introduction

In April 2000, in its regular end-piece feature 'A life in the day of', the *Sunday Times* magazine documented a typical day in the life of Mark Wnek, the 41 year-old executive creative director of London-based advertising agency Euro-RSCG Wnek Gosper, who had recently been awarded the job of promoting Ken Livingstone's bid to become London Mayor. Written in a punchy diary style, Wnek's account mixed together his views on advertising, creativity and agency life with details of the lifestyle that he pursued in and around work. His account went as follows:

My latest philosophy is that none of us learn enough or give enough. I've given up a lot lately: cigarettes, alcohol, caffeine, dairy products, salt and sugar. And I'm learning to play golf. I'm the most competitive person alive, which means that I apply myself thoroughly to the task, it's like meditation to me. So what if it's selfish? It's a start. Consequently I jump out of bed feeling great. . . . Getting dressed is bish, bash, bosh. Clothes are important to me, because they make a visual statement. I've got 300 shirts and ties at home and another 100 at the office. Every single pair of my underpants is Calvin Klein and my shoes are Gucci, but that's purely because they're comfortable. Giorgio Armani makes clothes for squat Italian blokes and they fit me. These are things that after 20 not-unsuccessful years in the business you get used too.

I get my washing stuff together and drive to the Harbour Club in my big fat second-hand Mercedes. Then I run on a machine for half an hour. . . . I probably think too much when I'm running – but then I'm a copywriter. My clients pay me to think. I have a blast in the shower, then I drive into work. I like the process to hurt. A little pain and suffering is a good idea. Never mind that I work 300 hours a week – that's irrelevant. I think everyone should do something that hurts.

The first thing I do is go through my lists, all hand-written from the night before. . . . I speed read all the papers. I'm like a life commando. I've learnt to extract information at breakneck speed. . . . I've got a creative department of 30 people. I assign a brief to a team, and if they don't come up with anything, they get fired. . . . There are two types of creative person: the one who draws upon a reservoir of life stuff, and the other who is simply brilliant. I'm a lot of the former and a touch of the latter. I have never, for one second, been afraid. The moment the fear gets you, you're out. Advertising is what gives society resonance and colour. Without it, we are nothing. That's why it's so important to put stuff out which is clever and witty and

makes you think, instead of being blanket-bombed with mind-less crap. Working here is like playing for West Ham – we're a premiership team and there's huge expectation. If you can't cut it, take-up pig farming or something (*Sunday Times* Magazines, 14/4/00: 90).

Mark Wnek's short, but extraordinary, narrative was shot through with a mixture of the banality and self-aggrandisement that often characterised the *Sunday Times* magazine's 'A Life in the Day of' feature and the testimonies of those sections of the metropolitan elite typically represented on its pages. However, it was in other ways, a tantalising little text because of the glimpses that it offered into the personal and professional life of a creative advertising person like Wnek and the social scripts that gave direction to his life. Certainly in this latter regard, his narrative was revealing. In its detailing of his preoccupation with the latest fads in healthy living and lifestyle and his stylistic self-consciousness with regard to how he looked and dressed for work, Wnek's narrative confirmed certain ideas about the modernity of advertising practitioners and their proximity to the most contemporary signs of urban life and consumption not only in the work that they performed, but also in their own lifestyles. A competitive and combative view of the business in which he had made his name was also evident in his account, together with a mode of self-presentation in relation to work that played up the ideal of the workaholic and ruthless advertising manager.

Wnek's narrative was suggestive in other ways. It offered additional insights into his approach to the business of advertising. Notably, it presented him as someone motivated by a positive and optimistic view of the commercial practice in which he was engaged and driven: by an ambition to produce advertising that added to the 'colour' of life through its cleverness and style. His account also suggested that this was a commercial practice that rested upon distinctive understandings of the creative people who performed this task and the sources of their creativity – 'reservoir of life stuff' individuals or those that were 'instinctively brilliant', as he put it. In fact, if we push further at this latter theme, we can see in Wnek's whole narrative a delineating of a particular model of the creative person in advertising and their distinctive habitus built around the cultivation of a flamboyant and assertive persona.

Mark Wnek's narrative is an appropriate place to start this book because creative people in advertising and their subjective dispositions and self-dramatisations are who *Creative Cultures* sets out to examine. The book focuses on the work experiences and attributes of a group of young male art directors and copywriters working for London-based advertising agencies and a group of their female colleagues.[1] It details the identities and

motivations that animated and gave direction to their working lives and also sets out to explore the informal cultures in which they worked, as well as tracking these individuals as they moved through the social networks that abutted to the advertising agencies in which they spent so much of their time. There are good reasons for wanting to document these creative cultures and the subjective identities of creative people. As a range of sociological commentators and cultural critics have argued, advertising and the wider commercial field have acquired a new centrality and salience to economic and cultural life in the last decade and a half or so. Certainly, developments within the commercial domain have been central to recent accounts of social and cultural change in Britain, together with much of the rest of Western Europe and North America. These changes have often been read in optimistic and epochal terms. Scott, for example, argued that 'the cultural economy ['those sectors that cater to consumers demands for amusement, ornamentation, self-affirmation, social display and so on'] was becoming one of the leading edges of contemporary capitalism' (Scott, 1997: 323, 1999; see also Wernick, 1991; Slater, 1997), while for Lash and Urry (1994) the commercial cultural industries were integral to a shift towards a new era of 'reflexive modernity'. For other commentators still, like Scase and Davis, these sectors of commercial endeavour were paradigmatic of wider developments in economic life that characterised a shift towards greater knowledge and information intensive forms of economic activity (Scase and Davis, 2000; see also Leadbeater, 1999). Less grandiose arguments from within cultural analysis have also confirmed the impact of the world of commercially produced goods and services upon particular social constituents and definitions of the good life through this period, and explored the interweaving of these developments with popular politics and governmental strategy (Hall, 1984; Mort, 1989; du Gay, 1996; Mort, 1996; Nixon, 1996).

Advertising has occupied an important place within these diverse accounts of economic and cultural change and represents a particularly visible marker of the dynamism of commercial society. For a sociologist like Andrew Wernick, for example, it was central to a new phase in the rise of a 'promotional culture' in which more and more areas of life were dominated by the logic of promotion and associated processes of commodification, while for a more prosaic commentator like the business analyst and style watcher Peter York advertising was an indispensable part of the matrix of metropolitan life, central to the intoxicating confluence of promotion, art, financial markets and government that characterized the recent period of commercial restructuring (Wernick, 1991; York, 1995: 136–64).

Recent policy initiatives have served to foreground the central role of the dynamic sectors of the commercial and associated media industries to

processes of social and economic change and renewal. In policy statements, especially those emanating from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in Britain, emphasis has particularly been upon the forms of creativity and cultural innovation that flow from these sectors and a concern to nurture these currents as part of a project of economic and cultural 'modernisation'. Advertising has figured strongly within this policy rhetoric as well. As the DCMS website proudly proclaimed 'Britain's creativity is flourishing as never before, whether in creative industries like advertising or film, or in the visual and performing arts. Our art, artistry and expertise is valued all over the world' (see also Smith, 1997). Here, then, was a sector (advertising) in which Britain was palpably a 'winner' in the global economy and one which – along with other industries like film, design, digital media, music and architecture – lay close to the beating heart of 'Britain's creativity', itself raised to an aspect of the national character.

Assessments of this order have contributed to a partial upturn in the social fortunes of advertising and specifically to the recognition conferred upon the advertising industry in Britain, with the views of advertising practitioners increasingly courted by the quality press and broadcasters[2] and some advertising people even being awarded high public honours. The cultural recognition evident in these developments is not without its historical precedents and contemporary accounts of the role of the creative and commercial industries have tended to occlude a longer history in which these sectors have been seen as pivotal to the restructuring of liberal western democracies (Mort, 2000). More significantly, the growing recognition conferred upon the industry and arguments about its new salience to economic and cultural life have proceeded with little sustained attention to the inner workings of these worlds of 'creative' work. While some attention has been given to the formal practices, institutional arrangements and types of expertise prevalent within this sector, little remains known about the social make-up of the advertising industry in Britain, its informal cultures or the subjective identities of its key practitioners (Schudson, 1993; Moran, 1996; Nixon, 1996; McFall, 2002). In the few instances where these cultural intermediaries have been addressed by sociologists, studies have tended to foreground in a general way their role as taste shapers and to consider the social make-up of this group rather abstractly in class terms (Featherstone, 1991; Wynne, 1998; Wynne and O'Connor, 1995).

Cultural critics have also offered generally attenuated accounts of this field of commercial endeavour. Certainly the established approaches that have framed the study of consumption and commercial cultures within cultural studies have tended to privilege consumers and practices of consumption at the expense of a more expanded account of the commercial domain. More or less absent from these accounts has been attention to the

work-based cultures of the commercial industries or the cultural resources that its practitioners draw on in living out particular social scripts within this field of commercial activity. The account that I develop over the next seven chapters places these substantive issues at the heart of its concerns and, in doing so, sets out to render more specific the over-general claims about commercial society that contemporary sociologists and cultural critics have been prone to advance.

In working against these established traditions of cultural and sociological analysis, my account has been driven by the insistence that much can be gained from foregrounding these previously neglected aspects of the worlds of commercial endeavour. In fact, it is a central contention of the account that follows, that opening up the informal cultures and subjective identities of advertising practitioners is an indispensable part of an adequate account of the commercial practices performed by advertising agencies. However, in insisting on this point, my intention is not to reduce the commercial practices of advertising to the subjectivity of its key practitioners or the cultures of agencies. The process of commercial cultural production in which advertising agencies are engaged is highly structured and involves a range of practitioners deploying different kinds of formal knowledge and expertise, as well as the mobilisation of a set of economic and cultural resources, in order to generate promotional materials and associated services for clients. This process is clearly also shaped by more informal factors and judgments, including those bound up with the particular social make-up and subjectivities of key practitioners. It is clear, for example, that informal knowledge possessed by practitioners about the target consumer but not itself present in the market research or planning documentation can be important in helping agencies to manage the relationship between their clients and consumers. This is especially germane in those markets where the key advertising people – essentially the art directors and copywriters – are culturally close to the target consumer. Furthermore, the cultural identifications of practitioners and the wider occupational culture in which they move will both provide resources for and set certain limits to the process of cultural production in which they are engaged. Thus, the subjective dispositions of key practitioners and the meanings, values and normative assumptions written into their occupational cultures will be important in mediating the process of reaching out to and connecting with consumers. It is this insistence, then, that has prompted me to ask: what is the social make-up of the core advertising jobs? What kind of values do these practitioners hold? What subjective dispositions and attributes animate their working lives? What kind of occupational culture do they work in?

In centre-staging these questions, *Creative Cultures* is, as I have already indicated, strongly particularistic in its focus as it seeks to break

with the problems of over-generality that have dogged recent sociological and cultural studies accounts of advertising and commercial society. In focusing on a specific set of jobs in advertising and a particular group of advertising people, I further privilege a story about gender and, specifically, masculinity. In this sense it is evident, again, why Mark Wnek's narrative was a particularly appropriate and apposite place to start this book. His account was richly indicative of a certain kind of flamboyant, combative and self-conscious style of masculinity. This surfaced in not only the extravagant tone of his testimony and its choice of wildly gendered metaphors ('I'm a life commando', indeed), but was also present in his investment in a highly contemporary style of masculinity carried through the codes of dress and self-presentation. It is this link between masculinity and creative jobs dramatised in his account that the book centrally explores. Again, there are good reasons for narrowing the focus of the book in this way. One of the areas of commercial provision where advertising practitioners have played a more intensified role in recent years has been in relation to men's markets and the consumption identities of young men. In fact, the industry has been central to the dissemination of new popular representations of masculinity shaped through the repertoires of style and individual consumption from the mid-1980s through to the present. These advertising representations have been key to the consolidation of a new set of masculine identities shaped through the world of commercially produced goods and services. The most notable of these have been the figures of the 'new man' and 'new lad'. It is worth pausing to reflect on the cultural significance of these consumerist masculine scripts. Both the 'new man' and the 'new lad' were characterised by the way they opened up consumer pleasures previously marked as taboo or socially dubious for groups of men and each, in their own way, represented a distinct configuration of a more or less coherent form of post-permissive heterosexual masculinity shaped through this world of goods (see Mort, 1989; Mort, 1996; Nixon, 1996; Nixon, 1997; Nixon, 2001). As I have argued elsewhere, however, there were important differences between these social scripts, even if commentators within the commercial industries themselves typically overplayed them (Nixon, 1996; Nixon, 2001). At its most ruptural, the 'new man' embodied a partial loosening of the binary codes that regulated cultural relations between hetero- and homosexual masculinities. In so doing, it resignified these relations through a more inclusive form of homosociability carried through a blurring of the visual style of gay and straight-identified men (see also Mort, 1996). The 'new lad', on the other hand, represented a certain repositioning of these consumerist masculine scripts against the sexual ambiguities of its precursor and a more trenchant version of heterosexual masculinity shaped around the consumer pleasures of 'cars, girls, sport and

booze'. In the case of the 'new lad', then, the predominant ordering of the social rituals of consumption was more exclusively heterosocial.

Both these cultural identities enjoyed a degree of popular legitimacy and recognition that suggested that they were connected with the felt movements of the culture of groups of young men over the last 15 years or so. Of the two identities, the figure and idea of the 'new lad' and its distinctive idioms have enjoyed the more prodigious currency from the mid-1990s through to the present. So-called 'loaded ladspeak', derived from the men's magazine, *Loaded*, that dominated the market for young men's magazines in the mid-late 1990s, was excitedly taken up – to be enjoyed as well as disparaged – by the broadsheet press and other parts of the media, including advertising agencies. Certainly, the idioms of 'ladspeak' and its ironic celebration of masculine juvenility provided an important short hand for advertising agencies concerned with targeting these lucrative young male markets (see *Independent on Sunday*, 3/9/95: 10; *Guardian*, 26/2/96: 14–15; *Campaign*, 11/10/96: 40–1; 1/11/96: 27).

What is striking, given the extensive interest in these shifting masculine scripts from both popular and academic commentators from the mid-1980s through to the present, is that little remains known about the gender cultures within the commercial industries – including advertising – that have mediated the production and circulation of these new masculine identities. In fact, the gender cultures of the advertising industry and the gender identities of its key people have remained more or less invisible. Exploring these issues is especially pertinent in relation to the ad men central to *Creative Cultures*. Art directors and copywriters occupy a pivotal place within the processes of cultural production that have underpinned the new representations of masculinity and it is clear, as I have already insisted, that their own cultural knowledge and dispositions can exert a particularly strong informal influence over the finished adverts. The art directors and copywriters whom I focus on in the book were all aged between 25–38 years of age and had started, or were establishing their careers in the mid-1990s, at a point when advertising's interest in young male markets was at a particularly high level. As such, they were close in age to the male consumers subject to this sustained commercial interrogation and it is their relationship to these shifting codes of masculinity carried through the forms of gendered commerce in which they were involved that the book sets out to explore. In doing so, I do not detail the relationship between the advertising creatives whom I interviewed and the specific campaigns that they worked on.

The book has been constrained by ethical considerations concerning the need to anonymize their testimonies and the concern to avoid including material that would make them easily identifiable. None the less, I do make

some specific claims about the relationship between the subjective identities and informal cultures of these practitioners and the advertising and promotion they were engaged in producing. To this end, *Creative Cultures* centrally asks the following questions: What were the informal gender cultures in which these advertising men worked? What cultural resources did they draw on in living out particular gender identities at work? What scope did this field of commercial endeavor offer for living out distinctive forms of masculinity? How, in short, was gender written into the creative cultures of advertising and into the subjective identities of its creative practitioners? In Part 3 of the book, I turn centrally to these questions and explore the informal cultures of the creative departments in which the practitioners worked and detail the kinds of gender identities privileged within these cultures. I push at the social scripts the men I interviewed drew upon and elucidate some of the tensions and inner conflicts that shaped these men's subjective investments in this world of creative work.

Creative Cultures is not only a book about gender. The question of creativity also looms large. Much of the reason for advertising's improved cultural standing in Britain has been bound up with assessments – or perhaps better, reassessments – of the 'creativity' of British advertising and the emergence of London as a centre of 'creative excellence' within the global advertising and marketing industry.[3] In this regard, the configuring of advertising as a 'creative industry' within the DCMS's policy statements represents but one instance of a wider celebration, dominant within the industry itself since the late 1980s, of the 'creativity' of London-based agencies. Significantly, this configuring of the industry's identity was not unrelated to advertising agencies more expanded involvement in young male markets. Style and lifestyle products aimed at young men offered scope for the development of a more image-led form of advertising upon which the industry's reputation for 'creativity' often rested. And while other markets and product fields were also implicated in these developments, the public profile of campaigns aimed at young men was not inconsequential in informing the reputation for 'creativity' enjoyed by London-based agencies.[4] The practitioners central to this book were implicated in this valorizing of creativity in very particular ways. They were often seen as an agency's most prized assets and as being the key sources of creativity within the processes of cultural production that agencies performed. Moreover, it was their expertise and skill, together with the peculiarities of their training, which was seen to lay behind the reputation acquired by the London-based industry as a centre of 'creative excellence'. In Part 2 of the book, I explore the currency of ideas about creativity within the occupational cultures in which these practitioners worked and reflect on the place of the rubric of creativity within their own sense of themselves as creative people.

Central to these chapters and the account of the occupational ethos and identity of these young ad men that I develop is a sustained reflection on the idea of creativity itself. The word, as will already be evident, looms large throughout the story I tell. Clarifying its meanings is essential to my arguments. The term figures, firstly, as a noun, creative, to collectively describe the jobs of art director and copywriter. When I talk of creatives or creative jobs or creative people, then, I am simply referring to this functional distinction. But there are also broader and more slippery conceptual issues bound up with the idea of creativity. As has been well documented, the term has emerged as something of a cant word in recent years. Its appropriation within government policy and the statements of the DCMS that we have already encountered represent only one version of its expanded currency and field of application. Particularly important within this process has been the way ideas of creativity have figured within prescriptive management literature and accounts of organisational reform. Within this body of writing, the idea of creativity has typically been bound up with the broader 'cultural turn' within management thinking and it is the links between organisational cultures and worker's creativity that has often loomed large in programmes of organisational re-engineering (du Gay, 1996). This pre-scriptive literature has typically deployed the idea of creativity to denote a general human capacity or disposition for invention, novelty and newness. In this regard, it forms part of a more widespread cultural process by which the idea of creativity has moved away from what Raymond Williams defined as 'exclusivist' definitions in which it was associated with a capacity for 'originality' and 'innovation' among a small group of gifted individuals, towards 'inclusivist' accounts that attribute the quality to a whole host of activities and (working) practices (Williams, 1976: 82–4). For Williams, there were dangers evident in this broadening out of creativity's semantic reach. Preeminent among these was his concern that the expanded field of application of the idea of creativity had eroded the conceptual value of the term. As he noted, a term that was once meant to 'embody a high and serious claim' about the value of particular kinds of human practice, 'has become so conventional . . . that it is applied to practices for which, in the absence of the convention, nobody would think of making such claims. Thus, any imitative or stereotyped literary work can be called, by con-vention, 'creative writing' and advertising copywriters officially describe themselves as 'creative' (Williams, 1976: 84).

Williams' comments are instructive and prompt the kind of clearing of the ground regarding the conceptual reach of the idea of creativity, parti-cularly in relation to advertising, that I undertake in Part 2. Certainly, the term is rendered especially opaque within the occupational cultures of advertising and exploring its currency and multiple uses within these cultures

necessities some definitional labour. In doing so, I draw upon Keith Negus' suggestive arguments about creativity developed in his work on popular music (Negus, 1995; 1998). At the heart of Negus' arguments is a concern to see claims about creativity (of a certain practice or cultural form) as highly context-dependent and shaped by value judgments in which recognition is conferred upon (or denied to) certain degrees of novelty or difference. Negus suggests that judgements about creativity are typically less to do with questions of absolute novelty or originality as with the way cultural practices or forms introduce some element of novelty or difference into a recognisable field of meaning. It is this mixture of familiarity and difference that discussions about creativity typically focus on and it is the small degrees of 'differentness' that are the subject of intense debate. This emphasis is also related to an insistence that debates about creativity are always local to specific fields of representation or domains of cultural practice and are not best thought of through the idea of creativity as the unfolding of a general human capacity that exists across all social fields or compartments of existence. More than that, debates about creativity are always informed by struggles over the authority of certain institutions or social actors to confer recognition upon a cultural practice or form and include the tensions between groups of protagonists to legitimate certain kinds of difference and novelty.

In Part 2, I explore how the practitioners I interviewed deployed the language of creativity and how it was bound up with their own attempts to legitimate the cultural practices they performed. Part 2 also explores the place of the rubric of creativity within the collective, institutional life of the industry and draws out the way the term was deployed by agencies and their corporate representatives to delineate the kinds of expertise offered by agencies to clients. Looming large here is an attention to the way a configuring of the identity of agencies as 'creative businesses', and the wider industry as a 'creative industry', was bound up with the moves by these businesses to consolidate a clearer sense of their commercial role. In developing this argument, I flesh out a picture of the London-based industry during the mid to late 1990s. This was a period of change and uncertainty for the agency sector shaped by both the legacy of the economic recession of the early 1990s and more deep-rooted changes in the commercial environment in which they worked. Creative people were caught up in the dislocations of agency life that flowed from these externals pressures on agencies in very particular ways and it is both the nature of these dislocations and their effects on the status and organisation of creative jobs that Part 2 – and specifically, Chapters 2 and 3 – explore.

At the heart of the account that I develop in *Creative Cultures*, as will already be clear, are the testimonies of the group of young ad men whom I

interviewed and their female colleagues. Weaving my account of the creative cultures of agencies around these narratives has raised a specific methodological question that is worth commenting on briefly. This concerns the status of their narratives and how I have read them. My primary concern throughout has been to play close attention to the language and metaphors they used and the associated modes of expression that they deployed, as much as it has been to document the directly factual content of their statements.[5] These former dimensions were revealing in terms of their subjective identities. In many instances, then, the practitioners said more than they intended to when talking about colleagues, working partners and the mundane routines of the job. These dimensions of their accounts were especially important in offering ways into the kinds of masculinity lived by the men I interviewed. It was how their gender identities showed themselves when they were substantively talking about something else that interested me. I have also attempted to be attentive to those moments in their accounts where certain things were not said (could not be said), as much as what was said and it is the absences in their testimonies that I also read in terms of what this might tell us about their gender identities.

The interviews were not, however, only revealing in terms of the talking that took place. The non-verbal dimensions were also important and I have been attentive to how the practitioners interacted with me more broadly through ways of sitting and other corporeal dispositions. Their gender also showed itself in how they dressed and presented themselves in visual terms and I registered this aspect by keeping a photographic record of the men and women I interviewed.

There is a further dimension at stake here in the interpretation of the practitioners' narratives and associated forms of self-presentation. This derives from the social relations of the research process. What the practitioners said and how they presented themselves was palpably produced in part by my promptings and their relationship to me was inevitably a key part of the dynamic that shaped what they said and how they expressed themselves. As is clear from the testimonies that animate the arguments of the book, the conversations that I had with the practitioners were often the setting for a sustained process of self-reflection by them. In this sense, the interviews often exemplified Pierre Bourdieu's contention that 'respondents see interviews as opportunities to explain themselves, that is, to construct their own point of view both on themselves and on the world. Thus, we might speak of an induced and accompanied self-analysis' (Bourdieu, 1996: 24). A recurrent element of this self-analysis was a concern to defend themselves and their work (their jobs) from a denigrating view of advertising that they appeared to read off from my status as an academic researcher. In this sense, their perception of me as potentially hostile to, or at the very least

condescending towards, advertising sharpened and prompted a particular set of self-reflections organised around the cultural standing of advertising. It is this question of the cultural standing of advertising, in fact, that looms large throughout this account. This had both occupational and gendered dimensions for the practitioners and how they handled these forms a central, recurring theme of the book. In this sense, it is the subjective consequences for these practitioners of working in this commercial field that connects Parts 2 and 3 of the book.

Before turning in detail to the occupational culture and the subjective identities of these creative people, however, it is appropriate to spell out further the conceptual arguments that have shaped the distinctiveness of the book and to delineate how its approach to advertising differs from other influential accounts of advertising and commercial society. It is to these arguments that I want to now turn.