obvious enough insult in itself, and the verdict of a ‘shallow’ style is formulated through a thinly-veiled homophobia, directed in particular towards Peter Mandelson and Chris Smith.

Why should the account of a residually Thatcherite critic and the theoretically moribund usage of ‘style’ and ‘substance’ as mutually exclusive entities be of interest here? I would suggest that the terms employed in Labour Camp are worth noting precisely because of their familiarity, because of the extent to which such commentaries on Labour’s cultural policies had, by 1998 if not earlier, become hegemonic within certain sections of the media. In this respect, the book was echoing, as well as eliciting, many other media reports about Labour’s concern with ‘style’ over ‘substance’.ⁱⁱ

Let us take another example which focuses on the cultural policies and discourses being promoted by New Labour. In an extended feature article in Guardian Weekend in November 1998, similar terms were differently mobilised by Jonathan Glancey, who bemoaned the current state of ‘dumbed-down’ British culture, arguing that it merely offered a watered-down culture packaged in the wrapping of free enterprise. This has been caused, he argued, primarily by well-educated, well-meaning liberals who have unwittingly betrayed the populace. Their pursuit of ‘democratic’ art has necessarily produced a populist culture in which second-rate art is encouraged at the expense of that of which could have been great.ⁱⁱⁱ

What both these arguments have in common is not only a shared distaste for Labour’s cultural policies, but an identification of the fact that the cultural policies introduced since the government came into office in 1997 have consistently articulated and promoted a connection

between ‘culture’ and ‘industry’. Whilst it is easy to sympathise with the issues that prompt Glancey’s critique, the danger in this article is similar to that in Labour Camp, namely the tendency to throw out the notion of democratic art, to revive that idea of ‘the great’, and to mix these discourses with one recommending expanded access. To look at this from another angle, both accounts, whilst pinpointing that something is rotten in the cultural state of Labour, are problematic precisely because of the way they interpret this newly manifested connection between discourses of ‘consumerism’ and the ‘culture’ which causes them so much displeasure.

Historically, the intersection between ‘culture’ and ‘industry’ has been a theoretical space in which distinctly undemocratic prejudices have crept in, often unannounced (‘high culture’ was a phenomenon constructed not only through an opposition to mass culture and consumption, but to their synonyms, the lower-class and the feminine) and this is certainly the case here, in Bayley’s snobbery about ‘Nescafé society’ and Glancey’s return to ‘the great’.^{iv} The issue therefore becomes how to understand and find a suitable language in which to identify New Labour’s cultural policies without collapsing into the pitfalls of either idealising ‘culture’ as a space separate from the rest of the social world or, conversely, of celebrating any linkage between culture and industry as necessarily emancipatory by virtue of cultural diffusion, a position only too compatible with neo-liberal economics. It is helpful, I suggest, to locate an analysis of this particular conjunction between culture and industry in relation to an understanding of the history of British cultural policy and the politics of discourses of consumerism. To these ends, this chapter will look at policies on culture alongside the more diffusive, discursive effects of New Labour’s allegiances.

Culture, Society and the State

To analyse the relationship between cultural policy and commerce under New Labour it is instructive to return to and reassess some of the ways in which the relationship between culture, cultural policy and commerce has been historicised and theorised by the left. As Raymond Williams demonstrated so persuasively and eloquently all those years ago in Culture and Society, the separation off of ‘culture’ as a relatively autonomous space can be historically located in the transformations of industrial modernity. The construction of a sphere which was formulated as beyond the material, political, social and economic, emerged as part and parcel of a system of industrialised labour organised around the pursuit of capital. The meaning of culture changed from the tending of crops, animals and, by extension, people, to become an independent noun meaning a system of objects and attitudes which were cordoned off from, and which were thought of as transcending society. Infused in Romantic thought, packaged through individuated authorship, ‘Culture’ gradually came to function as both a sanitising disclaimer of this system and as a marketable product unto ‘itself’.^v

In their recent book Culture and the State, David Lloyd and Paul Thomas revisit Culture and Society. Like many other recent commentaries they argue that Williams’s work contains a strain of romanticism, noting that in his writing what ‘remains as a powerful presence is a vestigial conception of culture representing the possibility of ‘the whole man’ against the division of labour’.^{vi} They argue that in his idea of culture as ‘a whole way of life’, Williams retains the idea of culture as a possibly utopian site but wants to give this a socialist inflection; that he implicitly pursues a project of ‘saving culture by making it socialist’.^{vii}

This text is not alone in locating a streak of Romanticism in Williams’s work.^{viii} Where it differs from some other critical re-evaluations, however, is that its outcome is neither the

recommendation of positivist empirical scrutiny as the only legitimate mode of cultural analysis (the idea that ‘truth’ can be found in the details), nor the wholesale dismissal of Williams. Rather, acknowledging its own relationship to the founding text, it sympathetically traces and critiques Williams’s conceptual trajectories and suggests that his schema can be re-theorised by drawing from Gramscian and post-structuralist theory as well as from occluded Chartist narratives. I want to summarise their analysis here, as it provides a useful frame for understanding Labour’s cultural policies and affiliations, as well as providing suggestions for a more progressive politics.

Lloyd and Thomas emphasise that not only was culture established to compensate and function as a substitution for the alienation of labour, but that ‘aesthetic culture becomes the ground or condition of possibility both for thinking and forging the human subject’.^{ix} They suggest that the notion of ‘culture’ was developed not in opposition to society so much as to provide the principle through which individuals became citizens for the state.^x To some extent this echoes – as well as Williams’s and E.P. Thompson’s work – Foucauldian-inflected commentaries which have astutely elaborated upon how ‘culture’ was deployed throughout the nineteenth century as a mechanism for dispelling ‘anarchy’ (to use Matthew Arnold’s terms) and disseminated through a range of institutions and practices to induce the formation of a civil and docile populace.^{xi} (To take but one frequently cited example, a key reason why London’s National Gallery was built in Trafalgar Square was because it was a popular site for public demonstrations – it was explicitly hoped that the gallery would have ‘a softening effect’.^{xii}) But where Lloyd and Thomas offer a new and useful perspective is to link this usage of ‘culture’ to the politicality of the modern state. Highlighting how the process by which aesthetic culture became separated as a distinct sphere paralleled the rise of

representative democracy, they argue that culture and the modern state are coeval: that they bring each other's terms into being.

Foregrounding the extent to which having a representative system – that is, having someone to speak for a constituency – was resisted and eloquently argued against, of how it 'was not easy to gain acceptance for the notion that being represented was the normative mode of one's relation to political life',^{xiii} Culture and the State argues that the 'representative' mode came to shape both cultural institutions and aesthetic ideals. This discourse around 'culture' provided the terms of what being a citizen and being a state meant. As the state came to mean 'the best self' rather than a conjoined whole, so too 'the function of culture' became 'to cultivate the identity between the ideal or ethical man in every object and the state which is its representative'.^{xiv} This ideology of being represented was therefore echoed and facilitated by an expanded and idealised notion of culture; and likewise by cultural institutions which were becoming increasingly 'sectioned-off' from other processes and realms, particularly that of work.

For instance, examples of the former include how the poet becomes a representative of all men, speaking to rather than amongst them; and how schools became a mode in which a teacher, representing the state and knowledge, imparted wisdom unto their pupils.^{xv} And as culture became a space which functioned to educe a citizen from a human being, it could of course be used as a space in which in which a struggle towards an endlessly deferred process of becoming 'fully human' could take place. In this way, culture as a separate sphere was explicitly used as the basis to delay further enfranchisement. Whereas the (proto-Gramscian) Chartist position argued that working produced relevant knowledge, the classic Victorian liberal position argued that disinterested education must precede the vote.^{xvi} Education in this

formulation explicitly meant distance from labour. The sectioning out of spheres was, therefore, crucial in dismantling the opposition to mutual democratic forms of cultural politics, and in particular, Lloyd and Thomas argue that the extent of the struggle over this terrain, and the degree of critical consciousness of this by the Chartists and others, has been totally obscured.^{xvii}

I cite Culture and the State at length here for two reasons. Firstly, its account is important because it exhaustively demolishes any remaining strands of credibility for the still entrenched idea that ‘culture’ can function as a utopian space outside of, or acting as consolation for, social conditions. The left has a long history of investing in a notion of that reified by-product of industrial capitalism, high culture. As Alan Sinfield, terming this phenomenon ‘left-culturism’, puts it, ‘the idea that culture transcends material conditions has a strong socialist lineage’.^{xviii} Culture and the State implicitly poses as its alternative a range of sites which offer mutual, democratic participation beyond that of the representative model – not a theoretical model which is new on the left, but one whose legacy in terms of recent cultural policy has tended to become obscured.^{xix} Secondly, its focus on the politics of the relationship between governments, cultural institutions and the uses of ‘culture’ provides us with both a historical perspective with which to think through New Labour’s cultural policies and with a political frame with which to trace their connections to previous governmental formulations of culture. If we look at Creative Britain, the 1998 collection of official speeches and pieces by the Minister for Culture Chris Smith, for example, a glaringly obvious and pervasive motif which remains, alongside the (sporadic) strategies for ‘inclusion’, is that ‘culture’ is in many ways fundamentally a separate sphere.

Private lives

Creative Britain has a clear investment, and I use the term deliberately, in the notion of ‘culture’ as a realm of individualised creativity. We are told that ‘individual creativity is where it starts’; and the notion of culture which is being mobilised clearly owes a great deal to a Romantic notion of high culture, with Smith informing us that it can ‘lead us into a deeper world than that which exists on the surface’.^{xx} The extent of the stake in this notion is apparent even as he is exhorting us to embrace what might previously have been described as ‘low’ cultural forms:

The deepest cultural experiences will frequently come, for all of us, from the heights of fine opera or the sweeping sounds of a classical orchestra or the emotional torment of high drama. But we shouldn’t ignore the rest of cultural activity at the same time.^{xxi}

The assumption here is clearly that the aesthetic of the sublime, of a romantic excess of feeling, is what fundamentally counts, and this is why he is trying hard not to ignore other cultural models (for which read ‘the low’). The most important type of ‘culture’ functions as the ‘fully human’, a utopian site, a space for experiencing ‘deep’ emotions, to be encountered individually. In this respect, the separation of culture as a realm unto itself, the notion which emerged from liberal modernity and the gradual introduction of representative democracy, is still firmly in place.

But at the same time, this discourse has been accompanied by a multitude of actions which clearly do not mark the entrenchment of a notion of ‘culture’ as a separate sphere. To start with, Labour’s renaming the Department of Heritage the Department of ‘Culture, Media and Sport’ (DCMS) and the concomitant widening of its remit necessarily involved an expansion of the meaning of ‘culture’ deployed by the government. Drawn further away from a notion

of ‘heritage’, which was often regarded as reactionary, anachronistic and nostalgic (particularly, but not exclusively, by critics on the left), the Department now encompasses a far broader field, one in which for the first time culture is brought ‘down’ to the same discursive level as sport and the media..

Secondly, there has been the encouragement of areas which would once have been regarded as ‘low’ culture, despite Smith’s occasional need to cordon off particular areas with the velvet rope of true cultural worth: Creative Britain is stacked with references to popular music, cinema and design. Certainly, the fact that the distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture have collapsed or are collapsing does not go unnoticed. High and low cultural forms are to be linked, however, through the idea that they should be disseminated and conjoined with industry.

The value accorded to the individual and to individualism is a central motif of Creative Britain and of policies like NESTA, the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts. This was primarily conceived to ‘help talented individuals develop their full potential’; secondly to ‘turn creativity into products and services which we can exploit in the global market’; and thirdly to convince the public and business of this agenda.^{xxii} The key link being made is between individualised creativity and the market:

The Creative Industries as a whole are big business. They are the fields in which jobs have been created and will be created, into the next century. And they all depend ultimately in the talent of an individual or the intellectual property that is created in order to succeed. That is why I welcome all moves to increase exchanges between the cultural and business world.^{xxiii}

What this rhetoric does is retain the ideology of high culture in the sense of individualised creativity and genius, and to disseminate this into an increasingly expansive cultural field – one which now includes ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture – with the primary aim of financial profit. We might say that the ideology of the ‘separate spheres’ as discussed in Culture and the State is present qualitatively, in that ‘culture’ is still an individually nurtured or private quality which is created in a space distinct from the rest of social life.

And so the entrepreneurial creative subject addressed by Creative Britain is a descendent of Enlightenment man who pursues his private self-defined interests, autonomously constructs his own identity and products, and to whom the State’s rightful role is one of facilitation.^{xxiv} In its current form, it is part of a larger project: Sylvia Bashevkin has identified as a key third way theme the increasing role of political leaders to operate as facilitators between individuals and corporations, in which individuals are encouraged to take what corporations offer. She adds that it is a project which goes hand in hand with the treatment of NGOs as less important than business-achieving individuals, and an increasing moral agenda of personal responsibility.^{xxv} Similarly, in Creative Britain – while ‘social inclusion’ is nominally on the agenda, and social regeneration gets an occasional mention – the primary term is individualism, either backed up by, or as a means of achieving, economic growth.

Entrepreneurial legacies

We can understand more about this cultural policy discourse by locating it in the history of post-war cultural provision, in relation to what Jim McGuigan has termed the slow movement from traditional social democratic arts funding to one based around ‘economistic’ principles.^{xxvi} I want to discuss this by focusing on how other historical models have negotiated the conjunction between commerce and culture.

Creative Britain, as already mentioned, relentlessly pushes to centre stage the relationship between culture and industry. Whether discussing art galleries, music, heritage sites or contemporary films, Smith has continually been at pains to point out the economic benefits of the arts, of the financial profitability of culture. '[W]e have recognized' he states at the beginning of the book, 'the importance of this whole new industrial sector that no-one hitherto has even conceived of as an industry'.^{xxvii} However, this fashioning of areas in 'the arts' as industries is however deeply indebted to, on the one hand, Thatcherism – prior to which mentioning the arts and money in a shared cultural breath was by and large anathema – and on the other, left models of cultural provision, most significantly developed in the practice of the Greater London Council during the 1980s.

Thatcherism attempted to fashion state arts bodies in the image of corporate business practice. The previous 'gentlemanly' agreements of cross-party appointments were by and large abolished; the lines of privilege and institutions previously dominated by the 'snobbocracy' (the Old-Boy white aristocratic network) were infiltrated and snipped by the entrepreneurial New Boys (the white, self-made businessman network). Cuts in state subsidies, demands for accountability and efficiency savings, and the refashioning of institutions in managerial terms were accompanied by a welter of attempts to encourage business sponsorship in the arts. The extensive use of public money to privilege and support the private sector took place through such mechanisms as Office of Arts and Libraries leaflets such as The Arts are Your Business, through the extension of such bodies as The Association for Business Sponsorship in the Arts (ABSA), and by the 1984 formation of the Business Sponsorship Incentive Scheme (BSIS).^{xxviii}

An alternative model explicitly connecting cultural policy to consumer culture was produced by the Greater London Council, in which the agenda was to politicise mass cultural forms and develop pleasure, skills and social cohesion in local communities.^{xxix} Alongside the Greater London Enterprise Board, the GLC established community recording studios, non-commercial video distribution in public libraries, and independent and radical book distribution co-ops and publishing houses. This ‘progressive cultural industries approach’ emanated from the GLC’s Economic Policy Group rather than its Arts and Recreation Committee. Producing reports and a major conference, Cultural Industries and Cultural Policy in London, the Economic Policy Group ‘showed how important the cultural sector is to London’s economy [and] concluded that public policy should treat the cultural sector as a co-ordinated whole’.^{xxx} Whilst it was not, as Franco Bianchini has pointed out, the most highly financed of the GLC’s cultural policies, it had significant impact as a new idea. In a radical departure from the policy-making tradition of the left, it involved working through rather than against the market.

Both of these projects linked explicit signifiers of consumer culture to cultural production in different ways. Thatcherism dismantled the previous social democratic/liberal consensus to create policies which effectively extended a High Art discourse through – and into – wider corporate use, thereby compounding the undemocratic tendencies pre-existing within the state ‘arts’ sector. The GLC enabled co-operative community groups and organisations to deploy technologies more readily associated with mass production and consumption in order to develop useful skills and redistribute cultural power. It attempted to fashion alternative cultural markets.

The very enthusiasm of the DCMS for the cultural industries has been a key part of its new identity. Like the old GLC activities it attempts to influence the sites producing cultural products or services, but unlike those practices, it has tended not to do this for an end goal of cultural democracy or community integration. At one moment in New Labour's pre-history, attention was actually given to this type of cultural politics. In 1986 Geoff Mulgan and Ken Worpole published their Saturday Night or Sunday Morning?, a book doubling as a historical excavation of left cultural policies and polemical manifesto, urging Labour to adopt more of the culturally populist strategies of the GLC.^{xxx} Now the senior figure at the No. 10 Policy Unit, however, Mulgan seems to have done little to prevent the wholesale marginalisation of this agenda.

Instead, the cultural policies and affiliations of New Labour draw significantly from those established under Thatcherism in their emphasis on economic growth or profit. The rhetoric of individualistic Romanticism is entirely compatible with Thatcherite entrepreneurialism, and the renaming and widening of the remit of the Department of Heritage now looks least as much due to the governmental 'recognition' of the economic potential of the cultural industries as to an anti-elitist agenda. It is noticeable that the only 'shape-up' speech in Creative Britain is delivered to libraries. Indeed the sponsorship initiatives of the Thatcher years are not merely praised but encouraged and extended into an approach which asks not merely what business can do for the arts, but what the arts can do for business:

The growth of business sponsorship has not just brought in useful cash, but expertise and experience too. This is now changing – and rightly so – into a two-way process. It has become clear that we also need to look at the benefits the creative approaches of the arts can in turn bring to business. Increasingly, the qualities demanded for business – such as communication skills, flexibility of approach, improvisational and creative

thinking, working as a team so that the parts add up to a whole – are precisely those that can be inculcated through exposure to the arts.^{xxxii}

This goes beyond even the arts-meets-business policies established under Thatcher, taking the insights of the GLC cultural industries projects and deploying them according to an agenda which begins and ends with the pursuit of profit. This idea that ‘the arts’ can bring ‘creativity’ to business intersects with the perceived ‘feminisation’ of industry and with attempts to integrate signifiers of leisure into certain types of ‘flexexecutive’ workplaces, as well as with the new-age discourse of holism in contemporary business practice that Karen Salamon explores elsewhere in this volume. It is also a key term for New Labour anti-politics; as Liz Greenhalgh astutely points out, in Blairite discourse, ‘creativity is positive, light, the essential human spirit, boundless and free, whilst ‘ideology’ is the old repressor’.^{xxxiii} In a similar vein, the asinine and ubiquitous phrase ‘excellence’ springs from the pages of 1980s management theory, particularly a book by Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman, *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America’s Best-Run companies*. As the self-help manual of radical democratic organisations, *What a Way to Run a Railroad*, commented as far back as 1985, it ‘has seemed recently to be the fate of Excellence to be championed by the mediocre in the interests of the worst’.^{xxxiv}

New Labour and the Sensation Generation

I want to turn now to looking at New Labour’s cultural affiliations in a more discursive sense by examining the politics of that much-discussed exhibition of 1997, *Sensation: Young British Artists From the Saatchi Collection*. Staged in the Royal Academy, traditionally the most ‘Middle England’ of metropolitan art institutions,^{xxxv} *Sensation* was easily able to bounce off the reflected dullness of the Academy’s reputation to fashion and hone its avant-garde credentials. Indeed, this was necessary for both the display and for the institution. The

main trope of both the exhibition's promotion and the media coverage it generated was that of the 'shock aesthetics' of its pieces, pieces including Marcus Harvey's image of Myra Hindley, Myra, Damien Hirst's stuffed shark, and Jake and Dinos Chapman's sculptures of children with penis-sprouting foreheads. Staging this event was guaranteed to alienate a segment (enough, but not too much) of the Royal Academy's steady audience and The Daily Mail; and simultaneously, and for exactly the same reason, it was guaranteed to expand vastly the host institution's promotional power. It worked, becoming the most profitable exhibition of the year, rescuing the supposedly ailing Academy from a considerable proportion of its debts.

The New Labour government lent enthusiastic support to the project. Tony Blair announced that a work by the artist Mark Francis, similar to his piece in Sensation, was to appear on his walls in Downing Street. 'He may' suggested a spokesman, 'use his office to promote works by British artists that are proving an international success'.^{xxxvi} In Creative Britain Chris Smith praises Sensation sculptor Rachel Whiteread (most famous for producing House, a temporary concrete cast of the interior of a terraced house in Bow) and refers to Damien Hirst as a good example of one of the 'skilled, creative people' that are, for him, reinvigorating Britain's cultural economy.^{xxxvii} A Hirst painting even adorns the book's dust-jacket.

In several respects the government's endorsement of the Sensation generation was very easy to read. A publicity-seeking exhibition which hyped its 'youthful' identity, the 'BritArt' of Sensation was being heavily promoted by its network of vested interests as a ready and available signifier of national renewal. For the government, association with this helped to consolidate and amplify its keywords of new, youth and nation in that particular post-election moment. But exactly what set of values and interests were being promoted here? To

understand what was at stake in this we can take a closer look at the cultural politics of the exhibition and its intersection with wider discursive formations.

Shark Aesthetics

Given that the artworks in Sensation were very visibly the property of Charles Saatchi, synonymous in British political culture with advertising (as co-founder of Saatchi & Saatchi) as well as with Thatcherism (Saatchi & Saatchi helped the 1979 election victory with their 'Labour Isn't Working' campaign), it is appropriate to consider further the discursive connections between the exhibition and the world of advertising.

A key cultural corollary of the exhibition lies in the 'shock' advertising techniques beloved of certain practitioners of second-wave advertising. Focusing on more closely defined niche-markets, 'second-wave' advertising marked its difference from previous advertising techniques by not so much dwelling on a product's unique selling point in adverts as marketing it through association with lifestyle aesthetics and cinematic or innovative visual effects. The clothing company Benetton became the arch example of a company using these shock techniques: shifting its advertising strategy in 1991 from one of multi-sweatered multiculturalism, its creative director and photographer Oliviero Toscani began to use a campaign based around controversial photographs, including images of a nun kissing a priest, a new-born baby covered in blood, a man who had been shot, black and white hands in handcuffs, and, perhaps most notoriously, an image of a man dying from AIDS.

The Benetton campaign interpellated two main consumer subjectivities: the media-savvy consumer, tired of conventional product advertising; and a socially aware consumer who might be counted on to appreciate the company's 'honesty' in displaying iconic images of

contemporary suffering. As Carol Squires puts it, the campaign indicated that ‘denial in the service of upbeat consumerism is no longer a workable strategy as we are continually overwhelmed by disturbing and even cataclysmic events’.^{xxxviii} Benetton extended this into a moral justification, stressing that it was being socially responsible by presenting the ‘realities of contemporary society’, and the argument that it enabled images of cultural and political tragedy and oppression to be widely circulated gained the campaign high profile supporters such as Spike Lee. The campaign also addressed a section of the media who, successfully shocked, would seize on its controversial new strategies as newsworthy, thereby providing free publicity and boosting Benetton’s brand awareness.^{xxxix} The discourse at work was one of shock aesthetics delivering a shot of necessary truths to its consumer constituency. In short, it offered a type of sensational, avant-garde realism.

We can see how this discourse worked its way through to the contemporary images constructed around an aesthetic of shock in Sensation. In Henry Giroux’s critique of the Benetton campaign’s cultural aesthetics, he writes that they offer ‘a type of “hyperventilating” realism (a realism of sensationalism, shock, horror and spectacle)’ in which ‘they are stripped of their political possibilities and reduced to a spectacle of fascination, horror and terror that appears to privatise one’s response to events’.^{xl} It would not be far-fetched to say the same of Myra. Whilst Sensation differed on certain grounds (dwelling more on the attempt to upset what it imagined to be bourgeois sensibilities, and less on manipulating liberal sensibilities) it shared much of the same agenda. Both Benetton’s advertising strategies and Sensation participated in a shared discursive formation of privatised immobility and an ethics of superior distance. For example, within the exhibition’s promotional frame, Richard Billingham’s photographs of his working-class family are rendered as an anthropological

encounter, a curiosity validated through the viewpoint of an ‘insider’. It is worth noting that there is no democracy of the gaze in the photographs; nothing is reciprocated.^{xli}

Labour’s implicit or explicit support for the Sensation generation continued that of the Conservatives; Chris Smith’s predecessor, Virginia Bottomley, had praised Damien Hirst’s work on the grounds that ‘All art is meant to disturb’.^{xlii} The work was validated through the discourse that the function of art is to display and reveal unpalatable and necessary truths. What was being legitimated and reinscribed by both Bottomley and Smith’s support, then, was the notion of the importance of an avant-garde.

Labour, however, became identified as sympathetic to this cultural formation to a degree way beyond that implied by Bottomley’s taut message of approval. In doing so it legitimated a second key feature of Sensation, that of its populism: the exhibition was in part supported simply because of the breadth and volume of its coverage, because of its discursive reach. In an unprecedented move, the London listings magazine Time Out –one of the exhibition’s sponsors – offered its version of a Sensation catalogue as a pull-out supplement. The exhibition also had a symbiotic relationship with the tabloid press: the dealer of the majority of the artists tipped off The Sun about its potentially offensive content, and in return The Sun gave the exhibition a barrage of scandalised coverage; as one commentator put it, ‘contemporary art has grown both popular and deliciously weird from the tabloid’s point of view’.^{xliii} Going out of its way to disseminate an avant-garde discourse to a wider audience, the exhibition’s visual jokes or concepts (Damien Hirst’s shark, Sarah Lucas’s kebab representing a vagina on a table-top) were easily accessible, not demanding the usual amount of cultural capital of its audience; the exhibition, as Angela McRobbie has pointed out, ‘self-consciously staged itself as shocking but was also completely unintimidating’.^{xliv}

But at the same time Sensation referred to little beyond its own shocking puns: there was little if any engagement with social issues, and an almost complete disregard for the cultural politics or histories of its subjects. The exception, out of this exhibition of work by forty-two artists, was Yinka Shonibare's post-colonial reworking of Victoriana, and while we might cite some artists' later output for evidence of more political engagement (such as Chris Ofili's painting about Stephen Lawrence's murder, No Woman, No Cry), it is important not to lose sight of the fact that it was the identity and branding of the exhibition which was influential. Here, as with the Benetton campaign, the 'necessary truths' it delivered were largely context-free. As Carol Squires has memorably pointed out, Benetton's uncaptioned images of social breakdown were reduced to icons of universalised contemporary tragedy, images pointing not towards understanding of their social and political context but to a privatised immobility to be participated in by a social group for which buying clothes is both signifier and consolation.^{xlv} The Benetton campaign offered a kind of immobilising pessimism, smug in its apparently alienated knowledge, disabling to any kind of agency for positive change. It is no coincidence that Benetton is often invoked as a neo-liberal post-Fordist company which has kept its overheads down by employing large amounts of poorly paid female subcontractors, and that company head Luciano Benetton has doubled as right-wing senator in the Italian Parliament, vigorously promoting policies of deregulation of the marketplace and limiting state intervention.^{xlvi} The advertising discourse of privatised immobility is not accidental.

Likewise, Sensation marked a new use being found for contemporary visual arts; it functioned as a tool which

can now be relied upon to deliver particular audiences, broadly speaking the social categories AB and C1, and more specifically, the design and style-conscious young

opinion-formers. The problem for businesses trying to reach these influential but marketing-literate categories of consumers is that they do not respond favourably to conventional advertising and marketing techniques.^{xlvii}

In these terms, in its attempt to reach what Bourdieu calls ‘new cultural intermediaries’, the exhibition functioned as a type of conventionally delineated advertising, only with a displaced identity, all the more effective for its concealed status. In this sense, Sensation inversely paralleled adverts like Benetton’s attempts to claim the status of art. Just as ‘art’ adverts make little reference to the products they purport to advertise, the Sensation exhibits made no reference to the social world which avant-garde art purports to critique. The promotional network surrounding and constituting the exhibition meant that Sensation was a moment of synergistic marketing between those with vested interests in it, particularly Charles Saatchi, the YBAs, Christies, the Royal Academy and Time Out. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with marketing per se – it can be used, amongst other things, to market democratic ideas – merely that what was being marketed in this case was a politically conservative discourse, one which simultaneously swelled the ever-expanding wallet of Charles Saatchi and friends.

The Ken Sensation

But if the YBAs are so apolitical, in contrast to the offerings of the GLC’s cultural policies, then what were they doing in the spring of 2000 explicitly supporting Ken Livingstone in his campaign to become mayor of London?^{xlviii} Is this not contradictory? Firstly, I would suggest that it was indicative of the politics of location: the YBAs displayed their identification with the metropolis in order to maintain an image of urban bohemianism. Secondly, the event of the Mayoral election itself was perceived as ‘less political’, offering minimal significant power, alongside the endorsement of ‘personality politics’ through the appointment of a ‘face’

for London. And thirdly, Livingstone enlisted their support because he was seen to offer an alternative to party politics. In one sense this is not a bad thing, since it demonstrated the enduring legacy of the GLC in reaching new constituencies of support and mobilising enthusiasm for a progressive agenda – an ability to reach parts that political parties failed to reach. On the other hand, the alignment of the YBAs with Livingstone occurred precisely because he was seen to be a ‘rebel’ against ‘the system’; in short, it is an avant-garde politics of critiquing without participating.

However, and more worryingly, in terms of the policies of New Labour – or more encouragingly, should we choose to look at it in terms of the political ‘maturity’ of the YBAs – in one selective sense this critique is right: it rails against the rigid authoritarianism and managerialism offered by New Labour. Despite the affection of both for corporate cool, the libertarian ethos of the YBAs clashes with the authoritarianism of Labour’s agenda. The mismatch between these discourses was one reason why ‘Cool Britannia’ looked so ridiculous so quickly.^{xlix}

The unique selling point of Sensation, as many commentators have pointed out, was its perceived status as BritArt^{TM, l}: a symbol of the current ‘state’ of both British cultural practice and the new political culture. It was recognisably part of the same cultural formation as Creative Britain and Mark Leonard’s Rebranding Britain report for the DEMOS think tank, thereby adding to its newsworthy appeal for the broadsheets.^{li} Just as the exhibition promoted the ‘mediators, brokers and diversifiers’ of the Sensation generation, so has the keynote of the DCMS been to promote the popular-and-profitable, and so too has the mantra of Creative Britain been that ‘the arts’ are a resource to be exploited.

From 'House' to Powerhouse

Culture and the State identified the emergence of a distinct mode of 'Culture' as coeval with the emergence of the representative modern state, with its more repressive, and exclusionary aspects. These legacies are apparent in New Labour's discourse in several ways.

Firstly, the liberal discourse of 'Culture' as constituting the understanding of works of creativity and genius – a discourse which was deployed to separate the 'civilised' from the 'uncivilised' – still has its place in New Labour's understanding of culture. This discourse of culture as the 'fully human' is now, however, primarily deployed not as a means of social division but in order to assist the accumulation of corporate capital. New Labour's cultural field has been licensed to expand by virtue of its capacity to deliver economic profit: at the heart of this definition of culture is an equation in which 'culture' can now only qualify as 'culture' if it is corporate – priorities which fit snugly into a wider governmental agenda that Anthony Barnett has termed corporate populism.^{lii}

The deference towards corporations, and the acceptance and encouragement of the global economy as a force of nature, is New Labour's primary point of orientation, as a quick glance around the Millennium Dome – a showcase for assorted businesses and a material polemic in favour of 'flexible specialisation' – will reveal. Whilst the function of the nation state is now clearly very different from the 1950s, we might compare the Dome with the enormously popular 1951 Festival of Britain, which also had a trade function: sections of the South Bank exhibition were designed to improve the sales and image of British goods. The key difference between the Festival and the Dome, however, was that, firstly, in 1951, there was considerable government anxiety and direct intervention about the potential partisan promotion of products; secondly, commercial exhibitors were limited to a small element of

the total display space; and thirdly, companies did not ‘display themselves’ – they did not have the governing principle and representational power over the exhibits. Rather than the individual companies autonomously bonding together to represent a fragmented commercial nation – which in some ways is exactly what the Dome does – it was for ‘the nation’ to decide how the individual companies were represented.^{liii}

In effect, the Dome formed what was rendered with a curious literalism at the Department of Trade and Industry’s temporary showcase for British creative industries, the 1998 powerhouse::uk exhibition. Illustrating the theme ‘Communicating’ was a room-sized model of London made from a one-stop shop at Sainsburys. The miniature commodity-city was entirely constructed from branded goods – almost a sanitised, comic version of an anti-consumerist dystopia, complete with a baked-bean tin version of Battersea power station, in order to illustrate ‘the city as a canvas for creativity as well as for inspiration’.^{liv} The exhibition was slightly more interesting and progressive than the Dome in its use of innovative display techniques, ergonomic designs, green solutions, and even a co-operative advertising firm, but the authoritarian discourse of facilitating corporate success remained.

The second point I have extrapolated from Lloyd and Thomas’s analysis is how ‘culture’ became deployed as a separate sphere distinct from work. Under Blairism it would appear that we have the exact opposite of this, as the promotion of the term ‘the cultural industries’ – alongside the incorporation of signifiers of leisure and ‘creativity’ into certain strands of the workplace – illustrates. However, paradoxically, what remains is the discourse of culture and creativity as a quality which is both individual and distinct from that of wider social life. Consequently, there is little or no sense that the objects and aesthetics being promoted have a politics which connects to them. This, of course, is directly the opposite of the project

pursued by cultural studies, which – in a genealogy we might trace in particular through the works of Williams and Bourdieu – took the expression ‘there’s no accounting for taste’ and turned it on its head. There was every possibility of accounting for taste, and the importance of doing so was a critical and political necessity. Such insights, which appeared to be gaining ground in an earlier moment of Labour’s cultural policies, have been explicitly marginalised.

Culture and the State also points to how ‘Culture’ became used as an authoritarian mechanism paralleling the rise of representative democracy in its structure of speaking to rather than amongst people, and marginalising Chartist calls for cultural activities which could be produced from, be integrated into and be relevant for daily life experience. Here we might cite that exhibition with its structure of self-absorbed statements, Sensation, which the government was so keen to promote, and Labour’s constant addresses to ‘the people’. Liz Greenhalgh, commenting on the frequency with which Blair has ‘bolted the phrase “the people’s” onto projects and princesses’, has noticed that alongside the more egalitarian impulses inherent in the phrase, there also lurks a claim to represent the people reminiscent of Thatcher’s authoritarian populism.^{lv} To apply the insights of Lloyd and Thomas, we can see in Labour the attempt to form a culture which is representative rather than participative. While its cultural rhetoric addresses ‘the many rather than the few’, New Labour promotes cultural forms which are authoritarian, rather than policies and discourses which are democratic in terms of participation and access. At present, ‘culture’ and ‘creativity’ mean little more than entrepreneurial brio inflected with some of the repressive seriousness of high art, a discourse more dependent on creative accounting than on an activated desire for democracy.

Notes

ⁱ Stephen Bayley, Labour Camp: The Failure Of Style Over Substance, Batsford, London 1998, p. 125.

ⁱⁱ See also Timothy Bewes, 'Truth and Appearance in Politics: The Mythology of Spin' in this volume.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jonathan Glancey, 'Never Mind the Quality', Guardian Weekend, 21 November 1998.

^{iv} For discussions of the elision of mass consumption with the feminine and lower-class, see for example Andreas Huyssen, After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism, Macmillan, Basingstoke 1988; Mica Nava, 'Modernity's Disavowal: Women, the City and the Department Store' in Mica Nava and Alan O'Shea (eds) Modern Times: Reflections on a century of English modernity, Routledge, London 1996.

^v Raymond Williams, Culture and Society: Coleridge to Orwell, Hogarth, London 1987.

^{vi} David Lloyd and Paul Thomas, Culture and the State, Routledge, London 1998, p. 14.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 14.

^{viii} For example, Ian Hunter, Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education, Macmillan, London 1988.

^{ix} Lloyd and Thomas, *op cit.*, p. 42.

^x *Ibid.*, p. 67.

^{xi} See, for example, Tony Bennett, The Birth of the Museum: History Theory Politics, Routledge, London 1995; Jim McGuigan, Culture and the Public Sphere, Routledge, London 1996.

^{xii} McGuigan, *op cit.*, p. 55.

^{xiii} Lloyd and Thomas, *op cit.*, p. 58.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, pp. 46-53.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 79.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, pp. 83-4.

^{xvii} What is noticeable by its absence in Culture and the State – although the authors explicitly highlight this – are the gendered and imperial dynamics of this process. It is relatively easy, however, to see how such an account could be compatible with the slower incorporation of women into a system of representative democracy.

^{xviii} Alan Sinfield, Literature Politics and Culture in Post-war Britain (Second Edition), The Athlone Press, London 1997, p. 242

Unknown

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- ^{xix} We could cite both 1970s community arts projects and the GLC projects discussed later in this chapter.
- ^{xx} Chris Smith Creative Britain, Faber & Faber, London 1998, pp. 147, 23.
- ^{xxi} *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- ^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- ^{xxiv} See Don Slater, Consumer Culture and Modernity, Polity Press, Cambridge 1997, pp. 38-9.
- ^{xxv} Sylvia Bashevkin, 'The Challenge of Personhood: Women's Citizenship in Contemporary Perspective', at Women's Equality and Participation in Public Life in Canada and the UK conference, Canada House, 21 October 1999.
- ^{xxvi} McGuigan, *op cit.*
- ^{xxvii} Smith, *op cit.*, p. 26.
- ^{xxviii} See Chin-Tao Wu, Privatising Culture: Aspects of Corporate Intervention in Contemporary Art and Art Institutions During the Reagan and Thatcher Decade (DPhil thesis, UCL 1997; forthcoming from Verso).
- ^{xxix} Franco Bianchini, 'GLC R.I.P.: Cultural Policies in London, 1981-1986', New Formations No. 1 (Spring 1987).
- ^{xxx} *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- ^{xxxi} Geoff Mulgan and Ken Worpole, Saturday Night or Sunday Morning? From Arts to Industry – New Forms of Cultural Policy, Comedia, London 1986.
- ^{xxxii} Smith, *op cit.*, p. 54.
- ^{xxxiii} Liz Greenhalgh, 'From Arts Policy to Creative Economy' in Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy No. 87, May 1998, p. 89.
- ^{xxxiv} Charles Landry, Dave Morley, Russell Southwood, Patrick Wright, What a Way to Run a Railroad: An Analysis of Radical Failure, Comedia, London 1985, p. 56.
- ^{xxxv} For accounts of the history of the Royal Academy see Gordon Fyfe, 'A Trojan Horse at the Tate: Theorizing the museum as agency and structure' in Sharon Macdonald and Gordon Fyfe (eds) Theorising Museums, Blackwell, Oxford 1996, pp. 217-8 and Sidney C Hutchinson, The History of the Royal Academy 1786-1986 (Second Edition), Robert Royce Ltd, London 1986.
- ^{xxxvi} Dan Glaister, 'New man at the Ministry shows his true colours in art', Guardian, 10 October 1997.

^{xxxvii} Smith, op cit., p. 147.

^{xxxviii} Carol Squires, 'Violence at Benetton', *ArtForum*, May 1992, p. 19.

^{xxxix} Benetton's profits rose 24% when the campaign started in 1990-1, and its brand recognition rose sharply 'to a level approaching that of Coca-Cola'. See Henry A. Giroux, 'Consuming Social Change: The "United Colours of Benetton"' in *Cultural Critique*, Winter 1994, p. 9.

^{xl} Ibid.

^{xli} *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*, Thames and Hudson, London

^{xlii} Bottomley is quoting Georges Braque. Cited in Andy Beckett, 'Shock Art to Shop Art', *Guardian* G2 28 August 1997. This article discusses how several Sensation artists had begun to sell limited edition prints of their work in Habitat.

^{xliii} Liz Jobey, 'A Rat Race' *Guardian Weekend* 4 October 1997.

^{xliv} Angela McRobbie, 'But Is It Art?' *Marxism Today*, November-December 1998, p. 56.

^{xlv} Squires, op cit.

^{xlvi} Robin Murray, 'Benetton Britain: The New Economic Order' in Stuart Hall and *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, Lawrence & Wishart, London 1989; Swasti Mitter, *Common Fate, Common Bond: Women in the Global Economy*, Pluto Press, London 1990

^{xlvii} Simon Ford and Anthony Davies, 'Art Capital', in *Art Monthly*, No. 213, February 1998, pp. 3-4.

^{xlviii} Many young British artists including Tracey Emin, Damien Hirst and the Chapman Brothers donated works to auction for Livingstone's campaign. See Fiachra Gibbons, 'Brit art stars boost Livingstone campaign', *Guardian* 1 April 2000, p. 6.

^{xlix} Jeremy Gilbert has discussed a similar relationship between Britpop and Blairism. See his 'Blurred Vision: Pop, Populism and Politics' in Anne Coddington and Mark Perryman (eds), *The Moderniser's Dilemma: Radical Politics in the Age of Blair*, Lawrence & Wishart, London 1998.

ⁱ William Feaver, 'Myra, Myra on the wall ...' *Observer* 21 September 1997.

ⁱⁱ Mark Leonard, *Britaintm: Renewing Our Identity*, Demos, London 1997.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a discussion of Anthony Barnett's use of this term and related themes see Michael Rustin, 'The New Labour ethic and the spirit of capitalism' in *Soundings* Issue 14 (Spring 2000) p. 116.

^{liii} Letter from Gordon Russell to Gerald Barry, 20 April 1948, Council of Industrial Design Papers, Design Council Archive; Ian Cox, The South Bank Exhibition: A Guide to the Story it Tells, HMSO, London 1951.

^{liv} Claire Catterall (ed), powerhouse::uk, Aspen Publishing, London 1998, p. 7.

^{lv} Greenhalgh, op cit., p. 92