

How to Complete a Work?

The Creative Working Process in the Arts

*“We work in the dark. Our doubt is our passion
and our passion is our task.
The rest is the madness of art.”*

Henry James

Introduction

- **The issue** : The creative process in the arts
- **The aim** : To lay some analytical foundations
- **The challenge** : Sociology has little to offer for the interpretation of specific works of art, but much to offer with regard to work, employment, careers, occupations and organizations in the arts.
- **The approach adopted** : One possible avenue to an individual artistic work is to see it as the outcome of an uncertain and highly variable course of action
- **The focus** : Completed as well as unfinished works. Why?

Agenda

1 What is Artistic Labor? Process, Choice and Outcome

2 Variability

3 Work: Unforeseeable and Inevitable outcome

4 Completion in Historical Perspective

5 Completion in Comparative Perspective

6 The Business of Completion

7 Methodological Considerations

8 Conclusion

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What is Artistic Labor? Process, Choice and Outcome

- **Intentionality and purposeful action**
- **A initial set of countless possible configurations**
- **Constraints, reuse of past solutions, desire of improvement, new challenges**
- **Cutting down the set of feasible possibilities**
- **How to stop working? The completion issue**
- **Picasso : “the most difficult thing is to know when to stop”**
- **Optimization inside the working process : the opportunity cost of time**

What is Artistic Labor? Process, Choice and Outcome

- Dedication to work and satisfaction derived from the creative process itself
- How to turn marginal cost of working into marginal benefit?
- Taking advantage of the non-routine type of creative work
- Two key characteristics of non-routine work :
 - *Its learning potential, a fuel for intrinsic motivation*
 - *Its uncertain outcome, a condition of self-actualization through work*
- Uncertainty as a double-sided incentive : mass-market arts and high arts

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Variable behaviors and situations

- **Variability in creative behavior accross projects : Picasso again**
- **Five typical situations**
 - 1. **Narrowly constrained work : commissioned work**
 - 2. **A conceptual target : Rodin's *Balzac***
 - 3. **Ambitious projects : Musil, Rodin, Scriabine, Mallarmé, Capote**
 - 4. **Experimentations**
 - 5. **Fragmentary work in an indefinite flow**
- **Variability as a resource :**
 - **Mozart and his stock of musical material**
 - **Portfolios of ongoing projects**
 - **Works as matrices : Schoenberg's *Jakobsleiter***

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The Artwork : Unforeseeable and inevitable outcome

- **Choice and optimization : a sense of inevitability conveyed by a successful work**
- **A purposeful process whose outcome is uncertain : a sense of surprising and unforeseeable end result**
- **Why and how do inevitability and unpredictability coexist? Probability and evaluation**
- **Materializing the working process : versions and ramifications**

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Completion in Historical Perspective

- The aesthetic potential of defective creation
- Baudelaire's four criteria of modernity :
 - *Unfinishedness*
 - *Fragmentary*
 - *Insignificance*
 - *Self-criticism*
- Creative impotence or creative tension?

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Completion in Comparative Perspective

- **Differences between the arts**
- **Upstream /downstream kinds of completion and incompleteness**
- **Innovation and open-endedness**
- **Control, cooperation and competition**

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The Business of Completion

- Sketch analysis, genetic criticism, scholarly studies on creativity : worshipping creativity?
- Failure and superhuman tenacity
- From the end result to the creative process
- How to overcome the scarcity limit?
- Supply and demand mechanics of rediscoveries, completions and supplements

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Methodological Considerations

- **Case studies and counterfactual reasoning**
- **Materials and their limits**
- **Deciphering the ultimate secret of invention in the arts : a self-contradictory aim**
- **Two caveats :**
 - **1) A bias towards success in the study of the creative process**
 - **2) The loose causal link between the working process and the value of the end result**

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Conclusion

- **Works of art : long lasting pieces of invention able to deliver a indefinite flow of services**
- **The paths not taken**
- **Who influences the creative process?**

Conclusion

- **An example of a recent paper on opera**
- I focus on operatic production and case studies (operas by Verdi, Moussorgsky, Puccini, Berg) and show that works entering the canonical repertoire have been able to deliver a indefinite flow of aesthetic, financial and scholarly services, thus becoming durable intermediary goods, but only if they remain subject to ceaseless interventions. The paper takes three steps. Firstly, it shows that textual instability has been a powerful functional requirement of the performance process and its varying conditions before receding as composers and editors gained control over the market distribution of their works. It then explores cases where famous works produced in different authorial versions due to deliberate revisions give rise to various reshufflings as performers, stage directors and editors feel increasingly entitled to refresh canonical works. Finally, it analyzes the completion business in relation to famous unfinished works: completion gains credibility when it successfully turns the story of incomplete creative undertakings into an ongoing puzzle that remains to be solved over and over again.