

## 'Being in the Zone' of Cultural Work

By Mark Banks

### Abstract

In the cultural industries, workers surrender themselves to ultra-intensive work patterns in order to be recognised as properly creative subjects. In its more affirmative versions, there is a recurrent idea that captures that special moment of creative synthesis between the ever-striving worker and the work – the moment of *'being in the zone'*. Being in the zone (hereafter BITZ) describes the ideal fusion of the intensively productive mind and the labouring body. But what precisely is this 'zone', and what is its' potential? As part of a wider project examining exemplary and intensified subjectivity, in this article I examine BITZ from different perspectives. The main aim is to contrast affirmative readings of BITZ (mostly derived from 'positive' social psychology) with other, more critical perspectives that would seek to politicise the conditions of its emergence and examine its range of social effects. The overall aim of the article is therefore to suggest the kinds of social and cultural frameworks that might facilitate exploration of the political potential of BITZ in different kinds of empirical context.

**Keywords:** Being-in-the zone, flow, work, subjectivity, cultural industries, politics.

## Introduction

What is a body *capable* of?  
(Lotringer 2004: 17)

In the cultural, media and creative industries – organised worlds of symbolic production – the total integration of the creative person and the creative work has long been standard. By practitioners, this is not necessarily regarded as problematic. The worker and the object of cultural work have often been regarded as two sides of the same coin; synonymous, even – the perfect fusion of human intent and material expression. Investing one's person into the act of creative production is merely the asking price and guarantee of an authentic art. Indeed, in cultural work – at the leading edge of media, fashion, art, music and design – to not surrender one's person to the work and all its demands is to endanger the prospect of producing anything of value at all.

In its more affirmative versions, there is a recurrent idea that captures that special moment of perfect synthesis between worker and the work – the idea of '*being in the zone*'. Being in the zone (hereafter BITZ) describes the epitomic, optimal fusion of the productive mind and the labouring body; an exceptional temporality where ordinary human capacities are transcended to produce excellence beyond convention. In the cultural industries BITZ is viewed as the special attribute of, and reward for, the most creative of workers, as well as the locus of much-needed original creativity. 'The zone' is simply where the best work gets done. As we'll see, in this cherished space of productivity, and time without time, the consummation of the union of person and work is at its most intense – the body in labour made both transcendent and ecstatic.

This article seeks to outline a range of socio-cultural perspectives on BITZ as part of a collaborative and exploratory project examining the contemporary prevalence of exceptional or intensified modes of social subjectivity<sup>1</sup>. In this inquiry 'the zone' is posited as a somewhat open-ended, discursive and embodied mode of intensity, characteristic of the psychological and social demands made by 'immersive' activities such as music, sport and – in this particular case – cultural industries work. At the heart of this project is a particular concern with the *politics* of intensity, or how BITZ, when activated, might illuminate something of the productive interface between culture and the body, or the relationships between the 'inner', individual world and the broader social relations that individuals embody and inhabit. Thus, by exploring some of the theoretical perspectives that have a handle on BITZ, that allow us to grasp BITZ in social and cultural (and not just psychological) terms, the aim of the article is to help develop a theoretical-analytical framework which might usefully examine BITZ as a particular expression of the kinds of contested, politicized – and increasingly intensive – subjectivities that pertain to cultural work (and other) immersive social settings.

The article begins by defining BITZ, before outlining its origins and popularisation in some of the more affirmative or ‘positive’ social science perspectives. These are then contrasted with critical social science accounts, which are imputed to understand BITZ rather less as a gateway to ecstasy and rather more as a biopolitical instrument for managing dutiful workers. In attempting to find ground between these perspectives, the final part of the article outlines the recent conversion of some exponents of ‘positive’ psychological approaches to a more nuanced social and cultural perspective on intensive work. The parallels of this reformulated theory with some emergent and increasingly influential critical sociologies of media and cultural industry work are then outlined. Finally, a more radical, autonomist rendering of the ‘affirmative’ potential of BITZ is speculated upon. The article is therefore deliberately suggestive and exploratory, concerned with potentials, rather than advocating the putting into play of any singular approach. In assessing these possible perspectives, and drawing attention to the overlaps and tensions between them, one aim is to invite others to evaluate the appropriate frameworks in which BITZ might be theorised, as well as consider the broader – or more fundamental – question of what might be the social or political potential of the zone, unleashed?

## **BITZ Defined**

Being in the groove. It just takes you away. You’re not even in the world  
Bootsy Collins

I was in the zone ...executing my shots...staying in the moment  
Victoria Azarenka

Sometimes I think I have multiple personality disorder, my personalities are ‘me in the zone’ and ‘me not in the zone’  
Jacques, programmer

Once I pick up those bamboo knitting needles and start with a simple knit or purl, I’m hooked. As an athlete would say, I’m in the zone  
Carla, knitter<sup>2</sup>

BITZ is a term commonly used to describe the feeling of existing ‘in the moment’, or in a state of exceptional concentration, clarity or productivity. BITZ is also associated with ‘peak’ performance, or the attainment of an extraordinary excellence. The most commonly identified inhabitants of the zone are creative artists (such as Bootsy Collins) or athletes (such as Victoria Azarenka), though it is widely used as a term to describe and account for a closed and focussed excellence within activities – such as Jacques’ computer programming or Carla’s knitting. The apparent consistency across fields suggests, in theory, everyone is capable of having zone-like experiences, alone or with others, however unexceptional their talents. By dint of having the human capacity for immersing ourselves in compelling and engaging tasks and activities we open up the possibility that we

too will enter the zone, and achieve excellence beyond the ordinary. Likely we can recall a time when we experienced something like BITZ, immersed in an absorbing activity to the extent that time and all external matters faded into insignificance and where, maybe, like Bootsy, we felt out of this world. Clearly, BITZ is usually regarded as positive and desirable. Accordingly, to begin to explore the range of socio-cultural perspectives on BITZ in cultural work, we first need to evaluate its origins in similarly affirmative and 'positive' forms of social science.

## **BITZ and Flow**

The precise origins of the idea of BITZ remain unclear<sup>3</sup>, but is most strongly linked in academic terms to the concept of 'flow' developed by the social psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in the early 1970s (Csikszentmihalyi 1975).<sup>4</sup> Since then Csikszentmihalyi has periodically refined and expanded his descriptions of the kinds of productive outcomes generated by flow – understood as the harmonious and productive synchronicity of mind and body:

These exceptional moments are what I have called *flow experiences* [his emphasis]. The metaphor of 'flow' is one that many people have used to describe the sense of effortless action they feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives. Athletes refer to it as 'being in the zone', religious mystics as being in 'ecstasy', artists and musicians as aesthetic rapture (...) their descriptions of the experience are remarkably similar (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 29).

Csikszentmihalyi contends that flow is an intense psychological state where both 'arousal' and 'control' are at peak levels and where levels of 'anxiety' and 'apathy' are low. Time goes unnoticed as distractions are eliminated and self-consciousness fades – all that remains is the actor in unthinking action, yet still wholly oriented to the task. Flow is a kind of forgetting, or abandonment of temporal consciousness – an unconscious negation of one's own bodily sense. Yet, while one can try to engineer entry to the zone, this is not always possible, and, conversely, it may simply happen when one is not expecting it. Neither are the outcomes of flow determinable in advance. There is therefore a certain kind of elusiveness or contingency in its availability or undertaking.

Nonetheless, according to Csikszentmihalyi, in all flow or zone-like moments, the balance between 'challenges' and 'skills' equalises, and there is perfect alignment between 'physical and psychic energy'. Here, then, 'life finally comes into its own' (ibid: 32), providing the 'flashes of intense living' (ibid: 31) necessary for animating otherwise routine and conventional situations. BITZ is thus a positive affirmation of the individual self and its creative capacity to transcend the confines of the ordinary; a rhapsodic timelessness, beyond self-consciousness, predictability or measure.

While activities of various kinds might be regarded as potentially absorbing and engrossing, in the literature, the concept of flow is especially earmarked as

being work or task-oriented – and so has proved ideal for application into different workplace contexts (Csikszentmihalyi 2003). For example, encouraging workers to enter the zone, to find their flow is, of course, one of the ways in which work can be intensified and productivity and efficiency gains can be made. Employers can also offset or counter worker disharmony by encouraging their charges to engage in (apparently) stimulating, rewarding and self-realizing activities. Here, flow, or BITZ, is imagined as an unqualified good – beneficial to employer and employee alike. Such insights have helped inform both an academic sub-discipline (‘positive psychology’<sup>5</sup>) as well as inspire a diverse literature in management commentary, psychology and training (see for example Geirland 1996; Marsh 2005; Carr 2011; Brusman 2013).<sup>6</sup> BITZ, then, is most commonly regarded as a *useful* form of bliss – a nirvana with purpose.

## **BITZ and Cultural Work**

Developing on this ‘positive’ approach, I want to argue that in affirmative readings of the cultural and creative industries, the ideas of BITZ and flow might carry a particular resonance. It is in such work – long regarded as the benchmark form of creative, un-alienated and progressive labour (see Stahl 2013) – that the possibility of productive, flow-like work appears particularly fertile. Here, immersive, intensive modes of work are commonly regarded as standard and intrinsic (Virno 2004). The cultural worker has also been perceived to anticipate the ‘model figure of the new worker’ (Menger 2002: 10, cited in Stahl 2013: 74), one exposed to, and able to uphold, the kinds of creative subjectivity now becoming more commonly distributed across the social body. Therefore, in cultural work, not only is BITZ more likely to be found, it might also provide the blueprint for a more thoroughgoing dispersal of its intensive mode to other kinds of professional and knowledge work.

In cultural work, cultural objects and commodities not only appear to emerge from free, productive union of the various ‘physical and psychic energies’ possessed by their autonomous, individual creator(s), but the imagined close bond between object, creation and creator rests on the social premise that only in ‘creative’ or artistic work is the product fully invested with an author’s own intentions. Given this relative autonomy, and productive control, the zone therefore becomes both an attainable and necessary state. To be in the zone, to feel flow, is widely regarded as a prerequisite for actually making an authentic (rather than inauthentic or ersatz) cultural object or commodity. Thus, with the more recent emergence and institutionalization of the cultural and creative industries, the emphasis on harmonious union between the creative process and commodity outcome has prompted much renewed theorising about how to get workers into the zone sufficient for them to execute their work – or channel their ‘energies’ – most effectively.

In creative industry policy, business and management literatures, promoting the zone will often involve some initial lionisation of the well-known individual ‘creative’ – be it a Damien Hirst or Sheryl Sandberg, a Joseph Beuys or Gertrude Stein; some archetype who has the capacity to make visionary ideas come to life while immersed in the state of flow, as popular commentator Eric Calonius positively suggests:

Steve Jobs ‘stood back’: ‘You can’t really predict what will happen,’ he said. ‘But you can feel the direction you’re going. And that’s about as close as you can get. Then you just stand back and get out of the way, and these things take on a life of their own’. (Calonius 2011, no pagination)

BITZ is just one element of the composite personality of the ideal-type celebrity-creative, who not only commands respect by making commercial profits, but by self-consciously (or some might say egregiously) disavowing much of the conventional means for their attainment. Conventional work narratives of cultural professionals routinely promote the necessity of emulating such free-spirited and zone-inhabiting role-models as a means for realising their own personal, latent (and comparably unrecognised) ‘talent’ – part of what Angela McRobbie (2002) has previously termed the wider ‘auteur relation’ underpinning the formation of cultural and creative work identities.

Managers, who try to emulate these inspiring individuals, or create flow or zone conditions that inspire their charges or employees, can rely on a range of interventions that might enable them to coax employees into the required states of productive ecstasy. It is now commonly argued that the workplaces can be engineered to enable flow states to more readily develop; usually by facilitating relations of informality, open communication, creativity and play, and by reducing bureaucratic management and discredited variations on Taylorism. Andrew Ross’s (2003) groundbreaking study of the ‘no collar’ technology workplace revealed firms providing their staff with the kinds of stimulating environments designed to induce the types of work intensity that generated the seductive thrill of BITZ-like experiences:

It was intoxicating at first. Look at me! I’m in New York and I’m working really late! Then, of course, you realize that it sucks. But, even then – and this was the strange part – it was still a rapturous feeling. (Kathy, tech-worker, quoted in Ross 2003: 76)

More explicitly, Yuri Martens (2011: 76) suggests the provision of ‘games rooms, relax lounges and green space’ and avoiding having ‘too high temperatures or too much noise, or not enough space to host the number of people’ as a potential means of manufacturing BITZ. That creatives can be given discretionary dispensations to ensure they more readily enter the zone (better workstations, more resources, research days, flexible hours, free time) has become a commonplace at leading technology firms like Microsoft and Google, and their emulators. Here, the zone is often an expression of normatively engineered workspace, one that

values the freedom of maverick individuals (usually men) to express outwardly their inner creativity in ways conducive to production imperatives (Nixon 2003). Yet, inspired by others or not, ordinary workers also routinely strive for the zone in their own everyday practices, viewing it as special pleasure or privilege of their personal creative endeavour – as revealed in David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker’s (2011) recent study of workers in television, magazine publishing and music recording (more on this later). Finally, note that BITZ can arguably occur *anywhere*, not just in the formal workplace – moments of focussed creativity inspiration, especially for the mobile and autonomous cultural worker, can occur at home, on the road, in leisure<sup>7</sup>, or in any circumstance where they might happen to be suitably stimulated or inspired.

BITZ, then, in its idealized form, is not simply an industry imposition, but a process of elective self-valorisation; both inside and ‘outside’ of work. It has become common for cultural and creative industry professionals to identify with, and publicly voice, the necessity of routinely experiencing flow or zone-like experiences. In fact, to identify oneself as someone capable of BITZ is a sure sign that one is as serious participant and true contender; for if one is not able to rouse one’s passion and enter the zone, and so attain the levels of in-flow excellence characterised as essential to the best kinds of cultural and artistic creativity, then what reasonable claim does one have to be a true creative, at all?

### **BITZ and the Social Subject – Critical Perspectives**

Clearly, ‘positive’ theorists of flow and BITZ seek to emphasise the pleasurable, productive aspects of work – those qualities that might make it such a compelling and attractive activity, beyond economic necessity. But that work *is* actually the source of much of our personal happiness and self-respect should not be lightly discounted – given the choice of giving up work for a life entirely comprised of leisure and ease, many people would choose to decline the opportunity. Work, to some significant degree, makes people happy. It fulfils and enriches lives. This truth has long been recognised – not just by Csikszentmihalyi and generations of managers, trainers and employees – but even by work’s most radical critics (see Granter 2009 for a most effective summary). It would be remiss therefore to discount the fact that BITZ at work *can* be pleasurable and productive – at least for some. Yet, to simply assume that it is a universal, or even commonplace, experience – beyond the realm of the social – is to insulate it from any kind of critical challenge, evaluation and analysis. This section suggests some perspectives that may help us to meet that challenge.

First of all, let us make the obvious point that for many people, work fails to generate anything like a feeling of BITZ or flow. For the majority, work is – at best – a routine and just-about-tolerable necessity, rarely punctuated by moments of transcendent bliss. Even in the kinds of creative and cultural industries that I’m

concerned with, which presume a degree of free intellectual and creative engagement not always found in routine manual and service labour, BITZ might occur only infrequently, maybe not at all. Across all industries, the continued existence of entrenched forms of structural inequality, ill-treatment and exploitation are likely to militate against having joyful ‘in the moment’ experiences. This much is given.

Additionally, the preponderance of alienation in work – in a plural sense of being alienated from the specific product of one’s labour, and being distanced from the regimes of organisational control and normative structures that prefigure it, might often lead workers to feelings of isolation, meaninglessness and self-estrangement sufficient to undermine the possibility of accessing and enjoying BITZ opportunities (Mitchell, 1988).<sup>8</sup> Given that BITZ and flow presuppose unfettered opportunity to enter (and exit) heightened states of creative productivity, then it is unlikely (given the division of labour and its associated conflicts) that the kinds of useful ecstasy imagined by flow theorists are commonplace or widely accessible – even in the cultural sector which claims to have privileged access to them.

But if we accept from this (broadly Marxian) perspective that BITZ *can* sometimes occur in the cultural industry workplace, this might still be explained through conventional forms of ideology critique, denunciations of a false and fictive consciousness and so on, and recourse, perhaps, to Adorno’s and other critical-theorists’ insistence that the idea of transcendental, free-thinking subjectivity at work is either a relic or more likely a manufactured ‘social effect’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 1992: 126) of the administrative machinery of capitalist production. However, more recent theorists of cultural industry – such as Bill Ryan (1992), Robert Witkin (2000) Sarah Brouillette (2009) – have tended to argue that the provision of subjective autonomy for creative workers (of the kinds likely sufficient for BITZ to occur) is actually a significant structural precondition for effective capitalist production, since it is only through providing people with the ‘free’ time and space to fashion new and ‘authentic’ commodities, that any future returns can be anticipated. The zone, therefore, is able to be imagined as part of the mixed repertoire of actions and temporalities that enable reproduction of the field conditions of cultural (industry) capitalism – where the freedoms of the cultural worker are part-protected to ensure that public demands for original products marked by the impress of authentic creation can actually be met. It is axiomatic that those designated as ‘creatives’ can never be entirely incorporated as abstract labour and subjected to standardised work routines, simply because they need to be given the latitude to create exciting and novel works that can be commodified – BITZ, therefore, might be regarded as part of the means to this end; an absolutely *necessary* temporal concession within a more familiar, fundamentally-ordered industrial structure.



By way of contrast, in other inquiries, the problem of creative subjectivity has been more keenly addressed using the concepts of governmentality and biopower – suggested by Michel Foucault as, respectively, the power to manage, and the power to produce and administer life itself (Foucault 1991; Lemke 1991). Here, under (neo)liberal rule, workers are willingly seduced and entrained to self-produce, uphold and refine the productive interplays of power and knowledge that ensure their subjection to the prevailing logic. Constituted through discourse and practices that affirm the personal freedoms to be obtained through inhabiting self-directed, entrepreneurial modes of being – ones that happen to be calibrated to effect discipline and responsibility in affairs of commerce – the worker-subject's desire becomes seamlessly enjoined to the accumulation imperative. Through such a lens, BITZ might be regarded as a kind of Grail-quest that promises deliverance to the higher plane of creative ecstasy, while simultaneously normalising the self-exploiting surrender of body and soul to the economic principle. In less purple prose, BITZ is now simply a routine part of the professional identity of the self-disciplined creative worker; which is nonetheless a 'tactic' – in Foucault's terms – effected by those concerned interests whose aim is to 'arrange things in such a way that, through a certain number of means, such and such ends may be achieved' (Foucault 1991: 95).

Viewed in such a way, the provision of BITZ opportunities is another spatio-temporal mechanism for breaking down any residual reluctance amongst workers to recognise and accept the necessity of surrendering oneself to the logic of production. Similar to recent innovations like 'away-days', 'boot-camps', 'Open Space', 'ideas-pools' and 'sand-pits', the zone provides a named concession to a human need for play, free space, autonomous time, and creative self-expression – one that just happens to be congenial to the kinds of governmental ordering it appears to disavow (Donzelot 1991). It is hard to read the accounts of, say, the fashion workers studied by Amanda Bill (2012) or the television workers studied by Gillian Ursell (2000) and not give some credence to claims that creative subjectivities are (at least partly) a manufactured means of ensuring obedience to a prevailing model of productive selfhood, one that also invites workers to co-write the scripts of their own subordination. And while in the wake of the legitimisation crises of industrial capitalism *all* kinds of work have been to some extent re-arranged in this 'empowering' fashion, it is cultural and creative industries work, with its veneration of sovereign talent and preference for individualized and performative modes of subjectivity, that appears most receptive to the kinds of organising technology that promise to propel workers more rapidly towards the promised land of meaningful work – or the kind of place where BITZ opportunities might more 'naturally' take root and flourish.

But is BITZ more fundamentally attributable to wider temporal adjustments in work? Autonomist writers such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009) and Paolo Virno (2004) have brought to our attention the contradictory ways in which

time at work is now being transformed, sufficient to question the kinds of separation of functions and practices that marked the industrial epoch. On the one hand, workers are subject to the kinds of managerial biopower and surveillant organizing previously discussed – and engaged in diligently (re)producing the social as freely-acting, self-constituting bodies, endowed with autonomous time. Yet on the other hand, time is never autonomous or disinterested, since one can only act within the limits prescribed by the situation of totalized precarity that now appear to unite working populations. Precarity names the process through which work has now escaped the confines of the plant, firm or factory, and become embedded in the social fabric, in the form of a necessary and generalized labouring subjectivity, which not only ruptures the historical partitioning between work and non-work, but ensures the worker's whole life experience is given over to capital. Indeed, Hardt and Negri (2009: 147) understand the term precarity partly as a kind of 'temporal poverty', a *lack* in which workers are no longer able to establish or exert control over their own ostensibly 'free' time. In such terms BITZ might be rendered as both a temporal endowment of biopolitical labour – part of a provision and demand for more intense temporalities of self-subjection – and an expression of the capacity of precarity to diminish the quality of free time, representing the further invasion of instrumentality into temporal relations hitherto protected from the generalized capitalization of life. In cultural work, analogous to the kinds of 'immaterial labour' studied largely by autonomist thinkers, this temporal dynamic is most markedly felt, since not only is the 'production of ideas, images and affects' (Hardt & Negri 2009: 147) demanding of freedom for producers to organize their own time, the capacity for producing such goods is now extended into the general social body in the form of uncontainable productive time and 'free' labour (Terranova 2000).

Further, not unrelated to these previous critiques, BITZ might be considered as one element of the administrative apparatus of an ascendant culture of intense or 'extreme work'. In extreme work (as in extreme leisure, see Elias & Dunning 1996), people work much longer than the norm, assume greater responsibilities and risk-burdens, and are pushed continually to the limits of their mental and physical capacities (Hewlett & Luce 2006; Granter 2009; 2013). On the one hand, we might account for this as a structural feature of an advanced capitalism that demands ever more effort from ever more power-less workers (while tending increasingly to disregard their non-productive needs), and, on the other hand, a testament to the extent to which work has displaced non-work as a significant source of human pleasure and meaning (Hochschild 1997). Indeed, it must be acknowledged that, *in extremis*, a gratuitous and exalted pleasure – not to mention elevated status – can be extracted by those workers who revel in the narcotic pull of working harder, faster and longer, or glory in their exaggerated and excessive labour. BITZ, then, might be regarded as both a way of thinking in the context of an affirmative language of total possibility, and a practical means of being a pro-

ductive person sufficiently geared to working extremely. Critics in this vein have, of course, identified the many deleterious effects on personal and social well-being of extreme work; one of which is – ironically – that it may not even be that economically productive (Hewlett & Luce 2006). While students of ‘edgework’ and others seeking adventure beyond the soporifizing effects of modernity would doubtless challenge the inherent pessimism of this reading of the ‘extreme’ (Lyng 1990), they would likely not deny the *potential* risks of those kinds of work where excess is construed as standard, and where the means of achieving the desired production intensity might tend more towards the authoritarian than the consensual.

Finally, for other critics, the simple question of the wider *ethical* purpose or ends of BITZ or flow has been neglected in the positive psychology literature. For Chris Rojek (2010) BITZ could be said to be suffering from a normative deficiency, in so far as we lack any substantive account of the ethical *reasons* one might be trying to be in the zone and what the ends of being in the zone might be – outside of some idea of its usefulness in enabling individuals to self-affirm, or to reach a point of extra-ordinary transcendence. Rojek develops this line in criticism of Csikszentmihalyi’s work on flow, where he forcefully makes the point regarding the necessity of developing a fully socialized and ethically-laden understanding of the concept:

From the standpoint of critical theory the objection to [flow] centres upon the ethical content of behaviour. Without a discussion of the *lebenswelt*, the context in which the experience of flow is located, it is really a somewhat facile concept. It is a reprehensible truth that the Nazis experienced ‘flow’ in the programme of Jewish extermination [...] From Arendt’s (1963) account [...] we know that [Adolf] Eichmann derived a powerful sense of work satisfaction and life justification by making the Nazi death trains [...] run on time. (Rojek 2010: 112)

An extreme example perhaps – but used to underpin the more general argument that we should not automatically associate BITZ or flow with positivity, affirmation, and life-enrichment, since both harmful deviancy and the most criminal horrors are equally likely to produce some intense, BITZ-like feelings. Rojek’s point is that any inquiry into the political potential of BITZ must involve situating it morally or ethically, by evaluating it in the context of the communities and practices within which it occurs. To do otherwise is to artificially separate BITZ from the very conditions and conflicts that both produce it and render it meaningful – or, put otherwise, to ignore why BITZ matters, socially and culturally. The following section therefore explores how others have tried to ground BITZ in some discernible socio-ethical context.

## **BITZ and the Social, a Retrieval?**

While the idea that BITZ is used to discipline and motivate (rather than to politically autonomise) compliant workers seems persuasive, in this section I speculate as to whether BITZ could still provide a means to other meanings, or other social outcomes. This requires thinking of an intensified labouring subjectivity as something potentially productive and generative – not just of happy work and compliant workers, but of an otherwise capable and capacitarian worker-subject, able to utilise the zone as a means to some kind of determined, social or non-capitalistic end. In fact, such a possibility is not wholly discounted by either the affirmations or critiques I have previously discussed – but let us return to them and outline some possible other scenarios.

First of all, we should acknowledge that consideration of such potential is, already, not entirely absent from the ‘positive’ literature. The more recent writings of Csikszentmihalyi and others have tried to explore the prospects for using flow to achieve progressive reforms in the workplace (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi & Damon 2001; Csikszentmihalyi 2003). It is suggested here that flow helps workers more intensively realise their self-potential, which, when appropriately directed, can contribute to maximising the sum of human well-being – with ‘good work’ loosely defined in relation to certain social and ethical precepts and standards now regarded as threatened by the commercial imperative. For example, in their study of journalists (identified as a hitherto flow-rich profession), Howard Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and William Damon suggest that the ‘insatiable quest for profits’ (2001: 138) has undermined the ethical basis of journalism, damaging its core ‘mission’ (ibid.) of upholding the democratic polity and providing honest, and honourable labour for liberal minds. Clearly, here, flow has become inappropriately blocked or stymied. But little is actually revealed about the essence of ‘good work’ or how flow might help us move beyond the unfortunate situation of its lack – BITZ in itself appears to possess no particular qualities that would enable it to allow ‘bad work’ to be overcome.

While this work represents a welcome effort to lift flow/BITZ into a projective social horizon, beyond any previous expositions of the ‘positive’ genre, it remains limited by its tendency to retain strong faith in the ability of enlightened firms and benevolent managers to recognise and value the symbiotic relationships between flow and ‘good work’. Its focus is only on transforming only the behaviour and performances of free-choosing individuals *in situ*, which is presumably deemed sufficient to overcome any of the obstacles configured by those social structures that might actually preclude the possibility of ‘good work’ flourishing. Nonetheless, such writings do at least offer some initial counter to Rojek’s critique of the lack of ethical discussion in flow theory, and suggest that exponents are seeking to pull together the psychological and the sociological in the interests of a unified, outward facing set of formulations about the effective purpose and goals of BITZ

at work. However limited as a form of critical inquiry, such work holds the virtue of suggesting a potential for further cross-over and rapprochement with other kinds of work sociology, from contrasting critical traditions.

Indeed, such a view of ideal-type journalism – with its focus on shared, ethical standards and excellence, geared to social rather than individual ends – has at least something in common with more critical, politically-focussed understandings of cultural work more recently developed in sociology and media and cultural studies. Here a number of researchers have tried to identify the ways in which workers are entrained to a labour process that can provide for (but just as easily diminish or degrade) capacities for ‘good work’ (variously defined as excellent, secure, meaningful, autonomous, interesting) cultural work – examples include Hesmondhalgh and Baker’s work already mentioned, as well as research on new media and web-designers (Kennedy 2012), visual artists (Taylor & Littleton 2012), craft workers (Luckman 2012) and film-makers (Vail & Hollands 2012) to name but a few. Work here is presented as a complex moral economy of mixed desires for wealth and esteem, autonomy and self-actualization, personal and social well-being, and political commitments of a worldly nature, all of which combine to influence significantly how the practice of cultural production takes place and how cultural goods actually emerge and become valued. Yet a striking commonality of this research lies in its persisting with the understanding that while capitalistic work remains plagued with various injustices, and plainly directed towards ‘external’, instrumentalizing ends, it also provides a focus for animating different kinds of ‘internal’ collective, co-operative activities (unions, associations, communities, practices) that might in different ways furnish critical understandings and actions that have the capacity to challenge some of the less-welcome impositions and iniquities of the labour process. But where might BITZ come into this work, *explicitly*? Let me suggest one example.

Recall that Hesmondhalgh and Baker’s study outlines how flow experiences play an important role in providing creative media professionals with moments of what they term ‘pleasurable absorption’ (2011: 132), that further enhance the satisfactions of what is taken to be inherently stimulating and rewarding work. They also recognise, however, that such flow or BITZ experiences may constitute only individualized and relatively self-contained compensations for what is otherwise somewhat difficult or exploitative work – the sweetener that ensures a more general (if never unquestioning) compliance. Yet the stronger point we could make here about BITZ, is that it is also part of an enabling repertoire of shared activities that help make up the ethical constitution of the total *practice* of cultural work. By practice I am explicitly adopting Alasdair MacIntyre’s (2007/1981) rendering of the term which is used to describe any kind of skilled, complex and collective activity that possesses its own ‘internal goods’ – a set of standards of excellence, techniques and ethical precepts which are unique to the specific practice in question. What unites people in a practice (in the cultural industry context, let us say

journalism, painting, screenwriting or opera) is not simply that they might singularly and competitively pursue or accrue ‘external’ goods (such as money, fame or power), but that they share some commitment to the internal goods of the practice, which are recognised as distinctive and special, and collectively valued for their own sake. In this respect, practices are not simply (or only) understood as ‘ways of doing things’ (as in their most commonplace definition) nor, as in Bourdieu’s formulations, ultimately concerned with optimising strategic interests, but as shared, ethical endeavours – strongly linked to ideas of how one should live, and, crucially, how one should treat others, in the practice, and beyond. Practices are therefore not simply analogous to professional ‘ethics’ or ‘integrity’ or ‘product quality’ but much more deeply linked to the collective extension of ‘human powers’ and the creation of ‘the good of a certain kind of life’ (MacIntyre 2007: 190-1). While practices are not guaranteed to be benevolent and harmonious, desires for internal goods tend to incline practitioners towards co-operative and collaborative modes of living that allow these goods to be most effectively obtained, since, as MacIntyre has it, it is only through concentrated absorption in the virtues<sup>9</sup> of a practice (his equivalent of BITZ is of a painter living a ‘Gauguin-like’ existence) that one becomes able to elicit its full array of internal goods and rewards. We might use this to speculate that the demand for virtuous engagement and excellence inherent to practices may be more likely met when practitioners adopt a position of *intensive engagement* in its characteristic activities.

In these terms, BITZ might be imagined hypothetically as a means of intensifying the production of a different kind of ‘good work’ – work that meets or surpasses the standards of excellence identified as consistent with the practice *and* that has benefits not just to practitioners and their community but – potentially – to wider publics (Banks 2012). When an author enters the zone to create a powerful new text, genre or style of writing that transforms the perspective of the practice, when jazz musicians get ‘into the groove’ and create a new composition or improvisation, one that significantly advances the practice and public appreciation of jazz as a whole, or when programmers intensely co-operate to create new software or applications that have wide community benefits, or cohere a political action – then one might say that zone has done its work. Ideally, here, standards have been raised, the ‘human powers’ of practitioners extended and the strengths of the community enhanced. Intensive modes of singular or co-operative work, in the context of a cultural practice, can have social or politically-beneficial effects – benefits that, theoretically, may *not* have accrued if those intensive, creative, zone-like conditions had not been made available. In short, BITZ *in itself* can be a route to the advanced cultivation of politically significant ‘internal goods’ – goods that might potentially cohere, unite, mitigate or challenge social worlds.

And yet (as ever) we must be cautious, sceptical even – not least because practices are not necessarily oriented to virtuous or ‘good’ work, only potentially so<sup>10</sup>. And the particular progressive, practice-enhancing uses to which BITZ might be

put – and the special intensive qualities that BITZ possesses to entail them – still remain contained within, and perhaps only a weak compensation for, the broader patterns of control, iniquity and injustice that pervade capitalist work. An awareness of the value of BITZ in a practice may raise consciousness but offer little challenge to established property relations, for example. And while a practice may have its own internal rewards and potentials, as might be obvious, it must develop them in relation to external pressures (such as money, institutions, markets) that are necessary to support the practice, but may also (as MacIntyre noted) threaten its foundation or integrity. Nonetheless, in linking intensive subjectivity to demonstrable ethical concerns (and the kinds of virtue needed to fulfil them), a redemptive prospect for BITZ at work is at least theoretically raised, beyond that conventionally offered in the more affirmative literature.

Finally, I want to briefly consider how this concern with the intrinsically productive qualities of intensified work might take on a somewhat different political cast in the autonomist perspective. We have already seen in a previous section how the social spread of precarity might serve to intensify regimes of biopower, sufficient to institutionalise BITZ as a mechanism of rule. Yet, here, the latent potential of the ‘multitude’ – the plural society (or dispersed unity) of active individuals and activating networks – also provides a way of thinking the possibilities of BITZ through a more radical lens; one that focuses not on the amelioration or reform of capitalism, but on its refusal.

For example, one of the more provocative claims of Virno (2004) is to suggest that all work (but especially work in the cultural industries) has increasingly taken on the form and character of politics, since (in its post-industrial guise) it now relies more strongly on political skills of communication, association, negotiation, managing contingency and problem-solving. Work (like politics) is also more performative, concerned with ‘being in the presence of others’ (ibid, 51), impressing an audience, and, crucially, directed towards producing not (or not simply) a physical commodity-object, but an open-ended, immaterial outcome, (such as) more communications, a brand, or an immaterial service – an execution of labour *potential* ‘without end product’ (ibid. 55). This assumes that workers are now more likely to be judged as productive in so far as they can embody these performative, communicative competencies – where they *show* they can self-manage and project their own labour-power, almost independent of any conventionally ‘objective’ or measurable outcome. With this in mind, Virno sketches striking parallels between the ‘virtuoso’ and the contemporary post-industrial worker. The virtuoso is an artist who offers a memorable performance, a display of artistry that carries within it its own internal weight and value – not someone who necessarily produces a commodity or object to take away, but an expert stylist or auteur whose work is ongoing and never complete, a potential always *becoming* – and, for Virno, this provides a quite congenial model for understanding the cultural (and non-cultural) worker.

Here, then, we might imagine BITZ construed *as* a particular expression of virtuosity – a performance of becoming that guarantees a worker’s ability to inhabit the creative role ascribed to her; a presentation of a body committed to the necessary but uncertain process of self-expression and exploration. Indeed, in the performative mode, BITZ is not simply passive or benign, but also about visibly and vocally putting oneself ‘out there’ in a creative sense, publicly displaying extraordinary creativity and risk-taking capacities of the kind that Virno artfully links back to Max Weber’s definition of the ‘vocation’ of the politician – namely, ‘knowing how to place the health of one’s own soul in danger’ (Virno 2004: 55). This suggests that, in cultural work, BITZ is about a wilful imperilment of the self – since one of the things we ‘know’ about BITZ is that its outcome can never be pre-ordained. What does BITZ *itself* actually produce? How can we predict or measure its effectivity or efficiency? We cannot, or cannot easily, answer these questions. Managers must rely on the virtuoso to present their own (though arguably stylised and pre-formatted) evidence of the zone’s intrinsic worth and value. Hence, the familiar ways in which cultural workers must talk-up the affects and dis-affects of BITZ, its glamour and its triumphs, its draining intensities – and seek to do so publicly, to ensure that it is appropriately witnessed, just as a virtuoso must be witnessed. The allusion is somewhat overdrawn as the products of BITZ are often tangible in a way – the text, code, document, symbol or image that might be produced – but equally they are perhaps as intangible as Virno imagines, often producing only an affirmation of faith in the process as the worker reproduces the desirable ‘score’, ‘script’ or communicative performance of acceptable competence and quality.

This, then, is the enthrallment, and the control, but what of the politics? For Virno, the performance of the virtuoso intrinsically contains an excess potential, able to be put to other than work-serving uses. This potential arises because the singular expression of virtuosity is also an expression of the general intellect, the stock of common creativity possessed by the multitude, and one that is never entirely shackled by the productive ends imagined for it. Constantly updating, and transmuting, the multitude is the radically heterogeneous source of creative surpluses that can never be fully expropriated. In such a register, BITZ seems remarkably analogous to the kinds of energetic and visceral modes of revolutionary being imagined by autonomist thought. Cast in Hardt and Negri’s most effusive terms, the intensities inspired by BITZ are easily imagined as part of the ‘spontaneous movement’ (Hardt & Negri 2000: 399) of the multitude, where productive flows of bodies transform spatio-temporal horizons and forge ‘new paths of destiny’ (ibid. 397). Clearly, the role of the zone here would *not* be to do ‘good work’, or enhance excellence in a communitarian practice, but to create an anti-reformist politics of civil disobedience, defection and exit from capitalist work relations. The refusal of work characteristic of the autonomist perspective would likely demand that BITZ (as, hypothetically, a time of intense virtuosity) be employed only



as a means to activate the ‘flee-option’ rather than the ‘resistance-option’ (Virno 2004: 71) – BITZ harnessed to a flight to future possible worlds, beyond the grasp of work itself.

## **Towards a Theory of the Zone?**

This article has offered a speculative and exploratory investigation into the phenomenon of flow or ‘being in the zone’ (BITZ), across different kinds of cultural or creative industry work. As an expression of a now more widespread intensification of labouring subjectivity, within an exemplary and influential field of work, such a study might prove suggestive of the broader and changing character of contemporary employment. What patterns or relationships have been detected, sufficient to underscore any future inquiry?

Evidently, a persuasive case can be made for a critical (either broadly Foucauldian, or neo-Marxist) interpretation. There seems no doubt that cultural workers today are being induced to offer employers the full, productive capacities of their unconscious bodies. This involves the immersive, kinaesthetic engagement of the worker into the productive tasks demanded of her; habitual acts of (re)production that enable the worker to become fully absorbed in her work and to undertake it ‘without thought’ – while remaining alert to its particular intellectual challenges and demands. Of course, labour – particularly in its idealised, craft forms – has always required some surrender to the beat and rhythm of the task in hand, a kind of necessary detachment from exteriority, sufficient for the very best or most rewarding work to be done (Sennett 2007). But now – especially across the kinds of professional cultural work I’ve considered here – the habituation to immersive and intensive work appear to act as a kind of organised and instrumental reflex; a standardised orientation to being usefully active that nonetheless remains largely internalised, un-spoken and un-examined. One is simply required to inhabit or even become one’s job, regardless of any intrinsic virtues or qualities it might lack or possess. BITZ is a manifestation of that compulsion. It remains important, politically, to resist that compulsion when it can be shown to have personal and socially-deleterious effects.

Nonetheless, it seems vital to continue to explore the possibility that BITZ – as an expression of a contingently creative and intensive subjectivity – might have other potentials, that might demand a different explanation. As we have seen, for positive psychologists, the potential of BITZ lies in its capacity to orient people towards ‘good’ and useful work – to create a ‘harmony of the spheres’ where managers and workers of enlightened good character, co-operate to enhance the shared quality of existence (Csikszentmihalyi 2009). The Panglossian and quasi-spiritual leanings of this approach, coupled with its determination to disregard either the problems (or potentials) of established social structures and divisions make it easy to dismiss it as an approach laden with unrealistic expectations. Less

easy to dismiss are the more critically-informed kinds of analyses that acknowledge the enduring value and appeal of cultural work, for both individuals and societies, while also recognising and seeking to challenge its deeply-entrenched and institutionalized injustices. It is here (in the kind of approach represented in this article by Hesmondhalgh and Baker) that studying BITZ as a form of intensive commitment to accessing internal goods and improving standards of excellence in the cultural work 'practice' appears potentially most fruitful – alongside or in conjunction with the equally necessary evaluations of the uses of the zone to control and exploit workers. This more 'balanced' approach is not without its own difficulties and limitations, however. For example, even a politically-directed and practice-led valorization of BITZ might provide only temporary consolations from – or help mask, or inhibit reform of – fundamental inequalities and enduring injustices. The rich plethora of active and ongoing demands for social justice within cultural work (amongst unions, collectives, worker associations and so on) already provides real contexts for the elaboration of debates about what might constitute the appropriate intensity of work and to what useful ends moments of extraordinary excellence might be directed. In this context, some extended inquiry into the capability of the body, and the politics of the zone, might prove illuminating.

This is not to discount the value of autonomist approaches that envisage a world pregnant with the possibilities of workplace defection and exit; worlds where BITZ might be – at least hypothetically – cast as an expression of intensive virtuosity, or a revolutionary disruption of the ordinary. BITZ certainly has affinities with the kinds of revelatory, spontaneous action imagined to (one day) fuel the exodus from work, though we must keep in mind the possibility that it may remain effective only as a temporary and fleeting form of escapism, as work rolls on regardless. Indeed, questions remain about the extent to which workers (and, actually, which workers in particular) are able to be 'spontaneously' direct themselves towards defective acts and networks of refusal. For the majority, work is a question of everyday struggle and subsistence, but one that is recognised as an absolute necessity – for diverse reasons that range from basic survival to perceived fulfilment of instinct or human essence. Much less is it regarded as a source for fomenting one's ungovernable surplus. And we must accept that those for whom work *does* actually provide the kinds of life-enhancing pleasures that other social realms fail to provide, are likely to be among the most reluctant to abandon its rewards and satisfactions. Nonetheless, it remains vital that BITZ in an autonomist register continues to suggest a potential to significantly disrupt (rather than simply try to redeem) the organisation of cultural work<sup>11</sup>, and here – as is the case with the other approaches I have outlined – there remains much reason to theorise the political uses of intensity in cultural work, and realms beyond. Perhaps, then, for now, at this largely pre-empirical stage, it is simply enough to offer a universal, rather than any particular, defence of BITZ; one that does not so much

celebrate intensity, as sympathise with its prevalence and acknowledge the condition that lies at its heart – a desire for transcendence, or a manifest longing for something else, both ecstatic and extraordinary, either within or without the confines of work.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> AHRC Research Network ‘Being in the Zone: The Importance of Culture to Peak Performance in Sport, Art and Work’, led by Kath Woodward (The Open University, UK) and Tim Jordan (King’s College, London) For more details see: <http://www.open.ac.uk/ccig/research/projects/being-in-the-zone>
- <sup>2</sup> Sources: accessed April 2013  
[http://juicemagazine.com/home/2009/09/bootsy-collins/#!prettyPhoto\[Gallery\]/0/](http://juicemagazine.com/home/2009/09/bootsy-collins/#!prettyPhoto[Gallery]/0/)  
<http://sports.ndtv.com/australian-open-2013/news/202064-victoria-azarenka-says-she-is-in-the-zone-after-another-win>  
<http://jacquesmattheij.com/living+in+the+zone>  
<http://blog.medbroadcast.com/?p=1491>
- <sup>3</sup> Some have attributed the first use of ‘the zone’ in popular culture to tennis coach Timothy Gallwey and his book *The Inner Game of Tennis* (1974), others to tennis player Arthur Ashe, or even baseball player Ted Williams (see Young & Pain 1999). Given its synonymy with older musical terms such as ‘in the groove’ and ‘in the pocket’, or even older ideas of being ‘open’ or ‘connected’ in everyday religious or spiritual contexts, we might presume to identify BITZ contains some general and long-established qualities of experience, even if particular descriptions and understandings of that experience have tended to vary across disciplinary fields and historical contexts.
- <sup>4</sup> Note that Maslow’s (1964) idea of ‘peak’ performance has close affinities with ‘flow’, though the latter has become more widely employed in work and employment contexts.
- <sup>5</sup> Positive psychology is concerned with the exploration of ‘positive’ human emotions, such as happiness, well-being and contentment, developed by its exponents in direct contrast to the

- (perceived) hegemonic social scientific focus on the negative, disabling and pathological aspects of the human psyche; see <http://www.positivepsychology.org> for more details
- 6 'One of the most powerful questions you can ask yourself is "Am I helping to create a work culture and climate that nourishes a state of flow?" Emotionally intelligent and socially intelligent organizations provide executive coaching and leadership development for leaders to be more innovative at motivating others' (Brusman 2013: no pagination)
- 7 In May 2013 The Economist ran an article entitled 'Cycling is the New Golf' in which the benefits of road biking for business networking were espoused, as well the effectiveness of cycling for generating useful zone-like experiences. As architect and cyclist Jean-Jacques Lorraine offered, on a group ride, "The adrenaline rushes, the serotonin pulses and the surges of endorphin create a kind of high, a sense of euphoria. I feel open, honest and generous to others. I often find I'm saying things on a bike which I wouldn't normally say, and equally I've been confided in when I wasn't expecting it." See <http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2013/04/business-networking> (accessed May 2013).
- 8 While alienation might discourage the flourishing of BITZ, one might also think of some kinds of repetitive, boring, menial or meaningless work as generating their own particular kinds of BITZ experiences, ones much less positively-valued than the kinds open to the creative worker. Any production line or routine labour that requires low skill and maximum repetition might be said to induce workers into another kind of zone – a 'dead zone' where thinking is unnecessary, or into a deliberate zone of 'switching off' by the worker as a means of coping with monotony, alienation and self-estrangement. Here the zone is about suppressed potential and capacity, not about extension and elaboration.
- 9 A virtue is a quality of moral excellence (e.g. justice, courage, benevolence) that aids the flourishing and progressive development of human-beings, which are seen (by virtue ethicist philosophers such as MacIntyre) as vital to the creation of equal and just societies. Derived from Aristotelian ethics, virtues are character traits which enable those who possess them to 'live well'.
- 10 At the time of writing, in the UK, the most recent example of where the 'vices' rather than the 'virtues' appear to have taken hold in a cultural work practice came in tabloid journalism, as revealed by the 2012 Leveson Inquiry.
- 11 See Stephen Shukaitis's *Imaginal Machines* (2009) for a lively and energising account of 'intense relations' and the possibility of some zone-like political interventions at work.

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