'You need to look for disturbances to the expected, be alert to unforeseen interactions.' Ian Stephen, seafarer and poet.

My area of interest is the role of masculinity in creative work. This situates my interest within the creative industries described as those that ‘generate or exploit knowledge and information.’ The creative industry I have selected for my PhD study is the transnational advertising agency and my research is being conducted in three transnational cultural sites: Sydney, New Delhi and Shanghai. (Anglo, Indian, Sino)

My research is primarily ethnographic where I spend time in the creative departments of agencies participating in their business activities and observing how they go about their daily professional practices. I also conduct individual in-depth interviews with selected and willing participants both male and female so I can get the juxtaposed opinions of the women who work alongside the men.

When the participants in my research reach a point where they cannot offer an understanding of their situation I am working on this being the starting point for recognizing the subjective investigation of their social complexity.

My fieldwork in Sydney has been taking place over the past four months and I am presenting here a series of flashes from the field. Emerging thoughts, impressions, snippets, partially formed ideas.

An economic and pragmatic description of an advertising agency is a commercial site for the commissioned production and assemblage of symbols and meanings into different forms of communication that are strategically distributed to specific target audiences to advance the commercial and political interests of institutions and businesses. In other words, an advertising agency is a specialist partner in the capitalist enterprise.

But my view is shared by C.A. Lin where the advertising agency is seen as a site of cultural construction and production and my interest is the men who do this.

Advertising is gendered male, hardly a surprise but confirmed emphatically whenever I ask by the men and women who work in it. The men like to think that it is changing, which is almost a politically correct position they take. In fact, despite the ratio of men to women, the men believe it is a gender equal industry in terms of opportunity.

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This identifies the first key thought. Men suffer from gender blindness. Men appear gender blind to the reality of gendered relationships around them in the workplace. This is primarily driven by self-interest. Why would you change the patriarchal status quo when you receive benefits and dividends from it?

So it was refreshingly honest when one senior male creative started our interview by declaring that the industry has moved very little from the 1960s and 70s MadMen perception of advertising: 'It’s still the same. The last of the gender divided industries.' This was a statement of fact rather than pride.

For a long time it has been argued that men are defined by their work that mainly takes place in the public sphere. What men do and what men produce is who they are. But the workplace has changed so that much producing work has moved from the first world to the developing world. There are many problems associated with this. For example, the exploitation of third world workers receiving cents for making sneakers in the backstreets of Jakarta that sell for hundreds of dollars in 5th Avenue, New York. But the other problem is that the opportunity to produce stuff has declined and this has had a significant impact on how men see themselves.

I am suggesting that in place of ‘producing’ work that I call ‘visible’ work there has been a dramatic increase in ‘invisible’ work. This involves shuffling and sorting knowledge through interconnected networks that is then stored in files, remains on desktops, or is simply ‘out there’ in the cloud. There is nothing to show for it, nothing visible.

My research in Sydney shows that the idea of visible work is fundamental and essential for the self-identity of being a male creative in advertising. It is hugely important that the individual is seen and sees himself as creative. This immediately separates him from the rest of the world that is populated by people who are not creative.

One respondent I describe as ‘100% beef.’ A full on loud and proud advertising man who carries himself with confidence and swagger. He is regarded as one of ‘creative heavyweights’ in the industry so the swagger has been earned. He presents himself in the classic white t-shirt under a white shirt worn outside faded blue jeans. Short cropped hair and designer stubble. ‘My identity as an adman is extremely important to me’ he declares. He ranks himself amongst the few people who get the opportunity to come up with ideas and see them produced and made visible. So when asked by a taxi driver what he does he can answer be describing his work. And, when the taxi driver replies ‘I’ve seen your ads’ his status as a cultural producer of visible work is assured.

There are two other aspects of visible work that are important.

The nature and the quality of the work.

Creatives don’t see it as necessarily hard work in a blue collar, VB-hard-earned-thirst sort of way. But it is conducted under the pressure of constant deadlines and I quote from one participant, ‘It’s not a job, it’s a way of life, twenty-four hours a day. I am on call twenty-four hours a day.’ This was illustrated with the story of receiving a call on the mobile whilst on a beach in Thailand asking him to return to the agency for an emergency presentation. The request was sweetened with return business class tickets and his holiday accommodation and expenses covered.
This style of macho storytelling is very typical in advertising. You can see they are used to construct the individual’s identity, status and reputation as a valued cultural producer.

Being creative carries great responsibility that is in turn constructs self-identity and status. Speaking of his involvement in a television campaign for one of the major banks, a creative director said, ‘We had to change the perception of the bank for the next twelve months. That meant for the entire country for the year. There were hundreds of thousands of employees, shareholders and customers who would be affected if we got it wrong. As it was we nailed it. It was our Apple moment. Our think differently moment.’

Some younger creatives, striving to get visible work, as evidence of their creativity, will put up their concepts on Facebook to build likes.

Advertising work is undoubtedly highly competitive both within the industry, as agencies compete for business, and within the agency as individuals compete to work on the bigger accounts with the bigger budgets. Visible work is work that has been approved by the creative directors and then by the clients. To get work approved depends on support which is where the female account people come into play.

The descriptors ‘creative’ and ‘not creative’ are used frequently and nonchalantly without rancor or judgement. The women in account service will say ‘we’re not creative’ not to define an inability but to define a point of difference and to underline skills that are used to manage and encourage the male creatives to be creative. A female account manager described her role as ‘part teacher, part manager, part encourager’ and explained that women are better organisers. They get things done and keep the projects on track. But this doesn’t mean that they are not aware of their subordination in gender relationships in advertising agencies. For example, two other female account managers recalled a staff meeting to update everybody on the state of the business. A chart was produced to show the vacant positions they were hoping to fill. These were represented by silhouette figures similar to the graphics used to identify the toilets. They were all male figures leading these women concluded that it had been decided that they were looking for men to fill the vacancies.

I was told how the more competitive creatives would hear to printers warming up and wander over to check out the other group’s work as it is being printed off.

I am interested in the visually competitive environment in which the work appears. The dominance of the visual and its continuing technological celebration has seen it become accepted as a reliable source of knowledge. Authors such as Martin Jay, promote the idea that vision is the most trustworthy of the senses leading to the notion that seeing is believing.

Which brings me to the second aspect of creative work, it’s quality. These cultural producers see themselves as craftsmen continuing a long line of professional obsessives. Craftsmen take pride in skills that improve and mature over time. This provides incentive to compete and focuses effort on originality and authenticity and away from imitation or what I prefer to call creative cloning. And advertising is full of creative cloning.
As Richard Sennett writes in his book, ‘The Craftsmen often faces conflicting objective standards of excellence; the desire to do something well for its own sake can be impaired by competitive pressure, by frustration, or by obsession.’

The advertising creative practices his craft in an industry obsessed with awards. Specific craftsmanship awards are made for technical and production skills such as photography, illustration, editing and music composition. But the main awards are those that recognize originality and creative excellence. Again, the importance of visibility becomes clear as visual recognition for great work can add thousands to a salary and elevate the creative producer’s status and reputation overnight.

I interpret creative awards as evidence of creative potency. It’s what leads to the strut and the swagger as the work is recognized by industry peers.

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