

advertising and commercial culture

Recent accounts of social and cultural change across the industrialised West generated from within the human and social sciences have made much of the increasing centrality of consumption and the consumer economy to the ordering of economic and cultural life. Within the sociological literature this process has often been characterised in epochal terms as variously marking the birth of a 'consumer society', 'postmodern culture' or the passage to an era of 'liquid modernity' (inter alia, Jameson, 1984; Baudrillard, 1988; Harvey, 1989; Featherstone, 1991; Wernick, 1991; Slater, 1997; Bauman, 2000). Other sociologists and sociologically-informed commentators have cast these processes in more prosaic terms, preferring to describe the emergence of more information and knowledge intensive forms of flexible accumulation and economic activity (Hirst & Zeitlin, 1991; Leadbeater, 1999; Scase and Davis, 2000). Whatever the formulation, commercial expertise and the world of commercially produced goods and services are seen to have acquired a new centrality and salience. At the same time, an extended attention within historical and cultural studies to the symbolic meanings of commodities and commercial texts, together with their place within the cultures of consumption of particular social groups, has served to draw attention to the worlds of commerce and to the institutions and social actors that constitute this area of cultural and economic endeavour.

In this chapter, I want to reflect quite selectively on some of these heterogeneous arguments. There is good reason for this. Taken as a whole, this body of work has provided a major impetus for the account of the informal workplace cultures of advertising developed in this book. At its best this range of work has furnished us with impressive accounts of the impact of commercial society and commercial players at both the level of societal organisation and at that of more intimate subjective desires. Significantly, however, my own account has been as strongly shaped by disagreements with some of the substantive foci and broader conceptual frameworks of much of this work, particularly as this has borne upon the analysis of advertising, as it has by more positive engagements. At the heart of this are two principle lines of disagreement. First, the over-general and

epochal nature of the models of cultural change into which advertising (and commercial culture more broadly) have frequently been inserted, particularly in sociological and historical work, has been a major stumbling block for my arguments. Second, the dominant narratives on consumption within cultural studies have also been problematic. These have tended to either subsume the particular ensemble of institutions making up 'commercial society' into the general rubric or idea of 'consumption' or else privileged studies of acts of consumption and the identities of consumers at the expense of a more expanded account of the commercial field.

Getting beyond the limitations of both these sets of arguments has prompted me to consider the conceptual frames through which advertising might be better understood. Drawing upon my earlier work and the suggestive insights of others, I propose that advertising can be profitably conceptualised within the more general framework or idea of 'commercial culture'. The term draws upon the closely related notions of 'consumer culture' and 'consumer society', but can be differentiated from them in the way it seeks to downplay the overly synthetic and epochal bias of those terms and the singular logic of commercialism with which they work. In place of this the idea of 'commercial culture' as I deploy it emphasises the differentiated and multiple forms through which commercial relations and cultures are articulated. It proposes, in other words, that there is no general, universal logic of consumer culture or commercial society (despite the universalising tendencies of commercial relations), but instead only specific commercial cultures. In doing so, it directs us towards the potentially diverse array of institutions, forms of knowledge and expertise making up this social field and the subjective processes constituted through the world of commerce and commodities. The idea of 'commercial culture' also insists on the importance of grasping the generative relations with wider economic, political and cultural formations into which commercial processes are drawn within particular historical settings. Above all, the aim is to establish 'commercial culture' as a discrete object of analysis, one through which advertising might be more effectively explored.

In the first part of the chapter, I reflect on a number of influential accounts drawn from contemporary sociological analysis. I focus on three ambitious analyses in particular: Lash and Urry's *Economies of Signs and Space* (Lash and Urry, 1994), Scase and Davis's *Managing Creativity* (Scase and Davis, 2000) and Featherstone's *Postmodernism and Consumer Culture* (Featherstone, 1991). I then move on to consider the way advertising and consumption have figured within cultural and historical studies and discuss some of the general features of this work. Finally, I conclude by elaborating further on the idea of 'commercial culture' that informs the arguments that I develop throughout the book.

advertising and the end of industrial society One of the most widely cited and ambitious accounts of contemporary social and cultural change produced over the last decade is Lash and Urry's *Economies of Signs and Space* (Lash and Urry, 1994). The book offers a bold vision of the role to be played by a re-invigorated sociology shorn of the narrow preoccupations of its classical past and focused upon the mapping of global flows of information, commodities and people. Lash and Urry take as their starting point the dynamic impact of the more intensive processes of commodification associated with the emergence of 'disorganised capitalism'. This is a capitalism increasingly organised on a global scale in which commodities, capital and human subjects circulate over greater distances and at greater speed, underpinned in large part by new information and communication structures. Alongside these global flows, Lash and Urry also identify a set of countervailing tendencies that have contributed to the distinctiveness of contemporary social formations. These derive from the increased possibility for human agency and reflexivity thrown up by the new social order ushered in by 'disorganised capitalism'. It is this mixture of both high speed global flows and new forms of reflexivity that form the lynchpin of their account and which lie at the heart of their ambition to develop a 'sociology of flows' and 'reflexivity'. Both these concerns are brought together in the central idea that drives their account. This is the idea of 'reflexive modernisation'. Lash and Urry derive the term from the work of Ulrich Beck and share with him a concern to periodise a new phase or stage of modernity – what Beck calls 'reflexive modernity' or what Giddens defines as 'high modernity' (in Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994: 91) or sometimes 'late modernity'. In fact, it is Lash and Urry's recourse to and elaboration of the concept of reflexive modernisation that does much to distinguish their account from other contemporary arguments about economic and cultural globalisation with which it otherwise shares much common ground (Robins, 1996).

For Lash and Urry, reflexive modernisation refers to those social processes that are dissolving the contours of industrial society. Reflexive modernisation in this sense represents the progressive deepening of modernity's corrosive powers and, in Beck's terms, the 'radicalisation of modernity, the creation of a new modernity' (Beck, 1994: 75 cited in Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994). A notable feature of this process is the way social subjects – individuals – are freed from the collective structures of industrial society; freed, that is, from the structures of class, family and work-based forms of collective organisation (Lash and Urry, 1994: 37). It is this 'freeing' of social subjects from 'social structure' that forces individuals to take more responsibility for the conduct of their lives and to reflect upon the contingency of their social existence. In other words, it is the 'freeing' of individuals that provides some of the necessary conditions for reflexivity.¹

Lash and Urry have most to say about how this process of reflexive modernisation works in relation to economic life. Their attention to what they call the progressive 'freeing of agency from structure' within this domain is especially germane for my arguments. This is because they give the cultural industries, and advertising in particular, a paradigmatic role in the emergence of new forms of reflexivity at work. At the heart of these changes within economic life lies the consolidation of what they call 'reflexive accumulation'. Reflexive accumulation refers to the increasing dominance within Western economies of more knowledge and information intensive forms of economic activity both within the manufacturing sector and within the burgeoning service sector.² They use the term to distinguish their claims from similar arguments that have described the same kind of transformations within economic life under the rubric of flexible specialisation or post-fordism. For Lash and Urry these other conceptualisations are limited because they fail to grasp both the increasing importance of services to Western economies and, more importantly, the defining feature of reflexive accumulation: the increasing penetration of economic life by culture. As they emphatically put it, reflexive accumulation refers to the way 'the economy is increasingly culturally inflected and that culture is more and more economically inflected' (Lash and Urry, 1994: 64). Underpinning this claim is an assertion that economic activity – including manufacturing processes – are more design and research and development intensive, and more concerned with the production and deployment of knowledge, images and aesthetic symbols. One consequence of these developments is that workers within key economic sectors are required to be more innovative and creative, able to initiate ideas rather than be guided by rigid rules and divisions of labour; required, in a word, to be more reflexive. Whilst Lash and Urry do acknowledge that this process is not universal and that there are 'reflexivity winners and losers', they see increased reflexivity at work as characteristic of the leading edge of economic activity. In further exploring the distinctiveness of these forms of reflexivity at work, Lash and Urry devote a good deal of space to the cultural industries. These sectors are important to their argument because they represent the most advanced cases of individualisation and reflexivity at work and provide the model upon which other sectors are developing. Thus, they argue that the cultural industries have long been innovation and design intensive and the sectors in which the labour process has been most rapidly reconstituted around the ideas of flexibility and individualisation. This is evident in the way these industries have led the way, they contend, in developing organisational structures that have broken from the forms of vertical integration and bureaucratic organisation that characterised earlier forms of industrial organisation. Further, they argue that the cultural industries are increasingly

organised around the ownership and control of intellectual property rights and less around control over the production of cultural forms. Their economic success derives from the packaging and presentation of a portfolio of assets: artists, images and sounds. In this sense, Lash and Urry contend, the cultural industries are becoming less like ‘industrial commodity producing firms . . . [and] more like post-industrial firms such as business services’ (Lash and Urry, 1994: 137). More like, in fact, as they suggest, the advertising industry. It is this expertise in packaging, promotion and branding that gives the advertising industry its new exalted position within the political economy of ‘disorganised capitalism’. For Lash and Urry, the advertising industry not only contributes to the increasing ‘culturalising’ of goods and services characteristic of reflexive accumulation (and through this the wider aestheticisation of everyday life), but is paradigmatic of trends occurring within the cultural industries and the wider economy as a whole in which control over knowledge and information are more central to economic success. There is also an inference in Lash and Urry’s account that advertising agencies represent models of business organisation and ways of working that are themselves emblematic of wider organisational restructuring, though their comments on agency structures are, as below, eccentric.

In privileging the role of advertising and the cultural industries more generally in their account of a transition from the epoch of industrial society to ‘reflexive modernity’, Lash and Urry’s argument chimes with a range of other contemporary sociological accounts in which the consumer and cultural industries have loomed large. Like these other accounts – particularly of Baumann, Wernick, Harvey, and Scott – the strength of their book lies both in its ambitious sweep and in the more mundane descriptive fit between its account of changes in economic life and widely reported trends in ways of working, workplace organisation and the growing importance of the media and cultural industries to Western economies (see Pratt, 1997; Smith, 1997; Leadbeater, 1999). However, there are significant problems with both the general account of reflexive modernisation that Lash and Urry advance and the particular argument that they develop about the cultural industries. Let us take the idea of reflexive modernisation first. Lash and Urry deploy the term in part to distinguish their work from the closely related debates about modernity and postmodernity. As Lash acknowledged, it was out of a sense of frustration with this latter debate that they were prompted to find a different language and conceptual framework for making sense of contemporary cultural and social change (Lash in Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994). Their recourse to the idea of reflexive modernisation, however, represents only a very partial break with the tropes of the modernity/postmodernity debate in that the term (reflexive modernisation) follows the same epochal model of change. The style of argument and

conceptualisation is similar in both cases. The account is structured around a ‘before’ and ‘after’ dualism in which the characteristics of competing eras or epochs are captured by recourse to a limited range of defining features. As Thomas Osborne has argued in relation to other kinds of epochal change theories, such accounts ‘tend to overdramatise the characteristics of social change and reduce such change to one or two fundamental elements’ (Osborne, 1998: 19). He suggests that ideas like ‘postmodernisation’ or the ‘information society’ or – I would add – ‘reflexive modernisation’ – are ‘gestural categories’ not amenable to sustained empirical evidencing. Certainly, Lash and Urry’s argument in *Economies of Signs and Space* is poorly evidenced and tends toward the use of illustrations rather than sustained evidence. Their argument is repeatedly couched in terms of generalisations and a reductive model of social and cultural change.

These problems are particularly acute in relation to the central idea of reflexivity itself. As we have seen, the term functions in their argument as an integral component of a new epoch of human social organisation. However, in casting reflexivity in these terms, Lash and Urry are guilty of over-generalising some rather specific (if undoubtedly widespread) processes of cultural change. Thus, if we take the area of economic life, it is clear that the increasing importance of ‘reflexivity’ at work (for some managers and groups of workers at least) is a product of particular processes of organisational reform that have sought to shape workers as autonomous, self-regulating individuals (du Gay, 1996; 2000: 64). These are moves distinct from those employed to open up personal relations and family life; for example, to a greater degree of choice and ethical reflection. In no way can these distinct developments across discrete social domains be reduced in an *a priori* way to some general notion of reflexivity. As Paul du Gay’s work on organisational reform has demonstrated, these developments are the product of specific technologies and practices. The extent to which they are generalisable within the limited arena of economic life is also open to question. The depth and extent of the impact of these moves to foster ‘reflexivity’ at work needs to be tested and may vary from sector to sector and between organisations within the same sector. This is certainly the case, as we will see, in relation to advertising.

These problems with the idea of ‘reflexive modernisation’ are further compounded by some of the specific, concrete things Lash and Urry have to say about trends in the media and cultural industries. We have seen how they want to place great store on developments in these industries as prefigurative of wider processes of economic restructuring, particularly as regards ways of working and the ‘outputs’ of this work (information, knowledge, cultural representations). While these developments correspond to their arguments about reflexive modernisation within economic life, they also make use of

the notions of fordism and post-fordism to explain changes in these sectors. Their deployment of these terms is a little confusing given that elsewhere they problematise them in favour of the idea of reflexive modernisation. None the less, they are emphatic in deploying the terms indicatively to refer to changes in the structuring of organisations and production processes within the cultural industries and suggest, for example, that the ‘culture industries were post-fordist *avant la lettre*’ (Lash and Urry, 1994: 122–3; see also 113 and 134). The deployment of the terms fordism and post-fordism to these sectors couldn’t be more unhelpful. Neither the model of fordist mass production nor that of post-fordism are directly applicable to the media and cultural industries. The film industry is the sector that has been most frequently fitted into these boxes – Lash and Urry, in fact, drawn heavily upon Christopherson and Storper’s well known account of Hollywood (Christopherson and Storper, 1989). Even Hollywood film production in the era of the studio system is not best understood through the model of industrial organisation derived from the manufacture of consumer goods. While the studio system may have displayed many of the features of vertical integration characteristic of fordist enterprises, film as a cultural form was not (and indeed, is not) amenable to the kind of product standardisation associated with mass production. Further, film production was not caught up in the drive to produce ever more complex machines that defined the classic fordist sectors. The Hollywood studios may have worked to produce a relatively stable set of genre films and broadly conceived of its audience within the rubric of the mass market and in both senses been drawn into a wider culture of ‘mass production’, but film production was not, per se, Fordist. This is an important distinction to hold onto.

Similarly, contemporary developments in film production do not neatly fit the claims that it has become post-Fordist. As Helen Blair has shown, the persistence of semi-permanent film production work groups within the UK forces a recasting of general claims about the impact of ‘vertical disintegration’ within the sector (where vertical disintegration is seen as classic evidence of post-Fordist organisation). The peculiarities of the domestic film industry – which historically had a more fragmented production base than Hollywood and was made up of a large independent sector alongside studios like Rank – also problematises the idea that the UK film industry can be fitted into the model of a transition from ‘Fordism’ to post-Fordism. Furthermore, some of the most distinctive features of recent changes within this sector do not neatly follow this pattern of economic change. These include the increasing dominance of large companies over the distribution of film (despite the rise of independent production) and their transformation into global conglomerates that act as ‘image empires’ across a range of media (Blair and Rainmie, 2000: 191).

The general problems with these models of economic restructuring are additionally compounded by some specific shortcomings with Lash and Urry's account of advertising. In a dizzying formulation they claim that 'advertising in effect evolves from a free-professional type business service to, in Fordism, an industry and, in post-Fordism, to a fully-fledged 'culture industry' (Lash and Urry, 1994: 138). The British industry, they contend, became from the late 1970s 'simultaneously Fordist and neo-Fordist' (ibid: 139). Such formulations do great damage to the organisational structures and institutional forms that have historically characterised the advertising industry in Britain. As I suggest later, the advertising industry in Britain is a distinctively bifurcated sector split between a smallish number of large, often multinational, businesses and a larger number of small enterprises. This is a pattern of sectoral diversity that goes back to the inter-war years at least. The business forms that have dominated throughout this history among the great swathe of agencies (and which continue to be important) are the partnership and limited company. These represent forms of commercial organisation that have a long history, both being legally consolidated by the Companies Act of 1862. Many contemporary advertising agencies in this sense would not have looked out of place in nineteenth century London. Alongside these small scale enterprises, the big agencies have typically developed by building bureaucratised organisations, with well defined ways of working (often embodied in organisational handbooks). While in this sense large agencies were, and remain, bureaucratic in structure, they are not (and were not) 'Fordist' or neo-Fordist, unless the terms are expanded to meaningless limits. Moreover, the large global agency networks that have emerged from within the British industry in the last twenty years have recurrently organised themselves as holding companies, itself an old business form dating back to the establishment of the first multinational companies. In many ways, then, the advertising industry in Britain does not fit into the models of industrial change that Lash and Urry deploy. Their account offers an unhelpful characterisation of the sector that cuts across a more nuanced sense of the institutional and organisational structures of the industry.

Some of the shortcomings of *Economies of Signs and Space* are addressed in a book that could not be more different from it in terms of style of argument and approach. Rooted in the tradition of empirical sociology, Scase and Davis's *Managing Creativity* develops a more grounded account of trends within what they call the 'creative industries'. It too, however, has ambitious claims to make about the place of these sectors in wider processes of economic change; claims that, in this regard, echo strongly Lash and Urry's general arguments despite the differences in approach between the two books. Similarly to Lash and Urry, Scase and Davis are interested in

long term trends that are transforming Western economies and identify the increasing dominance of knowledge, information and science-based areas of employment within the West as part of a broader global realignment in which manufacturing goods production shifts to the ‘Tiger’ economies of South east Asia (Scase and Davis, 2000: iii). They contend that what they call the ‘creative industries’ (the media and cultural industries) are at the ‘leading edge of the movement towards the information age [as] their outputs are performances, expressive work, ideas and symbols rather than consumer goods or services’ (ibid: 23). In particular, they claim that it is the requirement of workers within these sectors to exercise intellectual and creative skills that makes them paradigmatic of broader changes in economic life. While they acknowledge that plenty of occupations continue to rely upon their workers engaging in repetitive and routine tasks (such as important growth areas in the UK like call-centre operators), they argue that the demand for workers to work creatively (‘to think the unthinkable, to be original’) become more important in this shift to an information society (ibid: vii). It is this broader recomposition of work that gives the ‘creative industries’ their new significance to the economy.

While these contentions strongly echo Lash and Urry’s arguments, Scase and Davis’s claims are more particularistic in focus and more carefully grounded in empirical evidence. One of the strengths of the book, in fact, consists of the supporting evidence that they bring to bear on their arguments. Part of this concerns a more informed account of the make-up of the ‘creative industries’, including some assessment of the numbers of individuals employed in these areas of work (ibid: 32–4). At a more conceptual level, Scase and Davis are also concerned to challenge the appropriateness of those models of economic restructuring associated with Fordism/post-Fordism to the ‘creative industries’ that I have just discussed. Importantly, they suggest that there have historically been limits to the impact of processes like vertical integration within the creative industries arising from the uncertainties of cultural production itself. As they note, the core cultural producers in these sectors have often been – and continue to be – only weakly integrated into the larger organisations that tend to dominate these fields of cultural production. These core workers are often linked by agents and short-term associations, or else operate in partnerships or small businesses. As a consequence self-employment and small-scale enterprises represent important economic structures within this area of cultural activity (ibid: 37).

Scase and Davis are also concerned to draw out the differences between the companies that constitute the creative sector. They delineate four general ideal type kinds of organisation: the commercial bureaucracy, which are large scale, hierarchical organisations within the private sector

with well defined job descriptions and formalised mechanisms of control; the cultural bureaucracy, large scale hierarchical organisations in the public sector (they cite the BBC as an example); traditional or charismatic organisations, by which they mean small businesses run by owner-managers, with tacit understandings about the division of labour and weakly formalised structures and ways of working; and network organisations, which are either self-employed individuals or very small companies with little or no formalised control and coordination mechanisms (they cite the example of independent television companies) (ibid: 98–100).

Scase and Davis argue that these models cut across the creative industries and can apply to different companies within the same sector. They make good use of these distinctions in their comments on the advertising industry and offer, for example, a relatively nuanced sense of the differences between large agencies as commercial bureaucracies and those small agencies as traditional organisations. They are also particularly good at drawing out the way work is organised in small companies. As they suggest, ‘the conduct of work tasks are based on informal procedures, personal negotiations and team working. In these circumstances, the organisation operates as a constellation of projects and processes with loosely defined and continually fluctuating parameters’ (ibid: 51). While this formulation tends to downplay the division of labour that continues to exist within even small agencies between core practitioners, it nonetheless points to something important in the structuring of these small advertising enterprises.

Scase and Davis’s account, then, in its concreteness and attention to specificity has much to offer as a corrective to the more grandiose claims of Lash and Urry. However, their argument is not without its own problems. There are two central dimensions to this. The first concerns a problem we have already encountered with *Economies of Signs and Space* and derives from the epochal model Scase and Davis invoke in attaching their insights about the creative industries to a grander argument about the coming of an ‘information society’. The idea of ‘information society’ that they mobilise suffers from those shortcomings I noted earlier in relation to the idea of ‘reflexive modernisation’. Rather than attend to the ‘specificity of the present’, as Thomas Osborne recommends, Scase and Davis slide into a dualistic model of cultural change.

The second problem with their argument concerns the analytical limitations that arise from constructing ideal type models from empirical evidence and then attempting to place organisations within them. While they acknowledge that individual organisations will always be hard to precisely place within these models and remain dynamic and changing entities, the decision to construct ideal types works to fix the organisational attributes they detail and remove them from the historical process. As a

consequence, locating the current structures of the advertising industry within a longer historical narrative is difficult: the analyst is forced to place an organisation within one of the four types, rather than draw out the historical formation of particular kinds of business organisation. The types they establish also tend to abstract the creative industries from the wider economic and cultural formations with which they are articulated. The development of this historical setting stems from an over-emphasis on an internal, institutional account of this sector.

Another notably underdeveloped feature of Scase and Davis's book is any conceptualisation of the cultural role played by the practitioners working within the creative industries that they describe. This is surprising since their text is littered with the voices of practitioners working in these fields. However, this question is central to Mike Featherstone's account of the media and cultural industries. In an influential set of essays collected together as *Postmodernism and Consumer Culture*, Featherstone explores the emergence of 'postmodern culture' and the role played within this new cultural epoch by consumer culture. To this end, Featherstone has a good deal to say about those practitioners working in the media and cultural industries who have acquired, he argues, a new significance and salience within cultural life. He deploys the term 'new cultural intermediaries' to describe these practitioners and gives them a central role in the establishment of postmodern culture.

Featherstone appropriates the term 'new cultural intermediaries' from the writings of Pierre Bourdieu and he closely follows Bourdieu's description of this group. Bourdieu has most to say about these workers in his discussion of middlebrow culture in his mammoth book *Distinction* (1984), where he identifies 'the producers of cultural programmes on television or radio or the critics of 'quality' newspapers and magazines and all the writer journalists and journalist-writers' as the 'most typical' of this group (Bourdieu, 1984: 324). Elsewhere he includes practitioners in design, packaging, sales promotion, public relations, marketing and advertising within this category, and also cites the example of those people involved in the provision of medical and social assistance (such as marriage guidance counsellors, sex therapists and dieticians). For Featherstone, like Bourdieu, these occupations expanded in the last quarter of the twentieth century and have become increasingly important within the occupational structure. The expansion and greater salience of these jobs stems from the burgeoning of the consumer sectors of the economy and the associated consolidation of large broadcasting and media organisations. Featherstone is particularly concerned to reflect on the role played by new cultural intermediaries as the shapers of tastes and the inculcators of new consumerist dispositions among the wider population. The cultural authority they are able to exercise in

these areas derives from their position within the increasingly important cultural institutions.

Featherstone further develops Bourdieu's arguments by suggesting that the new prominence of these practitioners stems from the alliances they have entered into with politicians, government administrators and the worlds of finance and business. These alliances mark a significant turn around in the relations between these groupings, since cultural intermediaries were previously more marginal to the centres of economic and political power. It is their enhanced status, however, which for Featherstone, underpins the authority of new cultural intermediaries as taste shapers and accounts for their central role in the forging of a 'postmodern culture'. Through the work of cultural production and circulation, Featherstone contends that the new cultural intermediaries play a key role in the aestheticisation of everyday life and the accompanying breaking down of cultural hierarchies consonant with postmodern culture. As he suggests, 'effectively they [new cultural intermediaries] help to collapse some of the old distinctions and symbolic hierarchies that revolve around the popular culture/high culture axis' (1991: 95).

Featherstone's claims about the role played by new cultural intermediaries usefully add something to those accounts we have already considered about the increasing centrality of knowledge and information intensive forms of work to economic life (practices like design, promotion, research and development). In doing so, his account not only foregrounds those practitioners who tended to be subsumed in the more general institutional accounts of economic change (such as Lash and Urry's), but also draws attention to an important set of dynamics within these institutions that stem from the particular social make-up of these practitioners. Featherstone's arguments, however, are not without their problems; problems originating partly from the limitations with Bourdieu's original conceptualisations upon which they draw and partly from problems intrinsic to Featherstone's own style of argumentation. We can take the latter first as it can be dealt with quickly. It concerns the contrast between the very large claims that Featherstone makes about the significance of these occupational groups and the very limited evidence upon which these claims are made. In fact, not to put too fine a point on it, Featherstone effectively cites no evidence about an occupational group he sees as central to cultural change. The reader is forced to take a lot on trust. This problem is then compounded by the 'presentism' of the idea of new cultural intermediaries that he deploys (a problem already evident in Bourdieu's formulation). This problem stems from the unhelpful qualifier 'new' that Bourdieu attaches to 'cultural intermediaries'. This immediately throws up the question of periodisation in relation to the emergence of these intermediary occupations. The evidence

from Britain suggests the need for caution in talking uncritically about the expansion of cultural intermediaries and assigning to them the epithet ‘new’. Certainly, occupations such as broadcasting and advertising, alongside journalism, expanded markedly in the first half of the twentieth century and, in the case of advertising, decline, from a high point in the 1960s, in terms of the numbers employed (Baxendale and Pawling, 1996: 3; see also Chapter 3). In no sense, then, are these occupations particularly new and nor are they necessarily expanding. There is a requirement, if the idea of cultural intermediaries is to have any interpretative value, to separate the question of the numerical status of these jobs from their apparent increasing salience within economic and cultural life. The latter may occur, despite fluctuations in the numerical composition of these sectors. In the light of this, it is more appropriate to talk about ‘cultural intermediaries’, rather than ‘new cultural intermediaries’. Featherstone also tends to take for granted the cultural rise of these occupations. One of the arguments that I develop later is that for specific groups of practitioners – those working in advertising – this new centrality could not be taken for granted and was far from guaranteed. While intermediary cultural work as a whole may have become more central to economic and cultural life, this general prominence disguises intense struggles between competing groups of commercial practitioners over the provision of this expertise.

There are other problems with the idea of ‘new cultural intermediaries’ as Featherstone deploys the term. It remains a very inclusive category, aggregating a fairly diverse range of occupations into a common designation. This throws up some particular problems. The most serious concerns the way the term cuts across distinct occupational formations, cultures and forms of expertise. It also tends to downplay the rather different social composition of discrete intermediary occupations. Thus, for example, broadcast journalists and producers in British television – notably at the BBC – are a very different occupational grouping in terms of social and educational background and occupational ethos from the advertising creatives (as we’ll see later) who figure in my account (Burns, 1977). A more differentiated account of these occupations is required; one that can grasp the differences between them as much as ‘family resemblances’. Additionally, the idea of new cultural intermediaries as Featherstone uses it is inattentive to the organisational cultures of the enterprises that make up this diverse sector of intermediary work. It is a central claim of this book that exploring these workplace, and broader, industry cultures is integral to an adequate understanding of these occupations. In particular, attention paid to the cultural resources that shape the forms of endeavour engaged in by cultural intermediaries and their own subjective identities can add much to our picture of this area of work. In developing this more culturally-informed

account of a specific group of cultural intermediaries (advertising creatives), my account is strongly rooted within the intellectual traditions of cultural and cultural historical studies. However, the way consumption and the consumer economy have figured within work in this area has not been unproblematic for my concerns, despite the suggestive insights of much of this work. It is to the historical and cultural studies of consumption that I now want to turn.

advertising, consumption and historical and cultural studies

The most immediately striking value of much of the social and cultural historical work on consumer culture and the consumer economy is its direct challenge to the narrow contemporary focus of the sociological accounts that I have been discussing. While this field is now extensive and widely dispersed field – particularly as it bleeds into cultural studies – there remains one book that has had an enduring impact on the historiography of consumption and which has been seminal in relativising contemporary-focused accounts of the consumer economy. This is McKendrick et al's *The Birth of a Consumer Society* (McKendrick et al, 1982). The book's central claims remain controversial and highly contested and yet it undoubtedly continues to inform more recent historical work on consumption (Glennie, 1995: 167). Their argument is driven by the ambition to revise and interrupt established debates within economic history about the take-off of the industrial revolution in Britain. In particular, the book seeks to challenge the secondary and supporting role given to the expansion of consumption within the conventional historical narratives of industrialisation. For McKendrick et al it is changes in the structures of demand occasioned by a new set of intellectual ideas and commercial practices associated with the consumer economy that form some of the necessary conditions for wider economic change. Detailing these ideas and practices forms the substantive focus of *The Birth of a Consumer Society* and underpins its own account of a decisive 'consumer revolution' in eighteenth century England.

The book centres upon the consequences of social mobility and the desire for emulation within the tightly packed social ranks of eighteenth century England as the central mechanism of the growth of 'modern' consumption. It is emulation, the desire to follow the habits and lifestyles of your social betters, which, above all, accounts for the cascading of new propensities to consume and new levels of consumption through the social body. In exploring these processes of emulation, the authors place great store on the development of a vibrant metropolitan culture in London in stoking up

new consumerist dispositions, with exposure to London fashions and shops seen as a key component in the diffusion of consumer behaviour (ibid: 21).

The Birth of a Consumer Society also has much to say about the broader intellectual climate in which levels of consumption expanded, exploring in particular the intellectual origins of the ‘revolution in consumption’. McKendrick et al describe the movement from mercantalist ‘balance-of-payments’ explanations of economic growth in which ‘total demand’ appeared inelastic to conceptions of the ‘elasticity of demand’ in which consumers at all levels of society might acquire new wants and desires (ibid: 13–15). This was a shift noted by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* in which he claimed that the ‘doctrine of beneficial luxury’ had taken over from the doctrine of the ‘utility of poverty’. As McKendrick et al succinctly note, ‘it was increasingly admitted that the increased availability of the ‘comforts and conveniences of life’ could operate as powerful stimulus to industry at all ranks of society’ (ibid: 19). Observations of this kind were integral to the larger claims of the book about the significance of the expansion of the world of goods in eighteenth century England identified by the authors. *The Birth of a Consumer Society* stakes much on the argument that expanded levels of consumption was not just about the circulation and consumption of a greater number of goods, but represented the formation of a new social order, one in which collective representations of the good life and social harmony depended upon the smooth operation of commerce and consumption (Brewer and Porter, 1993: 2).

One of the most striking features of McKendrick et al’s ambitious account is its attention to the innovations in business practices that formed the engines of the new ‘consumer society’. Focusing on the pottery manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood, McKendrick et al claim that it was Wedgwood’s use of promotional techniques that was central to his success and made him emblematic of the wider shifts in economic life in which consumer marketing played a key role in the expansion of consumer demand. In their reading, then, Wedgwood emerges as a thoroughly ‘modern’ entrepreneur, deploying show rooms, exhibitions, trademarks, displays and advertisements as part of a consumer-focused and marketing-led approach to his business. More than that, in naming his factory, together with leading lines of his pottery, Etruria, Wedgwood was as cognisant of the symbolic dimension of commodities as any of those players involved in the regime of reflexive accumulation identified by Lash and Urry. Such observations are important in undercutting the claims of authors like Lash and Urry that somehow the ‘culturalising’ of goods and services is a new or recent phenomenon. As McKendrick et al show, Wedgwood knew a thing or two about the cultural associations that could be attached through design and promotion to commodities.

Paradoxically, the central role that McKendrick et al attribute to marketing in the expansion of consumption represents one of the more problematic aspects of their argument for my purposes. In foregrounding so strongly these commercial practices, *The Birth of a Consumer Society* produces a reductive account of the establishment of the ‘consumer revolution’ in eighteenth century England. In this sense, they are as guilty as their sociological congeners of collapsing together a set of distinct developments within the commercial field into a general account of the transition to a consumer society in which advertising and marketing emerge as the central driving force behind more complex economic and cultural changes. The book, thus, conflates a number of distinct developments related to the size of markets, the emergence of new consumption practices, the range of commodities and sectors involved, the levels of investment in the production and distribution of consumer goods and the expansion of related economic and cultural institutions. This is the first of a number of problems with their account for an adequate analysis of advertising and commercial culture. More seriously, *The Birth of a Consumer Society* is limited by the trope of ‘revolution’ that gives direction to its reading of ‘consumer society’ and by the epochal logic that flows from this. Again, not only does this place the book close to the contemporary sociological accounts in terms of the conceptions of cultural change with which it works, but it also means that it shares much in common with other histories of consumption.

Paul Glennie has noted that the historiography of consumption has been dominated by various and competing claims about the take-off of consumer revolutions. These have ranged from locating the birth of consumer society in Restoration England, the eighteenth and the late nineteenth century, and between the first and second world wars. Regardless of the period, there has been a recurrent tendency across this work to muster particular versions of a dualistic model of change in which an era in which people were the ‘users of things’ is superseded by one in which they become the ‘consumers of commodities’. As Glennie suggests, what this dualism tends to downplay is the complex use of objects – or cultures of consumption – that predated the more systematic developments in commercial culture (Glennie, 1995: 117).

None the less, the best of more recent work on consumption from within historical studies has filled in the most glaring gap in the account developed in *The Birth of a Consumer Society*. This is an exploration of the specific styles, practices and cultures of consumption that developed alongside the expanded world of goods. This work has offered detailed accounts of the place of commercial cultures in the fashioning of collective and individual identities, on the minutiae of consumer spectatorship, public and national rituals and intimate subjective desires (Steedman, 1986; Schama,

1987; Green, 1990; Alexander, 1994) Erika Rappaport, for example, has offered a compelling account of the links between gender identities and commerce in the West End of London in the late nineteenth century (Rappaport, 2000). She persuasively holds together an attention to the styles and practices of entrepreneurship and technologies of selling deployed by West End retailers with the formation of new kinds of femininity among bourgeois women and their own negotiations of the shifting boundaries between public and private worlds that flowed from the sphere of gendered commerce. She also draws out the relationship between the vision of metropolitan life offered by commercial practitioners and more official versions of the city and its moral fabric. Rappaport is also careful to side-step the temptation to fit such an account into a general model of consumer society or consumption.

Culturally-informed arguments like Rappaport's have much in common with the best cultural studies work on consumption. This, again, is now an extensive field of work and, despite the claims of the editors of a recent collection on advertising and consumption that this had long been a neglected area of cultural studies, it is a field sharing a lineage with the early seminal cultural studies (Nava et al, 1997). Certainly, it is possible to reread many of the studies produced through the 1970s to reveal how questions about consumption and the wider impact of the consumer economy on cultural life were central to their concerns. This is most apparent in a collection like *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson, 1976), though an attention to the place of shifts in the consumer economy and its relationship to changing forms of moral regulation and political control is evident in other work produced in this period, particularly in *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al, 1978) and Stuart Hall's study of the permissive reforms of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Hall et al, 1978: 254–8; Hall, 1980; Hebdige, 1979, 1988; Millum, 1975). Throughout this work is a preoccupation with the changing cultural forms through which (principally) class relations and identities were lived. In *Resistance through Rituals*, where these themes were most clearly developed, attention was paid to how the expanded world of commercially produced goods and entertainments had contributed to the remaking of working class culture and, most spectacularly, working class youth identities. And while *Resistance Through Rituals* took issue with many of the dominant stories of postwar affluence, including their proclamations about the end of class as a meaningful social category, it shared with more mainstream cultural and sociological commentators an assertion that consumption formed one of the central building blocks through which the story of postwar Britain needed to be told (see Mort et al, 2000).

This body of cultural studies work has bequeathed a distinctive legacy and continues to shape the way consumption and the consumer economy

are addressed within many studies of popular culture and popular consumption. Perhaps the most enduring impact has been the privileging of studies of acts of consumption and the use of commercial culture by particular groups of consumers. In fact, this attention to acts of consumption forms one half of the twin foci that have dominated cultural studies work in this area, the other being a more textually-driven reading of consumption, in which particular commercially produced cultural forms – often visual representations – have been taken as the central object of study. While its direct influence upon the study of consumption has undoubtedly waned, a neo-Gramscian model of cultural power and cultural change also continues to give a distinctive gloss to more recent work (see McGuigan, 1992). Certainly, the rationale for the study of popular pleasures and pastimes organised through commercially produced culture continues to bear the trace of the theoretical labour undertaken through the 1970s and 1980s in which the ‘turn to Gramsci’ loomed large.

The concern to place cultural forms in a wider map of cultural power and to explore the way specific cultural forms, practices and representations contribute to or disrupt various forms of social hegemony remains the typically unstated, but none the less constitutive ethos, of studies of consumption. This has not been an entirely unproblematic inheritance. As has been well documented, a search for the progressive currents in popular culture and the deployment of a largely rhetorical cultural politics in which cultural forms and practices were read for the contribution they might make to an imagined project of counter-hegemony led to a highly skewed account of the cultural field (Bennett, 1992; 1998; Nixon, 1996, 2000). This was one which notably downplayed the significance of those cultural forms that could not easily be inserted into a dissenting political programme and overplayed the cultural significance of more banal and routine forms of cultural practice within the lives of particular constituents of consumers. In a justifiable move to contest older conceptions of the ‘passive consumer’, recent studies of commercial culture have been burdened by an equally problematic analytical subject: the resistant or recalcitrant consumer (see McGuigan, 1992; Nava, 1992).

Both the positive strengths of this body of work, and some of its limitations, are evident in Paul Willis’ study of young people and consumption, *Common Culture* (Willis, 1990). Willis forms explicit links between earlier work in cultural studies with more recent studies of consumption. The strength of the book remains its attention to the grounded and nuanced exploration of particular uses and appropriations of commercially-produced culture by groups of consumers. To this end, Willis deploys the notions of symbolic work and symbolic creativity to account for, respectively, the necessary cultural work involving language and other symbolic resources

associated with the performance of everyday social routines and the active and innovative process of identity formation integral to social life. Arguing, contra to the thrust of contemporary sociologists that for most people, work – paid employment – now offers limited scope for creativity and innovation, Willis contends that it is in the realm of leisure, and particularly through ‘the active, not passive consumption of commercially produced goods, that creative processes of individual and collective self-fashioning occur (Willis, 1990: 18–19).

The book has been criticised on a number of counts, most notably for the romantic conception of human creativity that it unashamedly employs (Frith, 1996). Further it has been charged with seeking to merely celebrate commercially produced commercial culture and of falling prey to the more general tendency towards cultural populism that Jim McGuigan, most notably, has identified as a persistent feature of a wide body of cultural criticism (McGuigan, 1992). Other commentators have rightly argued that acts or practices of consumption need to be more carefully differentiated. Thrift and Glennie, for example, attempt to develop an account of shopping and the familiarisation with commodities associated with this practice, which emphasises the inculcation of a consumerist disposition as something which is embodied and inhabited, through routines of ‘being and doing’ (Thrift and Glennie, 1993: 37).

While there continues to be much that is instructive in this reworked attention to acts of consumption, my own work has been strongly shaped by a concern to open up different aspects of the commercial field. In this regard, it shares something with the moves of other writers to turn to the previously neglected areas of cultural production and circulations in a way that circumvents the recourse to political economy. An early version of this move was signalled by Angela McRobbie in a critique of subcultural analysis. In a suggestive essay, ‘Second-hand dresses and the role of the ragmarket’ (McRobbie, 1989), she insisted that the focus of subcultural studies upon the transformation of already bought commodities neglected a whole host of commercial activities and forms of entrepreneurship that were integral to the subcultural experience. While she did not take the argument very far in that article, it marked out an attention to the ‘cultures of production’ that has emerged more strongly in her recent work and also figured in the work of other cultural critics (du Gay, 1996; Nixon, 1996; Mort, 1996; McRobbie, 1998; Negus, 1992, 2002; Jackson et al., 2000). Frank Mort’s recent work has been particularly important in developing this approach in relation to the study of ‘commercial society’. In his book *Cultures of Consumption* (Mort, 1996), he suggested that the study of the consumer economy might be profitably approached through the idea of the ‘commercial domain’. For Mort, the idea of the ‘commercial domain’

represented a way of conceptualising a distinct and identifiable field of institutions, moral and intellectual entrepreneurship and related conceptions of personhood that were analogous to the field of the 'social' identified by historians like Donzelot and Rose (Donzelot, 1977; Rose, 1991). In *Cultures of Consumption* these pre-occupations emerged not only in the way Mort explored in detail the forms of identity produced through particular systems of provision and the spatial embeddedness of these commercial cultures, but also in his insistence on situating this analysis within a broader project of cultural history. This involved locating discrete, studies like his own within a wider set of histories of this domain and its distinctive dynamics.

Mort's comments are suggestive and have considerable strategic value in consolidating the commercial domain or commercial cultures as a discrete object of study. They underline, again, the importance of attending to the particular forms taken by commercial endeavour at specific times and in specific places; the changing kinds of technologies and expertise that are deployed in the enacting of commerce and the need to grasp, above all, the way the world of commerce and goods acts upon social experience and subjectivity. As such they hold out the possibility of revising those general narratives on the expansion of consumption, whether that be in relation to debates about the coming of the mass market in the post-war decades or the transition to an era of 'postmodern culture' or 'reflexive modernity'. Moreover, this approach to the commercial domain reinforces the importance of holding together the mutually constitutive relationship between cultural and economic processes within this field of endeavour – what Mort has described as an understanding of 'culture and economic as reflexively inter-related in ways which are neither pre-determined or mono-causal' (Mort, 2000: 12). Such an approach is distinct from earlier forms of anti-economism within cultural analysis in which the 'relative autonomy' of cultural practices was emphasised while retaining a conceptual ranking of social practices furnished by the notion of determination by the economic in the 'last instance'. It is also distinct from a return to political economy in which economic practices and identities retain a primary and foundational character. My own thinking on this matter has been informed by Ernesto Laclau's work and his emphasis on the contingency of all identities (including the economic) and with it the possibility of reconceptualising the relations between the incompletely formed fields of culture and economy through the notions of imbrication and mutual constitution rather than direct determination by, or interaction between, fully constituted domains (Laclau, 1990: 24).

Such a reconceptualisation is particularly important in relation to the study of advertising. Despite the fact that advertising is widely acknowledged to bring together both 'cultural' and 'economic' practices and calculations in

very obvious ways, its study has been dogged by a separation of these components of its practice. The idea of commercial culture as I deploy it builds upon the insistence that these components of advertising practice need to be grasped in their dynamic interdependence. Commercial culture, in this sense, is used to capture the ‘cultures of commerce’: the cultural meanings and values that cohere within and set the conditions for business and commerce to be enacted. In relation to the study of advertising as a commercial practice, this understanding draws attention to the way the business forms, practices and relations integral to the practice of advertising depend for their performance upon sets of cultural meanings and values. This interfusing is most evident in the way agencies manage the commercial relations between consumers and their clients. While agency practitioners often speak about these markets as if they existed independent of their actions, it is clear that agencies play an active role in helping to constitute and articulate the economic relations between consumers and clients through techniques like planning and market research that they deploy. In other words, agencies, through the representations of the consumer they deploy, provide some of the necessary (cultural) conditions of existence of these commercial (or economic) relations. This is a process that works in a number of different registers. It includes not only market research knowledge, but also the elaboration of these commercial relations through the promotional forms themselves (such as advertisements). What particularly interest me here, in relation to the concerns of *Creative Cultures*, is the way the management of these commercial relations depends upon not only formal knowledge (market research data, sales figures, consumer feedback, pre-testing of adverts), but also upon more elusive informal knowledge and dispositions. Information about consumers not known to the client or market researcher, but known to the art director or copywriter, together with their own cultural identifications, can be crucial in helping to clinch these commercial linkages. Furthermore, the informal cultures inhabited by these practitioners will both set limits upon and provide resources for the performance of the creative execution in which these practitioners are engaged. It is this insistence that informs my contention about why the subjective identities and informal cultures of advertising practitioners matter so much.

There is a further conceptual theme associated with this revisionist kind of analysis of commercial culture that is worth reinforcing. As many cultural critics have argued, the world of commercially produced goods plays an important role in shaping particular consumerist conceptions of identity and social rituals amongst those populations successfully targeted by commercial practitioners. In fact, there has been a persistent insistence that commercially produced goods and services have the capacity to intervene in and shape particular lived cultures through their capacity to mould

subjective identities and shape social habits and routines. Commercial enterprises – be they advertising agencies or retailers – can be thought of in this sense as articulating cultural projects or missions every bit as transformative in their ambitions towards specific populations as those pursued by social reformers and policy makers. As Janice Winship's work on Marks and Spencer in the inter-war years suggests, here was a business with ambitions not only to sell its goods, but also to establish certain norms of lower-middle class femininity around the ideals of the 'nice and neat' body and restrained, but modern consumption (Winship, 2000).

Winship's work is not unique. As I noted earlier in this chapter, there are many examples of concrete studies that have foregrounded the role of commercially produced cultural goods and services in helping to shape the cultural identities and expectations of particular populations. Such an analytical focus, in fact, is the *sine qua* of recent cultural studies of consumption. What has been less well explored, is the subjective consequences of these commercial strategies upon the practitioners who populate the consumer institutions. It is a central contention of *Creative Cultures* that the subjective consequences of the world of commerce and its consumerist understandings of identity can also be fruitfully explored through the identities and subjective choices made by practitioners like those central to this book. It is this most neglected aspect of these commercial circuits of provision – the informal cultures and subjective identities of commercial practitioners themselves – that I privilege. In this sense, the ambition of the book is to fill out our understanding of the way subjectivity is constituted through the world of commerce; not, in this instance, of those consumers targeted by the consumer industries, but the subjective consequences of commercial processes upon the identities of practitioners themselves.