At the core of Sean Nixon’s very engaging Advertising Cultures lies a straightforward proposition. Nixon proposes that, in order to understand advertising in particular, and commercial applications of creativity in what are increasingly termed the ‘creative industries’, there is a need to understand the workplace cultures of people engaged in creative advertising. Nixon does this through a tightly argued ethnographic study of creative workers in London advertising agencies, and the workplace cultures of these agencies. From this, he draws out a unique and very valuable series of observations about creativity, its relationship to gendered identities (particularly to masculinity), and the relationship between competitiveness and collaboration in highly competitive commercial workplaces.

Nixon’s book addresses a very important gap in the advertising literature. It is not a ‘how to do advertising’ book, yet it seeks to provide a bridge between the growing literature from sociology and cultural studies about the rise of the creative industries – in which, as Nixon notes, advertising is often seen as an exemplar – and the everyday routines and practices of work in the advertising industry. At the same time, it also provides a cautionary tale to sociologists and cultural theorists about the dangers of over-generalisation about the advertising industry, and making bold proclamations about its socio-economic significance that are not grounded in empirical work.

The book is structured into three parts. The first part may be the section which readers not well versed in recent theoretical debates in sociology or cultural studies may choose to skip, and start at Chapter 2. Chapter 1, titled ‘Advertising and Commercial Culture’, takes recent academic work on advertising to task for being overly prone to insert the industry into meta-commentaries on contemporary social and cultural change. Nixon critically appraises influential analyses by Scott Lash and John Urry (Lash and Urry 1994), Richard Sease and Howard Davis (Sease and Davis 2000), and Mike Featherstone (1991), that seek to connect developments in advertising to broader theories of consumer society, postmodernism, or the network society. While Nixon finds much that is valuable and path-breaking in these accounts, he sees them as possessing two sets of problems. The first is a privileging of acts of consumption and the uses of commercial culture over the production of cultural forms, such as advertisements, in a commercial context. Second, Nixon is concerned about the tendency towards over-generalisation in such accounts, and a related tendency to extrapolate from particular developments within industries such as advertising to a wider story about transition from one social form (e.g. modernism or ‘industrial society’) to another (e.g. postmodernism or the ‘network society’), often in spite of empirical evidence from the sector that provides contrary or contradictory information.

For those readers more interested in how creative work in advertising agencies actually takes place, the core arguments of the book are developed in Part 2. Chapter 2 discusses the rise of the ‘creative person’ as being central to the market identity of advertising agencies, discussing the rise of the ‘creative revolution’ in British advertising in the 1980s, led by companies such as Saatchi and Saatchi and Bartle Bogle Hegarty (BBH). It also discusses the ways in which the creative process was ‘re-imagined’ in the 1990s, as an industry down-turn made it increasingly apparent that advertising agencies competed not only with each other, but with a much wider range of prospective ‘purveyors of creativity’ (p. 39) in the media sector, and indeed within the client corporations themselves.

Chapter 3 focuses upon the social and educational make-up of creative jobs and those who do them in advertising agencies. Drawing upon sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the ‘new professions’ and their relationship to expanded access to higher education, Nixon finds that creative workers in advertising were more likely to have
come from lower middle class backgrounds, have grown up outside of London, and have been educated outside of the elite universities.

The question, therefore, of what one needs to know in order to work in creative advertising, and where such knowledge is acquired from, is central to Chapter 4 of Advertising Cultures. In this chapter, which may be the most significant chapter in the book, Nixon probes the relationship between, on the one hand, arguments that creative advertising requires professionalisation through appropriately accredited and credentialed teaching institutions, and, on the other, the view that true creativity can never emerge from such standardised teaching models, but instead requires practitioners to be deeply immersed in art and popular culture. In the latter understanding of creative advertising, its natural well-springs are not industry-accredited program, but rather art colleges and slightly ‘roguish’ academic fields such as cultural studies. At the heart of this debate, for Nixon, are two issues. The first is the extent to which ‘true creativity’ derives from detailed attention to established craft skills, or requires unique individuals who can think outside of established models. Second, it draws attention to the self-understanding of advertising creatives, and the extent to which they see themselves as primarily a part of the corporate world, or whether this is a necessary concession that they make in order to have the opportunity to realise a more creative, artistic and individualistic understanding of themselves and self-fulfilment.

Part 3 of Advertising Cultures focuses upon a more specific set of issues about creative advertising: its relationship to gendered identities, particularly to masculinity. Chapter 5, titled ‘A Homosocial World? Masculinity, creativity and creative jobs’, begins by observing an unusual paradox of the British advertising industry. The paradox is that, while women have a strong, although by no means dominant, presence in the marketing and business management sides of the advertising industry (account handlers, media buyers, media planners etc.), they are very poorly represented in creative jobs. Moreover, and in contrast to the marketing/business side, there are no signs of this changing over time. In one of the book’s more intriguing moves, Nixon connects this to the romantic conception of the artist, and the associated idea that attributes associated with the creative artist have historically been set against not only dominant understandings of masculinity (e.g., the idea of being insecure and child-like, rather than self-reliant and emotionally mature), but also to feminine identities. He quotes the executive creative director at one London agency as looking for a balance between ‘hiring pretty feisty sassy women’ and the need to keep young male creatives in a ‘child-like state’, implying that the presence of the former would threaten the latter, particularly what Nixon describes as ‘the essential juvenility that was crucial to performing the roles of art director and copywriter’ (p. 105).

Recognising that such an argument goes into contested territory in the advertising industry, Nixon uses Chapter 6 to explore in more depth the relationship between masculine identities and creative partnerships, looking at male-male, male-female and female-female partnerships between copywriters and art directors. In a particularly striking and funny part of the book, Nixon recounts articles in Campaign, the principal industry magazine in the UK, where creative partnerships between men in particular agencies are understood as being akin to marriage. He notes that not only do these articles stress the parallels between a successful creative partnership and a lasting marriage, and that creative partners tend to spend more time with each other than with their female partners, but that there is also a propensity among these men to be photographed as husband and wife in Campaign itself. While homosexuality is something of an ‘out-of-bounds’ topic for Nixon’s interviewees, the extent to which publicly-staged cross-dressing and husband-wife metaphors recur in relation to these creative partnerships suggests, for Nixon, a far more nuanced and ambivalent relationship to masculinity among his interview subjects than they are prepared to acknowledge themselves. Drawing upon a considerably smaller sample, Nixon finds that female-female partnerships were characterised by a more open acknowledgement of bonds of intimacy, while male-female partnerships ran a gamut from complementarity to awkwardness.

Nixon’s thesis is that the gendered nature of work and identities in creative advertising arises not simply from the people themselves, but from their broader workplace culture, and Chapter 7, titled ‘Pleasure at Work: the gender ambivalences of work-based sociality’, draws this out more specifically. He finds three recurring sets of issues in the workplace culture of creative workers in advertising agencies. The first concerns dress and general workplace ‘look’. Noting the importance attached to looking differently to the ‘suits’ in the agency (e.g., no ties for male creatives), Nixon identifies the
complexities and cultural codes associated with looking more ‘casual’, and the centrality of male fashion and lifestyle magazines in setting the parameters around which such choices are made. Second, Nixon identifies the centrality of drinking (and, more obliquely, drugs) to industry sociality, and the extent to which this both defines the cultural geography of the sector (such as the need to be near Soho pubs), and the gendered nature of work, as women working in creative advertising continually express their reservations about the ‘blokish culture of drinking’ (p. 151) associated with the workplace culture. Finally, Nixon identifies ambivalence among male creatives about whether their workplace culture generates ‘real work’, defined in the first instance by manual labour, and whether the workplace culture is sustainable as one gets older.

Advertising Cultures concludes with a discussion of creativity, and ‘claims about the new salience of creative people within what used to be called the media and cultural industries’ (p. 161), that extends the discussion from the specifics of advertising toward creative work and the creative industries more generally. Nixon has argued that the ‘valorisation of creativity’ (p. 161) throughout the advertising industry since the 1980s has been linked to a series of structural changes in the workplace, such as hot-desking and open plan offices, that have both shaped and been shaped by wider cultural shifts in workplaces more generally, which have been linked to identifying the wellsprings of innovation and creativity for commercial application. This has in turn shaped the forms of self-identification of creative workers within advertising agencies, as their increasing centrality to the sector has animated a wider set of debates about ‘newness’, originality, craft skills, self-promotion, and self-identification with the worlds of art and popular culture as compared to commerce and industry. It is also linked, in Nixon’s account, to ‘ideas of romantic individualism and the whole baggage of gendered attributes that have historically accumulated to this model of the creative person’ (p. 163).

The relevance and significance of Advertising Cultures to those involved with the creative dimensions of advertising and marketing communication can be readily grasped. In its fine-grained ethnographic work on creative workers in London advertising agencies, it provides both a useful antedote to over-generalised discussions of advertising that are found in many core texts in cultural studies and sociology, while generating valuable insights into the workplace cultures of some of the world’s most style-defining advertising agencies. What the book does particularly well is to connect these very particular stories to wider debates, without subsuming them within overly grand theories of epochal social and cultural change.

For those principally involved with marketing and marketing communication, and with the business side of advertising, the two key things which can be taken from Advertising Cultures involve the cultural contexts in which creativity and ‘newness’ are seen to emerge from, and the particularly gendered nature of creative advertising departments. In the first case, Nixon makes the important point about the need to identify and understand the domain-specific nature of creativity in advertising. Rather than seeing it as a ‘quasi-mystical’ force, or as a ‘general human capacity’ (p. 162), creativity in advertising will typically arise from an understanding of, and partial elaboration of, established forms of industry and professional practice. Rather than seeing this as exposing the debased nature of advertising in contrast to allegedly ‘purer’ art forms such as music, painting, performance etc., such expressions of originality as variations of established generic forms may well be the principal way in which creativity manifests itself across and beyond the creative industries. In the second case – gender, creativity and advertising – Nixon’s analysis should give some pause to those who would structure the workplace culture of creative departments within advertising agencies around ‘robust “laddish” forms of masculinity’ (p. 165), and then wonder why these more ‘arty’ areas of the industry seem to be greater enclaves of male dominance than the more commercially-based areas.

References

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