

About Innovation in Culture

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How is something new in culture born? Is “innovation” simply a neo-liberal catchword, which subordinates culture to the rules of the economic “field” as can be inferred from some of the discussions on the creative industries at least here in Estonia.

To comment this let’s start with Eco. At the end of the 1970s, in his infamous book, *The Role of the Reader*, Umberto Eco outlined two alternatives for the birth of new forms of culture as well as new meanings. The first is the “factual judgement,” which has an extralinguistic origin. For instance, the sciences discover some new regularity in the physical environment, and thereafter, create a sign system, a language, to denote it. In this way, the new knowledge is drawn into the culture. The second possibility, according to Eco, is metaphors. Rhetorical tropes, primarily metaphors, combine the (modally differing) components of existing sign systems so that the poetic interaction among these components, which then emerges, creates the opportunity to perceive reality in a new way. When this new trope is eloquent as a figure, is experienced as useful in meaning making practices, there exists a possibility that it will remain in a culture as a cultural form along with the meanings it carries. Thus, the trope-development dynamic is behind generating new knowledge, and opening new doors for culture. As we know from George Lakoff’s and Mark Johnson’s renown book *Metaphors We Live By*, human languages are so pervaded by metaphors that we often do not even notice how they shape our thoughts and discourses. However, non-verbal metaphors function in a quite similar way – all the different multimodal and interactive user interfaces, which similarly interweave representative conventions of different origins, are structuring today our main information flows. At this point, however, it is important to emphasise that the new knowledge that emerges from these tropes is effected primarily through combinatorics – through remixes of the culture’s communicative resources.

Yet, how is all this related to “techno-economic innovation” – everything that the concept of “innovation” normally is understood to refer to today? Let’s start from the beginning. The mainstream of contemporary innovation studies, i.e. evolutionary economics (which, in its own way, is in opposition to the mainstream of economics or “neoclassical economics”) was developed at the beginning of the last century by Joseph Schumpeter. He viewed the matter in relatively straightforward terms: the “creative entrepreneur” and his institutional framework – the “creative firm” – are autonomous agents, which are characterised by an ability to combine resources in such a way that they can design and offer new types of products and services. When these are introduced to the market, they disrupt the existing equilibria of the markets to the extent that they may either destroy these markets, or just generate new markets. If innovation enables production resources to be conserved, or if higher prices can be commanded (at least temporarily), in markets that are “out of equilibrium”, this results in higher productivity for the enterprise. This means that the enterprise produces more ‘value’. If in some region, there are more enterprises producing more value, economic growth results, which tend to

bring about other positive changes, including the improvement of the living standard.

Although the theory based on Schumpeter's ideas is rather market-fundamentalist, several assumptions are hidden therein that do not fit well with neoclassical theory. These include: markets themselves never operate in the best way, because the ultimate equilibrium (of demand and supply) could be never reached. The reason is that as the result of the activities of creative entrepreneurs, a large part of the market is constantly out of equilibrium – semi-monopolies often exist (the consequences of supplying innovative products are monopolistic markets, at least temporarily) as do various barriers to the spread of information, or systematic inertia that are caused by problems in coordination. All this does not promote arriving at equilibria. However, in the context of this article, one of Schumpeter's main assumptions should be stressed, i.e. the disequilibria in the markets are created by the entrepreneur as an agent who is open to absorb new information and whose creativity is constituted by the recombination of resources.

In the second half of the 20th century, an entire sub-discipline – “evolutionary economics” – was established based on the work by Schumpeter. However, what's most important for now, this approach has in many ways been more critical towards the role of the autonomous entrepreneurs in the processes of innovation, and as such also as the guarantors of economic development. Instead the focus tends to be on systemic features of the economy, on coordination and on communicative practices among institutions, which enable the exchange of knowledge and, in this way, facilitate opportunities also for “creative entrepreneurs”. Of the relevant theoreticians, let us take Chris Freeman, who started as a Marxist, but later became a leading disciple of Schumpeter, but whose works, for instance, in the area of national innovation systems or the ‘long cycles’ can be considered to be part of “evolutionary political economics”. This primarily means that the focus of evolutionary economic theory is on enduring evolution of the society as a complex whole, and on the identification of ‘coordination failures’ in this process. As an example of the issues being dealt with, we can highlight the avoidance of “negative path dependency” (reigning standards and other settings that narrow society's choices), which may hinder the development of new innovations. The general ethos could be argued to be similar to the idea of ‘reflexive modernisation’ (Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Scott Lash, et al.) – whereas the idea is that an increasingly self-aware society is capable of learning to recognise its risks and reorganise itself accordingly. However, the main instruments of reorganisation are innovations in products, services, and production operations, as well as in the regulations or institutions that organise the markets. Thus, the disputed “endless growth” could also be possible, because growth no longer needs to be based on the exploitation of natural resources, but can be achieved by new skills, acquired via critical reflection, to recombine the existing resources, to use them more effectively or to replace them with others, if needed.

Let us return to the question of how we arrive at innovations. There are no dogmas in evolutionary economics, but, as stated above, the more broadly shared interest is comprised of the coordination and communication failures among social subsystems and institutions. Paradoxically, the assumption is that these failures occur always and are inevitable. But this is just what's needed. In this way, systems, such as various sciences, can evolve autonomously and to create their distinctions in the form of alternative perception, knowledge and related metalanguages. However, there is still a need for

communication channels among these autonomous domains that need to be deployed from time to time, in order to enable these knowledge domains to establish a dialogue (and to see the “Other”). This is needed because innovation emerges in the first place out of a dialogue, through the synthesis and combinatorics of disciplinary perceptions.

Let us finally get to culture. The argument is that, similarly to techno-economic innovation, innovation in culture is also related to the combinatorics of cultural resources, and dialogues between the cultural subsystems. At the start of this article, I referred to Eco, for whom the substantial mechanism for cultural innovation is metaphor – a poetically expressive connection between two illogical partners. This supplements Juri Lotman’s treatment of rhetoric, for whom a “rhetorical text” or text that is comprised of collages in poetical tension – of elements with different origins and modalities – form the basis for cultural innovation, in regard to both the forms and semantics of culture. Let us remind ourselves that, already in the theses of cultural semiotics formulated in 1975, Lotman and his colleagues stated that every text is at least bilingual and is comprised of various communicative systems, which in their interaction – through the meaning networks that are facilitated by intertextuality – effect alternative ways for interpreting specific texts, i.e. the spectrum of possible meanings.

Thus, in culture, the primary mechanism for innovation is the recombination – remix – of cultural forms that effects new convergent cultural forms and semantic fields. Moreover, thanks to this function – the development of new socially expressive signifying systems – the arts could be argued to be extremely important in the context of the functioning of the broader innovation systems of “reflexively modernising” societies. Namely, with the help of new semiotic resources one can arrive at new questions, new visions and new goals for sciences. In this way the society can arrive at new alternatives, which could help to eventually overturn current negative path dependencies and develop new markets, institutions, and other forms of organisation that better serve human society.

However, how can we ensure that there is more of innovation – activities that create new cultural forms and meanings in culture? The logical answer would be by having creative processes that are open; by having more active participants operating in the field of culture; and having culture’s semiotic resources made as open as possible to its all people. And understandably, the Internet and all other developments in computation technology have contributed towards all this. ICT developments have reduced both production and communication costs together with enabling the participation of a greater number of interested parties in the production of culture – all kinds of semi-professional or hobby-like forms of cultural production. This has also brought more culture within the reach of such new creators that has in turn brought about an era, which Harvard law professor Lawrence Lessing has called ‘remix culture’. This means an era when, for instance, audiovisual literacy has become as important as verbal language in the lives of ‘digital natives’ and when various forms of collaborative co-creation are providing the culture with interesting remix forms (or “rhetorical texts” to use Lotman’s vocabulary). The inter-textual continuities of the latter may reach deep into cultural history, or like rhizomes spread out into the endless multitudes of today’s media expressions. However, the main argument is that the possibility for participation carries the potential for the democratisation of social reflection – to have the signifiers as well as their signifieds grow out of the actual social milieu, not from the detached ‘expressions of a metaphysics of life’ of the highbrow minorities (Evi Arujärvi, *Sirp* 31.05.2012).

At this point, I want to return to the position that an Estonian cultural analyst Evi Arujärv expressed in the summer. She wrote, “Unfortunately, the latter [the Internet] functions as a powerful copy machine that produces a ‘click and copy’ culture, mediates annotated and varied copies and collages on the provided materials. ...although the high-tech Internet has great intellectual and educational potential, it functions predominantly as a channel for primitive consciousness.”

I will start the commentary of this statement by saying that what is a ‘remix culture’ for some is a ‘copy culture’ for others. She fails to recognise the poetic tension inherent to ‘rhetoric texts’ but reduces the forest to the trees – the remix to copies. At the same time, it is true that a large part of the semiotics of culture suggests that culture generally develops through ‘incremental innovations,’ small adjustments, adaptations, interpretations. Most changes are modest. Arujärv also suggests an axis of primitive-to-complex of genre differentiations and signals that the former is, mostly, mediated by the Internet and the latter (“serious culture”) should be protected from the forces *de la nature* of the free market. However, maybe the problem is that Arujärv speaks about complexity at the level of single texts, by focusing on the structures of autonomous cultural units? Wouldn’t it also be appropriate to examine the aggregate effects of the poetical accents of many ‘structurally primitive’ but incrementally adapted texts? More precisely, if the interpretation of a slight semantic variation of an adaptation presumes great inter-textual awareness, then how primitive is this interpretation? And how primitive is the (pop) culture complex that has produced the given text? The fact that this may not always be the case was Steven Johnson’s central idea, when he wrote his infamous *Everything Bad is Good for You* (2006). Let us also remind ourselves that one of Lotman’s central theses was that every text grows along with its reader. Could it be true that the combatively inclined “friends of serious culture” might sometimes just lack the ability to read popular culture?

Secondly, Arujärv suggests that the material for Internet collages is being “fed”. At this point, in the spirit of Karl Popper, I would first like to ask is the Internet not too complex to be searching its depths for the conspirators that are feeding materials to the users. On the other hand, maybe the whole problem is that too little is being fed? Because, if culture evolves through remixes, through inter-textual connections and combinatorics, the question is actually whether enough of cultural resources is always available to all people for such practices – are they aware of the alternatives and do they know about their rights to use these materials? Today, here in the North-Eastern periphery of Europe, I would not be so sure. Spotify does not stream into our pockets and Netflix into our living rooms, and arthouse films can be seen on the large screens only in the capital. Not to mention that, of the 15,000 Estonian films ever made, 99% have still not been digitized. It’s not exactly easy to remix a film reel fading on an archive shelf into a “new interpretation.” Therefore, perhaps we do need to make a greater effort related to networked media, in order to overcome the problem of limited resources? And perhaps we also need to relax some of the copyright restrictions in the process?

In concluding this article, I want to point to the economic reductionism that frequently appears in discussions about today’s ‘creative industries’ and the innovation processes in culture. These phenomena are seen as serving only specific economic interests, while ignoring the various co-evolutionary interdependencies among the subsystems of a complex society. The contemporary approaches to a creative industries

that combine both the cultural studies tradition and the political economy approach, often use the concept of “value” to interpret these interdependencies. Based on Niklas Luhmann’s ideas, one could suggest that the purpose of the arts as a functional system is to arrive at artistic values. These are either aesthetic experiences or semantic innovations, i.e. new languages and meanings, along with all their aforementioned positive characteristics, especially the ability to increase society’s self-reflective capability. By creating languages and semantic space, a society is also created in which all the other social subsystems, including the sphere of business can operate. In addition, when artistic values are perceived as being positive, these can be reinterpreted into values in the other subsystems of the society – experiences or semantic texts can be paid for, among other things, with a “value equivalent” or money. If there is greater readiness for this, if the creators have found their audience, then, sooner or later, this will be reflected as a small ripple in the graphs showing the growth of the national economy. Then the artistic value is reinterpreted as economic value. During the next few years here in Estonia, when searching for the corresponding examples, we can turn to the “cross-innovation” research initiative led by the Tallinn City Enterprise Department. This European-wide Cross-Innovation project, which is financed by the Interreg IVC programme, examines, among other things, these very same innovations that are born of the dialogue between the fields of art and technology while also creating multi-dimensional value. In other words, artists should continue focusing on their own practice and generate new culture by creating new interpretations and experiences. But if the national economy might then, eventually, grow, we should recognise that the arts may have notably contributed towards it.

