Whose cultural value? 
*Representation, power and creative industries*

This item was submitted to Loughborough University's Institutional Repository by the/an author.


**Additional Information:**

- This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

**Metadata Record:** [https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/34179](https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/34179)

**Version:** Published

**Publisher:** Taylor & Francis © The Author

**Rights:** This work is made available according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence. Full details of this licence are available at: [http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Please cite the published version.
Whose cultural value? Representation, power and creative industries

Eleonora Belfiore

To cite this article: Eleonora Belfiore (2018): Whose cultural value? Representation, power and creative industries, International Journal of Cultural Policy, DOI: 10.1080/10286632.2018.1495713

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2018.1495713

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 22 Aug 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 2132

View Crossmark data
Whose cultural value? Representation, power and creative industries

Eleonora Belfiore

Centre for Research in Communication and Culture, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

ABSTRACT

The debate around ‘cultural value’ has become increasingly central to policy debates on arts and creative industries policy over the past ten years and has mostly focused on the articulation and measurement of ‘economic value’, at the expense of other forms of value—cultural, social, aesthetic. This paper’s goal is to counter this prevalent over-simplification by focusing on the mechanisms through which ‘value’ is either allocated or denied to cultural forms and practices by certain groups in particular social contexts. We know that different social groups enjoy different access to the power to bestow value and legitimise aesthetic and cultural practices; yet, questions of power, of symbolic violence and misrecognition rarely have any prominence in cultural policy discourse. This article thus makes a distinctive contribution to creative industry scholarship by tackling this neglected question head on: it calls for a commitment to addressing cultural policy’s blind spot over power and misrecognition, and for what McGuigan (2006: 138) refers to as ‘critique in the public interest’. To achieve this, the article discusses findings of an AHRC-funded project that considered questions of cultural value, power, media representation and misrecognition in relation to a participatory arts project involving the Gypsy and Traveller community in Lincolnshire, England.

Introduction

The debate around ‘cultural value’ has been a prominent feature of both scholarly and policy debates around arts and creative industries policy over the past 15 years. A significant strand of work in this area has been concerned with the ways in which ‘economic value’ (usually in the guise of ‘economic impact’, or contribution to the economic growth agenda) seems to have too often overshadowed other forms of value—cultural, social, aesthetic—in policy discussion (Belfiore 2015; Caust 2003; Crossick and Kaszynska 2016; Harvie 2013; Scott 2014), and most notably, in relation to the ‘creative industries’ (Banks 2015, 2017; Lee 2017; Schlesinger 2007). There has been, over the past ten years or so, a renewed interest in articulating the non-economic value of culture and advocating for more ‘holistic’ approaches (Donovan 2013) and for ‘non-reductionist’ cultural economics methods (Bakhshi, Freeman, and Hitchen 2013). It is important to note that cultural economists have been themselves at the forefront of resistance to the excessive predominance of economistic notions of value within cultural policy debates (Hutter and Throsby 2008; Throsby 2010; Bakhshi and Cunningham 2016), with Bille at al. (Bille, Grønholm, and Møgelgaard 2016) even qualifying the economic rationale in policy debates as ‘parasitic’ in the pages of this very journal.

CONTACT Eleonora Belfiore e.belfiore@lboro.ac.uk; @elebelfiore Centre for Research in Communication and Culture, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
However, notwithstanding this wave of critical reflection, it is beyond question that the strategic positioning of the cultural and creative sector as pivotal to Britain’s economic recovery post-financial crash, and of the creative economy as the key to future prosperity and growth for Britain in the uncertain post-Brexit economic scenario, is a key feature of current policy discourse (CEBR 2013; Doyle 2016; Henley 2016; Hesmondhalgh et al. 2015; Lee 2017; Neelands et al. 2015; Newsinger 2015).

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS), for its part, has long been promoting a celebratory discourse centred on the contribution that the sectors it supports make to the British economy. Most recently, it commissioned Sir Peter Bazalgette—Chair of broadcaster ITV—to head an Independent Review of the Creative Industries with a view of setting out a series of recommendations to government ‘for the continued growth of UK’s Creative Industries’ (DCMS 2017). The resulting report (Bazalgette 2017: 11) suggests that the creative industries ‘contributed £87.4bn in GVA in 2015, 5.3% of the UK economy (comparable to the Construction or Information sectors) and between 2010 and 2015 grew by 34%—faster than any other sector’. The review report also forecasts that ‘[b]ased on current trends, the Creative Industries could deliver close to £130bn GVA by 2025 and approximately one million new jobs could be created by 2030’ (Bazalgette 2017: 11). Upon publication of the Bazelgette Review, Culture Secretary Karen Bradley commented that ‘[t]he UK’s Creative Industries are an economic powerhouse and the government is committed to removing the barriers to its growth’ (in DCMS 2017; emphasis added).

**Value: shifting the perspective**

This article aims to make a contribution to the mounting critique of the predominant articulation of the value of the arts and of creative artifacts in terms of economic value. It does so by offering a discussion of cultural value that centres on questions of power, which has been so far, a largely neglected lens through which to dissect matters of ‘value’. And yet, the interconnection of power and value has long been acknowledged by theories of the social production of the aesthetic, such as those championed, among others, by Janet Wolff (1981). This stance entails an approach to cultural value that focuses on the study of the mechanisms through which ‘value’ is either allocated to artistic and cultural forms and practices, or denied to them, by certain groups in particular social contexts:

Understanding art as socially produced necessarily involves illuminating some of the ways in which various forms, genres, styles, etc. come to have value ascribed to them by certain groups in particular contexts (Wolff 1981:7).

This is a useful starting point because it allows us to focus attention on the relational nature of processes of value allocation and cultural validation: cultural value does not operate and is not generated in a social, cultural and political vacuum, but is in fact shaped by the power relations predominant at any one time, and is a site for struggles over meaning, representation and recognition (Frow 1995; Jordan and Weedon 1995). This also means that struggles over cultural value have winners and losers: insights from the sociology of taste (especially the writing of Bourdieu and others developing his work) have shown how symbolic power operates, and how different social groups enjoy not only different levels of access to different forms of artistic and cultural engagement, but also different access to the power to bestow value and legitimise aesthetic and cultural practices (Bourdieu 1984; Di Maggio and Mohr 1985; Swartz 2013; Van Eijck 1997; Warde 2010).

The aim of the article, thus, is to show how the creative industries’ celebratory rhetoric that is so prominent in official cultural policy discourse is problematic in that it effectively obscures, and thus shelters from scrutiny, power imbalances, unequal distribution of cultural authority in society, and unequal access to the means of symbolic representation and meaning-making. As a result, debates over cultural policy and creative sector funding focus mostly on government-approved instrumental arguments and reasoning, thus leaving real and substantive issues of cultural value, access and
justice under-explored and unchallenged. The article ultimately calls for a collective effort, by scholars as well as cultural professionals and policymakers, to strive for a new approach to understanding ‘cultural value’, more cognisant of the reality that this space is an arena for power struggles and a site of inequality. I will argue that it is an important task of cultural and creative industries policy to acknowledge and address (instead of merely reflecting) such unequal distributions of value, voice, and symbolic power. In order to achieve this, the article is built around the discussion of a case study, Our Big Real Gypsy Lives, a participatory arts project in Lincolnshire (a largely rural county in England’s East Midlands), funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (the largest dedicated funder of community-focused heritage projects in Britain) and involving children from Gypsy and Traveller communities (usually referred to as GRT—Gypsy/Roma/Traveller—communities in official British policy discourse) and their families. It was devised and delivered, in 2014, for the education charity Lincolnshire Traveller Initiative (LTI) by the local independent cultural consultancy cultural solutions uk.

The original aim of the study was to challenge the ‘orthodoxy’ of the celebratory creative economy discourse and its reproductive character (Schlesinger 2016), and to consider to what extent Our Big Real Gypsy Lives might offer a basis to reflect on the use of publicly funded projects for the purposes of the redistribution of cultural value. To this end, the aim of the study was not to assess whether this heritage-based intervention had been ‘successful’ or not in delivering on its funder’s expectations. Rather, the goal was to understand how the people involved in making the project happen, in their different roles, saw it in relation to questions of ‘cultural value’ and voice. For this reason, the qualitative interviews focused on those who had a pivotal role in making the project happen: even the GRT participants interviewed had been involved mostly as facilitators for the project, either by running activities tied into the project in local schools, or, in the case of Gordon Boswell—founder of the Gordon Boswell Romany Museum in Spalding—by letting the project make use of his museum as a site and inspiration for activities with the participating children, and by using his status and recognition within the community to endorse the project and facilitate its running. The qualitative data that emerged revealed how difficult it is to deliver a genuinely community-driven participatory project within the strictures of current funding systems.

A full analysis of the significance of this case study in relation to the initial purpose of assessing whether ‘cultural value redistribution’ is a viable rationale for publicly funded participatory projects within the current funding infrastructure is still in the process of being written up, however, the purpose here is slightly different. This article is the result of a personal need to better understand and reflect upon the ways in which different conversations about cultural value were happening in different locations in the UK at the heyday of the ‘cultural value debate’. Because of a longstanding research interest in this area, I have been involved in several of them—an experience that has been enriching but that also made evident the disconnections between some of those conversations. The fieldwork discussed in the following sections of this article was carried out in 2014: at this time, the AHRC Cultural Value Project of whose steering group I was a member, was in full flow, with a number of collaborative research projects underway across the country (including the one being discussed here); I was also then involved in leading the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value, a high-profile public engagement project that brought together a number of highly influential stakeholders in British arts and culture, policy, education and business to develop fresh policy ideas for the cultural and creative sector (Neelands et al. 2015). This meant that, over the Summer of 2014, within the space of the same week, I would be attending high-powered meetings and evidence review sessions with the ‘great and the good’ in UK arts and culture in some of the most grandiose and illustrious buildings in London, belonging to flagship national arts organisations and policy making agencies, and also driving to an isolated industrial estate on the edge of Spalding, in Lincolnshire, to get to the Gordon Boswell Romany Museum, where several of the interviews were carried out. In both settings, I was having discussions of cultural value (whether the label was used or not); in most cases, matters of arts funding were being raised by both senior London arts figures and by my project participants (be they the team that delivered the project, or...
Gordon Boswell expressing his frustration at what he saw as the snobbish attitude of local authorities towards his museum, which they always refused to support. Both sets of conversations were, arguably, part of the cultural value debate that was thriving at the time, yet only one of the two was visible, influential and ‘legitimate’, with ambitions to shape the future of national policy. The cultural, social, and economic capital differential between the people involved in those parallel debates is the key explanation for their (in)visibility.

In this article, then, the case study offers a powerful demonstration of the fact that not all actors involved in struggles over cultural value and authority have equal power and voice. Yet this fact, and the social justice and equality issues it causes, risk being obfuscated in our contemporary cultural policy discourses, which are more intent on advocating continued funding on the arts and culture than on exploring the true politics of cultural value (Belfiore 2012).

**Cultural value and the politics of representation**

The project was the main case study for an AHRC-funded project, delivered with the support of non-HE partners David Lambert and Leanne Taylor of cultural solutions uk. The partnership with cultural solutions uk allowed precious access to documentary material relating to the project, such as its creative and educational outputs, applications and reporting documentation, and contextual information. More crucially, it facilitated access to the creative team that delivered the project, to key LTI staff, to Gordon Boswell (who in 1995 founded the Gordon Boswell Romany Museum in Spalding and passed away in 2016), and to two other adult participants in the project from Gainsborough’s Gypsy Romany community, who were all interviewed alongside cultural solutions’ staff. Overall, 12 people were interviewed, and Gordon Boswell was interviewed twice. The Heritage Lottery Fund officer that handled the award of the funding for the project was contacted several times, but consistently declined to be interviewed. Ideally, I would have liked to be able to interview more community participants in the projects: the young people who were involved in the activities facilitated by the project’s artists. However, by the time the interview work had started, all the families that had been the most engaged in the project had moved on to other sites without leaving contact details with the project team, and therefore were not contactable. All participants signed a consent form which explained that due to the nature of the research, and its focus on the team delivering the project and some of the core participants from the community, even though attempts would be made to keep attribution of quotes unidentified where possible, anonymity could not be guaranteed (and certainly not for Gordon Boswell, whose interviews focused explicitly on his experience founding and running his museum).

The semi-structured interviews were based on a core schedule of 12 questions that all the interviewees involved in the delivery of the project were asked. This allowed for additional questions or slightly modified versions of the questions to be used where it was felt important to capture the particular role of the individual in the project. Project participants were interviewed using a modified schedule that focused on their personal experience. The core interview questions ranged from a general introduction to the artistic or professional practice of the interviewees, to how they became involved in the project, to their views on what worked and what did not, their perception of the response to the project from the communities they were working with, as well as the broader Lincolnshire communities. The interview schedule did not make any explicit reference to the reality TV programme *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (henceforth MBFGW), although it acknowledged the tendentially negative media representation of the Gypsy and Traveller communities (the question I asked was: ‘What do you think this project told people about this community that is different from how it is portrayed in the media?’). Even though the name of the project does intentionally play on the connection with MBFGW, I had not expected the programme to feature as prominently as it did in all the interviews I conducted, both with those involved in the delivery of the project, and the participants. And yet, the programme seemed to have cast an oppressive shadow on all the interviewees’ experiences of the project.
The discussion that follows is my effort to make sense of the unexpected evidence of the overbearing influence of the MBFGW series on the experience of those involved in the Our Big Real Gypsy Lives project, and the obvious connection they saw with questions of cultural value and recognition. For the purpose of this article, then, the interview scripts and the ‘project book’ (a memento of the project including images, drawings and poetry, and an oral history CD produced by the participating children and their families) were analysed, through coding, for evidence of the ways in which the representation of the GRT community in MBFGW has shaped not only the project, but also the team’s experience of interaction with members of the community, and the experiences of the community members themselves as they engaged with the project. Whilst the term ‘cultural value’ was not often used, the interview data in particular clearly brought up experiences of tensions, misrecognition and the kind of struggles over meaning and representation that are at the heart of cultural politics and the social reproduction of value.

Whose idea of cultural value?

Consider the reality TV programme My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding. The BAFTA-nominated MBFGW was broadcast weekly on Channel 4 between 2011 and 2013, and represents, in the words of its producers, ‘Channel 4’s highest-rating documentary series of all time’. The programme is organised around ‘acts of consumption linked to social rites of passage’ (Bell 2015: 134), mostly weddings, but Holy Communions, Christenings and other key occasions for the social reproduction of GRT identity (e.g. horse fairs, bare knuckle boxing competitions, etc.) also feature. The programme followed young brides-to-be from the Gypsy and Traveller communities and their families across the UK as they plan their big day, and indulge in extravagant, showy wedding dresses and lavish and seemingly over-the-top parties. The wedding dresses and cakes—inevitably custom designed and made for the featured brides—and the seemingly reckless spending of money on the part of a community that many perceive as outside of ‘normal’ economic structures (self-employment is traditional and underemployment an issue within the community) are key tropes in the programme. As Emma Bell (Bell 2015: 134) observes, ‘[t]he exchange of money for products is both the axis of the show’s narrative and its margins: the actual costs of products, services, bets, or wages are alluded to as “excessive” but flagged up as “restricted” knowledge’, because the programme participants refused to discuss their sources of income on camera. As a result, MBFGW constructs GRT identity as excessively materialistic and vulgar, as ‘un-civic economic activity and conspicuous low-taste-high-cost consumption’ (Bell 2015: 128).

Like so much of reality TV, MBFGW represents an indisputable creative industries success story: the figure of 8.4 million viewers for the first series’ second episode make it Channel 4’s eighth highest-rating programme ever, and MBFGW has provided the network’s highest ratings since their big reality hit Big Brother in 2008 (Frost 2011). In March 2012, audience figures for Episode 1, series 2 of Big Fat Gypsy Weddings had consolidated at 9.2 million viewers. In the same year, Firecracker, the production company that made the programme, won the ‘Best International Sale Award’ at the Broadcast Awards, a key industry accolade. The judges said the show had ‘made a significant mark on the international market, with some staggering deals’ (Broadcast 2012).

Such deals meant that, by 2012, MBFGW had already generated sales revenue of £3.5m from deals in 81 territories, which included lucrative sales to both terrestrial and cable channels (a rare feat in TV), including a €300,000 deal with Vox in Germany (Ibid.). As explained in the write up of the awards by professional publication Broadcast, which runs the awards, not long after the UK broadcast of the first series of MBFGW in 2011, ‘distributor Zodiak Rights and producer Firecracker Films secured a format and finished programme deal with US cable network TLC worth $4m (£2.6m)’ (Ibid.). This marked the global spread of MBFGW, as Discovery acquired the series for Western Europe, Latin America and Italy, and BBC Worldwide Africa has started to broadcast MBFGW on their BBC Lifestyle channel (Ibid.). In addition, the programme has also sprouted a number of spin-off series, such as Thelma’s Gypsy Girls (2012), focusing on the wedding dressmaker
Thelma Madine (the maker of most of the wedding dresses featured in the original MGFGW programmes). This was also broadcast on Channel 4, whilst in the US a new series Gypsy Girls was first broadcasted on the TLC network in 2013, running for four seasons until July 2015. Several similar programmes have appeared that the past ten years (several produced by Firecracker Films, the company that made MGFGW), so much so that we can now speak of a distinct reality TV/documentary sub-genre: gypsy-focused reality/factual programming.

This exponential growth in ‘Gypsies-themed’ reality TV is especially remarkable if we consider that MBFGW started life as a one-off show broadcast in 2010, which was only developed into a series following exceptional viewing figures (Jensen and Ringrose 2014). The economic value of this scale of highly successful and profitable TV productions is obvious, and nobody could deny the contribution that Firecracker Films—with revenues up from £8.9m to £13.4m year on year in 2012 (Dams 2012)—are likely to have made to the impressive economic data that DCMS regularly features on its website. Indeed, in their 2012 study, Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood on the basis of industry financial data have shown that, even in the midst of a serious economic recession, reality television had been able to turn around remarkable profits for the British television industry, earning directors of production companies millions in bonuses alone, whilst the protagonists of the programmes in questions are largely working-class and usually unpaid for their lucrative services.

Beyond economic value?

Reality TV might be exploitative, but it is certainly very lucrative, definitely a thriving corner of the cultural and creative British ecosystem, and thus an important factor in the generation of those much vaunted £87.4bn that the creative sector apparently contributes to the British economy. Accordingly, MBFGW is unquestionably a glowing example of a cultural product generating substantial economic value for the creative industries (and one could then hypothesise a resulting broader benefit to the national economy). In addition to these exquisitely economic benefits, the enduring popularity of the programme (a popularity which, as we have seen, has now acquired an international, if not even a global dimension) indicates the extent to which MBFGW has also provided, over its lifetime, a range of more distinctively non-economic benefits to its viewers: whether they might be expressed in terms of fun and enjoyment (albeit at the expense of others), well-being or relaxation, it seems evident that the viewing experience on offer has been appreciated by millions of TV viewers in Britain and internationally.

Furthermore, amid the criticism and controversy generated by the MBFGW programmes, their producers, as well as Channel 4, have insistently argued for what they posited as the more exquisitely cultural value of the series. In a section entitled ‘Diverse Voices’, Channel 4’s report and financial statement for 2011 states:

Channel 4 gave viewers unprecedented insight into marginalised communities [...] We also wanted to give voice to other overlooked communities that face discrimination—those with facial disfigurements, the gypsy and traveller community, and transgender people. [...] 79% of respondents to another survey said they had learnt something new about the traveller community from Big Fat Gypsy Weddings (Channel 2011: 48).

The report does not go, however, into the important matter of what viewers might have learnt about this community, and whether the information absorbed was accurate and truthful, or rather the result of careful editing that ultimately reinforced stereotypes and offered a portrayal of Gypsy and Traveller communities as an exotic other (Jensen and Ringrose 2014; Tremlett 2013; Tyler 2013).

As we will see in detail, criticism has been waged against the programme not only from academic quarters, but also from certain parts of the media (see Tremlett 2014 for a discussion), yet MBFGW has also received public recognitions of value beyond high viewing figures: it was voted ‘Most Groundbreaking Programme’ at the 2010 edition of the Cultural Diversity Awards, an accolade run by the industry membership forum Cultural Diversity Network, and, in 2011, Series 1 was nominated for a BAFTA in the YouTube ‘Audience Vote’ category. Considering the role that
awards have in the legitimation and assertion of prestige and cultural value (English 2008), we can only conclude that, contestation notwithstanding, the awards MBFGW has received can be interpreted as markers of positive valuation from both audiences and creative industries professionals.

And yet, MBFGW can also be seen as the weekly public humiliation and mockery of one of the already most vulnerable, vituperated and discriminated ethnic minorities living in the UK, which the programme portrays as the ultimate ‘other’ among us. As the Traveller Times journalist Jake Bowers pithily put it: ‘We’ve become trailer trash versions of the Flintstones there for your TV entertainment’ (cited in Tremlett 2014: 320).

Tremlett (Tremlett 2014: 324) offers a detailed analysis of the framing and narrative techniques used in the MBFGW programmes and comes to the conclusion that ‘[t]he material is selected and rearranged so that in the end we have a particular world described in stereotypical, racialized terms’. Far from giving voice to overlooked communities that face discrimination, as claimed by Channel 4, MBFGW in fact has played a pivotal role in legitimising and giving unprecedented visibility to the discrimination, ostracism and victimisation of the Gypsies and Travellers living in Britain. The othering of Gypsies and Travellers through their portrayal in MBFGW and in its spin off programmes and publications as unproductive, vulgar and ostentatious people, holding on to obsolete values and a lifestyle that marks them as outlandish outsiders is instrumental to the articulation of their condition of exclusion and disadvantage as resulting from cultural factors (rather than the product of neoliberal social structures and material inequality), thus displacing responsibility from society’s institutions to the Gypsy and Traveller community itself (Tyler 2013).

The price of misrecognition

The negative reaction and the upset caused by the programme among Gypsy and Traveller communities is well documented. This extract from a Guardian article featuring an interview with Jane Jackson of the Rural Media Company, a charity that has a long experience of working with Gypsy and Traveller communities in England, well exemplifies the frustration they felt at its portrayal on MBFGW:

‘It’s posing as a documentary, the voiceover is saying we’re going to let you into the secrets of the traveller community – and it’s just not true’ […]

‘They’re made to look totally feckless, not really to be taken seriously as an ethnic group’ […] ‘I think Channel 4 should be ashamed of themselves for pillorying a community who already face a lot of prejudice’ (Frost 2011).

This exasperation over systematic misrepresentation of their customs in MBFGW also emerged in the interviews I conducted with members of the Gypsy and Traveller community in Lincolnshire. A Romany Gypsy female adult participant in the Our Big Real Gypsy Lives project articulated her frustration when recounting the work she did in Lincolnshire schools as part of the project, trying to rectify the inaccuracies of her community’s media portrayal:

But when that, when that Big Fat Gypsy Wedding got put on, on the telly, it was a lot different than the way we lived, a lot different? So and like I say with, if the … some little kids, oh yeah, Big Fat, yeah we watched it, we watched it and we turn round and say, well that isn’t the way we live.

This ostensibly corroborates the conclusion that Bev Skeggs and Helen Wood (2012: 7) have come to in their extensive study of the gender and class politics inherent in reality TV: ‘[p]aradoxically reality television has found a formula for extracting profit from the people with the least person-value’ (in the context of a capitalist and neoliberal order). Even the Daily Mail, one of the most popular (and right-leaning) tabloids in the country published stern criticism of the programme, when its then film critic, Ian Hyland (2012) commented:

We’re invited to stare at the supposed freak show in wonderment, despite the fact that it isn’t actually that wondrous. And we are encouraged to laugh at and judge the participants. We’re given close-ups of their chubby bodies spilling out of skimpy outfits.
Annabel Tremlett (Tremlett 2014: 324) concludes her thoughtful discussion of the portrayal of the Gypsy and Traveller community in MBFGW and affiliated programmes suggesting that the representation template that can be seen in operation ‘is easily recognizable as combining old Gypsy stereotypes with broader racialized stereotypes, what could be termed [following Stuart Hall] a “racialized regime of representation”’. What we are witnessing here, indeed, is not just the stereotypical representation of an ethnic group and the resulting misrecognition, but, arguably, its stigmatisation, which as Tyler (Tyler 2013: 8) points out, ‘operates as a form of governance which legitimizes the reproduction and entrenchment of inequalities and injustices’.

**Representation and symbolic violence**

On the basis of the analysis so far, it can be arguably concluded that the consciously racialised and demeaning way in which the Gypsy and Traveller communities filmed for MBFGW are portrayed through framing, editing and narrative manipulation amounts to what Pierre Bourdieu has referred to as ‘symbolic violence’. This, in his words, is ‘a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling’ (cited in Swartz 2013: 83–4).

As Charles Taylor (Taylor 1994: 25), one of the founding figures of academic debates over identity politics and ‘the struggle for recognition’, puts it, the effects of this type of misrecognition are severe, and can affect the victim’s sense of self:

> The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.

This quote from the *Our Big Real Gypsy Lives* project’s book, which includes extracts of the oral histories collected as part of the participatory activities, is telling in this respect. Linda, one of the adults involved in the project, as part of a piece recalling her time in school, commented:

> Am I proud of being a Gypsy? Yes and no. You know by people’s attitudes if you bring it up, sometimes you feel awkward and you don’t want people to know. Sometimes you keep it to yourself – I don’t care what anyone says – it’s not that you’re not proud, you just don’t know what people’s reactions will be (p. 23).

Misrecognition and stigmatisation have indeed very real damaging consequences for their victims, including the possibility of physical as well as psychological harm. This passage from an open letter to Channel 4 written in 2012 by Filip Borev, a prominent young blogger of Romany Gypsy heritage, fleshes out compellingly the reality of lived misrecognition:

> Dear Channel 4,

> I am writing to you with the hope that you will stop ruining my life. […]

> The myths that you have been spreading have not helped matters. Indeed, I was subjected to physical attacks during your last series of your ‘documentary’ which ultimately led to my expulsion from school (long story), whilst my 12 year old cousin was beat up on her way home from school by a gang of girls who were calling her a prostitute. […]

> We suffer from discrimination on a daily basis and our human rights have historically been violated, yet you deem it acceptable to broadcast a misleading ‘documentary’ that has been made not to raise awareness of our plight but for entertainment. We are not a joke, we are human beings and your work of fiction is only strengthening stereotypes and ignorance.

More formally, the harm of misrecognition caused by MBFGW has been documented in the submission presented by the Irish Traveller Movement of Britain (ITMB) in 2012 to the Leveson
enquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the British press. Here, ITMB (2012) gathered compelling evidence of the ways in which the portrayal of the GRT community in MBFGW had affected its coverage in the press and normalised negative language. For example, Brian Foster, Chairman of the Advisory Council for the Education of Romany and other Travellers is reported as noting:

‘Big fat gypsy’ has joined ‘pikey’ as an acceptable form of address in some schools and girls have been subjected to sexual harassment by boys emulating the dubious practice of ‘grabbing’ [boys holding girls with force and demanding a kiss] sensationalised by the programme. The tabloids follow the programme assiduously seeking to capitalise on aspects of the portrayal of these communities (ITMB 2012: 15).

The harm of misrecognition, however, does not only manifest itself in stigma and its attendant implications in terms of self-perception and social status, but, rather, has very real repercussions on all aspects of life, including the economic. This emerged very clearly in the second interview with Gordon Boswell, who discussed openly the negative impact of MBFGW on his wedding carriage rental business:

I do weddings with the horses, this last 3 years has been very, very quiet and I believe they now know that, when I turn out, I’m a Gypsy doing their wedding and I don’t think some of them, it doesn’t make any difference, some people love it, but other people have got that feeling, that will be the stigma, oh we don’t want a Gypsy to do our wedding.

This kind of symbolic violence and harmful consequences of the broadcasting of MBFGW would be enough to warrant a careful reflection on the responsibilities that the media and the cultural and creative industries have when they portray ethnic minorities. Yet, I would argue that the misrecognition, stereotyping and stigmatisation of the Gypsy and Romany communities on national television, which amount to their construction as ‘social abjects’ (Tyler 2013), is especially poignant and problematic. This is because the Gypsy and Romany community do not just face the challenges common to all minorities struggling with the mainstream for voice and recognition. In fact, the Roma, Gypsy and Romany communities in Britain, and throughout Europe, are amongst the groups that are most discriminated against and that face the toughest challenges in terms of poverty, and difficulties in accessing educational, health and social security services (Celmyn et al. 2009).

It is important to emphasise that the reason why the nature of the portrayal of the Gypsies and Travellers on MBFGW is so problematic, is that it takes place against the backdrop of representation in the wider media and society that is also highly negative, discriminatory and often blatant in the vilification and disgust that it pours over this community (Richardson 2006; Tyler 2013).

In 2003, the diversity charity Stonewall commissioned a survey from IPSOS MORI which showed that Gypsy and Travellers are one of the most disparaged groups in British society: over one third of British adult respondents had no qualms in admitting openly to being prejudiced against them (Richardson and Ryder 2012: 4). A new poll conducted by YouGov in 2017 on behalf of The Traveller Movement (a community development charity) to investigate current levels of prejudice suggest that, if anything, the discrimination faced by the community has worsened: by way of example, 13% of British adult respondents ‘believed pubs and restaurants should refuse entry to a Gypsy/Traveller because they are a Gypsy/Traveller’ (YouGov 2017: 6), and 42% stated they ‘would be unhappy with a close relative having a long-term relationship or marriage with a Gypsy/Traveller’ (p. 4). These percentages were significantly higher than for other minority or excluded groups (refugee/asylum seeker, Black Caribbean).

The effects of consistently derogatory media portrayals are poignantly articulated by the Irish Traveller folk singer Thomas Carthy in terms that echo Charles Taylor’s definition of misrecognition that was referred to previously:

The press is full of stereotypes of who we are – so was my Big Fat Gypsy Wedding. And the stereotypes are mainly negative. […] It has a devastating effect on the Travelling people. It eats at your self-confidence, self-image and self-esteem and causes bad health in your mind and in your body. When I see the headlines it feels like a physical blow. It feels like we have been knocked backwards when we are trying to step forward (in ITMB 2012: 16).
In the case of the Gypsies and Travellers, the ‘harm of misrecognition’ and the media-fuelled ‘disgust consensus’ (Tyler 2013: 142) need to be seen in the context of the harms of misdistribution of resources and services that this community has long been suffering, alongside centuries-old discrimination and (until fairly recently) persecution, which have been well documented (Kenrick and Clark 1999; Powell 2008; Richardson 2006; Richardson and Ryder 2012; Tyler 2013).

The British courts have established that Gypsies, Scottish Gypsies and Irish Travellers are a distinct and recognised ethnic group for the purposes of the Race Relations Act 1976 (Richardson and Ryder 2012: 5). Their legal status, thus, reflects this group’s history, linguistic and cultural heritage. Indeed, they are a culturally rich group: the problem is that this heritage and cultural wealth is not valued in contemporary society (Acton 1974; 1997). The anthropologist Judith Okely has conducted extensive and influential research on the origin, culture and the ‘modern misrepresentations’ of the Gypsies (Okely 1983: 28 ff.): their alleged preference for isolation, fixed images of their lives in rural contexts, in horse-drawn caravans, and ways of making a living based on what Gmelch (Gmelch 1986: 307) explains as ‘organisational flexibility’ as self-employed labourers, but which is often seen as dubious and shady. Jane Helleiner (1998, 2000) has done similarly germinal work documenting the anti-traveller sentiment in Ireland during the war and the post-war period, its recrudescence in the 1960s and its present-day incarnation.

This long history of hostility makes it harder for the community to be fully involved in the cultural life of the country, from whose institutions they are mostly excluded, or in which they are, at the very least, under-represented. Where they are ‘present’ in mainstream British culture, that is largely in highly mediated, exoticised, edited and choreographed ways, which are not fighting against, but are actually promoting and reproducing the misrepresentation and misrecognition of the Gypsy and Travellers (Tremlett 2013, 2014). This exclusion, inevitably, is reflected in low life expectancy, higher rates of infant mortality, poor rates of educational participation and attainment, and growing rates of unemployment and welfare dependence in these communities (Commission For Racial Equality 2006: 13). And yet, despite scoring badly according to most social and health indicators, it is important to note that Gypsy and Traveller communities tend not to be represented as belonging to the ranks of the ‘deserving poor’ (Bhopal and Myers 2008: 158).

The empirical research conducted for this project corroborates the negative impact on the Gypsy and Traveller community of the MBFGW programmes: every single interviewee commented on how inescapable the show was, both for the creative professionals delivering the participatory arts project and for the community itself when dealing with members of other communities. When asked about what she had learnt from the experience of being involved in *Our Big Real Big Gypsy Lives*, the community filmmaker in the creative team answered:

*Well, I've learnt a lot about the Gypsy community and I've learned that trust's been absolutely destroyed between the Gypsy community and the outside community or whatever the correct word is. I've learnt that that has been portrayed and destroyed millions of times over, which I didn't, I suppose I wasn't aware before.*

The consultants at cultural solutions uk have also reported increasing tensions between groups within the Gypsy and Traveller communities on account of the widely felt resentment against the Irish Travellers, who feature most prominently in the programme, and whose ‘antics’ on camera have been perceived to have damaged the reputation of the entire travelling population. For instance, Gordon Boswell commented:

*You've got the Big Gypsy Wedding, they are Irish people, they are a type of a gypsy person, but I can't call them proper gypsies or proper Romanies, they're Irish and that is who we're taking notice of and they are but, it's just very difficult to, to get it all over, out to the public sort of thing. I try my best in the way, when I talk to a party [of visitors to the Museum], a group of people and try my best to talk about it and then when they go and leave here they'll shake my hand and say it's the best two hours we've had for years, and that's a nice feeling you think you've done some, you've got something through.*
David Lambert, owner of cultural solutions uk and manager of the Our Big Real Gypsy Lives project commented:

In Lincolnshire as well, we’ll get to that in a minute, erm as soon as that camera came out there was suspicion. And so there was always these conversations around Channel 4, you know and it became quite divisive. Because, err, as I mentioned in the early days with Arts Award, we were working with Romany gypsies and Irish travellers and Channel 4 is predominantly Irish travellers and therefore it gave an opportunity for the Romany gypsies to say it’s not us, it’s them. So how divisive is that? […]

So those sorts of conversation that we were having and the artists were having with the children and young people and to a certain extent, their parents was all around Channel 4. So when **** [a member of the creative team], she’ll confirm, erm, one day was having conversation around writing and sort of creative expression, erm they were talking about sort of being happy and truthful, you know the codes. And it just came out, you know this project should be called Our Big Gypsy Lives as a kind of a foil, as a challenge to the Channel 4 documentary.

Gordon Boswell was adamant in declaring that he found MBFGW such an upsetting topic that he did his best to avoid it, although visitors to his museum often did not make that easy for him:

That was horrible. […] er, they've, its been a, its been on everyone's tongue and I shall say to people – it makes them laugh – a coach party coming, don't ever ask me a question about the Big Fat Gypsy Weddings, I don't want to know, […] I say that for a start and that causes a laugh … then it keeps them … well if one mention, does mention it, I says I told you early on … it keeps me out the way of it.

**Assessing the value of MBFGW**

So, what are we to make of MBFGW? Is it a successful example of the ways in which the creative industries can create both economic and cultural value for the benefit of the UK economy and the entertainment of its population? Or is it an exploitative form of symbolic violence and stigmatisation against one of the most disadvantaged and openly discriminated against ethnic groups in Britain? The only legitimate answer to this question is: ‘it depends’; it depends on the basis of whose values, interests and point of view this judgment is made.

MBFGW then becomes a very interesting example of how a single cultural object can become carrier of both positive and negative value, depending on what group’s perspective is adopted to make the assessment. The case study of MBFGW and the Gypsy and Traveller communities living in Lincolnshire displays this duality well, and puts under the spotlight the agonistic character of struggles for the authority to claim cultural value. The words of Jackie Boyd, a Gypsy pastor who had to face bullying and harassment after MBFGW was broadcasted, make the relativity of cultural value plain for all to see. Addressing herself to Firecracker Films, she said: ‘What you have done may be a good thing in your community and you’ve obviously made a lot of money out of it. But it has brought great shame and fear to mine’ (cited in Tyler 2013: 147).

Boyd’s words go at the very heart of the cultural value question: what matters more, the economic value generated by MBFGW and other reality TV shows, or the negative social impact (and therefore value) generated by MBFGW on the Gypsy and Traveller community? And more importantly still, who gets to have the final say on this matter? And what role should the state play in this struggle over meaning, representation and value—especially as the state is hardly a neutral bystander in these (symbolic) power struggles?

If this discussion has shown anything, it is that cultural value is not a zero-sum game, so these different, and even opposing, dimensions of value do not cancel one another out. However, some groups in society have easier and uncontested access to mechanisms for the expression and pursuit of their own interests and values; others, like the Gypsies and Travellers the world over, have to battle for recognition, and have a more limited control over influential means of symbolic representation such as recognised cultural institutions and the cultural and creative industries.
Contrary to the predominant arts advocacy and creative industries rhetoric, the label ‘cultural value’ does not refer to something easily identifiable, monolithic or homogeneous that simply needs to be adequately described, captured, evaluated or measured. Cultural value is, in fact, something that is continually defined and redefined, contested and fought over, and therefore has a clear relational nature. A cultural activity or object that is valued by one group, and whose consumption offers that group a series of positive benefits or desirable wider socio-economic impacts might at the same time also be an instrument of symbolic violence on a different group, and one of the means through which its social subjugation, public humiliation, disempowerment, marginalisation and stigmatisation take place. Yet, cultural policy discourse very rarely acknowledges the true conflictual and agonistic nature of matters of cultural value and the role that power (or lack thereof) has in shaping public conversations about how arts and culture function in society. (Belﬁore 2013).

Conclusion: against de-politicising trends in cultural policy

This article has shown that, contrary to the simplistic celebrations of the value of arts and culture that prevail in public debates over cultural and creative industry policy, the process of value allocation, and consequently that of resource distribution, is not a neutral one, but rather the site of tensions, struggles for power, and the scene of a complex politics of representation, identity, taste and class. There are clearly winners and losers in the struggle over cultural value, yet cultural policy discourses seem intent on only focusing public attention on the winners. This opens up fundamental questions of democratic accountability: whose ideas of ‘cultural value’ drive decisions over investment and funding justified in terms of public beneﬁts? And can the process through which cultural authority is exercised in this decision-making process be made genuinely democratic and accountable? What is the responsibility of public policy towards those who appear as ‘losers’ in these struggles over validation of their cultural value?

These are obviously very important but also highly complex and politically delicate questions. Public debates surrounding cultural policies, however, do not always reﬂect this complexity and this diﬃculty. This is primarily because of the other, connected but distinct, way in which cultural value has become crucial to cultural policy debates over the past 25 years: the evermore pressing need for the cultural and creative sector to ‘make the case’ for public investment. The facile celebratory rhetoric of the creative industries as ‘economic powerhouse’ is a direct result of the primacy of advocacy in creative economy discourse (Belﬁore 2012 and 2015).

This discussion of the inherently and inevitably political essence of cultural value allows us to sketch the signiﬁcant challenges it opens up for cultural policy research and practice. What needs to be tackled, then, is how to develop new critical approaches that:

- Acknowledge the real, negotiated and often antagonistic nature of cultural value.
- Have a focus on equality, social justice, inclusion, diversity and fair access to the means of cultural production, but go beyond a perfunctory celebration of diﬀerence that fails to lift itself above a tick-boxing exercise. The aim should be to ﬁnd ways to empower and support communities that do not enjoy the privilege of an armory of solid cultural, social and educational capital, to elaborate their own representations of themselves, and to articulate their own claims to cultural authority and value (as was indeed the goal of the Our Big Real Gypsy Lives project). This is crucial to ensure wide enjoyment of what the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe refers to as ‘the right to take part in cultural life’ and sees as ‘pivotal to the system of human rights’ (Council of Europe 2012).
- Avoid the ‘deﬁcit model’ (Miles and Gibson 2016) that drives so much of contemporary widening participation initiatives in the UK, especially those targeted at groups unhelpfully and patronizingly labeled as ‘disengaged’, ‘low participation’, ‘disenfranchised’, etc., which equates cultural authority with cultural value, and elevates production and consumption of traditional, ‘legitimate’ forms of culture over all others.
What this article has aimed to show is how fundamental questions of power and cultural authority are to the cultural value debate, in spite of their invisibility in the public official cultural discourse, which is one of celebration of the arts, their claimed benefits and contribution to national wealth. The analysis presented here supports the argument made in 2006 by Jim McGuigan that Cultural Studies (from which Cultural Policy Studies originates) has lost its original commitment to producing research with the ambition ‘to inform action in cultural politics’. McGuigan (McGuigan 2006: 138) discusses other scholars lamenting the political ‘quietism’ that afflicts too much of contemporary cultural analysis and concludes that ‘Cultural Studies should renew its commitment to critique in the public interest’. Philo and Miller (Philo and Miller 2001: 75) are among the scholars who share this view:

There is a deafening silence in media and cultural studies about the consequences of popular culture and the media. We mean both in the more familiar sense of consequences in terms of public beliefs and also, more fundamentally, in the sense of the consequences in terms of the distribution of power and resources and the reproduction or transformation of cultures and societies.

This article has endeavoured to break this silence, and to contribute to the renewal of Cultural Studies’ commitment to critique in the interest of social justice and equity. As Jordan and Weedon (Jordan and Weedon 1995: 62) remind us, ‘culture plays a central role in the legitimation of social relations of inequality and in the struggle to transform them’. Hence why struggles over cultural value and authority have winners and losers. This article has shown that there is a clear choice to be made for creative industries scholars and practitioners: on whose side shall we be?

Notes


Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

The research presented in this article was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (award number AH/L005115/1).

Notes on contributor

Eleonora Bellife is Professor of Communication and Media Studies at Loughborough University, UK and editor of Palgrave’s book series New Directions in Cultural Policy Research. She has published extensively on cultural politics and policy, and particularly the place that notions of the ‘social impacts’ of the arts have had in British cultural policy discourses. For Palgrave she has published, with Oliver Bennett, The Social Impact of the Arts: An intellectual history (2008) and co-edited with Anna Upchurch a volume entitled Humanities in the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Utility and Markets (2013). More recently, her research has focused on researching the politics of cultural value, and she was Director of Studies of the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value (2013–5), and co-author of its final report, Enriching Britain: Culture, creativity and growth, published in February 2015. Eleonora is co-investigator on the AHRC funded Connected Communities project ‘Understanding Everyday Participation – Articulating Cultural Values’, and research lead in the Paul Hamlyn-funded 3-year Fun Palaces Ambassador Programme. Since 2016 she has led for Loughborough University’s involvement as Founding Associate in the ‘Tate Exchange’ programme with Tate Museums.
References
