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2015

https://doi.org/10.25595/1496

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Sommerlund, Julie; Strandvad, Sara Malou: *Inhibited Intentionality and Cultural work : Reconsidering Gender and Female Success*, in: Culture unbound : Journal of current cultural research, Jg. 7 (2015) Nr: 2, 271-283. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/1496.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here: https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.1572271

GenderOpen – Repositorium für die Geschlechterforschung: www.genderopen.de

FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

Culture Unbound
Journal of Current Cultural Research

Inhibited Intentionality and Cultural Work: Reconsidering Gender and Female Success

By Julie Sommerlund & Sara Malou Strandvad

Abstract

In this paper we suggest ways to reconsider the question regarding the relationship between gender and creativity. First, we review the theoretical literature on gender and creativity, concluding that the dominant thought is that men are prevalent in making creative achievements, particularly when connected to the notion of 'genius.' Second, we review the empirical studies on gender and creativity, a body of literature that comes to the same overall conclusion. Third, we present an empirical case, a Scandinavian design school in which the relationship between gender and creativity is more nuanced, complex, and more dependent on context than both the theoretical and empirical literature would suggest. Based on this case, traits that are often described as hindrances for female agency and creativity are reconsidered. We conclude by suggesting that in certain creative contexts women use their 'hindrances' to produce fruitful strategies for overcoming historical gender inequalities, thus turning Iris Young's classical argument – that women embody limitations – to give a productive and positive account of how women may become successful in creative work.

Keywords: Creativity, Gender, Creative Industries, Arts, Textiles, Music, Film.

Introduction

As Siri Hustvedt (2014) shows in her novel *The Blazing World*, the gender of an artist has profound consequences for the way the artist's work is perceived. Inspired by experimental studies of how professional work is judged differently based on the gender of the author (Goldberg 1968; Paludi & Bauer 1983), Hustvedt tells the story of Harriet Burden, an ignored female painter whose work is praised only when she recruits three young men to present her creations as their own. With this story, Hustvedt's novel addresses the misogyny of a form of art. Thus, rather than simply criticising the inequalities of men and women within the arts, Hustvedt's novel opens up for telling stories of qualified female artists, their work, and the ways in which this work is perceived. Historically, we know of many female artists working under pseudonyms – George Elliot, Isak Dinesen and the Bell Brothers are just a few examples from the world of literature. To this day, female authors still choose to use only their initials, J.K. Rowling being the foremost example.

Informed by Hustvedt's approach, we look into how different areas of creative work enable men and women, separately. The point is not simply to identify inequalities, but to illustrate how men's and women's works are perceived differently, and – perhaps even more importantly – which types of creative work enable and empower women and men, and how female and male practices in creative work may sometimes be hindrances and sometimes advantages.

We base our discussions on the realization that the genders perform differently in different creative arenas. Simultaneously, we adhere to the basic premise that this realization does not reflect innate differences in women's and men's capacity to be creative. Instead, we argue that gender does not necessarily constitute a uniform category in all kinds of creative work, but may turn out differently in different creative fields.

We discuss first how gender and creativity have been described and explained in theory, and second, how gender and creativity have been investigated in empirical studies. Third, we use empirical observations from a Scandinavian design school to reopen the debate on gender and creativity. Specifically, we suggest that although gender most certainly does play a role in respect to creativity, the question as to which role is highly contingent. Thus, a certain female type of creativity can be a strength as well as a weakness depending on the situation – the same obviously goes for male creativity.

Literature Review: Theoretical studies

The concept of creativity is closely connected to concepts such as talent and genius. Whereas the notion of talent includes a variety of gender and sexuality per-

formances (Ganetz 2011), the concept of genius has strong male connotations. In *Gender and Genius*, literary theorist and philosopher Christine Battersby (1989) traces the gender bias of the concept of genius. Genius characterizes the magnificent creative individual, a trans-historical and context-independent person who rises above genre conventions, sets new standards, and reshapes traditions (Negus and Pickering 2004: 138f). According to Battersby, genius is an inherently male category. In the classical Aristotelian tradition, women were seen as inferior regarding judgement, wit, reason, and skill, as they were believed to hold an excess of passion, imagination, and irrationality. In Romanticism, these characteristics specifically – passion, imagination, and irrationality – became valued and seen as traits of genius. However, they were only praised in male artists. Thus, genius described a feminine man, not a woman. Despite poststructuralist attempts to deconstruct the author (Barthes 1990 (1968), Foucault 1979), the concept of genius has lived on (see for example Burke 1998). According to Battersby, this means that the privileging of male artists continues:

> Our present criteria for artistic excellence have their origins in theories that specifically and explicitly denied women genius. We still associate the great artist with certain (male) personality-types, certain (male) social roles, and certain kinds of (male) energies. And, since getting one's creative output to be taken seriously involves (in part) becoming accepted as a serious artist, the consequences of this bias towards male creators are profound. (Battersby 1989: 23)

In addition, the gendered structuring of the arts continues as administration is feminized and understood as caretaking whereas artistic leadership is seen as a masculine competence (Wennes 2002: 93ff). Hence, the dual-leadership model, which is often found in creative industries (Bilton & Leary 2002; Alvarez & Svejenova 2005), appears to be supported by gendered connotations.

In 1980, Iris Marion Young wrote the now classic essay 'Throwing like a Girl'. In the essay, Young describes the relationships between lateral space and female bodies, and she concludes that girls and women do not move their bodies as freely in lateral space as do boys and men, and that the relationship of the body to the material environment defines the relationship of the subject to the world. Young describes the relationship of the female subject to the world as characterized by restriction, which denies the woman subjectivity, autonomy, and creativity. She ends the essay by writing, 'I have an intuition that the general lack of confidence that we (women) frequently have about our cognitive or leadership abilities is traceable in part to an original doubt of our body's capacity' (Young 1980: 155). We will continue this line of thought and link Young's thoughts on the relationships between bodily restrictions and lateral space to notions of gender and creativity.

The observations at a Scandinavian design school conducted for this paper do not suggest—as one might assume from the literature on gender and creativity—that the match is a simple one, and that women are less creative than are men on a

general level. Rather, the case suggests that some types of work seem to lend themselves to male creativity, and that these do seem to be characterized by something akin to the lateral space described by Young, but others seem to lend themselves more easily to female creativity. Interestingly, Young points out three particularly feminine ways of relating to the physical environment: 'inhibited intentionality', 'ambiguous transcendence', and 'discontinuous unity'. Young describes these as predominantly negative and hindering creative ways of relating to the world. However, from our empirical observations, certain creative situations seem to be furthered by these traits, which lend themselves to an experimental and open-ended way of relating to the surrounding world, which is enabling rather than disabling in certain types of creative work.

Overall, the dominant thought within the theoretical discourse on gender and creativity is that bodily and creative agency is given to men, while women are characterized by restriction in their relations to the world. Likewise, genius is a category explicitly denied women.

Literature Review: Empirical Studies

The rise of the creative class also raises the question of who succeeds in the creative industries. As a number of British studies of creative work have shown, gender differences constitute a predominantly overlooked, yet persistent and decisive factor in structuring creative work practices (Gill 2002; McRobbie 2002, 2007; Nixon & Crewe 2004; Banks & Milestone 2011; Allen 2013; Tayor & Littleton 2013). What these empirical studies show is that cultural work is gendered, as the ideal of the cultural worker is associated with masculinity and fun. Hence, the egalitarian image of the creative industries covers discrimination and gender inequalities. Yet, at the same time, some of these studies also point to the pleasure and autonomy in creative work, which both men and women may take advantage of.

Likewise, in Denmark, a number of studies, along with public debate concerning gender inequalities in creative industries, have been launched over the last few years. On a general scale, various structural gender differences within the creative industries have been revealed: In the recent national canon of Danish art, very few female artists are represented (Frederiksen 2006). Female artists earn less than do their male counterparts (Sjørup & Kirkegaard 2007). Statistics of the 32 largest arts awards in Denmark from 2000-2011 show that out of 502 awards, only 153 were given to women (Brovall 2012).

In spite of these obviously gendered inequalities, the debate in Denmark has been polarized and narrow. Feminist researchers have pointed out inequalities, and male representatives from the artistic fields have refused these with reference to universal artistic standards that female artists apparently do not live up to – which have only proven the feminists' point. Thus, gender differences have been

explained as patterns relying on traditionalized male and female roles where men perform visible and rewarding tasks while women take care of supporting and invisible work. In that way, new forms of work have been considered to reintroduce old patterns of gender differences, which are in favour of men. Let us give two illustrative examples of gender differences within creative industries in Denmark: rhythmic music and film production.

In the case of rhythmic music, The Rhythmic Music Conservatory in Copenhagen held a conference with the title 'Imbalanced Music' in 2010. The theme of the conference was the decreasing number of female instrumentalists and the low number of students with ethnic diverse backgrounds. In 2010, the conservatory had only accepted two new female instrumentalists together with twenty-four male students (Boukris and Marstal 2010). In the public debate about the theme of the conference, an important reason for the gender inequality at the rhythmic conservatory was emphasized: that rock music is 'male-centric' (Boukris and Marstal 2010). The 'male-centrism' of the music industry can be illustrated with statistical data: The Danish organisation for composers, KODA, had 18% female members in 2009, and they earned 11% of the total income from copyrights. When The Danish Artists' Organisation, Dansk Artist Forbund, investigated 30 record companies and 22 radio stations in 2010, they found that all CEOs and musical executives were men (Boukris and Marstal 2010). Historically, this imbalance stems from the rock scene, which has been defined by masculinity from the 1960s onwards (Cohen 1997; Frith & McRobbie 1990).

In the case of film production, gender is not constituted in the same way as in rhythmical music, as many more women are recruited into the film industry than into the rhythmical music scene as instrumentalists; nevertheless, male directors still dominate. For example, the award for best director in Denmark was given to male directors for twelve consecutive years (2000-2011). Confronted with this gender imbalance, the head of the Danish film academy, Kim Magnussen, explained, 'We have never discussed if there were too few female award winners, but the last 12 years the men must have been better. Otherwise they wouldn't have won' (Brovall 2012). Despite the success of female directors, such as Lone Scherfig, Annette K. Olesen, Pernille Fischer Christensen, and Susanne Bier (who won an Oscar in 2011), the Danish film academy sees their male colleagues as more qualified.

Although gender was not an issue in an interview study with 15 young Danish film directors, a difference between the male and female respondents (8 men and 7 women) appeared to be strikingly consistent throughout the interviews (Mathiasen & Strandvad 2005). Whereas the male respondents all said that they had known they wanted to direct films since childhood or adolescence, the women all excused themselves for not discovering they wanted to become film directors until their mid-twenties. Female respondents told remarkably similar stories about being 'the one mistake that slipped through' (interview quote, ibid: 124). For all of

the female respondents, it was in their mid-twenties that they decided to become directors. Until then, they had made other kinds of creative work, either in the film industry or in related fields. As they grew older and more mature, they discovered that they missed one element in their work, namely leadership. None of the male informants mentioned this as a factor when deciding on a career as director.

The young men attached themselves to a well-known story about the born film director, whereas the young women described themselves as mistakes. By doing so, these men appeared self-confident, while the women excused themselves and described the construction of their professional identity as a struggle. Hence, a gender difference favouring the men seemed to manifest itself.

An explanation for this phenomenon can be found by going back to the notion of genius and its counterpart in film studies, 'the auteur figure.' Based on Battersby's feminist reading of the concept of genius, the fact that the young female film directors found it difficult to connect themselves to the story of the great directors is not surprising, nor is it that their male colleagues did so easily. Although the problem appears to be individual for each of the women, the genealogy of the notion of genius shows that it is a defining tradition that they are up against.

Although gender inequality is documented both in the British and in the Danish studies, these studies also indicate that women in creative industries not only experience inequalities, but also discrimination and exploitation. Statistics show that today the majority of students at art schools in Denmark are female, yet female painters' works are exhibited as often as are male painters', and the state subsidiaries for the arts in general are distributed more equally than earlier (Sjørup & Kirkegaard 2007). Hence, there may be good reason to identify new stories of when, where, and how women succeed creatively.

In the case of rhythmic music, a frequent explanation for the gender imbalance among instrumentalists is that females are reluctant to improvise (Kristiansen 2010). At The Rhythmic Music Conservatory, jazz and the more experimental tradition are paired with the rock tradition. Hence, students are expected to improvise, and the women are reluctant to do so. At The Royal Danish Academy of Music, the classical conservatory, more than 50% of the students are female. Hence, the gender gap does not concern female instrumentalists here, but it does concern female instrumentalists within rock and jazz in particular. On the basis of these data, one might assume that female instrumentalists feel more comfortable playing written music (Bayton 1990) than they do improvising and moving into uncharted musical territory. Young's essay can be used to underline this point: Women tend to throw a ball – or play the guitar – rather timidly, because they do not move their bodies – and their guitars – as freely as do men, and do not use them to their full potential.

However, one might also argue that this becomes a strength within classical music: Young describes how women seem to prefer to move only one part of the

body (the arm in the case of throwing a ball), leaving the rest of the body still. Playing in a classical ensemble does not leave any space for moving in unplanned ways, and takes great control of the body, where certain parts must be completely still, while others perform extremely controlled movements. Thus, although Young describes the typical female way of relating the body to material surroundings as a weakness, it can be seen as a strength within the setting of classical music. 'Ambigious transcendence,' which Young described as a transcendence that is not a purely fluid action, but a transcendence that is 'overlaid with immanence', seems to further the female classical instrumentalist and work as a strength rather than as a weakness. Thus, the creative practices in classical music seem to be advantageous to women. Still the question of perception is worth recognizing: In Goldin and Rouse's (1997) paper 'Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of 'Blind' Auditions on Female Musicians,' they lay out data concerning sex-biased hiring in symphony orchestras. In the 1970s and 80s, most symphony orchestras introduced 'blind' auditions, where a screen concealed the identity of the candidates. According to Goldin and Rouse, this introduction had profound effects: 'Female success rate [was] 1.6 times higher … for "blind" than "not blind" auditions' (Goldin & Rouse 1997: 14). According to Goldin and Rouse's findings, the perception of female candidates was markedly worse than their practice ought to have indicated.

In the case of film production, industry insiders consider young female directors to make more interesting films than their male colleagues. Contrary to the thesis that femininity is associated with mass culture (Huyssen 1986), the case of young Danish directors suggests that female creativity is seen as experimental and artistic. The leader at the film workshop at the Danish Film Institute explains:

> The men usually brag more and wear their sunglasses on their foreheads and have totally far-fetched ideas about the success they may achieve with their films. It's actually inversely proportional to what we see in the films: The expensive films with great costs, which almost always have to be made on real film, are put on the shelf after the premiere. . . . The women often have a more original take on it; they shoot on 8mm and usually make more humble projects with an artistic angle, which is more exciting and different. It's the kind of thing, which is seen more on festivals. (Prami Larsen in Mathiesen & Strandvad 2005: 123)

According to Larsen, the leader at the film workshop, which is a development programme aimed at supporting the making of short films by young filmmakers, women make more interesting projects than do men. Whereas the men are much more self-confident and manage to set up costly projects, the women create smaller projects that are more innovative. Creatively, the women surpass the men. Larsen emphasizes the fact that women have an 'original take' on the material; they generate 'an artistic angle' and their projects are 'different.' In that way, the women's projects are considered to express artistic originality. At the same time, however, this comes with an emphasis on the personal, emotional, intuitive, and deeply felt approach that the women use.

Returning to Young's characterization of the gendered ways of relating to the world, males relate to the world with intention, while the female way of relating to the world is characterized by 'inhibited intentionality.' Certain weaknesses are connected to this inhibition, but as these empirical examples have shown, certain strengths are connected as well. To enter into a creative situation without a specific intention is also to leave the situation open-ended, thus leaving space for the results that are more original, artistic, and different, all of which are positive outcomes.

Hence, although the majority of the empirical studies of gender and creativity we have thus far mentioned further the general point that being a woman is a hindrance and a weakness when it comes to creativity – both as perception and practice – these studies also add nuances to this picture, showing gender and creativity as a highly contingent phenomena. We will pursue this contingency in the case study below.

An Empirical Case: Design Education

Reports show that approximately 75% of the students at design schools in Denmark are women (DKDS 2010; Kolding Designskole 2012). If one focuses on textile and fashion design, the number of girls and women increases significantly. Thus, in the case of design schools, women often live up to the expectations of creative talent (Sommerlund & Strandvad 2012), and textile design is a particularly poignant example for discussing the specificities of female creativity (McRobbie 1998).

During a five-year period (2008-2012), where one of the authors of this paper headed a department of textile and fashion design, only two male students specialised in textile design at the school in question. Referring to Young's argument of spaces and the bodily restrictions of girls and women, this fact makes sense: Textile design is characterised by a focus on faces, rather than on spaces; the two major disciplines within the field are construction (weaving, knitting, crocheting etc.) and imprinting (analogously as well as digitally) – both of which have a strong focus on faces. Young argues that girls and women do not use the lateral space to its fullest potential, and although she does not touch upon the question of faces, her argument implicitly makes faces the physical home-ground for women, while spaces are home-ground to men.

During the time span mentioned, one course offered by the Textile Department was also quite popular among students specialising in Furniture and Industrial Design – the course on 'Textile and Space,' and many of these students were young men. The course urged the students to experiment with space and scale, and the men responded eagerly to this, knitting with rope on the bike racks, and similar experiments in which unlikely spaces and surprisingly large scales were drawn into the creative constructive work of textile design. The young women, on

the other hand, had a hard time working with large-scale constructive textile design. Large-scale printing – as one could observe in other courses – did not present the same problems to the young women. Only constructing (that is weaving, knitting, crocheting, etc.) seemed to present a hindrance to the women's ability to experiment with scale. The teacher heading the course often noted how the usually very experimentally creative and gifted female students shunned experiments in scale and space, and left the floor to the boys, who were only visitors in textile design. The creative and experimental role of the boys in the course on 'Textile and Space' was surprising exactly because Textile Design is traditionally such a female stronghold.

This example underlines Young's argument about the bodily restrictions women feel in relation to lateral space, and indirectly points to the female stronghold of faces, which she did not touch upon in her essay. The example serves as an exception to the rule – the rule being that women in design like experimenting, that they work intuitively and personally. This stronghold can be seen quite vividly in the admissions test, where women do very well. The tests are based on portfolios, and evaluators look for students who are able to use this very fixed format to present inventive, intuitive, open-ended, and personal processes, while refraining from coming up with fixed and finalised results (Sommerlund & Strandvad 2012). Judging from the results of the admissions processes at design schools, this balance is easier to strike for the women than for the men.

Perhaps the ability to work in scale and space is of overall importance to the ability to transform creativity in schools into a success in the ensuing work life. Every year the Danish schools of design and architecture produce a report analysing patterns in employment. The reports consistently shows that men who have received an education from these schools do better – in terms of employment – than do their female colleagues. The average difference in unemployment rates between men and women is 2.5 percentage points. (RKU 2014: p.3). Looking at art educations broadly, the picture is more or less the same (Kulturministeriet, Ministeriet for Forskning, Innovation og Videregående Uddannelser og Danmarks Statistik: Beskæftigelsesrapport 2012, p. 11). This suggests that the ability to work and experiment creatively in space and scale is related to the projection of the self into the future, which is inherent in forging out a successful work life.

Doing observational studies of admission tests at the design school, we further identified a tendency with the evaluators to address technical issues in relation to male applicants and, on the other hand, a tendency to address artistic inclinations of the female applicants. This is not to say that the evaluators are operating with gendered standards. The evaluators' questions respond to the work applicants have submitted. For example, in an interview with a male applicant, many questions were concerned with the computer programs he mastered, his methods of drawing, and his knowledge of digital animation. None of the interviews with female candidates that we observed had the same focus on technical issues. On the

contrary, female candidates presented and talked about aesthetic immersion, personal emotions and artistic ideas. Evaluators responded to this, asked female candidates questions concerning emotional explorations and aesthetics, and categorized female applicants as artistic and not technical.

An example: a female candidate had handed in a short stop-motion film for evaluation. The film consisted in distribution and removal of objects: paper, pencils, and colourful pot scouring tools hung on a clothes dryer. When discussing the film, the evaluators responded: 'It's very special' (evaluator 1), and 'It almost has to be a boy; it's very rough with the pot scouring tools' (evaluator 2). At the later interview, it became obvious that the applicant was a young woman. She explained that a male friend had assisted her with the technicalities of making the film. When asked about the sponges, she answered: 'I just loved the colours.' Near the end of the interview the evaluators asked, 'What interests you? It's very abstract, imaginative' (evaluator 2). She agreed, 'It's probably very abstract. I often try something that's very simple and then I wrap it up. . . . I love the stories in things, finding old things and inventing stories about them.' After the interview, when the evaluators discussed the performance of the candidate, they agreed that she had an artistic rather than a technical talent: 'She talks about art when we talk about design. . . . She has an open mind, but not the techniques' (evaluator 1) (observation notes, May 10, 2010). Thus, the candidate confirmed the pattern that female design applicants are not technically but artistically motivated and competent.

The main point to be taken from the design school case – which shows that the female students often do very well in portfolio-based evaluations but shy away from large scale experiments – is that the specific context within which creativity unfolds is of utmost importance for how successful the gendered strategies of creativity are. Context that emphasises space, large scales and bodily improvisations further male creativity and, likely, employment, while contexts that further faces, small scales, and personal experiments seem to further female creativity.

Conclusion

Historically, a profound inequality has existed – and to some extent still exists – between the genders in relation to creative success. Likewise, as our introductory examples of female writers writing under pseudonyms, fictional female painters posing as men, and female candidates for symphony orchestras, who do much better in 'blind' than 'not blind' auditions showed, there has been – and perhaps still is – a tendency towards perceiving the work of men and women through the lenses of gender, often to the advantage of men.

Previous studies – both theoretical and empirical – that pinpoint gender inequalities have produced very limited change and are mostly refused by the male representatives of creative industries. In this paper, we have presented reviews of

theoretical and empirical literature – as well as specific cases from a design school, cases that seem to blur the confrontational lines of both these reviews. Hereby we hope to have illustrated ways in which women produce fruitful strategies for overcoming historical gender inequalities that can inspire future changes. Instead of simply underlining the unfairness of the low percentages of successful women within the creative industries, we have focused on how women do succeed. In fact, girls and women are met with, and confirm, the expectations that they are creative in personal, emotional, indeterminate ways. Thus, Young's classical argument that females embody limitations may be turned to give a productive and positive account of how women may become successful in creative work. Instead of seeing the three traits described by Young as particularly characteristic to girls' and women's creative relation as subjects to the world – 'ambiguous transcendence', 'inhibited intentionality', and 'discontinuous unity' – as confirming patriarchy, these may also be considered to produce ways of getting beyond this.

Hence, the conclusion to this paper is a complex one, concerned with the blurring of lines rather than the clarity of them: while male and female creativity are indeed often perceived and performed differently, this is not only a disadvantage to girls and women. While many – perhaps most – contexts further male creativity, some contexts, such as those concerned with faces, personal approaches, and open-ended processes, seem to further female creativity.

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