

MIDLIFE CREATIVITY AND IDENTITY

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MIDLIFE CREATIVITY AND IDENTITY: LIFE INTO ART

BY

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2019

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78754-334-8 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-78754-333-1 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-78754-335-5 (Epub)



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

In memory of Claire Rosalind Miles 1974–2015

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Acknowledgements

It is right and proper to begin acknowledgements with a shout out to those who took part in the research by giving me their time, energies and thoughts about the creative process. Therefore, big appreciation goes to Johnny Vincent, Duncan McIntyre, Ian Burton, CJ Bailey and Miles Simpkins of The Ruins and to Ian's wife, Sharon, for hosting us for group interviews and the weekly 'jam', rehearsals and recording sessions. It was a joy to be there. Thanks also to Peter Driver and Robin Wilson for their invites to join them at their studios in Reading and Oxford and for their detailed, fabulous thoughts on inspiration, action and value. They were awe-inspiring meetings where I learned so much about the artistic muse and the strength of the individual will to make things happen. Thanks also go to Katherine Webb for her insight on writing and authorial routines and for the most excellent cake and tea during numerous visits to her home. Appreciation is also due to those who have taken part in the research process but have chosen to remain anonymous for various reasons; it goes without saying that I respect and understand your ideas, thoughts and motives equally and would like to thank you for your time and hospitality.

Appreciation also goes to a variety of people who have assisted and encouraged me at various stages along the way, all equally inspiring: Graham Falgate; Chris Cheetham and Doris Crick; Nick Ellison, Steve Fuller and Chris Llewellyn; Ray Jobling, Rob Moore and Madeleine Arnot; Paul Willis and Phillip Brown; and to my Editor at Emerald, Philippa Grand, who gave this book a chance to exist, and to her colleagues Rachel Ward and Charlotte McSharry. Many thanks to my academic colleagues Andy Bennett (Griffith University) and Gary Manders (University of Bedfordshire) for their comments on earlier drafts of this book and for the encouraging early feedback of the anonymous referees. Respect and appreciation is also due to Paul Innes and John Hughes (University of Gloucestershire) and Rebecca Beasley (University of Oxford) for positively instilling the incentive to combine sociology with literary studies and to embrace the art of the possible. It is a work in progress, but the destination is now clear. A special mention is also due to Steve Hardy (scriptwriter, journalist, musician, raconteur) who has provided creative inspiration and the most exceptional friendship throughout my adult life while himself being a most dedicated contributor to, and supporter of, the creative arts in many forms.

Finally, the process of writing this book has been, in time-honoured fashion, suitably riddled with the most invigorating of stress, but to those who have experienced me daily as this oscillating level of anxiety has fired the process – Maria, Sebastian and Huw – the greatest debt to you must be acknowledged. I love you all. Indebtedness must also go to my wonderful parents, Ron and Yvonne Miles, who have given me the love and unconditional support to help me achieve goals in life. Finally, this book is dedicated to the memory of my sister, Claire Rosalind Miles, whose presence among us I miss every day.

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Introduction: Life into Art

Where does art come from? What are the routines and inspirations that bring works of art into being and ‘where’ are these actions and inspirations acted out, made sense of and exploited? In the coming study, it is my intention to introduce, investigate and explain creative processes via the lives, work and subjectivities of 10 people engaged in the generation of musical, artistic and literary texts for public consumption, all entering or experiencing middle-age (or ‘midlife’ as it shall be referred to throughout) and living in England. These people are both distinctive and alike in many ways; they are male and female, working class and middle class, educated in different sectors and to differing levels and working in different ways, but they are also all engaged in what I call an ‘authorial routine’ based on transforming ideas into art forms via sound, visuals and the written word. The participants in this study are approaching their work in a variety of formats by utilising an assortment of skills to achieve tangible outcomes but are aiming, ostensibly, for the same *conclusions* both in terms of a sense of contribution and completion as well as obtaining a bolstered self-efficacy and satiation of artistic energies. Therefore, whether differentiated by gender, class or skill set, the participants are dedicated to the articulation of imagination and the realisation of novelty.

The narrative at the heart of this volume will involve a subtle mixture of foci that encompasses the dynamics of midlife, identity and creativity running throughout the text, never isolated entirely from one another but perceived as distinctive at times, prominent and energetic in their functions. It is the intention that the reader can consider the dynamics as interlinked and supra-determinant in the lives of the participants featured here and further within the analysis of their arts, routines and inspirations. While contemplating the format of presenting the research, I decided that I would offer an introductory chapter that set out the context, form and theoretical ‘influences’ of the process before introducing the data via the themes of ‘music’, ‘art’ and ‘literature’, organised into corresponding thematic ‘sections’. These subdivisions will be expansive, handing over the focus of the narrative to the people who made the research come to life – namely those musicians, artists and writers whose daily core activity is to consider and create and make new and exciting things. These *things* are works of art that incorporate a process, or *routine*, that enables the inventive individual (or group) to step away from the humdrum of the ‘everyday’ and into a zone where the anxieties of what I shall refer to as ‘late modernity’ are quelled in a space of innovative zeal. The ethnography – driven by observation and

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interviews and the explanations proffered on meaning of art and craft – was designed only to seek and understand the culture of creativity that exists in some middle-aged people, the incentives to create, the sense of worth that emerges from the process and the comparator of midlife routine in the ‘real world’. What emerged was a series of fascinating portraits of artists as middle-aged men and women and some secrets about where it was that they ‘went to’ when they sought to summon the inventive muse. This was not a project that sought to prove or disprove a pre-existing idea or theory within the broader cultural study of creativity. Instead, I let the artists do the talking first, guided only by questions that I wished to ask on *why* they did what they did, *how* they did it, *where* they did it, how much regularity was involved in the processes that they harnessed and utilised and, importantly, what it *meant* to them at their stage in life to ‘do’ art and to share art with others. The theoretical framework evolved *after* the data in what is loosely framed as ‘inductive’ form with a surprising effect of capturing the creative process not as what one may think of as being a *serene retreat* but actually as an assertive and sought-after *resistance* to the tumultuous and insecure essence of the time in which we live, albeit that the ‘tumultuous’ and ‘insecure’ are viewed as ‘normative’ and predictable and art as ‘chaotic’ in practice, erratic in outcome and just simply *exciting* in comparison. Thus, if anything, it becomes clear that the insecurity of creativity is the *security* itself and that security of which I speak is a joyous *insecurity*; the biography and character of the individual is combined with a creative urge that provides a playful, expansive domain for riotous abandon that challenges the suggestion that art is merely vocation. Art is *life* to these people and their life is experienced *as* art and, quite frankly, life and art are perceived as possibly more unpredictable than the future simply because the future arguably has expected (or entrenched) cultural, political and social ‘routes’ whereas art, as I shall explain, is a continual engagement with the blissful unknown.

Throughout the work that follows is situated a recurrent, incremental argument (drawing on an interdisciplinary, eclectic, and occasionally esoteric literature) on the transformative essence of art – how things may *come to be* simply from the kernel of an idea, a sound, a smell or a random memory. Via ethnographic acuity and associative analysis, among other things, I will explain the often overlapping processes of rehearsal and composition in music, the maintenance of the communal and the sociality of creativity in midlife, the vagaries of the ‘artistic routine’ and the variations of process that leads to meaningful creation. I will gauge opinions on, and engagement with, commercialism; a sense of place; the perception of the penetration of individual identity *into* art and how art reflexively penetrates the identity. Overall, this book is dedicated to understanding a sense of value in the *decision to be* creative and, ultimately, where this creativity thrives best. In the final stages of the book I will explain my own theory of ‘where the artists are’ and where it is that they ‘go’ to be creative coupled with how late modern society, midlife and self-identity contribute to formulating this in-between state, or ‘*mezzanine*’, as a metaphysical (and occasionally physical) zone of detachment, bliss, excitement and productivity. Midlife creativity and identity, as I shall explain, are not a new lifestyle choice of the committed

or languidly curious middle classes but are, instead, a state of *being* and a state of *equilibrium* that has been searched for, earned and exploited with equal verve, experienced individually and communally with equal value.

Therefore, in the following chapters I will begin – following the obligatory explanation in Chapter 1 of where the book is best situated in the wider canon of sociology and cultural studies – to explore core areas of artistic creativity by theme. In Chapters 2 and 3 I shall introduce The Ruins, an alternative rock band from Derby in the English Midlands who continue to write, record and perform exciting, innovative music into their fifties. They are fired by an acceptable mixture of self-belief, anxiety and sociality, emerging from a small studio in the suburbs to play occasional adrenaline-fuelled gigs before retreating to write and ‘jam’ and subliminally search for the moment of artistic ‘aura’ (Benjamin, [1923] 2008) where anything is possible and the structure of musical composition is joyously fluid. The study finds a band exploring the texture of their ideological and heuristic connective tissues – life, experience, expertise, skill and the personalities that arise from five decades of life – via music, discourse and the pooling of hope and the search for a ‘satisfaction’ to be found through the creation of new music, the permanent reinvention of existing sound and structure and a myriad of possibilities unencumbered by management-editorial interference or the assumed requirement to conform to an expected style. The band arguably provides a communal soul for each member in the ‘phase’ of life of families, jobs, diminishing youthfulness and other routine worries and joys of midlife. In Chapters 4, 5 and 6 I encounter Peter, Robin and Dominic, three artists engaged in what I shall refer to as ‘fine art’ – namely painting, printing, ceramics, occasional photography and sculpture/carving. The artists are disparate in background and personality as well as in practice, operating mainly as individuals in their routines of creation and connecting with different ‘art worlds’ (Becker, [1982] 2008) via domicile, teaching and project work – including Robin’s fantastic Wytham Woods project in the Oxfordshire countryside. However, these artists do have some things in common, including having come to practice their skills driven by personal upheavals that has arguably seen art as squaring a particular – highly personal – circle in life. To these artists the practice of creativity is both a vocation and a *change*: completion, the potential for continuous renewal and embracing the limitless possibilities of life itself. Thus, art is about *transforming materials* as well as *transforming life*. In Chapters 7 and 8 I move on to speak with two published authors, one producing mainstream fiction and the other emerging into the children’s literature market and both responsible for innovative, detailed and successful literary outputs. Both authors are women and both are encountering and continually developing their own authorial routines in different ways. For Katherine, creativity is experienced in isolation, is unpredictable, spontaneous and driven by deadlines and the *supervention of novelty* (Eliot, 1919; Kermode, 1975) inasmuch that it is her established back catalogue that drives her contemporary outputs. Annette is a new author – her identity anonymised here – who flourishes with the joy of liberation, the new opportunities that emerge during midlife via career change and the primacy of available time coupled with the possibilities of a new focus.

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She has a new and exciting role to practice, protect and enjoy, but also a new opportunity to re-evaluate her identity as a middle-aged woman. Finally, in Chapter 9, I will combine the thoughts and observations of all of the respondents in a wider discussion on creativity, resistance and midlife and the comprehension of artistic routine as that 'in-between state' mentioned above, where the possibilities of creativity are celebrated as an opportunity to resist the banal, the ordinary and the expected. The notion of 'life into art' is understood as a series of chances, ambitions, freedoms and anxieties all presented as an exhilarating response to what may be considered as the banality and humdrum of 'midlife routine'. Creativity is seen to act as a stream of variable, simultaneous resistant consciousness and action to the increasing perceived meaninglessness of the mid-life regimen and how this can be transformed into opportunities for advancement.

To begin, however, it is expedient to explore – in combination – the scholarly foundation and field for this book as well as discussing a number of theoretical ideas that assist in situating the work in the wider sociological oeuvre, along with the method for gathering data. I shall now turn to such matters mindful that the dominant narrative here belongs to the respondents as much as to sociological and cultural interpretations but also aware of the conventions of explaining from where a study like this is ostensibly sprung.

Chapter 1

Transformations

Art, it is argued, is about transformations (Berger, 2016: 100). It is about the transformation of things, time and of the self; such change can be affected by actions, thoughts and circumstances as well as by the structure and culture of society experienced via ideological frameworks (Thompson, 1990: 281–2), a *feeling* (Williams, 1961), a sensuousness (Willis, 2000) or via a form of interactive, individual instrumentalism (Bourdieu, 1993). Simple incremental human experiences of the ‘everyday’ understood, perhaps, by ‘incorporeal, insentient’ *familiarities* (Highmore, 2011: 82) can therefore be considered subliminal, subtle and affective and, of course, *transformational*. Art is therefore at once an esoteric and an ‘everyday’ thing (Read, 1956; [1931] 2017), empowering and active, deeply personal, illustrative of narratives and biographies, of space and time and age and experience. Art remains in continuous contact with the self via the media and the ‘street’ (usually via advertising, but also more subtly through architecture and colour as well as via graffiti and pavement art, etc.), as well as within the domicile (Racz, 2014) that also includes our interaction with fashioned spaces of our living (Bachelard, [1964] 2014). The individual may also, of course, have additional acquaintance with art via his or her *own creativity*. Art therefore is not exclusively a ‘thing’ that exists to behold, it can also emerge from within, realised through rehearsed routines, occasional chance and determination to make something new, to *make something appear* that did not previously exist. Therefore, creativity is a process of transformation (from idea to realisation) and such a *process* or ‘change’ can be considered manifest in a variety of tangible and abstract forms such as the physicality of objects (and the processes that bring such things *together*), the shifting ‘meaning’ of such objects to individuals and groups and their state of novelty or decay.

It is also possible to consider transformation as something that works in tangible harness with the process of *making art happen* such as a shift or sea change in an individual’s career, a notable change in *lifestyle*, or the arrival of new economic or cultural life chances. Transformations, consequently, can be physical and symbolic, and art, as a *practice*, can drive and represent such change for people as both the creators of art and as the consumers of it. The crux of this study is to understand the dynamics of this combination of artefact and inspiration, with focus on the *artist* rather than the art itself, the *process* of transformation rather than the *outcome* and, ultimately, the *value* of the process to those who make time to create.

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Transformation of things and of the self is also potentially representative of the *nature of the times*. In its many forms, art (specifically considered here as works of music, fine art and writing/literature, but myriad in form in a wider context in society) is arguably symptomatic of micro- and macro-transformations in society, harnessing the dynamics of experience, action and intentionality (and the occasional tendency for serendipitous outcomes and their lasting effects) that combine to deliver what Raymond Williams might observe as something of a contrast of mechanism and emotion, a duality of capitalism and culture and a shifting pattern of *sense into sensibility* (Williams, [1958] 2017: 66). To be sure, art can be perceived variously as active orchestration of the enlightening thrust of music, literature or image/painting and it can be considered intensely personal, holding secrets of influence behind its façade or having new ideas inculcated upon its form by others separated from its ‘author’. It can also be physical, considered ‘complete’ or ‘perfect’ or challenging us to merely consider its potential longevity in aesthetic terms (Wolff, 1983). However, art is considered here as a variety of intention and outcome, method and completeness, embodying the *personal and the private* and resultant of a combination of personally-held views of authenticity and self-value in the creator, manifestly benefitting *from* the identity – and assisting in *developing* the identity – of the creator. Ultimately, it can be synoptic of the myriad meanings that can be applied by both author and eventual beholder to the routine and methods of creation and impressions of outcome, thus continually transforming its own abstract narratives from day to day via time, setting and location as well as functioning, instrumentally, as a perceived resistant sense of vocation and self-worth to its creator. Thus, ‘art’ in this study is viewed mainly as a *pinnacle of process* that is situated in the turmoil of creation. What comes after the process of creation is aesthetic, malleable and given to be considered ostensibly powerless.

It has been posited over time that art is founded in the *social* (Read, 1956; Wolff, 1993) with a potential to transform sociality and individual thoughts, strategies and opportunities while acting potentially as something of an ‘anchor’ to the individual that creates it. This anchor may or may not be considered necessarily a *brake* on a personal or collective progress but, essentially, as a setting down of *permanence*, providing a sense of security and reassurance, self-efficacy and dynamism. Throughout this book, in what I will refer to as ‘late modern’ times (Giddens, 1991), *liquid*-like in economy, morals and sociality (Bauman, 2000; Bordoni, 2016; Davis, [2013] 2016) and beholden to accompanying risks connected to individualisation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and the fragmentation of tradition and its associative ‘biographical solutions’ (Beck, 1992), the focus will be on the essence of security and reassurance sought by the creator rather than the effects of art on the audience. Thus, art will be considered in its various manifestations as having a subtle role to play in a personal resistance to the individualised anxiety and dislocation perceived within late modern times that is often understood (but not necessarily recognised) as manifest in transference of responsibility from state to individual and tacitly embodied as the way the biography must now assume primacy over experience via a process that has precedence for the way ‘the story of life is told, rather

than the way in which life is lived' (Bauman, 2002: 69). This inferred exhibitionism and reliance of the centrism of the ego and flamboyance of virtue may not, necessarily, be a *bad thing* if such recourse to ego is understood as a form of *resistance* and, ultimately, personally transforming and instrumental. To be sure, the potentially eroding and unsettling effects of anxiety are possibly experienced via the fragmentation of social worlds and our relentless drift towards the attenuation of sensual collectivity, separated (and conversely 'connected') via computer screens (Miller, 2011; Turkle, 2017), mobile phones (*avec screens*), private transport, diversification of information (and modern problems of verification of reliability) and so on, but it can arguably be countered by the maintained assured solidity and familiarity of the ego, the biography and the creative self. While art (essentially communicative in nature) can be understood in creative terms as a *secluded* thing, arguably personally transformative but determined by thought patterns that are personal, personally *challenging* and developmentally *indefinite*, it is also inherently *social* (Becker, [1982] 2008; Wolff, 1993). I shall argue that the creative process is therefore *socially* as well as individually transformative, but that such sociality is itself potentially experienced in isolation (in this instance via the study of a rock group). The methods and value of creativity and the contrasting physical forms of art itself can accelerate a combined sense of artist and object 'identity' (and harness further connectivity between artist, artefact and audience) but also, as is the focus in this study, develop a powerful *sense of self* that drives the creative process forwards: not quite ego, not quite *biographical* in essence, but possibly a base instinct for *certainty*. There is a sense that, to the 'midlife artist', art is an omnipresent process of achieving meaning and I shall therefore seek to explain how such meaning can transform the everyday through the raw excitement of potential and the defence of the resistance to the banal. Thus, the 'audience' and 'reception' of art, while active, is peripheral when considering the simple value of creativity and its *routines*. Thus, to understand such transformational power it is necessary to talk to those who practice it. It is the task of this book to uncover what such power looks, sounds and feels like and how these dynamics can be sociologically conceptualised.

§

Let me continue by informally considering some insightful assertions by two profoundly influential individuals. Both Johnny Marr and Terry Eagleton have made considerable contributions to the world of the arts and literature over the years via the creation, performance and production of music and invaluable, entertaining and erudite literary criticism, respectively. An otherwise throwaway line in Marr's 2016 autobiography *Set the Boy Free* stated that, in the making of music, occasional moments occur when participants in the field of musical production are present, together and yet *apart*. Something bonds these people together, external to the sound waves that they are in command of; something exists in the moment that frames the milieu, however transiently. 'When a group of individuals are working instinctively and intricately, thinking within

milliseconds of each other’, he states, ‘it’s as close to real magic as you can get’ (Marr, 2016: 180). Such atemporal synthesis can be considered the central bonding factor of any band; it is where art and life are fused via the combination of experience and skill and emotion to produce new things, new sound, new belief and where a sense of ‘magic’ is sought and occasionally achieved. Eagleton, writing in the context of the understanding of changing social mores, values and principles over time – and how it can affect the experience of *reading historical literature* – can add some important additional significance to this sense of *togetherness*. Writing, he argues, is a process and skill that involves developing how the *reader receives* the literature that he or she is encountering, thus creating an additional dynamic beyond the authorial routine and the skill of telling a story well. In making sense of what the author might have meant and how the reader may relate to such potential, Eagleton articulates the ‘external’ essence of the *experience* of art. Where Marr speaks of a closed intimacy, Eagleton recognises both such intimacy that people *feel* with the art and the relationship they sense with the *society* from which they are formed. In stating that ‘my emotions are not my private property [...] On the contrary, there is a sense in which I learn my emotional behaviour by participating in a common culture’ (Eagleton, 2013: 34), Eagleton nods (arguably) towards an established, generic narrative that life and art are *fused*; in many ways, it cannot be art unless it is observed and made sense of – an *a priori* ‘language’ of art is thus established, structurally. Art is merely a component of a language: social, symbolic, semiotic and lucid as well as personally emancipating, intra-theoretical (Kristeva, 1980) and functioning as both the manipulator and manipulated.

Within both statements lies a communal, communicative *thing*: Marr is speaking of a *group* engaged in unison, present in one place but yet detached, making sound as a language that all of the creative human components of such generated sound can recognise as a product of an elusive ‘magic’, whereas Eagleton is speaking of an inclusive, interpretative *culture*, described, *inter alia*, by Raymond Williams as consisting of something of a detectable *structure of feeling* that implies borderline conscious–subconscious awareness of the meaning of culture and how it is lived, how it is interpreted and how its transforming powers can be harnessed (Williams, 1961) or, alternatively, how culture can be perceived as something of an ‘independent noun’ of intellectual and *anthropological* use (Williams, [1976] 2014: 89). Such ‘anthropology’ is arguably in observing the interactive, cultural discourse of meanings (feeling) that are applied by individuals and, occasionally, recognised comparatively by groups, that are built upon the senses and – when enacted – in compliance with instinct resulting in a considered (but not necessarily articulated) change. Structure of feeling is important to this study because it partially characterises what I will later call the ‘mezzanine’ – an in-between conscious (and sometimes *subconscious*) state experienced by creative individuals and groups – explaining a form of metanarrative that can present something of a ‘soft challenge’ to the dominant ideology, hegemony or simply confront the expectancies of midlife as inculcated by tradition, values, norms and so on. I will return to Raymond Williams again below – and his arguable approximation with the multifarious work of