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Cursed creatives: alienation, sublimation, and the plight of contemporary creative work

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ABSTRACT

This paper connects the critical discourse on the 'creative class' with a longstanding lineage of thought on creativity in psychoanalysis, demonstrating their combined value in understanding worker subjectivity and exposing the perils of contemporary creative work. Drawing upon object relations theorizing in particular, the argument is made that the 'objects' of contemporary creative work coupled with its surrounding 'potential space' prove severely impoverished, giving rise to a newfound experience of alienation. Accounts of creative workers are presented to further elucidate alienation's unconscious correlates, as well as to suggest ways of mitigating creativity's compromised expression through the process of 'sublimation' – a concept central to the psychoanalytic theorizing on creativity, yet wholly absent from the contemporary discourse. Implications for the critical study of the 'creative class' are discussed.

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Introduction

On the surface, members of the growing 'creative class' (Florida 2002) rarely come across as disaffected employees. Often lauded for their self-sufficiency, authenticity and unconventionality, so-called creatives are supposed to be fulfilled in their jobs and carry the promise of urban renewal and economic growth (Ray and Anderson 2001; Howkins 2004; Martin 2009; Kelly and Kelly 2013; Catmull 2014). But recent studies paint a more worrying picture (Jeffcutt 2000; Ross 2003; Gill and Pratt 2008; Boon, Jones, and Curnow 2009; Miller 2009; Muhr 2010; Standing 2011; Taylor and Littleton 2012; Eikhof and Warhurst 2013; Loacker 2013; McRobbie 2016). 'Many creative workers [are] expending huge effort for little reward and no job security', observe Taylor and Littleton (2012), 'apparently tolerating this precarious employment in the expectation of creative fulfillment' (4). McRobbie (2016) concurs, noting how the omnipresent injunction to 'be creative' permeates the work environment and ironically short-circuits creative output. Still others have highlighted the all-encompassing nature of the work itself, which 'can enlist employees' freest thoughts and impulses in the service of salaried time … everything that employees do, think, or say in their waking moments is potential grist for the industrial mill' (Ross 2003, 19).

Whatever the precise reasons for this purported 'creative malaise' (Wyatt 2013), little is yet known about the relationship between today's forms of creative work and the underlying psychodynamics of creativity. How, for instance, might such work both mobilize and impede what we know of the unconscious creative process? And how might this creative process, in turn, both contribute to and disrupt the creative worker's seeming complicity with a less than desirable, even exploitative state of affairs?

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These questions frame the present paper, which draws upon psychoanalysis to explore, understand, and ultimately interrogate contemporary creative work and its discontents. As a body of theory, psychoanalysis possesses powerful conceptual tools for explaining how and why people maintain otherwise self-defeating subject positions. Moreover, ever since Freud's first forays into the topic (Freud 1910a, 1914a), creativity has long been an interest of psychoanalysis (Milner 1950; Kris 1952; Greenacre 1957, 1958; Waelder 1965; Eissler 1967, 1978; Winnicott 1971; Gedo 1983; Bollas 1999; Levine 2016). Despite this robust lineage of thought, however, psychoanalysis has yet to substantially inform the critical study of the 'creative class'. While not entirely absent, applications of psychoanalysis to issues of creative worker subjectivity and ideological complicity tend to derive almost exclusively from the work of Jacques Lacan (Driver 2008; Ekman 2013) at the expense, this paper contends, of other psychoanalytic perspectives.

One such psychoanalytic perspective ripe for consideration is that of object relations, which brings a unique set of concepts to bear on the creative process and its propensity for curtailment. Rooted in an understanding of how unconscious dynamics interact with the environment (Buckley 1986), object relations situates the creative process in an early environment of parent–child relations – or what Winnicott (1942) famously calls the 'potential space' between infant and mother. Central to such potential space is 'the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects' (Winnicott 1971, 47) out of which the capacity for spontaneity and illusion emerges, as well as 'the ability to create the world' through full 'object use' (Winnicott 1970, 40). When such a potential space gets disrupted, however, either through excessive impingement or excessive withdrawal and neglect, the creative process falters (Bollas 1999).

This paper seeks to capture a similar disruption within the environment of contemporary creative work. Specifically, the argument is put forth that the all-encompassing nature of creative work impinges upon the creative process in profound and ultimately debilitating ways, leading to a stymied sense of subjectivity and ultimately a compromised creativity. Put in the psychoanalytic language of object relations, the 'objects' of contemporary creative work – which increasingly comprise not just thoughts, feelings, and emotions (i.e. immaterial labor), but one's very sense of self (i.e. existential labor) (Ross 2003; Fleming 2009, 2014) – do not stand at a sufficient distance from the psyche to make either the psyche or environment coherent as separate entities, and as a result, work threatens to collapse in on the individual.

In addition to illuminating the intricacies of the creative process, object relations also holds potential for revising existing concepts in organization studies. The concept of *alienation* in particular, once foundational to capturing worker subjectivity under industrial capitalism (Marx 1844, 1867; Lukacs 1923) and later under bureaucracy (Blauner 1964), has since waned in light of broad-scale changes in capitalist work relations and arguably warrants revisiting in light of the vicissitudes of contemporary creative work. From the vantage of object relations, the shift in capitalist work relations that gives rise to new forms of 'existential labor' (Ross 2003; Fleming 2009, 2014) can be shown to parallel a psychodynamic shift in object relations, with profound repercussions on the creative worker's psyche. Moreover, in contrast to classic portrayals of alienation, today's alienation can be shown to manifest less from a psychological distancing or removal from one's labor (Marx 1844, 1867; Lukacs 1923) and more from an uncanny closeness indicative of collapsed 'potential space'.

To further elucidate the unconscious correlates of this collapsed 'potential space' and corresponding alienation, this paper draws upon a concept central to the psychoanalytic theorizing on creativity, yet wholly absent from the contemporary discourse – namely, *sublimation*. Defined as the successful navigation of unconscious impulses (Freud 1910b), sublimation has also been framed by Freud (1914b) as a 'way out … a way by which those demands [of the ego] can be met *without* involving repression' (89; italics in original). Crucial to such successful navigation, according to object relations, is not only sufficient 'potential space' but also sufficient 'objects' with which to transform unconscious impulses into communicable form (Bollas 1989). Understanding how sublimation plays out among creative workers might shed further light on the vicissitudes of contemporary creative work.

This paper thus intends to offer a threefold contribution: first, it aims to expand psychoanalytic theorizing in organization studies by drawing on a broader set of perspectives and concepts. Specifically, by articulating the creative process and its likely curtailment in contemporary creative work, psychoanalysis might further illuminate the nuances of creative worker subjectivity. Second, this paper responds to calls for more lived and embodied accounts of contemporary creative work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2012; Hoedemaekers 2018) by applying psychoanalytic ideas to first-person accounts of user-experience (UX) designers, a rapidly growing 'creative class' profession specializing in all aspects of a person's interaction with a product or service (Brown 2009). While not intended as an in-depth empirical inquiry, these accounts offer a glimpse into the way creative workers articulate the felt-sense of their day-to-day work in relation to hypothesized unconscious dynamics.[1] Third and more broadly, this paper adds to the growing chorus of criticism directed at the burgeoning 'creative class' by offering psychoanalysis as a unique and hitherto underutilized scholarly resource.

Before proceeding, some caveats and conceptual clarifications are in order. First, the perspectives offered here do not purport to apply to all members of the 'creative class', which is an amorphous and ideologically-charged grouping of individuals routinely scrutinized in the scholarly literature (Jeffcutt, Pick, and Protherough 2000; Galloway and Dunlop 2007; McRobbie 2016). Where such a grouping proves useful, however, is in signifying a broader transformation in what constitutes 'work', which has become not just increasingly immaterial but existential in form (Fleming 2009, 2014) and constitutive of a widespread blurring of work and life (Hardt and Negri 2000). It is in this sense that the term 'creative work' is deployed in this paper, which seeks to capture a heightened version of existential work central to some (but certainly not all) members of the 'creative class'. It is also in this sense that accounts of UX designers have been chosen; a profession that, in virtue of meticulously crafting everyday experiences for a living (Keller 2014), arguably trades explicitly in 'life itself' as the new commodity form (Fleming 2014). At the heart of this paper, however, is an examination of the creative process itself, which from an object relations vantage refers not just to an intrapsychic process of libidinal forces, but a *relational* process of potential space, objects, and their transformation via sublimation.

The paper is structured as follows: first, an overview of the literature is provided on the rise of creativity in organizations, coupled with the corresponding conceptual decline of alienation in organization studies. Second, the psychoanalytic study of creativity is shown to offer what is arguably missing in the existing literature, namely a substantive theoretical account of the creativity process amid a changing landscape of work. Third, the lived experiences of UX designers are presented to illuminate just how creativity might be compromised today, giving rise to a newfound experience of alienation, but also how it might be salvaged through successful sublimation. The paper concludes with discussing the implications for the ongoing critical study of the 'creative class'.

The rise of creativity and the fall of alienation

In attempting to make sense of the seemingly seismic shift in capitalist work relations that gives rise to the 'creative class', scholars have pointed to the appropriating tendencies of late capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2003). McRobbie (2016), for instance, reveals how the very term 'creative industries' is itself a capitalist creation 'adopted by the policy-makers and advisers in the late 1990s to designate a preference for the ways in which creativity as an individual activity could be economized' (10). Others have linked the rise of creativity in organizations to a change in consumer behavior away from the mere accumulation of commodities – once the prime engine of capitalist expansion – and towards an accumulation of experiences. Or as Crary (2013) notes, 'the desire to accumulate objects is less important than the confirmation that one's life is coinciding with whatever applications, devices, or networks are, at any given moment, available and heavily promoted' (45). In the new so-called 'experience economy' (Pine and Gilmore 1998), organizations now seek to capitalize on such intangibles as time, access, and exclusivity (Degen, Melhuish, and Rose 2017; Greenfield 2017), which

scholars have warned leads to an escalation in not just immaterial but existential labor (Fleming 2009, 2014; Wagner, Barnes, and Scott 2014).

Curiously, in virtual lockstep with these economic and sociological changes we witness a decline in the conceptual currency of alienation. At first glance, this would seem all but inevitable in the face of popular descriptions of contemporary creative work, with their emphasis on individuality, self-expression and fulfillment (Florida 2002; Kelly and Kelly 2013). As McRobbie (2016) observes,

> [t]he importance of finding enjoyment and reward in work itself is an important counter to the Marxist idea of 'alienation'; this new kind of workforce will have no reason to find common cause in the monotony or boredom of labor. (73–74)

A similar point is echoed by McGuigan (2011), who notes '[t]he appeal of creative labour … is quite possibly the prospect of a job that combines conception and execution in a de-alienated manner' (213).

Less mentioned in the discussion of alienation's demise, however, is the concept's connection with once-popular images of art and artist. As Bain (2005) notes, '[a] general acceptance of the artist as an alienated and a tempestuous figure was reinforced by an emphasis on feeling, imagination, genius and a search for abstract "beauty"' (28). More generally, insofar as artistic work was once diametrically opposed to manual labor, the artist was believed to necessarily operate at a certain alienated remove from society. Today, in contrast, the estranged artist no longer serves as reflective foil to the blue-collar laborer or white-collar 'organization man' (Whyte 1956), but instead joins their ranks in the new (and muddled) category of 'creative worker'. Moreover, it is now the creative worker and not the artist who serves as 'radical change agent' credited for recent social upheavals (Gladwell 2010) and beckoning humanity's next stage of development (Lanier 2013). Meanwhile, the idea of the estranged artist striving against an intrusive society has all but lost its social currency. Thus, with the shift in capitalist work relations that gives rise to the 'creative class', alienation is ingeniously avoided, in part, by revising these once-popular images of art and artist.

Psychoanalysis and the creative process: an object relations perspective

The literature canvassed above, however robust in its ability to capture the subjective correlates of shifting capitalist work relations, offers only part of the story and focus of the present paper. Arguably missing is a substantive account of the psychodynamic aspects of creativity affected by this changing landscape of work. Long an ally in the critical dissection of subjectivity under capitalism (Fenichel 1934; Reich 1945; Kovel 1983), psychoanalysis offers potentially novel perspectives on creativity and its relationship to alienation that, in turn, might deepen our understanding of contemporary capitalist work relations. Moreover, as recent psychoanalytic forays into the 'creative class' suggest, it is not enough to understand the structural or discursive patterns that subjugate creative workers; we must also understand how such patterns engender a 'libidinal investment' (Ekman 2013, 1164).

At the same time, however, such 'libidinal investment' stands to benefit from considering the broader 'relational space' surrounding the creative worker and contributing to the creative process itself. It is in this sense that the psychoanalytic perspective of object relations might bring added value to a critical examination of the 'creative class'. This section thus provides an overview of the psychoanalytic components of the creative process rooted in object relations. For the sake of conceptual brevity, these components can be conceptually parsed into three broad areas: potential space, objects, and sublimation.

Potential space

Like virtually all phenomena examined by psychoanalysis, the creative process in object relations theorizing gets traced back to life's earliest stages. In his magisterial survey of the topic, Kris (1952)

connects the adult's creative capacity to a pre-Oedipal zone of development that revolves around the mother.[2] It is here where self and other merge or have yet to differentiate; a place Balint (1968) describes as an 'interpenetrating harmonious mix-up'. It is also here where the infant's unconscious structures of relating to the world first form, prior to the development of language and the imposition of the 'reality principle' (Freud 1920). As Greenacre (1957) notes, 'the nature and immediacy of the relationship to the mother', with its 'early sensory oversensitivity together with the greater reactivity to rhythm and gestalt relationships of form … bring the infant into a wider range of awareness of his own body and of the surroundings' (497). Provided the mother can remain attuned to her child (Winnicott 1956), she will facilitate the child's creative exploration of the world. Conversely, if the mother fails in her attunement – either by being too impinging or too withdrawn – the child will in turn fail to develop a self precocious enough to explore the environment, and instead ossify into a compliant orientation toward reality (Winnicott 1960).

In a similar vein, Winnicott (1971) puts forth the notion of 'potential space' necessary for creativity; a space that can only emerge if the mother is away long enough to make 'possible a separating-out of the not-me from the me' (147). Without such potential space, the child (and later adult) loses the opportunity to 'creatively fill [such space] with playing, which in time becomes the enjoyment of the cultural heritage' (Winnicott 1971, 146). Enjoyment, however, like 'interpenetrating harmonious mix-up' (Balint 1968), arguably puts a positive gloss on what is often a more nuanced emotional experience. Reading of Freud's personal life (Gay 1988), for instance, we learn that his affinity for the artist Leonardo da Vinci (Freud 1910a) derives, in part, from a shared maternal experience with the artist, and specifically a shared anxiety from having to contend with 'dual mothers'. For da Vinci, as Freud (1910a) reveals, this likely explains the famous duplicity of Mona Lisa's face, whereas for Freud himself it manifests in a competing attachment to a beloved nanny, on the one hand, and an emotionally withdrawn mother, on the other (Whitebook 2017; also see Green 1983).[3] As Whitebook (2017) notes, because of these contrasting and disorienting maternal imagos, Freud's 'sense of self tended to be vulnerable and brittle', and yet, 'in Freud, as in many other remarkable people, these radical contrasts in his personality helped to engender a creative character structure' (42).

Object relations theorizing has since expanded upon this work by making direct links between the ability to reside within potential space – however fraught with 'radical contrasts' (Whitebook 2017) – and later adult forms of creative activity. While Winnicott (1971) himself viewed entry into potential space as the foundation for all cultural experience (also see Reviere 1936), subsequent theorists have designated this 'intermediate area' between external and internal reality as the proper domain of culture and art (Rose 1996). In the broadest sense, what proves essential to the creative process, as Goldman (2017) notes, is 'the meeting up of the imaginative freedom of the psyche with an environment safe enough to allow the individual to be surprised without being shocked', thus allowing for a dynamic and ultimately generative interplay of the individual's inner and outer worlds (166).

Objects

In addition to the significance of potential space, the objects that populate such space are given equal weight in object relations theorizing on the creative process. Creativity reveals itself, according to Winnicott (1969), through the use of objects. Not only do objects assist in exploring the world, they also give form to the unconscious. By extension, following Freud (1911), objects allow for the individual to 'mold his fantasies into truths of a new kind' (224). In object relations theorizing in particular, the child's earliest molding of fantasies occurs in relation to the 'primary object' mother (Klein 1937). Moreover, the child's ability to make use of this primary object – up to and including its creative destruction (Winnicott 1969) – determines the child's capacity not only to calibrate unconscious phantasy to reality, but also to give external shared form to private life. So long as the mother can accept the inevitability of being both a satisfying and frustrating primary object, the child will in

turn select, take up, and ultimately use further objects for expressing and elaborating the unconscious (Winnicott 1969).

Building from Winnicott, Bollas (1993) puts forth the notion of the 'evocative object', which he defines as an object imbued with 'unconscious resonance' (47). Such an object carries direct significance for the creative process in virtue of its 'promise to alter the subject's external environment' (Bollas 1989, 16). 'It is usually on the occasion of the aesthetic moment', Bollas (1989) writes, 'that an individual feels a deep subjective rapport with an object (a painting, a poem, an aria or symphony, or a natural landscape) and experiences an uncanny fusion with the object, an event that re-evokes an ego state that prevailed during early life' (16). Moreover, such an ego state of 'uncanny fusion' – or what Freud (1930) once called 'oceanic feeling' – is only possible insofar as the object maintains requisite distance from the psyche (Kris 1952) or 'a separating-out of the not-me from the me' (Winnicott 1971, 147). Conversely, if the object is too distant (or the mother is away too long), 'then [the image of her] fades, and along with the baby's capacity to use the symbol of union ceases' (Winnicott 1967, 131).

Sublimation

While potential space and objects offer a topographical view of the creative process from an object relations perspective, just how the individual makes use of such space and the objects therein to bring about creative activity remains to be explained, and for this we may turn to Freud's metapsychological concept of sublimation. Central to subsequent psychoanalytic accounts of the creative process (Loewald 1988; Kaplan 1993), sublimation is defined by Freud (1910b) a 'process of development … in which the energy of the infantile wishful impulses is not cut off but remains ready for use' (60). Ultimately, Freud's (1910b) theorizing on sublimation remains tentative and unfinished, on the one hand believing 'we owe our highest cultural successes to the contributions of energy made in this way', (60) while on the other, expressing strong reservations towards imbuing sublimation with any pretentions of 'high culture' (61).[4] This dual quality permeates the early debates in psychoanalysis over whether sublimation is among the mechanisms of defense or should be kept wholly separate (Glover 1931; Freud 1936; Fenichel 1945; Laplanche and Pontalis 1974).

More recent theorizing has built upon Freud's own non-reductionist accounts of sublimation to propose that the release of – and relief from – the build-up of internal libidinal pressure allows for 'something more' than just the neurotic symptom (Loewald 1988; Whitebook 1995; Rose 1996). In contrast to Freud's (1910b) view of a progressive, higher-order channeling of instincts, however, these theorists have framed sublimation as a 're-creative return … a reconciliation of the polarized elements produced by individuation' and more generally, a 'bring[ing] together what had become separate' (Loewald 1988, 21–22). Moreover, this emphasis on return and reconciliation suggests, somewhat paradoxically, an ability to regress in order to sublimate – or what Kris (1936) famously denotes as 'regression in service of the ego' and Winnicott (1954) as 'regression to dependence'. The rationale here is that only through such regression can one gain 'freer access to visual and primary process modes of thought' that in turn directly translate to creative activity (Knafo 2002, 25).[5]

Crucial here, and drawing upon the theorizing above, is the existence of an external world of objects to transform such regression into communicable form, lest primary process thinking become pathological. Thus from an object relations perspective, sublimation becomes an 'ability to maintain … early forms of object relationships' while at the same time maintain 'the capacity for self-reflection and distance' (Knafo 2002, 29, 33) – or in other words, the ability to reside within a potential space between self and other, and by extension, creator and creative work (Winnicott 1971).

Bringing together these overlapping psychoanalytic accounts, we find a remarkably coherent set of components inherent to the creative process from an object relations perspective. Put simply, potential space provides the setting in which objects can be mobilized, and this mobilization is driven by the instinctual drive of sublimation. To hazard an automotive metaphor, if space and

objects comprise the engine, sublimation comprises the fuel, and all of these together give rise to creative movement.

User-experience (UX) designers

As intimated above, object relations serves as a potentially illuminating framework for understanding the creative process in relation to broader changes in capitalist work relations. To further demonstrate how the components of the creative process might manifest among contemporary creative workers, first-person accounts are presented here from eight user-experience (UX) designers, each working at a different organization in either London or New York City (two global hubs of UX design). Derived from the psychoanalytic methodology of free association interviewing in which pre-planned questions are minimized, and instead open-ended reflection is encouraged (Hollway and Jefferson 2012), these accounts offer a potentially rich platform for interpretive inquiry.

Aligned with the free association method, UX designers were asked in the interviews to openly reflect on their work and elaborate further on any experiences shared, probing for additional thoughts, feelings and associations, all the while maintaining 'a space for respondents to share their own sensemaking' (Ulus and Gabriel 2018, 227). Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes and were conducted away from the worksite to ensure confidentiality. In order to stay present with the sense-making process, all interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Analysis of the interview transcripts proceeded in an iterative manner whereby themes were coded based on both content frequency and content strength (O'Cathain and Thomas 2004). This included an initial coding of important words or groups of words, followed by a categorization of related codes into overarching themes. To corroborate the coding process and check for reliability, a random selection of transcripts were shared with two clinical psychologists with expertise in psychoanalytic theory and practice. The study protocol received institutional review board (IRB) approval from the university human subjects review committee.

Following Costas and Fleming (2009), Thomas and Davies (2005), and Watson (2008), the presentation below is intended to reveal the experiences that might begin to coincide with the evolving conceptual frame outlined above, and as such, is exploratory in nature. In keeping with the theoretical discussion, first-person accounts are grouped into the three categories of potential space, objects, and sublimation. In each, a disruption is to shown to emerge that corresponds with a felt-sense of distress. To summarily capture this distress, an interpretation of alienation is then offered that suggests a coherent (albeit deeply dysfunctional) set of shared experience across participants. This is then followed by an illustration of what can be considered a 'contrasting case' (Munk 2004), namely a UX designer who seemingly navigates his compromised situation in a wholly different manner from his colleagues, thereby shedding further light on the complexity of unconscious dynamics in relation to contemporary creative work.

Collapse of potential space

If from an object relations perspective, the creative process requires requisite space in order to mobilize objects and give shared form to the unconscious (Winnicott 1971), preliminary evidence of a collapsed potential space and its effect on the creative process can be gleaned from a number of first-person accounts. Arguably, this manifests most starkly in the muddling, if not merging, of the individual with the work environment. Manning,[6] for example, a UX designer based in London, attests to a growing sense of obsolescence – a term previously reserved for inanimate objects but now deployed as a viable self-description:

> And you're losing, like, for every month that goes past where I'm not learning some new tech or exploring new things is like a month I'm dying. I'm just like, I'm going to become obsolete. (Manning)

Phillip, his colleague in the field, concurs:

> So I either have to adapt or die. And I say it like, everybody has to adapt and embrace the technology coming in, or you're not going to have a pay check. (Phillip)

In addition to constantly staying abreast of 'new tech', other UX designers attest to having to sculpt their self-image incessantly in order to stay relevant to their peers and to the profession as a whole. Amy, a UX designer in New York, speaks of having to 'ooze designerness':

> If someone comes to your house, you have to ooze designerness. You have to have designer feeling oozing from your pores to win over someone's trust … I have to go out and spend money, spend time looking for clothes to make me look a certain way. And since I've graduated from school I've had to pretty much revamp my wardrobe. (Amy)

Holly, also based in New York, puts it more bluntly:

> It's insane to have such a curated life. Like in the past six months or eight months I completely shifted my friend group … a group of people that I don't feel connected to. (Holly)

Curiously, this failure in 'separating-out of the not-me from the me' (Winnicott 1971, 147) extends to the very work of UX design, which involves an intentional conflation of a company's 'identity' with everyday experience – or what is also known in the profession as 'experience as brand' (Pottie 2017). Amy explains further:

> Basically you can take an experience, any experience, and create a product around it. Take the experience of exercise. Nike's no longer a representation of exercise, like I'm wearing running shoes. Nike *is* exercise. Nike's gotten beyond just selling items to selling the idea of exercise itself, using like the Nike fuel band, using like the Nike plus, going online and having this digital component which tracks all this. So the entire product is no longer just one thing. It's the sensor that's on your shoe, it's the watch that you're wearing, it's your heart rate monitor, it's the software on your iphone, which you can pull up at anytime to see your progress, it's similarly the tablet application which all synchs up, and the website experience – it's all one experience. (Amy)

Thus, just as the conventional physical space of the organization arguably no longer exists (Spicer 2009), so too does the work itself, which becomes both everywhere and nowhere ('it's all one experience'). How this in turn affects the worker's psyche can be inferred in the references made to 'exposure' and even 'incest' by Holly and Amy:

> You have to believe that what you're saying is important, you know, there's a lot of exposure. (Holly)

> It is very kind of incestuous, I think, all these things – experience, brand, identity. (Amy)

Returning to the theoretical framework of object relations outlined above, we find here an overarching difficulty in navigating the work environment of UX design. Instead of an environment in which one might both meaningfully connect and differentiate (Goldman 2017), the UX designers seemingly must grapple with an ambiguous environment, muddled with everyday life. Put differently, the requisite space needed to effectively be creative (Kris 1952) has all but collapsed, leading to what Holly describes as a 'curated life' and Amy as 'designer feeling oozing from your pores'. Not only is this collapsed potential space at odds with classic images of the artist operating at a remove from society so as to maintain critical distance from conventional life and the creative limitations it imposes (Bain 2005), it also correlates with a panicked quality evidenced by Manning and Phillip feeling constantly on the verge of 'death'.

Impoverished objects

In addition to a collapse of potential space conducive to creativity, the setting in which UX designers work comes populated with objects that are hardly evocative in the sense of eliciting a deep subjective rapport (Bollas 1989). Instead, the existence of rather impoverished objects become apparent when UX designers begin to elaborate on what they actually do for a living. As Bill, based in London, explains:

> I'm not talking about products or services. I'm talking about meaning beyond the 9–5. You know, you're part of something bigger and this is kind of, this is where we're going for … In fact we're always telling our clients … 'be more authentic, find out who you really are, and then execute on that'. Dolly Parton said, 'Find out who you are and do it on purpose'. And I think that's really clever. (Bill)

Amy answers in a similar manner, emphasizing the importance of 'creating identity':

> And when we create a company's identity it extends beyond, like, what your stationary is gonna look like, what your logo looks like, what your type-face looks like—no, this is like, who you are. We're gonna tell you who you are and we're gonna tell you how to best project who you are and your values through visual design. Like, that is a different level of, um, it's a different level of thinking than just, you know, were gonna make stuff for you. (Amy)

Not only do Bill and Amy's descriptions go well beyond the conventional definition of crafting experiences around products and services (Brown 2009), they also convey in more detail the 'incestuous' nature of UX design work, which entails telling clients 'who [they] really are' beyond products and services. And yet, these very products and services can only endure so much embellishment before becoming something different, and arguably something more than they should be. As Bill reflects further on the day-to-day tasks of his job, we get a sense of just how this embellishment registers on the psyche:

> Suddenly you're asked to deal with quite an abstract entity, a corporation, and live and breathe it in incredible detail, for probably longer than is good for you, every day. And, you know, breakfast, lunch and dinner is spent thinking about how a carton of milk should look, and how a pack of sausages should be sold, and what the different ranges are inside the supermarket, and how the store should be laid out, and how wide an aisle should be … And there's a state, you know, there's a moment at three in the afternoon or three in the morning, whenever it is, where you just want to throw your hands in the air and say 'I can't, if I see another pack of value chocolate, or whatever it is, I'll scream'. (Bill)

Seen from the vantage of object relations, we can infer here that it is not just a collapsed potential space but also a landscape of impoverished objects that make up the UX designer's work environment. Specifically, insofar as creativity reveals itself through object use (Winnicott 1969), the objects of UX design – which, on the one hand, are comprised of abstract entities such as 'identity', 'authenticity', and 'experience', and on the other, mundane products such as 'sausages' – appear to offer a confused and indeed confusing artistic medium. Borrowing from Winnicott (1969) and Bollas (1989), they appear to simultaneously fail at maintaining sufficient distance from the psyche to be put to use (Winnicott 1969) *and* at maintaining 'unconscious resonance' for the individual (Bollas 1989), resulting in a clear sense of exasperation.

Thwarted sublimation

Without such objects and corresponding potential space to adequately bear and transform the force of instincts, sublimation (or the successful navigation of unconscious impulses) gives way to neurosis, thereby thwarting the creative process (Loewald 1988; Kaplan 1993). Among the UX designers interviewed, this stymieing of libidinal forces (Freud 1910b) leads to a quite profound sense of disillusionment, as demonstrated in the cluster of accounts below that emerged when UX designers began to contemplate the overall trajectory of their 'creative class' jobs. Thomas and Chad, both based in New York, convey a sharp disappointment:

> I keep doing it over and over again, and there's no sort of creative point. I'm not trying to create some sort of creative concept or construct, it's just labor. (Thomas)

> When I started, people warned me how shitty it was, and when new people start, I try to tell them too. At first, when you're young, no one really believes that that's going to be true, but 6 months down the line people find out the truth. (Chad)

Phillip and Manning appear to have sat longer with their disappointment, leading to a more extreme, if not also more dire assessment:

> I've got to quit my job. I've got nothing to go to, but I've got to quit my job because I'm creatively dying. It's just, I'm not going anywhere. (Phillip)

> I just started to become disillusioned, and I went into another agency, which was nicer, but that was really just, I was just like, if I continue doing this, I'm gonna just hate myself more than I already do. Or just completely leave the industry all together. (Manning)

Hardly 'a way out' (Freud 1914b, 89), these accounts nevertheless offer an unflinching glimpse into the perils of contemporary creative work. Bill, who is arguably the most articulate in capturing the felt-sense of his experience, goes on to provide what comes across as an overarching self-diagnosis:

> You build so much of your natural being, of who you are, of how you define yourself, through the work that you produce, through your creative output that if you're alienated from it, very rapidly you also become alienated from your own personality, from your self, from who you are. (Bill)

Returning once again to object relations, we can infer from this cluster of first-person accounts that in addition to having to endure a collapse of potential space and impoverished objects, UX designers also experience a thwarting of sublimation. Recall, for instance, that sublimation comprises the libidinal 'fuel' for mobilizing potential space and objects in order to create, without which such 'wishful impulses' remain 'cut off' and no longer 'ready for use' (Freud 1910b, 60). We sense this cut off quality in the depersonalizing and even deadening experiences above, which are seemingly the opposite of an 'immersion in potential space [that] involves a certain type of affective experience, one of vitality, aliveness, and play' (Gorney 2011, 60–61). Moreover, the re-integration of self and world evident in successful sublimation (Loewald 1988) never appears to takes place because the division itself never arises. Instead, the distinction between self and world remains muddled. Central to this cluster of first-person accounts, however, is an apparent stagnation of the overall creative process, leading a generalized sense of disillusionment. Indeed, what we might call 'creative estrangement' from the world once conducive to the artist (Bain 2005), is now replaced by an estrangement from *the creative process itself*, giving rise to a wholly distinct type of experience conveyed by Bill as 'alienation'.

Alienation, revisited: 'creatively dying'

Intimated in the first-person accounts of UX designers above is a novel, albeit already foreshadowed view of alienation worthy of further articulation. First, and most obviously, the objects of today's work have changed. In contrast to the classic Marxist account of the 'commodity fetish' in which the impersonal objects of one's labor bear an almost spiritual quality (Lukacs 1923), today's objects are partly (if not wholly) personal in quality (i.e. 'identity', 'authenticity', and 'experience'). Thus instead of impersonal objects holding the very social relations alienated from workers in the process of production (Marx 1867), today's social relations – and especially everyday experiences – now hold what should otherwise be impersonal objects (i.e. 'sausages').

Second, while the alienation expressed by UX designers above owes its existence to a similar abstraction of sorts, the process arguably differs. That is, if earlier forms of alienation derive from an abstraction away from social relations that gives rise to the classic fetishized commodity form, today's alienation is an abstraction away from the creative process itself (and particularly its unconscious processes), that gives rise to the experience of having a 'curated self'. Moreover, this sense of 'curated self' is no longer 'hidden' in commodities (Marx 1867) but laid bare and exposed, as conveyed by UX designers in the abovementioned feelings of 'exposure' and 'incest'.

Third, and in keeping with classic accounts of alienation (Lukacs 1923; Blauner 1964), there is a deadening and lifeless quality to the UX designers experiences, arguably in direct proportion to the commodification of 'life itself' in their day-to-day work (Fleming 2014). From an object relations vantage in particular, this sense of deadness suggests a severely compromised relationship with reality. Indeed, because of a seeming collapse of potential space, the UX designers are deprived

of the very opportunity to have a relationship with their work; a relationship arguably not only required for sustained creative output (Knafo 2002), but also for withstanding otherwise unhealthy or toxic relationships elsewhere, including in one's work environment. All of this, together, results in a creative process gone awry, or what Phillip colloquially captures as a felt-sense of 'creatively dying'.

Successful sublimation? 'We're not saving lives'

In striking juxtaposition to the above accounts, a UX designer named Mike presents a qualitatively different set of experiences that, in turn, point to the potential for a different relationship with contemporary creative work and the surrounding environment. From the outset, rather than defend against an imperfect if not all together toxic reality, Mike seemingly finds space within this reality to work; an achievement obtained by first identifying what he calls an 'epidemic of fear' in his industry:

> There's an epidemic of fear in the design industry and that as a whole in general we tend to be very reactive. We're in the service industry and what we create is art for the sake of business. And we often get into the habit of saying yes to a project or to a client not because it's something that we love or that is aligned with our own personal mission, but because it will provide stability. It will help pay the bills, a fear of what happens if we say no. 'Will something else come along? Well I should take the safe route'. And that leads designers to under-value their work, and so they end up working like dogs just to make ends meet. And so it's this sort of vicious cycle … fear and that cycle of brokenness in the creative industry. (Mike)

Mike's ability to acknowledge and keep at bay this 'epidemic of fear' already suggests an ability to maintain potential space. What proves particularly striking about this ability, however, is how it allows Mike to not hold work in a 'life or death' manner. Instead, Mike operates from a place of detachment:

> A design business, really any kind of service business, is not an emergency room. We're not fighting wars, we're not saving lives. If a client has a problem we don't need to make it our problem. It can take wisdom to really see the difference between a problem that I create and a problem that a client creates. (Mike)

Indeed, one of the more fascinating aspects of Mike's situation is his ability to create distance from his allegedly 'creative' job. The seductive aura of creative work is all but evacuated as Mike settles into a calmness and even 'boringness' of his daily tasks:

> You ask most creative professionals how they're doing and at least half the time they reply with some version of, 'I'm busy, I'm really, really busy'. You know, 'I got this, that or the other thing going on'. And if somebody says, 'you know, I don't really have a whole lot going on right now and I'm really happy with that' most people would be like, 'Okay, that's kind of weird'. (Mike)

To be sure, there is evidence of resignation in Mike's accounts, as if forced to make peace with the more turbulent and conflictual experiences of his past ('In 2011, I think, through the beginning of 2012, I went through a phase of burnout'). But to see Mike as solely resigned would fail to do justice to his ability to create. Mike describes a reclaimed creativity in the face of design:

> As long as I'm creating—it's much broader than design—as long as I'm creating things, I think, you know, I'll be satisfied in my work. And I think that I would have been terrified to even think about something like that four years ago. (Mike)

Mike goes on to attribute this reclaimed creativity to a sense of deliberateness, which he distinguishes from the agitation experienced by many of his colleagues (and seemingly his former self).

> Deliberateness, I'm not sure if that's the word, but a lot of people in my industry struggle with being really reactive in the way that they work and the way that they plan or don't plan. (Mike)

For Winnicott (1960) in particular, agitation leads to 'a poverty of cultural living. Instead of cultural pursuits one observes in such persons extreme restlessness, an inability to concentrate' (150). Mike

displays an ability to seize cultural living almost by a counterintuitive distancing from the frenzy of creative living. 'I don't tether my sense of self-worth to the work that I do', he declares, as if to offer a hard-earned insight.

While it remains to be seen whether Mike can continue channeling the space and objects therein to sustainably create, he nevertheless offers a different glimpse of the vicissitudes of contemporary creative work. Perhaps one might begin to intuit here a return to a more classic experience of alienation (namely, an abstraction away from the social relations of UX design), so as to buffer the self and safeguard the creative process from impingement. Indeed, it is arguably precisely this abstraction that is most needed in order to successfully sublimate amid an 'epidemic of fear' pervading the industry. It is also in this sense that sublimation might be placed in dialectical relation to contemporary alienation as a countervailing and even antidotal force, especially insofar as the distance needed for sublimation rekindles an estrangement from the world conducive to creativity (Bain 2005).

Above all, and because of Mike's ability to sublimate, there is a sense that he maintains the capacity for spontaneity and illusion (Winnicott 1970), while simultaneously acknowledging a separation between illusion and reality. 'Trying to live imaginatively and creatively in the "real" world without undue despair', writes Rose (1996), 'may well entail living with illusions, knowing they are illusion, but valuing them for their function, indeed, their necessity' (125). Arguably, it is Mike's deliberate and 'controlled illusion that is art' that differentiates him from his peers and allows him to carry on creating amid a compromised environment (Rose 1996, 126). Moreover, while the necessity of Mike's work may not be garnered from needing to 'save lives', it is arguably garnered from an internal (and largely successful) need to give form to the unconscious (Bollas 1989), allowing him to remain satisfied in his work.

Discussion

While intended as exploratory, the above application of psychoanalytic ideas to first-person accounts of UX designers begins to shed further light on the creative process and its likely curtailment, coupled with how such curtailment registers on the psyche. Together with the theoretical discussion above, these preliminary interpretations carry important implications for the ongoing critical study of 'creative class'. This section outlines the paper's implications in relation to extant scholarship, including contemporary psychoanalytic theorizing. This section also notes the paper's limitations and areas in need of future study.

First, and central to object relations, this paper frames the creative process as a dynamic interaction between unconscious dynamics and the environmental surround (Buckley 1986). This focus on specifically *how* the creative process and its concomitant curtailment might play out among 'creative class' workers stands in contrast to simply asserting ready-made interpretations – a risk often plaguing other psychoanalytic scholarship (Pedersen and Kristensen 2016). Similarly, and in contrast to Lacanian scholarship in particular, this paper does not deploy first-person accounts in order to locate instances of imaginary or failed imaginary 'constructions of the creative subject' as determined by discourse (Driver 2008, 189). Instead, the experiences of UX designers are viewed within a broader relational process of potential space, objects, and sublimation that, together, convey a more active struggle between creative worker and creative work. Put differently, the tendency to reflect on language that predominates Lacanian theorizing on the 'creative class' (Driver 2008; Ekman 2013) is replaced with a focus on the dynamic interplay of psyche and social.[7]

Second, and related, what renders creative workers 'attached to their own subordination' (Ekman 2013, 1164) can be interpreted as deriving less from a constitutive lack or desire for wholeness (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008; Spicer and Cederström 2010) and more from a broader environment of collapsed potential collapse and impoverished objects that in turn forces UX designers to sublimate in a claustrophobic and 'incestual' space, with corresponding feelings of futility, obsolescence, and even self-hatred. This would also suggest that the more general Lacanian-inspired interpretation of 'ideological dis-identification', which purportedly reinforces complicity with the status quo (Zizek

1989) and underpins contemporary employee subjectivity across a number of industries (Fleming and Spicer 2003; Jones and Spicer 2005; Roberts 2005; Villadsen 2017), warrants reconsideration. Captured by the colloquial refrain, 'I know very well that what I am doing is problematic, but I do it nonetheless' (Villadsen 2017, 9), ideological dis-identification is less applicable to the first-person accounts of UX designers in at least two important respects: first, the work of UX designers is arguably qualitatively different from other forms of labor studied from a Lacanian perspective – be it leadership (Driver 2013), entrepreneurship (Jones and Spicer 2005), or smartphone usage (Villadsen 2017) – by virtue of its uncanny closeness to, and even conflation with, worker subjectivity ('it's all one experience'). Second, and arguably because of this, what precisely might be needed – and which is the very import of the revised interpretation of alienation offered here – *is* such critical distance or dis-identification, and not merely to reinforce ideology (Zizek 1989), but rather to 'glimpse a chance of maturity' (Adorno 1991, 197). Intriguingly, in Adorno's (1991) own critique of the 'culture industry' we find an emphasis on the space between aspects of ourselves shaped by the industry and those aspects outside of it that offer, if not an exit from ideology, than at least a form of emancipation within it (Sherratt 2002) – a space arguably synonymous with potential space, which is neither wholly inside or outside but in between self and other (Winnicott 1942, 1971).

Third, and building from this, the implications for critical praxis might be further gleaned from an object relations perspective. For Winnicott (1963) in particular, potential space affords the individual the opportunity, however paradoxical, to both find and create the world.[8] Extrapolating beyond the immediate relational frame of clinical psychoanalysis, potential space might also afford the individual the opportunity to move more freely within the determinations of discourse and societal structures in order to create new figurations of subjectivity and, in turn, new articulations of creative work. We saw this intimated with Mike above, who, in having grasped the compromised or 'cursed' quality of his situation, was seemingly better able to cultivate a different relationship towards it; one defined by not just distance but 'deliberateness' which suggests a renewed sense of agency and perhaps even of emancipation.[9]

Despite the above implications, the limitations of the present paper should also be noted. First, the experiences captured above are no doubt limited to the UX designers interviewed. Obviously not all creative workers share these experiences, and those who do are not all affected in the same ways captured here. Similarly, no single psychoanalytic perspective, no matter how useful, can fully capture the complexity of any one creative worker, let alone the whole of the 'creative class'. While effort has been made to argue for the utility of an object relations perspective, its full potential may only lie in dialogue with other psychoanalytic perspectives (Fotaki, Long, and Schwartz 2012) as well as non-psychoanalytic approaches that share in a critical engagement with the 'creative class'.

Second, by focusing on sublimation as a possible antidote to alienation this paper risks veering into therapeutic territory, and specifically into the classic psychoanalytic prescription of abreaction. Ultimately, however, sublimation has its limits, as Freud (1910b) himself noted along with a number of first-generation theorists. 'After we have sublimated and sublimated', writes Floyd Dale as early as 1915, 'the world still remains in some respects a fitter place for the beings we unsuccessfully pretend to be than for the beings we actually are' (quoted in Hale 1971, 407–408). More research is clearly needed on the concept of sublimation, whose emancipatory potential continues to pique the interest of critically-minded psychoanalytic scholars (Marcuse 1955; Whitebook 1995).

Third, and more generally, any focus on creativity arguably already psychologizes work and organizational phenomena insofar as creativity carries the connotation of 'something inherent in personhood' (McRobbie 2016, 11). While a focus on personhood in critical scholarship is not without value (Latour 2004), it can nonetheless detract from, and even obfuscate, broader societal structures. One of the core merits of the object relations perspective, however, is precisely its attunement to a broader relational space that envelops and informs personhood, and vice versa, how such personhood contributes to and co-creates this relational space. Thus, if there is any value at all in taking a psychoanalytic perspective on creativity, object relations is arguably ideally placed.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to deepen the critical engagement with the 'creative class' through an appeal to psychoanalysis, and specifically to the hitherto neglected perspective of object relations. As demonstrated above, this perspective helps shed novel light on the creative process and its likely curtailment in contemporary creative work, coupled with how such curtailment registers on the psyche. Object relations also provides new insights into how creative workers might navigate their stymied subjectivity and make space within their environment to sustainably create, with intriguing implications for the future study of 'creative class'. Additional in-depth research is no doubt needed to further illuminate the subtleties and complexities of the creative process in relation to the lived experiences of creative workers. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the ideas explored here inspire critical scholars to probe deeper into the unconscious dynamics at play in the 'creative class', and thereby consider anew the pitfalls of creative work amid a still compromised working world.

Notes

1. Such an approach is not uncommon to the psychoanalytic study of organizations, which often deploys vignettes and a narrower range of empirical material to 'flesh out ideas' and substantiate 'experiments in thought' (Stein 2007, 349, 364; see also Kvale 1999; Ulus and Gabriel 2018).
2. Two points are worth noting here: one, the term 'mother' need not be gender-specific, and two, pre-Oedipal need not equate to anti-Oedipal.
3. Biographical accounts describe Freud's nanny as a surrogate mother of sorts, stepping in to care for Freud when his younger brother fell gravely ill and died, which catapulted Freud's mother into a profound state of grief and withdrawal (see Gay 1988; Whitebook 2017).
4. 'We ought not to exalt ourselves so highly as completely to neglect what was originally animal in our nature' (Freud 1910b, 61).
5. The connections made to childhood in psychoanalytic accounts of creativity should not be conflated with childish behavior or the need to become a child in order to be creative. 'Adults who regress do not become children', maintains Knafo (2002), '[r]ather, they invoke earlier modes of functioning and experience that are similar to those that once prevailed' (32).
6. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.
7. It is in this sense that the paper can be said to draw inspiration from an emerging 'psychosocial approach' defined by 'a cluster of methodologies which point towards a distinct position, that of researching beneath the surface and beyond the purely discursive' (Clarke and Hoggett 2009, 2–3).
8. Winnicott (1963): 'the object must be found in order to be created. This has to be accepted as a paradox' (187).
9. We might also find here intriguing parallels with the more radical portrayals of creativity captured in the notions of 'creative activism' (Harrebye 2015) and 'creative disruption' (Muhr 2010). While space does not permit a thorough comparison, any such radicalized creativity from an object relations perspective will necessarily be forged in a relational process that opens up the very potential space for disruption.

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