Performing Potentiality
Sommerlund, Julie; Strandvad, Sara Malou

Published in:
Theory & Psychology

Publication date:
2012

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
The promises of talent: Performing potentiality

Julie Sommerlund
The Danish Design School

Sara Malou Strandvad
University of Roskilde

Abstract
In this paper we address the question of talent from a performative perspective. Instead of entering the discussion about whether talent should be considered an individual or a social construction, we suggest looking into how talents are performed. Inspired by the sociology of expectations, we explore when talents are made and what effects they have. Based on studies of Danish film directors and designers, our research suggests that talent is constituted during three processes: identification, self-technology, and materialization. Identification is when others locate potentiality in the individual. Self-technology describes the work which the individual carries out to cultivate his or her talent. Materialization refers to the objects that manifest the talent and the necessity of enrolling other participants to create these objects.

Keywords
attachments, creativity, potentiality, self-technology, talent

Many are called; few are chosen! (Film director and film school teacher Gert Fredholm, as cited in Wiedemann, 2005, p. 24)

In the era of the experience economy, the arts and creative industries are attracting an increasing number of aspirants (Florida, 2002; Howkins, 2001; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). In deciding and discussing the fates of hopeful candidates, talent is an important criterion. Talent is required and determines future prospects. Yet, what it takes to constitute a talent that can carry a creative career does not seem to be as explicitly stated as the request for talent. Hence, in this paper, we track the constitution of talent. Based on empirical studies

Corresponding author:
Julie Sommerlund, The Danish Design School, Strandboulevarden 47, 100 København Ø, Denmark.
Email: jso@dkds.dk
of young Danish film directors and fashion designers, the paper looks into how a few talents emerge from processes where most aspirants are turned down.

In tracing the selection of talents, the paper points to the paradoxical fact that although talent has to manifest itself in material objects, it is not the objects but the person “behind” them who is held accountable for their effects. Hence, the talent is, on the one hand, materialized in objects and, on the other hand, an immaterialized notion, which is located in the subject. The paper also points to another paradox: that talent is often explained as an individual accomplishment, which is contrasted with social explanations. As an alternative, we will argue that these stories cannot be separated but are interrelated. In other words, we will tell the story of the talented individual as a case of both self- and social technologies.

Thus, talent is a phenomenon which takes place between the individual, the material, and the social. In the paper we track how the aspirant gains strength and stability through material and social practices of talent. More specifically, we trace three phases in which the social technologies of talent can be identified. First, the paper describes identification, in which the talented person is recognized and hailed as a talent. Fundamentally, the works of art function as mediators, and it is the personality behind the works that is at stake. Second, we discuss self-technology, in which the talented person works to discipline and refine his or her skills, under the supervision of others: for example, mentors and teachers. Primarily, the willingness to merge life- and work-spheres is more important than any skill. Third, the paper describes materialization, in which talent is summoned in the production of works of art. Materialization is crucially dependent on the talented person’s ability to make attachments to other actors: people, money, place, and so on. All three processes take place simultaneously and/or interchangeably. Within each of these—identification, self-technology, and materialization—the paper will point to forceful exclusion mechanisms.

Cases and methods

This paper is based on various separate research projects. Strandvad conducted two of these, exploring the organization of creative work in the film industry. Other studies were conducted by Sommerlund, investigating communication and mediation within the fashion industry. Lastly, a study of admission procedures at the Danish Design School was carried out by Strandvad and Sommerlund together. Strandvad’s studies in the film industry consist of an interview study with 15 up-and-coming film directors, and a case study of five film projects that were followed over a 1-year period. These studies also include interviews with central figures in the film industry, such as film consultants, the head of a film school, successful producers, and so forth. One Sommerlund project includes interviews with four central actors in fashion communication, and observations of situations such as fashion shows, trade fairs, sales meetings, and so forth. Moreover, Sommerlund has been working on a report on the collaboration between fashion education and industry for the Danish Enterprise and Construction Agency, and in this context has generated a data-set consisting of interviews with heads of four design schools, six fashion students, nine business representatives and representatives from the above-mentioned agency, as well as the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education. Lastly, the joint study of admission procedures was based on observational studies of about 100 portfolio assessments and 16 interview sessions. Strandvad conducted these observations, and Sommerlund is herself an active
Sommerlund and Strandvad

part of admission procedures and education at the Danish Design School, and therefore has hands-on knowledge about this field.

However, it is only the last, joint study that is explicitly about talent. The other studies are on neighboring themes, but do not have talent as the central research question. Therefore, this paper does not present, and is not intended to present, a classical empirical analysis. Rather, we have used the varied data-sets to identify and conceptualize common traits, between the art forms that we have studied, in the constitution of talent. We have done so by looking at factors that arise in both of the two specific fields at hand, film and design, but also through conversations with other artists when possible. We have looked for such instances by going over each other’s data-sets in an iterative manner, shaping hypotheses, going back to the data to test them, rewriting hypotheses, going back to data, and so forth. It is our hope thus to have produced a set of concepts that are specific and yet general enough to be of use in further studies of talent.

Talent: A performative approach

In analyses of how creative talents are constituted, two opposing views seem to dominate. On the one hand, the belief persists that especially gifted persons exist. On the other hand, sociologists hold that those gifted persons are constructed by social factors. In the following, we suggest an alternative approach, which takes its departure from the debate between the two opposing views, but aims to transgress their ingrained dichotomy. By turning to a performative perspective, as initiated by Callon (1998, 2007), we set out to illustrate how talent becomes manifest via several instances of socio-material intervention. Thus, the talented person is not simply “socially constructed.” Rather, talent is performed in a number of situations in which the individual as well as various other actors take part. When pointing out talent, which may be done by oneself as well as by numerous others, the talented person is not simply described but shaped. By turning attention to such moments of shaping talent, we set out to offer an analytical perspective that captures specific empirical instances of when and where talent is performed, rather than general claims about individual creativity versus social causalities.

The idea of the creative genius, rooted in the Romantic conception of the inspired artist, holds that talents are individuals who possess exceptional creative abilities (Negus & Pickering, 2004). In a number of studies, sociologists have demonstrated convincingly that the myth of the creative talent provides an insufficient explanation of creative practices (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1980/1993; Elias, 1991/1993). In opposition to seeing artistic work as the materialization of a single person’s vision, studies within the sociology of art have shown how artistic work is dependent upon numerous social factors such as educational systems, sources of financing, cultural policies, critics, exhibitions, and distributing institutions (e.g., Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1980/1993; Crane, 1992; DeNora, 1995; DiMaggio, 1982a, 1982b; Du Gay, Hall, James, Mackay, & Negus, 1997; Faulkner, 1983/2002; McRobbie, 1998, 2002, 2004; White & White, 1965/1993; Zolberg, 1990). However, the cultural sociologist Chandra Mukerji (1994) argues that repeating the claim that creative work is not an individual deed, debunking the myth of the creative talent, does not explain how creative production is collaborative: “In the sociology of both culture and science, eschewing ‘auteur’ or ‘Great Man’ theories of human creativity has been easier
than trying to understand human thought and creativity in group rather than individual terms” (p. 147).

Following Mukerji’s argument, we suggest that sociologists of cultural production have generated a position which is primarily defined by its opposition to the individualistic explanation of creative talent. This means that sociologists have opened a space of possibilities for considering collaborative practices in creative work by rejecting the individualistic explanation, as Mukerji suggests. However, sociologists can be said to have filled this space with social instead of individual explanations. By substituting individual factors with social factors, sociological explanations of creative talent have maintained—although reversed—the causal logic of the individualistic explanation. In this way, the sociological approach to creative talent can be criticized for being delineated by its starting point.

The position of Bourdieu, who has produced one of the most famous and widespread sociological theories on cultural production, may illustrate the point here. According to Bourdieu (1980/1993), the sociological perspective entails seeing artistic work as shaped by the social field (cf. DeNora, 1995). Hence, Bourdieu (1980/1993) asks the cunning question: “But who creates the ‘creators’?” (p. 139), and clarifies: “[T]he question to ask is not what the artist creates, but who creates the artist” (p. 147). In raising such questions, he proposes that creators of cultural products are themselves socially created. Thereby, he suggests that social causality determines cultural production, which is an argument that represents a rejection, and reversal, of the individualistic explanation of creativity.

Bourdieu’s argument has been criticized by those expounding its counterpart, the individualistic explanation. Critics from this stance have maintained that Bourdieu’s position implies “sociologizing exceptionality away” (Negus & Pickering, 2004, p. 152). Hence, the solution which these critics have proposed is a return to the individualistic explanation: accepting that some individuals are more gifted than others, or at least that a very few are exceptional. In that way, a dichotomy between individual and social explanations has been installed as fundamental in the sociological debate over artistic production.

At first sight, this opposition has only two stances which are mutually exclusive: subscribing to the individual or the social explanation. After a closer inspection, the question becomes how the dichotomy may be overcome by combining the two extremes, finding a middle way that incorporates both sides of the opposition, as, for instance, Giddens’ structuration theory proposes (cf. Giddens, 1984). However, we do not find that a combination of the two sides solves the problem of the dichotomy. On the contrary, we find that the dualism may be reinforced by accepting it as a premise for the discussion, because the discussion thereby primarily becomes concerned with how that dichotomy may be overcome. Thus, in our opinion, precisely the attempt to unite the two sides is a way of reinstalling the dualism.

Instead, we propose posing the question differently; asking how creative talents are performed. Hence, rather than making the discussion about creative talent a paraphrase of the actor–structure debate, we suggest moving the discussion forward by concentrating on investigating empirically and considering theoretically how the performativity of talents can be grasped. In this, we are inspired by Callon’s definition of performativity, Foucault’s notion of technologies of the self, the sociology of expectations, and post-Bourdieuian sociology of art.

In the field of economic sociology, one of the founding fathers of actor-network theory, Michel Callon, has outlined a performative approach which proposes that descriptions,
analyses, assessments, and so on, are not neutral but active in forming that which they depict. In Callon’s words: “[E]conomics, in the broad sense of the term, performs, shapes and formats the economy, rather than observing how it functions” (Callon, 1998, p. 2). Thus, the concept of performativity calls attention to the fact that various objects and actions participate in making the phenomena which they describe. Transporting this notion to research on talents enables seeing that training, work, evaluations, and so on, are not simply reflections of talent, but constitutive of talent.

Whereas discursive constructivists have used the concept of performativity to underline that performative speech acts compose that which they state (e.g., Butler, 1993), Callon rejects the boundary between discourse and that which lies behind it. Thus, he widens the scope of analysis to include not only discourse but also materialities that form socio-technical arrangements. In doing so, he argues that entities which are considered to reside outside the social may also be performative (Callon, 2007; see also Mol, 2002).

Besides Callon’s concept of performativity, we are inspired by the sociology of expectations (Brown, Rappert, & Webster, 2000), which argues that expectations and statements about the state of the future are deeply performative acts, which have profound consequences for the practices of today. Futurology has long had a reputation of not being serious, a business for fortune-tellers, and not an appropriate object of interest for vigorous academic thought. The sociology of expectations has transformed predictions from statements that can be proven right or wrong to objects of empirical examination in their own right. Instead of seeing the future as something that lies ahead of us, at a specific and set place to which the road is hidden, the sociology of expectations suggests regarding the future as an abstraction that has reality now—in the exact same way as the past is both something that once was, which we have no direct access to, as well as a discursive abstraction that lives and works among us now. But the future-as-present abstraction is not innocent or transparent. Rather, the future is contested (Brown et al., 2000), because the future-as-present abstraction is an important tool in the colonization of the future. This is to be understood quite literally: different actors harness different expectations, some that might even be in conflict. By proposing these different expectations and visions of the future, actors perform a colonial war. Arguments and narratives can be important tools in these wars, but material embodiments such as certain types of design or technologies also play a role. In that sense, evaluators of talent are not simply right or wrong about the talent of the aspirants, but more or less powerful in colonizing a bit of the future by making their particular vision of talent come true. This is the way in which we will discuss talent: as statements about the future, which may or may not turn out to be true, but which—and this is the interesting point—will have practical consequences today regardless of their future truthfulness.

While the sociology of expectations seems well equipped to highlight the performativity of assessments of talents, the work which persons carry out themselves to become manifest talents is not automatically made visible within this framework. To grasp the work on oneself which aspirants conduct, we use Foucault’s notion of self-technologies (Foucault, 1984/1990, 1984/1992, 1976/1998). Although Foucault has been read by discursive constructivists as a forerunner of their theoretical stance (e.g., Butler, 1993), his work on how the subject creates itself may be understood differently as performative practices that are not exclusively discursive. Hence, we employ the concept of self-technology to underline the performativity of practices undertaken by persons who strive to develop their talents.
Finally, we draw on the post-Bourdieuan sociology of art, which is informed by actor-network theory (Born, 2009; DeNora, 2000; Hennion, 1989; Hennion & Grenier, 2000; Strandvad, 2010). Within this strand of research, art works and other material mediators are treated as potential actors. Hence, in opposition to Bourdieuan analyses of aesthetic preferences, the post-Bourdieuan perspective holds that taste is defined in action, by its interference with objects (Hennion, 2001, 2007). As Hennion suggests, taste is not “already there” but a performative act, which requires a number of constituting materials. Thus, we draw on this perspective to describe how objects become enrolled in the constitution of talent, and how these objects may affect those persons who encounter them.

To sum up, the performative perspective enables us to portray talent as potentiality that is always in the making, constituted by evaluators, self-practices of the talented person, and various material mediators. Hence, as mentioned in the introduction, we will tell the story of performing talent through three processes: first, the constitution of talent through the identification and recognition of talent by others; second, the installation of talent in the individual through self-technology and work; and, third, the materialization and expression of talent through the attachment of talent in networks.

Identification

*You cannot learn to be an artist; it’s something you’ve got in you. It’s an imbalance, a defect. Some kind of punch you’ve gotten during your upbringing or genetically. The way most of us look at the world represents an adjustment to the ruling norm. The students we admit have been distorted and have a different perspective on the world and a different relation to the world and a different way of describing the world. That’s the way artists see things.* (Nesgaard, cited in Mathiasen & Strandvad, 2005, p. 117)

Aspirants in the arts and creative industries are met with continuous tests of their skills: entrance examinations, competitions, selections by investors and employers. All instances of testing are meant to identify talent. Despite the fact that judgements are contested, identifying talent is considered possible. In the case of the National Film School of Denmark, the head of the school argues that talent is an individual ability which makes you do things differently. This statement is restated by many actors in the field, who explain that they look for people who do things differently, surprisingly, individually, extraordinarily, or exceptionally. Conversely, works should not become incomprehensible, and there is a limit to how different and surprising a work should be.

This rephrases what previous studies have suggested: artistic value is ascribed to works that bend rules—but, importantly, that recognize doing so. Creativity research proposes that creative thinking consists in challenging and transforming boundaries from within (Boden, 1994; see also Bilton, 2007). Hence, Howard Becker (1982) suggests that art worlds thrive on rule-breaking individuals who are, nevertheless, familiar with the rules they break. Also, Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s (1988) suggestion that value is contingent points out that the ascription of value depends on recognizability and relations to previous value-judgements. The evaluations of talent can be said to confirm such propositions as that artistic value depends on whether works of art are recognizable and at the same time different. Talent is demonstrated by making works that challenge aesthetic rules without breaking them.
Moreover, the criteria in judgements of talents are characterized by the fact that they pertain to the personality of the artist, and his or her future potential, rather than the quality of the works already produced. Thus, the study of admission procedures at the Danish Design School show that personality is one of the most central and most contested of the implicit criteria at work. The explicit criteria are: “the ability to (a) research and register; (b) create and develop ideas; (c) handle and develop form, function, materials, and digital tools; (d) disseminate and communicate” (evaluation form). However, less explicit criteria are at play: first and foremost, the ability to focus on process rather than product; and the ability to express personality without being self-centred. As two evaluators discussed, when assessing a particular portfolio:

Evaluator 1: We don’t give a damn about a diary!
Evaluator 2: The log book helps explaining her process.

(Observation notes from Danish Design School, 21 April 2010)

There is a very thin line between too much and too little personality, which is also expressed on the stances on skill. The applicants must not be unskilled, but cannot be too obviously skilled either. The focus on personality rather than the product is thus emphasized by the observation that evaluators are very sensitive to works that show signs of an aspirant who has taken many preparatory classes. Such signs are seldom regarded as a positive factor. More often, it is seen as a problem if a student is schooled in a special type of aesthetics typical of a teacher or preparatory school, if it hides or covers a more spontaneous expression. Moreover, the personality of the aspirant often seems to be even more important than the portfolios they produce, and many evaluators claim to be able to tell which aspirant has talent after a few minutes of conversation, without seeing any of the work the person has done; although they also insist they never depend on this judgement alone. Likewise, while it is not the rule, neither is it rare for evaluators to change their judgement of the portfolio when meeting the person behind it.

The search is thus not for the perfect product, but for the talented personality behind it, and the primary criterion concerns not the quality of the product, but the talented personality. That is, the works which the aspiring talent brings forward to be evaluated are not in themselves interesting but serve the function of mediating a self (Hennion, 1995). In that sense, talent is not simply a question of bending rules while recognizing this and being acknowledged for doing so. The potentiality of the self is at play. The relations between personality and product are complex: on the one hand, in walking the line between making works that break rules but are still recognizable, that product must present considerable savoir-faire; on the other hand, the works must be uncharacterized or open, and not schooled in any particular direction. Thus, the paradoxical ideal seems to be an idiot savant, who can play with aesthetic rule-bending without being explicitly schooled.

Evaluators also stress that it is important that aspirants, if turned down, should continue their work anyway. As the head of the National Film School of Denmark suggests, artistic talent is something you have in you, which you cannot avoid following. If an aspirant says that he or she will go and do something completely different if not admitted, this can be a reason to dismiss this aspirant. Thus, paradoxically, if evaluators believe that aspirants will do what they want to do, regardless of the judgements of evaluators, they are more likely
to admit them. On the contrary, if evaluators believe aspirants will be affected by their judgements, and turn towards a different career, they are more likely to dismiss them. This seeming paradox expresses an ideal of self and personality: the ideal of a personality which is less context-dependent than most of us, driven by goals and wishes from within itself, and which moulds contexts rather than being moulded by contexts. The personality or self implicit in this ideal is reminiscent of the Romantic idea of an authentic self (Negus & Pickering, 2004).

Finally, the talented personality should hold a promise of unfolding and becoming something more. Talent is understood as a self to be discovered and expressed—a self characterized by its potentiality, not by its accomplishments, competences, or skills. An example of this is the emphasis put on process, and the ability to stay in the process, without moving towards an end-line or a product. It is within the process that the potentiality of the self is accessible—once you step forward to the product, the doors to the unknown potential are closed. A former aspirant writes the following on a blog: “Yes, process is the most important at the Danish Design School. … It is best if it is raw and sketchy and with a bit of text” (Mathiesen, 2010). This is often underlined by evaluators who prefer processes to stay open. Here is an example from assessing portfolios:

*Evaluator 1:* You are kidding me! God damn it! Reverse! Reverse the process! It should have gone from there to here [points from the last page to the first page in the assignment].

*Evaluator 2:* She’s got a fantastic process, and then she kills off her project and makes a product for IKEA! … She doesn’t see what she’s doing!"

(Observation notes from Danish Design School, 21 April 2010)

It is our claim that one of the attractions of the open-ended process is the access to the potential personality which it entails: personality and personal style must indicate that there is something more behind; something which may hold great potential.

In sum, when talent is identified, the criteria are complex. First, the materials—portfolios, in the case of admission procedures at the Danish Design School—that form the basis of the evaluation must bend aesthetic rules without departing from these—thus demonstrating considerable *savoir-faire*. Second, they must serve as mediators of a personality or self, and it is this self that is interesting, not the materials in themselves. Third, the personality must be characterized by authenticity: existing in and of itself, not depending on contexts. All in all, the talent is identified by potentiality, a self at the start of the process of unfolding into something bigger.

In regard to evaluations of talent, the sociology of expectations (Brown & Michael, 2003) would suggest that assessments of personalities and their potentiality are anything but innocent. Assessing someone’s potentiality is not simply a question of being right or wrong. It is a deeply performative act, and one that has profound consequences for the types of talents—and works of art—we will see in the future. Paradoxically, then, talent—which we have just described as giving access to an otherwise impossible personal authenticity and freedom from context—becomes constituted when identified by others. The self cannot point to itself as singularly authentic or as holding extraordinary potential. Although
evaluators maintain that talent is immanent, their selection procedures and evaluations can also be said to produce the talent which they are looking for. Thus, by selecting and announcing certain individuals to be talents, evaluations at art schools, competitions, funding institutions, and job interviews can be characterized as performative mediators.

Self-technology

All of sudden I found myself thinking, “I’ll die if I don’t get to do something creative again.” It was so strange .... Actually, I could feel that otherwise I would really die. So I had to do it somehow. (Aspirant, cited in Mathiasen & Strandvad, 2005, p. 104)

In explaining why they want creative careers, aspirants emphasize that it is a necessity; it is something which they cannot escape. The stories aspirants tell when being asked why they chose this career-path are personal and existential. Thus, the stories are about uncovering deep truths, which cement the idea that creative talent is located inside the individual. This is echoed by the evaluators at admissions, who tend to dismiss those who are able to imagine other career-paths than the one at stake. Thus, the self seems to constitute the inner core where talent is produced. To investigate how talent becomes installed in the individual, an approach can be found in Foucault’s History of Sexuality (1984/1990, 1984/1992, 1976/1998). Parallel to sexuality, creativity is described as the core of the subject. In that sense, creativity, like sexuality, becomes a truth about the Self.

In The Will to Knowledge (1976/1998), Foucault describes the process whereby sexuality became ascribed as the truth about who we are, as individuals and populations (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983). Ironically, sexuality became an object for government in the attempts to liberate and unfold it, according to Foucault. Today, the interest in being creative may be seen as an analogue of the interest in becoming sexual. To be creative is an activity that becomes necessary, and apparently liberating to inner nature, equivalent to sexuality.

In psychoanalysis, both notions have been portrayed as fundamental to human nature. Freud described the sexual drive as originatory in human activity, including for creative expression (Negus & Pickering, 2004). Freud’s student Otto Rank, by contrast, replaced sexual instinct with the creative impulse as the fundamental human drive (Karpf, 1970). After having broken with Freud, Rank moved to Paris and later New York, where he founded a treatment of neurotic artists. According to Rank, the human being is a creative creature. The artist realizes this potential and creates not only art but also his or her own self.

Furthermore, in Foucault’s optic, sexuality has to be cultivated to thrive. Hence, creativity may be seen as a truth about the self which has to be worked on to find its form. In parallel to the self-practices of managing sexuality, which Foucault describes, aspirants tell about work which they carry out to cultivate their talent. For instance, a young storyboarder explains:

I began drawing very early on. I think I began when, of course I began a lot earlier, but I think I began when I was thirteen where I would be drawing many hours every day. From the moment I came home, well, also in school, but when I came home from school and then more or less until dinner time and after dinner I was drawing. (Aspirant, cited in Mathiasen & Strandvad, 2005, p. 110)
As the young story-boarder’s account illustrates, talent has to be worked upon to mature. Aspirants train their creative abilities to become more and more dominant. In addition, the young story-boarder emphasizes that he began conducting his talent “very early on.” Thereby, he underlines that he naturally felt inclined to pursue a creative career. By this, his account represents the most dominant and well-accepted narrative of talents.

Preferably, aspirants talk about their talent as an inner drive, which they have cultivated since childhood. With statements such as: “I made 8mm films when I was seven years old” (Mathiasen & Strandvad, 2005, p. 118), or: “I started making films when I was seven years old, on 8 mm” (Aspirant in Mathiasen & Strandvad, 2005, p. 118), aspirants confirm the well-known storyline about talent as a natural ability, which one trains because one simply must. Some aspirants speak ironically of this narrative. When asked if he made films as a child, an aspirant answers “like Steven Spielberg?” (Mathiasen & Strandvad, 2005, p. 118). By raising such a question in return, about similarities with an extremely famous director, the ridiculousness of the storyline for which the interviewer’s question sets the scene is revealed. However, after having rejected that storyline, the aspirant clarifies: “[Y]ou always want to be able to make that story where you could say [in a distorted voice:] ‘when I was nine, I clearly had...’” (Mathiasen & Strandvad, 2005, p. 119). Thus, even if this aspirant ridicules the dominant story about talent as an inner essence which has been cultivated since childhood, he confirms the dominance of that storyline.2

An important difference between the installation of sexuality and talent is that sexuality is defined as an essentially recreational activity, as is creativity in its broadest sense. The talents discussed here, however, do not use their creativity for recreational purposes. Creativity is not recreation, but work. Or, rather, there is no difference between recreation and work. This is the crux in this particular mechanism of talent: self-expression must be the same as self-preservation. Thus, talent is not performed for fun, but becomes a deadly serious activity.

Aspirants explain that their work has consequences for both their selves and their lives: as work in this field is a question of self-expression, your self becomes something you lay bare and show off, and let others assess. One aspirant uses the metaphor of showing off your bare butt in the city square, and describes the courage it takes to do so, and the anxiety it fosters. As for the merger of work and life, many aspirants—especially those who are over their first youth and have started families—regret the double-bind presented by an all-consuming worklife, on the one hand, and familylife, on the other. Some of these aspirants start readdressing the issue of freedom—used by many aspirants to explain their hunger for this type of life—and tentatively ask the question whether there is more personal freedom in an ordinary job, which lets you go home to your family, while still having an income. Thus, aspirants who want a family seem to have a hard time coming through this moment of inclusion or exclusion. The wish for a steady, reliable income, which becomes a dream for many supporting a family, is at odds with the dream of the work–life merger entailed in talent-work. In the aspirants’ accounts, the schism between the freedom of self-creation and the freedom of economic security is often recounted as a question of will-power, bravery, discipline, and the will to sacrifice—some aspirants say outright that the price for this type of career is your life.

That the economic situation is a central problem for many working in the creative industries is by no means a surprise. For instance, Angela McRobbie (1998, 2002) has
shown convincingly—in a study of young British fashion designers—that work in the creative industries is often hard and badly paid (see also Banks, 2007). However, when confronted with the question why one would set forth on such a career, few seem to regret it. Whereas McRobbie interprets this as a delusive form of self-government leading to self-exploitation, creative work may also be considered a productive technology of the self.

Thus, as Foucault also underlines, self-creation is not a game. For aspirants, manifesting one’s talent is hard work that becomes a life mission. At the same time, creative work is seen not as work, but as an activity which bears its own rewards. Hence, life and work merge in the self-technology of constituting one’s talent. Paraphrasing Foucault’s will to knowledge, aspirants in creative industries can be said to demonstrate a considerable will to self-expression. If one is able—and willing—to express one’s self, it may grow and become a talent. Yet, conversely, if the self cannot be expressed, both one’s work and one’s life are at stake.

Materialization

A part of the talent is making others work together. (Theatre instructor Maria Vinterberg as cited in Poulsen, 2007, p. 107)

Talent has to be materialized to become manifest. If aspirants are to discover themselves and initiate explorations of their selves, they have to produce works. Without material and objectified examples of aspirants’ abilities, there is no evidence of potentiality. If a great talent resides inside someone who is incapable of documenting it, it is useless. Objects are necessary as they make promises of more to come. Only few works of art can be materialized through the work of one talented person alone. Even pictorial artists who paint in isolation depend on galleries and magazines to make the art works public (Becker, 1982). Thus, attachments to collaborators appear to be constitutive. If an aspiring talent is capable of attaching to other actors, chances increase that this talent will be unfolded. People, things, and resources have to be attached to the projects that will manifest one’s talent; otherwise the talent will not be realized. This is probably also the reason why many evaluators at admissions put great emphasis on the aspirants’ ability to work in social settings, often dismissing aspirants who come across as too shy.

In this respect, collaborators are literally all participants in the process of materializing talents. In the cases of film directors and fashion designers, this point is quite obvious. The film director does not (usually) fund, photograph, edit, act in, or sell the film. The fashion designer does not make, sell, or market the clothes. Other participants are crucial and they come in many different forms, not only persons but also equipment and money. Hence, talent cannot simply be seen as a self-technology, but must rather be regarded as a technology of establishing the talented self through the making of connections. That is, talent is not an individual act, or a social act in the sense that the individual is constituted by other people. Rather, the self of the talent is materialized by making a number of other participants work.

It seems that two elements are important in establishing the attachments necessary in materializing projects: first, visibility, presence, and availability; and, second, plasticity and a sense of nonchalance. First, for others to be able to attach to you, you must be
visibly present at a variety of occasions and situations. You must be highly sociable and put yourself in situations where you are exposed to a variety of different actors, who may or may not turn out to be useful collaborators in some future. Thus, it is often emphasized the materialization of talent is paramount:

Why do some artists pass into history, while others are forgotten? The most obvious difference is talent, but maybe this answer is too simple. Other mechanisms are at play, and as in any business it is not ability alone that determines who gets success. More is needed. Networks, money, funding, fashions, luck and maybe chance. (Strøm Hansen & Jalving, 2004, p. 2)

To complicate matters, it is not enough to be visible and present. Hiring a marketing strategist or sending CVs and project descriptions to every relevant actor seems not to be a winning strategy within the arts. Rather, trying too hard is an important exclusion mechanism. In fact, it seems crucial that collaborators should attach to the talent rather than the other way around: an element of casualness and nonchalance must be present on the side of the talent, and explicit activity in making the attachment seems to take place on the side of the collaborators. This can be seen in interviews with the young aspiring talents, as well as with the evaluators admitting them into schools—both parties point out that trying too hard can be a problem. This is something of a paradox when working hard and investing your life in your work was another criterion from the process of self-technology. In other words, aspirants must work hard, but not try hard.

French sociologists Emilie Gomart and Antoine Hennion (1999) have discussed how to understand this seeming paradox. According to them, the enrolment of others in the constitution of one’s talent can be described as an “active passion.” Attachments to objects are based in taste for that object and the effects which the object gives rise to. Hence, Gomart and Hennion suggest making attachments to objects entails a wish to let that object take possession of the self. In our case, this would mean that the collaborators must be actively passionate about the talent’s self; they must be “possessed.” This also means that the talent should be recognizable and manifest, but still open and unfinished enough to allow attachments—maybe this is another reason for the focus on process rather than product. If the talent meets these paradoxical requirements, collaborators will go very far to help materialize the project. To emphasize this, our data abound with stories of collaborators working around the clock, for no, or hardly any, pay.

Often enough, aspirants have started their careers as collaborators, letting themselves be “possessed” by the work of others. Later in their careers, roles seem to shift—or at least they do for some people. However, it is interesting that within a given project, there seems little negotiation about the ascription of authorship. When the roles are in place, they seem to stick. In one story, a director had a nervous breakdown. While the crew continued filming, and finished the shooting without him, they never challenged his position as the talent and author. This type of seeming paradox is not lost on the aspiring talents. They say openly that in their view, despite the seeming power and control placed on the central “author”—whether a director or designer—power and activity are placed in the hands of “the others,” who have the final word in deciding whether your CD is produced, your painting exhibited, your movie shot, or your design sewn.
However, it is an open and frustrating question to many how you go about enrolling collaborators, when activity in shaping attachments is placed with the collaborators. Stories are often told by aspirants and artists who feel excluded in this moment of constituting talent. In 2010 a dramatic debate concerning public support of literature took place in a variety of Danish daily media. A group of writers claimed that funding was given to an exclusive group of people according to personal networks, rather than the quality of work:

The cuts to the budget have ignited a hot and tough debate on whether the arrangement works as it is. Accusations of “camaraderie,” “nepotism,” of a “rotten” and “incestuous” system have been heard from critics, who in return have been called “traitors” by writer colleagues in different forms of debate. (Øhrstrøm, 2010)

They tell rather painful stories of those who succeed, stories that are often filled with hurt feelings. To be excluded at this moment of constituting talent seems profoundly unfair and unjust. Those who do have the particular ability of letting others attach to them are described as making it simply “because they know people,” and not because they are talented. On top of this, the activity of talents in this moment is opaque and invisible—it is not a question of working hard or calling the right people. It is a question of being around, being seen, being there, and a sense of laid back nonchalance (paradoxically paired with hard work and commitment) which is hard to cultivate or work your way explicitly towards. Those excluded by this process of talent and experiencing hurt and injustice only acknowledge identification as the process that legitimately includes or excludes talents. However, materialization seems every bit as crucial and essential as identification—and self-technology for that sake—and its exclusion mechanisms seem tougher, and let fewer aspirants through.

It is important for us to state firmly that in arguing that materialization of talent depends on others, we are not saying that the talented people are in effect unimportant. Rather the opposite: the ability to let others attach to you, to be active through the activity of others, seems to be quite crucial and quite rare, and is probably one of the most painful exclusion mechanisms in the social technologies of talent, as it often entails an assessment of your attractiveness to others.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we have looked at the constitution of talent. As an alternative to discussing whether talent is a given or a social construct, we have suggested investigating how it is performed. Thus, rather than engaging in the dualistic debate of individual versus social explanations, we have proposed to see talent as a matter of expressing self. Self-expression is an individual practice, but also a social and material one. Hence, the constitution of talent relies on the individual as well as on other actors. To track talent in this way, we have outlined three processes where talent is performed and thus constituted. The first is identification: recognition of potentiality by evaluating others. When identified by others, talent is brought into the centre of attention and hence its momentum is meant to increase. Secondly, self-technology emphasizes the work that the talented person performed. This work is work on one’s self; hence it can be described as a technology of the self. Thirdly, the process of materialization shows that talent is produced through attachments to
collaborators. To express a talented self, other actors have to be enrolled as they enable the materialization of objects that demonstrate talent. It is an obvious question if talent comes before these three processes—or after. What we have tried to argue is that talent is performed simultaneously through these processes: you learn to compete with others by learning to be a talent—and you work on and fine-tune your talent in many ways. An interesting parallel here are the television shows such as *American Idol* or *The X-Factor* that are hugely popular throughout the world. These mimic two of the processes we have outlined here—identification and self-technology—while skipping materialization altogether. Rather, that is what the shows offer—to materialize the talent by having record deals or the like as the main prize, without the talented person having to go through the process of enrolling others to achieve materialization. The enrolment has already taken place, so to speak. Moreover, the shows firmly install talent as something that comes before the processes of identification and self-technology. However, it is noteworthy that the talents discovered in these shows only rarely develop into performers with any staying power. We believe that it is the installation of talent in the *individual* and *before* the processes of identification, self-technology, and materialization that makes this difference.

Returning to the processes of talent in the contexts where we have observed them: earlier we related the self-technologies connected to sexuality—but one central difference between sexuality and talent is that while sexuality and, increasingly, creativity are self-technologies for all, talent is a discipline for the few. Thus, all three moments entail elimination and work as exclusion mechanisms. Whereas identification is explicitly aimed at selection, self-technology and materialization are not as obviously processes of exclusion. Self-technology seems to be a matter of self-discipline and materialization appears as a question of personality. Whereas the exclusions that self-technology and materialization produce may not be as visible as the selection performed during identification, they may nevertheless be experienced as more unjust since they depend on one’s inner self and not the self as it is presented in manifest objects. Moreover, the exclusion mechanism of self-technology advises hard work on one’s self, while attachments are most easily made to a visible, relaxed, and comfortable self, which seems to entail a paradox. Thus, during all three processes, the few are separated from the many. In other words, while some talents are constituted, most aspirants are eliminated.

Returning to the performativity of talent, we will conclude the paper by referring to Callon (2007), and his description of economics as a performative rather than a descriptive science. We believe that talent shares this characteristic with economics, and that talent is performed rather than described through the processes which we have outlined in this paper. Callon writes that practices become enactments, which in our case means that if a person tells herself that she has talent, if she works on her talent, and if actors around her confirm her talent and work to stabilize it, then she does indeed have talent. Moreover, seeing talent as performative means that the processes by which talent is constituted are considered as anything but mysterious. Instead of viewing talent as a phenomenon that is based on hidden causes behind the talented person, the performative approach enables identifying those concrete sociotechnical constellations by which talent is constituted.

Our aim in this paper has been to conceptualize three processes which entail such sociotechnical constellations. A logical next step would be to let the processes of identification, self-technology, and materialization, which we have identified and named in this paper, serve
as the starting point for further empirical, in-depth studies, preferably including comparisons between different art-forms. It would, for instance, be interesting to compare film and design with talent in classical music, where identification processes, such as the one we have studied at admissions at the Danish Design School, prevail throughout a musician’s career, and positions in orchestras are given to certain musicians after auditions. This seems to be quite different from the way a director gets to direct a film. This process takes place in a much more informal manner, without formal job positions. Studying whether these differences in practices result in differences in what talent is perceived to be would be an interesting next step.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. A number of further theoretical inspirations could have been included in the paper as the concept of talent resembles and is often associated with various other concepts. As the theoretical section has illustrated, creativity and genius are two concepts affiliated with the notion of talent. Also, concepts of fame, celebrity, stardom, exceptionality, and so on, could be used to clarify what the talent is (perhaps) aiming at. Finally, comparisons with other concepts such as nobility could show how talent today may resemble self-conduct in previous time periods. However, we have chosen to focus on talent and its constitution, rather than its affinities with similar concepts.

2. Also, in the study of young Danish film directors a gender difference is observed with regard to when one started exhibiting one’s talent. Whereas the male interviewees in general testify having started filming at a very early age (e.g., at the age of 7), none of the female interviewees recount the same. On the contrary, all female aspirants tell of discovering an interest in directing quite “late”: that is, in their early 20s. As the story about having performed one’s talent as a director since childhood composes the dominant legitimizing story in the field, all female interviewees relate how they feel “different,” “wrong,” “a slip-up,” or “a cheater” who is waiting to be outed as such (Mathiasen & Strandvad, 2005).

References


Unpublished master’s thesis, Department of Sociology, Copenhagen University, Denmark.


Julie Sommerlund holds an M.A. in Modern Culture and Cultural Communication from the University of Copenhagen and a Ph.D. from the Copenhagen Business School. She heads the Department of Fashion and Textile and is an associate professor in aesthetic communication, branding, and marketing at the Danish Design School. Julie Sommerlund studies fashion and is particularly interested in the sociology of expectations, where her focus is on the effect of predictions and expectations of the future on our current taste, assessments, and choices—and thus the development of practice and aesthetics. Address: The Danish Design School, Strandboulevarden 47, 100 København Ø, Denmark. Email: jso@dkds.dk

Sara Malou Strandvad has an MA in sociology from the University of Copenhagen and a Ph.D. in organizational studies from Copenhagen Business School. She is currently assistant professor of Performance Design at the University of Roskilde. Her dissertation Inspirations for a New Sociology of Art: A Sociomaterial Study of Development Processes in the Danish Film Industry analyses development work in Danish film production from the perspective of the new sociology of art looking into the role of mediators and the co-constructions of material works and social relations. Address: University of Roskilde, Department of Communication, Business, and Information Technologies, Universitetsvej 1, Building 42.2, 4000 Roskilde, Denmark. Email: malou@ruc.dk