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Gateway: Experience economy and spatial strategies

The 'experience industry' – concepts and contexts

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Introduction

The background for this paper is my struggle to grasp what the experience industry is about – and at the same time to find a theoretical platform suited for a further investigation of the topic. Several factors involved in the development of both the experience industry and in the theoretical approach to the field needs to be addressed in order to accomplish this.

First - a backdrop for the development of the experience industry: around 1970-80 rather radical changes in consumption- and production patterns are detected, that can briefly be summarized as in figure 1.

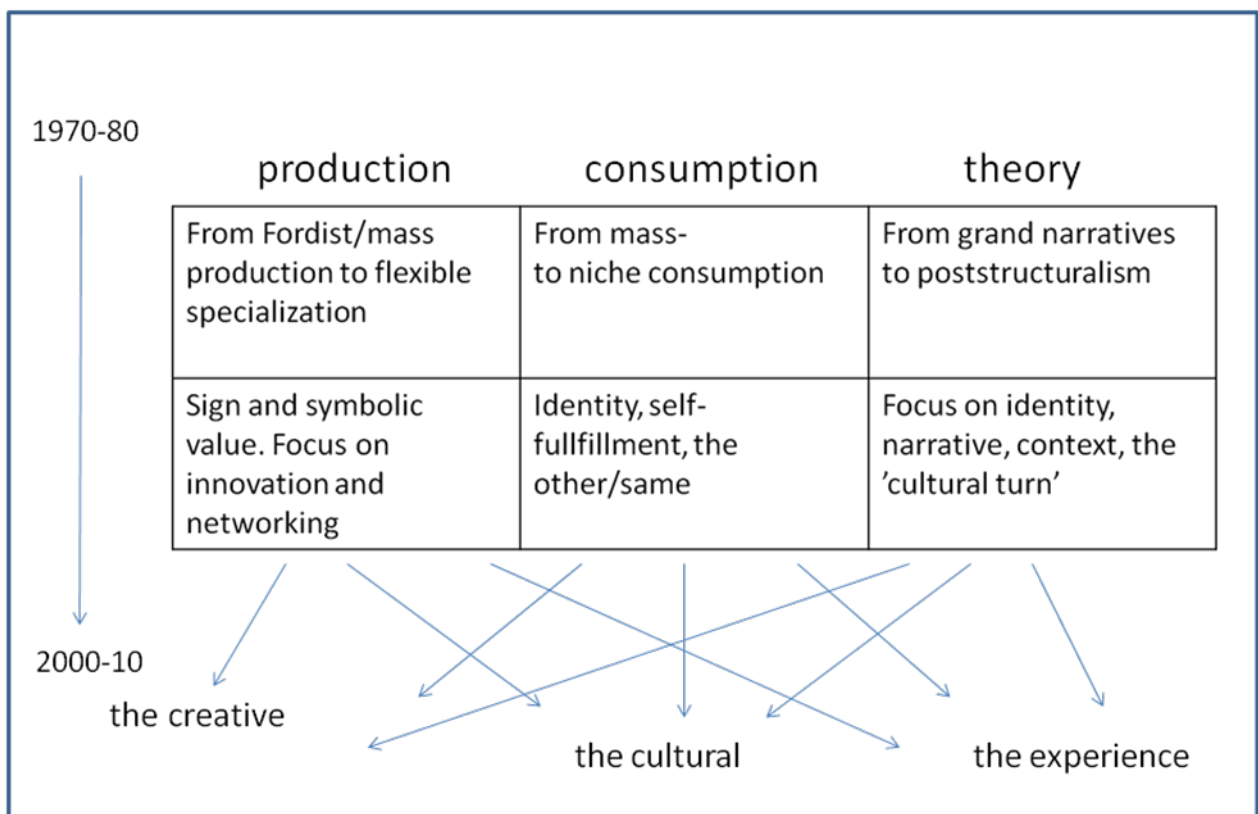


Figure 1: Backdrop

From around 1970 Piore and Sabel (1984) point to a change in production patterns. Mass production started to give way to a different kind of production focusing on symbolic and aesthetic values. There is a debate about the degree of this change, whether the “post-Fordistic” production systems replaced the Fordistic, or if they rather co-exist (Dale, 1994). Never the less, instead of mass produced goods dominating in all markets, from around 1980 it is clear that smaller producers aiming

at niche markets are succeeding in certain markets. *“Responses to these new consumer markets demanded faster and more detailed flows of information back to the producer and an ability to respond to quickly changing demand through a more flexible production process”* (O'Connor, 2007:28). This shift from mass production to ‘flexible specialization’ coincided with a number of radical changes in the academy as well. Most predominantly it coincided with both a ‘postmodern’ (a contested term, see Dear, 2001; Giddens, 1990; Grbich, 2004) and a cultural turn (Barnes, 2001; Barnett, 1998; Cloke, 1997; Rodriguez-Pose, 2001) in the academy. In addition and specifically relevant for this case, it coincided with a focus within the social sciences on the relationship between identity and consumption (Baudrillard, 1996; Bourdieu, 1986; Giddens, 1991; Sarup, 1996).

Sign value and the importance of symbolic content are by now widely recognized, both with regards to the physical and immaterial products as well as for the business or brand itself (Klein, 2000; Lash and Urry 1994; Mach, 1993). Consumption, no longer being a simple act of purchase is rather *“a social process whereby people relate to goods and artefacts in complex ways, transforming their meanings as they incorporate them into their lives”* (Jackson,1995:1914). Whereas this was recognized in certain products related to identity formation some years ago, the development seems to be going in a direction where almost any purchase now can be linked to identity in one way or another.

The way we perceive identity, both within the academy and outside are linked to these changes. Instead of viewing identity as congenital, stable and fixed, we now see it as temporary, fluid and narrated – and therefore up for alterations. There has been a focus on the liberating aspects associated with the post-traditional society, where the individual freely can choose where to live, whom to live with, what to buy – as well as what to do (Jameson, 2001; Valentine, 2001). The purchase of experiences I see as a prolongation of this development. This ‘freedom’ however implies that your choices to a much larger extent say something about who you would like to portray yourself to be - since your surroundings no longer supply this information. Giddens (1991) (among others) refer to this process of selection as a person’s *narrative*.

These changes lead to an increased interest in the cultural and creative matters, not only exclusively to the economic field, but also in the social and human sciences, often referred to as the ‘cultural turn’. At the same time, however, several assumptions regarding knowledge production are challenged within the academy in the form of a ‘postmodern turn’. Not only is society changing, but the same can be said about the way we view our knowledge about this society.

These 'turns' offers not only new fields of research but also new ways of approaching knowledge when studying these fields. In this picture then, where does the experience industry fit in? What does the concept mean, how do we demarcate our field of interest and what could be fruitful ways of approaching the subject?

To answer these questions at least to some extent, I will discuss the use of concepts, first in general, before addressing the concept *experience*. To understand and be able to study the experience industry as a separate entity, I argue for a contextual approach, "...purposefully side-stepping the now locked-in and tired refrain of 'let's join economy and culture'" (Crewe, 2003:352), and rather focusing on including "dynamic notions of space, time and performance" (Ek, 2008:122).

In the following sections I will first present some of Mieke Bal's (2002) theory about concepts, before I briefly outline the concept *experience*. The statement "The most confusing ones are the over-arching concepts we tend to use as if their meanings were as clear-cut and common as those of any words in any given language" (Bal, 2002:25) seems to point directly at a problem within this field of research. Using a concept like *experience* is of course problematic without a clear definition. The concept is used not only in a variety of ways in academic writings, but also in ordinary language, which of course adds to the confusion.

Concepts

According to Bal (2002) a 'concept' should not be mistaken for a 'word' or a 'label' – but rather be seen as a miniature theory that can act as a useful tool in an analysis. She suggests that "concepts can become a third partner in the otherwise totally unverifiable and symbiotic interaction between critic and object" (Bal, 2002:23). Since concepts are not 'objective representations' (what is?), their intersubjective understandings should always be thoroughly defined. From what I have learned so far from the field of the 'experience industry' this task is not yet completed. The process of definition is not a simple task – as concepts are not fixed and stable entities, but rather flexible and usually related to one or many disciplinary traditions. If we can conclude that since the critique of the positivism in the 70's, followed by the postmodern turn - 'objective representation' and 'neutrality' has lost a lot of its influence, the objective could rather be to encourage positioning.

Concepts are debatable, and these debates can be very fruitful. Even so, Bal (2002:28) stresses the point that a "concept is best deployed in a specific meaning because the results can then be discussed" and she continues to argue that this point "is indispensable if we are to get out of turf-policing defensiveness". To be able to have a constructive discussion, we must agree to some extent

on the meaning of central concepts – both with regards to *how* we use the concepts as well on *what* they contain.

The point of defining a concept is not for everyone to agree, rather for no one to be indifferent. If we do not clearly state what we mean by a concept, or in Bal's (2002) terminology, outline our 'mini-theory' - discussing it can prove to be rather meaningless. The socio-cultural field of scientific practice subjugates normative epistemology, as the rules of the field are constantly changing. Bal (2002:31-2) further underlines that for a concept to be rendered adequate it does not imply truthful representation. A concept is adequate "*to the extent that it produces the effective organization of the phenomena rather than offering a mere projection of the ideas and presuppositions of its advocates*". A constant reconsideration of the concepts ability to organize phenomena in a new and relevant way is how we can measure and evaluate its productivity. "*...in the reorganization it facilitates, a concept generates the production of meaning*" (Bal, 2002:32).

Experience

What do we mean or refer to when we talk about an *experience* in relation to the experience industry? The first challenge regarding the concept 'experience' for me is that the Norwegian term 'opplevelse' is not completely synonymous. Since I will be doing my fieldwork in Norway, but write in English, I need to think through what this translation challenge implies. I will leave that part out of this paper though, since most readers of this paper probably are not Norwegian-speaking.

But this still leaves out what an *experience* really is, and why is it so sought after? Jantzen and Vetner (2007) refer to Gerhard Schulze's (1992) *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft* as the most important sociological contribution to the *phenomenon* experience. He here accounts for a fundamental change in modern individual's value base: for many people the desire for experiences has become a decisive parameter in everyday life. Schulze meticulously accounts for specific ways to manage this urge for experiences in group-specific sets of values. While some groups find the experience they seek in being challenged and getting their identity 'tested' – others prefer experiences which in one way or another are reassuring and create feelings of security (this dichotomy I find to be strongly supported by psychological research¹)(see also Weber (2001) in relation to adventure tourism). Experiences understood in this way, are not just a legitimate way to understand one self – but also a group specific way of narrating one's identity (Jantzen, 2007).

¹ See for instance: Roberti, J. (2003) A review of behavioral and biological correlates of sensation seeking. *Journal of Research in Personality*, Vol. 38(3):256-279.

But back to the understanding of the actual experience – what characterizes an experience?

Jantzen and Vetner (2007) (still inspired by Schulze) locate three levels within the individual:

- The sensed impressions the individual experiences in direct participation with the object world.
- The evaluations the individual makes based on these sensed impressions.
- The customs and routines the individual then establishes as a result of these impressions – which then evolves into somewhat of an embodied knowledge about where, when and how it is interesting to experience something.

Experience understood in this way can then be structured on three levels:

The first would then be the neurophysiologic level – closely tied to the physicality of the organism.

The second would be the evaluative level – where bodily experiences are transformed to emotional

evaluations. The third level is where habits and practices are formed – where the emotional

evaluations are incorporated into cognitive frameworks (see figure 2). Paramount to these levels is

reflection – or the reflexive level. This level is imprinted with idiosyncratic differences due to

individual demographic, cultural and social variation, as well as differences caused by biographic

circumstances.

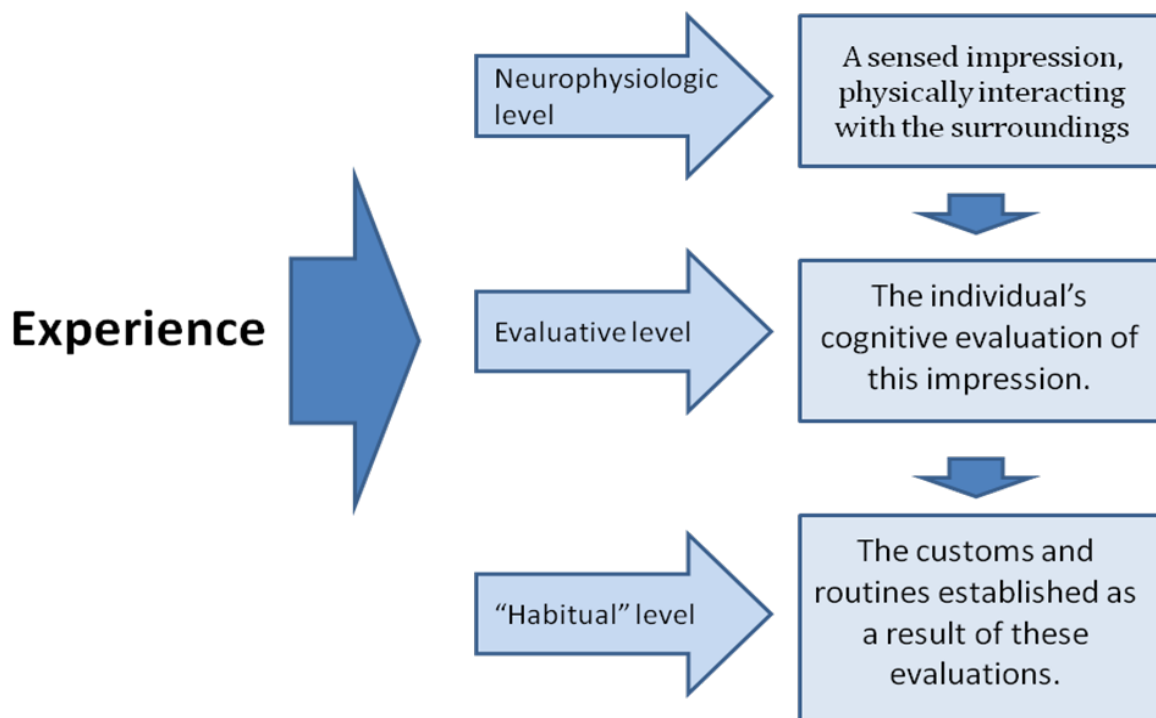


Figure 2: The Experience

Then there is the question of pleasure or happiness – which should be a part of, or the result of, any experience for it to be desired. Jantzen and Vetner (2007) suggest that pleasure occurs when there is an alteration from over- or under stimulation to its opposite. The quicker this alteration occurs, the stronger the sense of pleasure is. They refer to Csikszentmihalyi (1990) that introduces the term ‘flow’ to describe the intensified attention and engagement in the event when we optimize our physical performance. Achieving this flow make us experience pleasure and happiness. *“The concept [flow] describes a particular kind of experience that is so engrossing and enjoyable that it becomes autotelic, that is, worth doing for its own sake even though it may have no consequence outside itself”* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999:824). This could certainly amount as one of the explanations as to why people consume experience products.

Each and every one of us incorporates relevant and interesting experiences in our cognitive framework – or in another word - our taste. Several aspects regarding our taste are relevant to take into consideration in understanding the experience industry. First – our taste tends to have syndrome characteristics – if we prefer a certain product, we tend to like similar products. Secondly, our taste is predominantly collective. That the sole important aspect of an experience is uniqueness is thus a misconception. What we are looking for are experiences that are unique to *us* – that can validate our identity, expand our horizon and lead us to whichever goals we have in our life-project. We still however want a bit of excitement and something that feels “new” to us. A combination of the new and therefore interesting and the known and therefore relevant, is what characterizes an experience product we consider to be enriching. An experience perceived as challenging will be meaningful in relation to identity formation, in a similar manner as when children master new tasks – *I can do more than I thought I could* (Jantzen, 2007:40).

However, they also point to the fact that an experience can be sought after for its social reputation’s sake. *Lifestyle* is a term that illustrates the significant level of similarity in preferences amongst individuals. According to Williams (2001:13) two approaches can be identified in understanding and explaining emotions (which are intrinsically tied to experiences): organismic theory and social constructivism. In the first of these focus is on what goes on internally in the individual as a result of biological factors. From a social constructionist’s viewpoint emotions and experiences are seen as *“wholly or primarily cultural or social, from the public language games within which they are lodged to their discursive construction across time and culture.”* To get a grasp of what experiences are and what they mean to us – I argue that both levels be included in our understanding, linking the individual and internal with the social and in this respect external.

But how do I find “my own” experiences in an experience market that is suppose to appeal to many other people’s taste? The challenge lies in understanding that the nature of an experience is embedded in the reciprocal action between universal response mechanisms and behavioral regulations and subjective opinions. In short; the meaning attributed to an experience is rooted both in the individual’s self image and in his or hers social identity. On the conscious level the experience is related to the temporal aspects of the identity. Impulses and emotions are linked to a *before* and an *after* – gaining explanatory powers and uniqueness. This is of course closely linked to the before mentioned *narrative* (Jantzen, 2007).

Following these points in understanding the actual experience, it seems clear that we here are dealing with products that have moved even further away from standardization and mass production. To provide the consumer with a sought after product it should stimulate the senses in a desired fashion, which is then interpreted and evaluated as positive, before it is ‘attached’ to the consumer’s mental schemes as a positive experience, that could be repeated in the future as well as recommended to others. The experience should provide pleasure from either over- or under stimulation, possibly even a feeling of ‘flow’, and in addition fit to the consumer’s narrative in the sense that his or hers desired lifestyle and social reputation will benefit from it.

Summarizing the content of an experience in this way illustrates that the positive implications of a thorough examination of central concepts hardly can be overrated. Especially in new fields of research it is fundamental to agree on certain aspects to be able to have fruitful discussions. Understanding what an experience means to us as individuals, members of social groups and consumers, is necessary to generate further knowledge about the experience industry, whether we focus on the individual, social, cultural or economical aspects or try combining them.

This leads me to the next issue at hand; the importance of contextual definitions and demarcations – what do I mean by the concept in a specific context, namely the experience industry?

The experience industry

Having outlined the ‘mini-theories’ that lays in the concept experience, it still leaves the question of what *the experience industry* refer to, as opposed to the cultural industry or the creative industry (to name two the most frequently used ones). A number of researchers have already looked at the various concepts and the ways they are applied in these fields of research. And this is my point here – the cultural, the creative and the experience industry are related but separate (this of course

depends on what level one operates within), including where they are applied and which types of industry they include and exclude. In this relatively new field of research it is however not yet consensus on which concepts to use in various contexts, nor on what the various concepts contain. Consequently there are many concepts in use, and I suspect – quite a few different topics investigated into without the necessary demarcation and definition. I argue for a more thorough debate.

I have chosen to look closer at one of these contributions, the report "*Kartlegging av kulturnæringene i Norge – økonomisk betydning, vekst- og utviklingspotensial*" ("Mapping the cultural industries in Norway –for economic significance and potential growth and development") (Haraldsen et al., 2004). This report investigates on behalf of the Ministry of Commerce what the concepts 'culturally based industries' and 'creative industries' mean, and in addition looks at the role these industries play in the Norwegian economy. I have chosen to look closer at this report because it is central in the Norwegian debate and is being referred to by practically everyone studying the experience economy. At the same time it illustrates the need for a concept debate. From my point of view the problem here is that the experience, cultural and creative industries are approached as if they were simply three potential names representing the same phenomenon. The report mentions the term 'experience industry', but primarily debates whether to use the term 'cultural industries' or 'creative industries' - landing on the first of the two. The concept 'experience industry' is rejected on the grounds that "*without a further specification of the product than it being 'an experience' it is difficult to operationalize this definition*" (translated). The argument used here is that the concept 'cultural industries' is more fruitful when concerned with economic issues than the concept 'creative industries' because "*creativity exists more or less in all industries...*" (translated) (Haraldsen et al. 2004:17). In a Norwegian context a valid argument for using the term 'cultural industries' is of course that the 'experience industry' is not yet properly represented in public statistics.

But to separate the three concepts, what can be said on a general basis to be typical of each of them? Haraldsen et al. (2004:18) refer to Hesmondhalgh (2002) who separates between products primarily characterized by communicative qualities and those where the primary characteristics are functional. According to him the first category can be categorized as cultural products. Cultural products can ergo be recognized by their communicative characteristics. They communicate with an audience, and are open to interpretations and can be viewed as texts in the widest meaning of the term (signs, symbols, shapes, sounds, images etc.). The distinction between what is functional and communicative is however sliding and the products are constantly evolving, which means that each

product must be evaluated individually and continuously to determine what its dominant characteristic is (Haraldsen et al., 2004).

To distinguish between the cultural and the creative one way of looking at it could be to consider the cultural as mainly concerned with communication (Hesmondhalgh, 2002) and the possible profitable output of this communication, whereas the creative industry would be more concerned with the creative processes preceding their output (Lorentzen, 2009), as well as the profitable output itself. The different understandings of these concepts could however, according to Lorentzen (2009), rather be seen as related to perspective more than the different industries 'belonging' to the one or the other.

But back to the report - the problems mentioned there in relation to the concept 'creative industries' is from my point of view no more significant than the challenges that comes with applying the term 'cultural industries'. Despite Haraldsen et al.'s (2004) definition – 'culture' can by no means be regarded an unambiguous or unproblematic concept (and is also one of the concepts Bal (2002) specifically mentions as problematic). I will however be the first to admit that neither one of the concepts ('culture', 'creative' and 'experience') are unproblematic. But by applying the concepts cultural, creative and experience as if they were interchangeable – I firmly believe that more is concealed than is revealed. Although they are overlapping at some points, I would argue that separating them could turn out to be far more fruitful. What it comes down to is what do you want the concepts – or according to Bal (2002) the 'mini-theories' to contain or explain?

So – to follow my last point, what do I want the concept 'experience industry' to contain, and what do I think it could explain? My fascination with the experience industry is that it represents development of some kind – something new, perhaps indicative of more profound changes in society in general. This is not to say that the desire for experiences is a new phenomenon – what is new is the scope of this desire. How come we all of a sudden are flooded with festivals? Why is 'everyone' jumping out of planes in parachutes, or rafting down rivers? Why is every purchase suddenly an 'experience', whether it's a car, a pair of jeans or chewing gum?

However, listing various industries as belonging to the experience industry on a theoretical level will go against my belief in the significance of context. I will instead in figure 3 list certain characteristics that might be instructive for operationalisation purposes. If all points listed in the figure can be recognized as inherent in a product - I would argue for that product to be labeled an experience product. This type of demarcation will at least to some extent help clarify the difference between experience, cultural and creative products/industries.

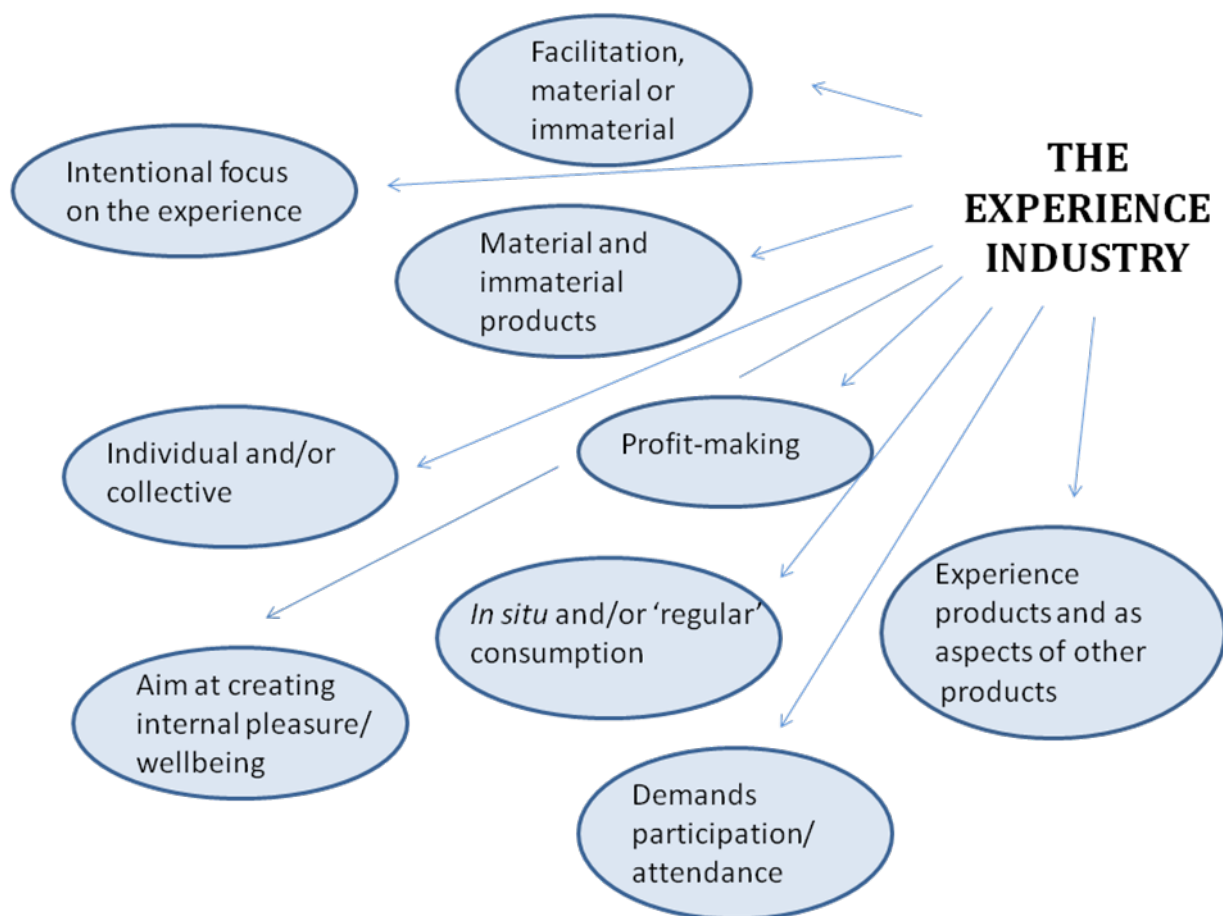


Figure 3: The Experience Industry

Again with reference to Bal (2002) - to be able to use a concept as a methodological tool, it is vital that the concept and the object being examined – are confronted with each other and reexamined, as both concepts and objects are likely to change. If we are to study the experience industry then – bearing similarities to hermeneutics - we must therefore first clarify what we mean by the concept – thereafter examine the relationship to what it ought to explain – before we re-examine the concept again.

Combining geographical approaches

What could then be a fruitful theoretical approach to the experience industry from a geographical viewpoint? What I see as a challenge at this moment is to contextualize the theory as well as the empiricism. Dichotomies are still very much in use, consciously or not; economy versus culture, producer versus consumer and space versus time.

The idea that the cultural and social perspectives are suited to understanding the dynamics of consumption whereas the economic perspectives are the proper ones for understanding the dynamics of production are already challenged in the ever ongoing debate about culture versus economy (Amin and Thrift 2000; Gertler, 2003; Gregson, 2001), but could still benefit from more debate. The same accounts for the conception that time and space are two distinguishable factors that can be included or excluded according to disciplinary boundaries. And finally - the understanding of the producer as active and calculating separated from a passive and receiving consumer ought to be challenged.

Without going into the culture versus economy debate – is it possible to merge the two fields in studying the experience industry? Or are there insurmountable contradictions between the two? According to O'Connor (2007:7) the relationship between 'art' or 'culture' and 'the market' is complicated. The production of cultural commodities has accelerated in the last century, due to technologies of reproduction which has become increasingly capitalized. And while capitalism on the one hand, is steered by "*the principle of unlimited accumulation at the expense of all other values*", 'culture' has always protested against this principle. The paradox is of course that culture at the same time to an increasing degree is becoming a commodity, and one subject to the same laws of capital.

The articulated objectives in culture and capitalism differ greatly. For culture to be genuine and 'authentic' – the profit making side should not be prominent. This applies to both the supply and demand side of the business. In some cases it appears that producers are content with long working hours as long as they can make a living. The customers as well, expect the supplier to 'live' to work, as well as to have a genuine interest in the product far outweighing the profit making side of things (Branth and Haugen, 2008). Gibson (2003:202) compares this with the problematizing of unpaid work in feminist economic geography and states that while "*such perspectives have triggered wide debate within economic geography, they have rarely been brought to bear on the cultural industries...*"

While economic geography traditionally has tended to focus on 'worthy' or 'serious' industries, such as "*food, automobiles, infrastructure, manufacturing, and so on*" I agree with Gibson (2003:202) that the recent 'turn' or interest in cultural aspects ought to be reflected also in the types of industry studied. As with the service industry decades ago, perhaps the experience industry is now representing the *zeitgeist*? By combining elements from geographical sub disciplines, a contextual and customized theoretical approach can hopefully be outlined.

In general "*cultural commodities are expensive to produce but cheap to reproduce – the more copies sold the greater the return on the original investment.*" (O'Connor, 2007:20). If the

commodities you are selling are attached to a specific place and must be consumed in 'real time' I imagine you will face a different set of challenges concerning both production and quantity, than do more traditional physical products that can be distributed. Following mainstream marketing theory, certain types of products evolve from a state of exclusiveness consumed by innovators or 'elites' and from there on becomes more and more available and popular amongst the 'masses'. Combining this with an ever increasing access to information and commodities - refinement and exclusiveness are short lived qualities. One of the interesting things about the immaterial and *in situ* experience products in relation to some of these aspects I find to be their 'remoteness' when it comes to everyday consumption. Because of the time, money, creativity and sometimes skills it takes to consume them, it is harder to see how many of them can ever become mainstream possessions, and thereby drop in status and price.

The time-space distinction is another element in this picture. According to Ek et al. (2008) the time-aspect is very much relevant also when tourist's representation and understanding of the place and space they are experiencing. The *before*, *during* and *after* are all affecting and shaping the image of the physical, cultural and social space experienced. This also corresponds with Jantzen and Vetner's (2007)² temporal focus. For a geographer the spatial dimensions can of course hardly be overrated, and I find them particularly relevant with this type of consumption. Mansvelt (2005) takes a close look at the geographies of consumption, and argue that through the studying of consumption, critical contributions to the relationship between society and space can be revealed. This can also "*explain how and why economy and culture, the symbolic and the material, collide, demonstrating how the complex meanings and expressions of consumption in place are in turn connected to other spaces and scales*" (Mansvelt, 2005:5-6).

Another interesting element in the experience industry, which makes the combination of theoretical approaches particularly relevant, is that the consumer to a large extent is responsible not only for consuming but also for producing the experience. "*...the tourist [consumer] takes over the responsibility for the final 'production' which will determine the final value of the whole production chain...*" (ANDERSSON, 2007:48). Merging these elements then, Ek et al. (2008:123) call for developing a model that includes all aspects of how the consumer/tourist perform and produce places, through their active, corporal, technical and social participation. If we rather view tourists or consumers as *performers*, their role changes to include also production aspects.

Rather than talking about culture versus economy, time versus space and consumer versus producer - perhaps a thorough and contextual definition of the concepts 'experience' and

² See page 9.

'experience industry' is a more productive road to travel, definitions that includes "*dynamic notions of space, time and performance*" (EK et al., 2008:122).

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