

Like a Fraction of Some Bigger Place—The “Creative Industries” in a Peripheral Zone: Reflections from a Case Study

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Abstract: This article questions the notion of “creative industries” while contributing to the analysis of mediations between the cultural sphere and capitalist relations of production. Research pertaining to the “creative industries”, as well as contributions to the political economy of cultural industries, have often focussed on central and metropolitan areas. By contrast, the case study that these reflections are based upon was conducted in a peripheral zone, the Shetland Isles, marked by specific socio-economic, historical, political and cultural features. This study considered the importance of local cultural policies, over the past 35 years, and how they are presently facing a significant revision. However, the rise of “creative industries” discourse, and its applications in public policy, can only be understood within a wider national and supra-national context. Moreover, I argue that these evolutions are linked to an extension of cultural industrialisation and commoditisation. By analysing the adaptations and limits that the “creative industries” doctrine encounters in a peripheral zone, this article firstly completes existing critiques of the notion. Secondly, it illustrates how an apparently exceptional terrain magnifies certain key aspects of relations between ideological / cultural superstructures, and the socio-economic infrastructure of contemporary capitalism. In particular, it is concerned with the increasing artificiality of the economic basis of Western societies, and the complex ways in which this phenomenon is translated within the cultural sphere.

Keywords: Critical Political Economy, Cultural Industries, Creative Industries, Periphery, Cultural Policy, Base/Superstructure, Residual Cultures.

In the Barclay Arms

The strip of orange lights
Over in Sandwick Is like a fraction
Of some bigger place
A percentage
Of a big city
All the rest, the power
Cut
And the big windows
Are like a departure lounge
Car headlights
Are like jets landing
Taking off
For somewhere new

Alex Cluness, *Shetland and Other Poems*, 2002

Shetland is an archipelago of creative excellence. Brilliance and quality are its hallmarks, in everything from traditional knitwear to cutting edge music, from architecture to the production of... bears.

Promote Shetland, *Shetland Brand Pack*, 2011

1. Introduction

Practically no one travels via the Shetland Isles. That is to say: the archipelago does not typically constitute a step in a more extensive trip. There are of course exceptions—groups of summer tourists whose cruise ships stop over briefly in the main town of Lerwick, on their way around the North Atlantic; sailors pausing before they set off for Faeroes, Bailey, or

South East Island; North sea gas and oil workers landing at Sumburgh airport, before a helicopter carries them on towards the rig. But on the whole, there's very little chance of ending up there fortuitously: you either want to get there, or you have to. If the same can be said about many islands worldwide, Shetland's isolation remains quite exceptional by Western European standards, considering its sheer distance from mainland UK (to the nearest regular ferry port, Aberdeen, it's a thirteen hour crossing), the size of its population (22,500 inhabitants) and land area (1468 sq. km), and its position (60°N, the same latitude as southern Greenland). Located roughly half way between Scotland and Norway, it unquestionably qualifies as a peripheral zone, whilst also offering a series of notably distinctive—perhaps even exceptional—historical, political, and socio-economic features.

Firstly, one should recall that Shetland (and Orkney) is among the most “recent” adjuncts to Scotland (and hence to what remains the United Kingdom), having effectively been annexed in 1469 after over six centuries of Norse rule. The incorporation of this territory has never been accounted for by a binding international legal agreement or treaty and, to this day, neither Denmark nor Norway have officially recognised their loss of sovereignty (although no attempts to regain it have been made since the late seventeenth century) (Withrington 1983; Crawford 1984). Despite the presence of the Scottish lairds, Shetland's isolated population retained a degree of cultural autonomy, in particular via the usage of their own language, “norn”, which was widely spoken until the mid-nineteenth century. The takeover of the islands by the Scottish aristocracy set in motion what became known as the “Shetland Method”, a generalised system of exploitation based on the expropriation of local inhabitants (and common land), and the payment of rent to lairds, in the form of fishing produce (Smith 1977). From the late eighteenth century onwards, rents were often drastically increased on order to force local inhabitants into exile, clearing the land for large sheep farms. This system of domination was eventually overthrown by two exogenous phenomena. On the one hand, the side effects of expanding industrial capitalism were determinant, for instance, as the herring trade boom of the 1880s gave rise to wage-based relations of production between workers and both external capitalists and a renewed local bourgeoisie. On the other hand, democratic advances consented by the British establishment emancipated the crofter-fishermen, in particular the 1886 Crofter's Holdings Act, which partially freed them of rental obligations towards the lairds (Smith 1977).

Secondly, this particular historical configuration helps to explain the reaction I encountered when asking MSP Jean Urquhart about her perception of Shetland's cultural identity: “It seems to me that, although Shetland likes to think it has always invested in its traditional music and culture, like the rest of Scotland [...] like Scotland—I won't say *like the rest of Scotland* because Shetland doesn't recognise being part of Scotland—I think there was clearly a resurgence in the 1970s and 80s.” Indeed, one particularity evidently noted by Mrs Urquhart is the discrepancy between the political situation prevailing in Shetland (and Orkney), and that of “the rest of Scotland”, dominated by the SNP, which she then belonged to¹. Although committed independentists are in fact few and far between, liberal or liberal-democrat representatives have dominated national elections in Shetland ever since the mid-nineteenth century. Historically, neither Tory, nor Labour, nor Scottish nationalists (in the more recent period) have succeeded in making significant and durable gains. At the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the “No” vote was considerably higher than the national average, local political figures having voiced concerns at the prospect of an autonomous Scottish state and considered how Shetland might acquire a British Crown Dependency status (similar to that of the Isle of Man). Nevertheless, despite the prevalence of liberal politicians, a wide consensus appears to exist around the necessity of public intervention in local social and economic affairs. Ever since this “entry into modernity” that the 1886 Crofter's Holdings Act represents, the political history of the isles has been marked by various of forms of intervention, which

¹ In 2011, Jean Urquhart was elected MSP for the Highlands & Islands constituency, via the regional list system, completing Shetland's representation at the Holyrood parliament, despite the SNP having only received 12% of cast votes in the archipelago. Mrs Urquhart left the nationalist party in 2012 disagreeing with its change of position regarding nuclear weapons and now sits as an independent MSP.

can of course be partly justified by geographic isolation. This paradoxical liberalism has become increasingly apparent since this discovery of North Sea gas and oil fields in the 1970s.

Indeed, this event and the subsequent construction (between 1974 and 1981) of one of Europe's largest oil and gas terminals in Shetland (at Sullom Voe) constitute a third and most distinctive feature, which is highly significant for the analyses developed in this article. At the time, the Shetland Islands Council (SIC) was able to strike a deal with leading oil companies, the “disturbance agreement”, which guarantees a steady flow of commissions according to the volume of oil or gas transiting via the terminal. The details of this agreement are not in the public domain, but according to *The Economist* this income reached around 13M£ in 2001, and increased considerably over the following ten years, due to the exploitation of new oil fields and the rise in natural gas extraction. The ensuing “reserve fund” is managed via the Shetland Charitable Trust (officially independent from local government) and distributed towards specific projects or programs, led by the SIC, the Shetland Amenity Trust, the Shetland Recreational Trust, or Shetland Arts. Since the early 1980s, sustained public expenditure has brought about, and maintained, educational, social, cultural and sports services, and equipment, of a level rarely encountered elsewhere in the UK. What's more, Shetland is the only county council in the entire country that can pride itself of being completely free of public debt. According to the SIC published *Shetland in Statistics* brochure, roughly half of the working population is employed in the categories “health, education and social work”, “public administration” and “transport and communications”, which gives a clear idea of the importance of the public sector in the local economy (Matthews 2015, 29).

Explaining what took me to Shetland, as a traveller in the first instance, is of little relevance here; may it suffice to say that I was in search of that *edge of the world*, which Michael Powell's 1937 film so masterfully evokes.² During my first trip in the summer of 2002, improvised instrumental sessions in bars and community halls gave me an insight into the islands' traditional music scene. Six months later, I was able to pursue my exploration of Shetland cultural life, attending Lerwick's internationally renowned, Viking-themed fire festival, *Up Helly Aa*. For those who have heard of these islands, this is indeed what they are known for: folk music (especially fiddle reels), the mid-winter fire festival, and of course traditional woolen knitwear (Fair Isle patterns, notably). The local culture's “Scandinavian origins” feature prominently in tourist guides and promotional publications. The representation of an isolated community³, having partially side-stepped cultural industrialisation, admittedly played a prominent role in my own first contacts with Shetland and its inhabitants.

The research that this article stems from was conducted during a 6-month period in 2011, extended the following year (my eighth trip to the isles) and finally completed in 2014, as the central section of my professorship habilitation thesis, entitled *An Archipelago of Creative Excellence/Les industries créatives dans une zone périphérique: le cas des îles Shetland* (Matthews 2015)⁴. The ambition of this work was twofold.

Firstly, it aimed to question and deconstruct recurring representations of a “Shetlandic” cultural identity, generally comprising both the aforementioned anachronistic and seemingly “semi-foreign” traits, and the supposedly characteristic traditional forms of textile and instrumental music. This entailed verifying, for instance, how Raymond Williams's concept of “residual” culture might be of use to apprehend the seemingly higher proportion of technically unmediated, collective cultural practices (in comparison with mainland UK).⁵ Williams states:

² Powell (1905–1990), better known for the controversial *Peeping Tom* (1960), shot his first full-length feature film *The Edge of the World* on the isle of Foula in Shetland.

³ I use this term here and below in the broad sociological acceptance stemming from the work of Ferdinand Tönnies. In doing so, I do not imply that the population and territory of Shetland aren't part of wider social groups, nor do I wish to induce any presuppositions regarding the “organic” characteristics of this social formation.

⁴ This full study is available on the website of the *Observatoire des mutations des industries culturelles*: <http://www.observatoire-omic.org/pdf/Anyarchipelagoyofcreativeyexcellence.pdf>.

⁵ I refer here to traditional music sessions and dances, regular festivals, but more broadly to a variety of cultural events such as dog trials, agricultural fairs, regattas, as well as mock-sporting or mock-culinary events, which I closely observed each weekend as part of my fieldwork, and which continue to attract significant crowds of island community members of diverse ages and social backgrounds.

“The residual has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present.” (1977, 122) This led me to inquire precisely *in what past* might these residual forms have originated. Contrary to superficial impressions one might get from attending *Up Helly Aa*, very few specific Shetland cultural practices have any definite resonance with real social and economic relations linking the inhabitants of this archipelago to those of the Faeroe Isles or Norway. Moreover, historian Brian Smith points out that Shetland's cultural traditions are relatively weak (in comparison with Ireland or the Scottish Western Isles): almost all of what now makes up local folklore is effectively rooted in the nineteenth century, when industrial fishing became the key economic activity and islanders emerged from over three hundred years of the “Shetland Method” (Smith 1977).

Considering the hypothesis of a specific “Shetlandic” cultural identity raises several key questions, providing one steers clear of the somewhat “enchanted” representations that feature prominently in promotional documents and guidebooks. First of all, the degree of rituality of cultural practices most commonly associated with this territory must be examined; to what extent can one identify “emergent” cultural forms specific to Shetland in fields like music, literature, graphic arts or textile design? More importantly, what mediations can be traced between potentially specific cultural practices of Shetlanders and the real social and economic relations that characterise this limited and located population? The complexity of this question is increased by the fact that these relations are significantly based on the industries of oil and gas, fishing and aquaculture—all of which are fully integrated into global capitalism—as well as being reliant on an artificially supported public sector, which has shielded the population from various external pressures throughout the past three decades.

This brings me to the second object of the research I began in Shetland in 2011. Indeed, during the 1980s and 1990s, local policies in the fields of heritage, arts and cultural industries increased significantly; the legacy of this support has been widely recognised (Hamilton and Scullion 2004; *Ekos* 2008a). In 2011, taking into account public funding stemming from both national endowments and budgets specific to the local trusts, public cultural expenditure per capita was still 1.25 times that of a comparable county in mainland Scotland, and 1.6 times that of a typical rural English county (Matthews 2015, 74–75). Among the various cultural forms funded by Shetland Arts, music has benefited from the greatest support⁶. Its central place in local cultural policy can be traced back to the 1950s and 60s when instrumental tuition programs for the youth were initiated, following the efforts of enthusiasts such as Tommy Anderson, who had spent numerous years archiving fiddle tunes played by elder Shetlanders. When the SIC introduced a means test, in 2011, several generations of youngsters had benefited from free, after-school music and knitting classes, regardless of family income. This particular measure sparked off discontent among local inhabitants, but in fact, it was just one episode of a widespread revision of the scope and role of cultural policies in the Shetland Isles, which has been set in motion over the past ten years. The prospect of far deeper cuts in local funding, and “self-sufficiency” of cultural producers (not to mention that of Shetland Arts itself), is now clearly perceived by the local population (Matthews 2015, 105–108).

In the same period, promotional and institutional discourses (Schlesinger 2007), such as those produced by Shetland Arts, have given particular significance to two elements: the need to develop “digital arts”, and the opportunity of diversifying the local economy through support for “creative industries” (sometimes coupled with a criticism of oil and gas dependency). The emphasis placed on these themes coincided with the SIC approved commissioning of a new cultural facility in Lerwick—a project that Shetland Arts had been lobbying for since the 1990s, and which the agency was to run. I observed how its initial conception evolved, from a “music and cinema venue” in the early 2000s, to the *Mareel* “creative industries hub” ten years later, hence pertaining not only to the sphere of cultural consumption, but also to the fields of audiovisual, musical and digital arts production, as well as training and

⁶ According to the most recent figures available, music accounted for 42 % of Shetland Art's financial support. Visual arts were in second place (23 %), followed by literature (14%), drama and dance (12%) and crafts (9%) (Matthews 2014, 71).

higher education. Whilst its actual construction was underway (2009–2012), projects of on-site film editing were presented to the public, as well as the prospect of setting up a “creative industries” chair at the Shetland College (a part of the University of Highlands and Islands). Although the building of *Mareel* was financed by European and national funds, as well as the SIC's own budget, prominent local political players joined a campaign denouncing it as a lavish waste of public money, at a time of school class closures. Shetland Arts officials were warned by their SIC counterparts that the facility would have to “wash its face” by the time it was finally opened to the public (Matthews 2015, 86), reflecting a clear inflexion of local cultural policy. However, these shifts are by no means specific to Shetland and can be better understood within the broader, West-European context of public policies towards the cultural industries, and structural evolutions of these last.

2. Linking up with wider empirical and theoretical issues

Over the past ten years, I've taken part in a number empirical investigations looking into the strategies and discourses of web and cultural industry players in Europe and North America, as well as the evolving position of user/consumers (notably via web platforms), and shifts in public policy. This research has principally been concerned with the hypothesis of a new step in the long process whereby communication and cultural practices have gradually become an object of industrial organisation and capitalist exploitation, since the nineteenth century (Huet et al. 1978; Garnham 1979; Beaud 1984; Curran 2002). Several works that I've contributed to show how the “collaborative web” reinforces this process, both structurally and ideologically (Bouquillion and Matthews 2010; Bouquillion and Matthews 2012; Matthews, Rouzé and Vachet 2014). These publications also provide a critique of enchanted visions of “participatory culture”, in which commodity and community are supposedly reconciled (Jenkins 2006; Deuze 2007) and point to the theoretical shortcomings of the “creative industries” / “creative economy” theses (Caves 2000; Florida 2002; Cunningham and Potts 2008). We illustrate how these academic discourses combine as ideological and practical vectors of increased cultural industrialisation. Our analyses also draw from studies by Nicholas Garnham (2005) and Philip Schlesinger (2007), which help to shed light on two key facts.

Firstly, the heuristic value of the notion of “creative industries” is highly debatable due to the heterogeneity of the sub-sectors it encompasses: in addition to the existing definition of the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh 2007), this term refers to fields such as art and antique markets, architecture, crafts, design, advertising and marketing, as well as even tourism-related activities or *haute cuisine*. This association of very diverse industries has led to a statistical blurring which is anything but neutral. It deliberately inflates the “creative” sector, hence backing up discourses that aim to present the development of these industries as a “crisis-exit” scenario and a source of competitive advantages for Europe and North America in their struggle versus the BRICS economies and those of other emerging nations. The notion of a “creative economy” extends this representation, assigning a central position of innovation catalysts to these various sub-sectors, within the putative—yet mandatory—framework of global post-industrial capitalism (Bouquillion 2012).

Secondly, given that creativity is conceived in terms of globalised competition, the “creative industries” doctrine also implies transformations of cultural policies—which the UK was one of the first States to formalise, under the New Labour governments that followed the 1997 general elections. In accordance with this conception, public funding and support for these industries was primarily redefined as a means of increasing their capacity to generate economic growth, through exports, job creation and intellectual property. Within such a framework, little space is left for public policies aimed at cultural development and social redistribution; artists and creators are required to demonstrate evidence of their economic efficiency, hence bringing this area of public intervention in tune with the general aims of industrial policy (Galloway 2008). In this respect, the development of the “creative industries” effectively coincides with a process of increased commodification and rationalisation, and therefore fully contributes to the new stage of cultural industrialisation referred to above.

Moreover, it's worth noting that a large proportion of all academic work dealing with the “creative industries” appears to be obsessed with the theme of urban regeneration, as points out cultural geographer Chris Gibson:

Much has been written about the geography of creative industries such as film, music, design and fashion, especially in the northern hemisphere. Frequently the focus has been on agglomerations or clusters of activity in districts of major Western cities [...] One effect of this mass of academic work and policy making about creativity has been to shape a particular set of assumptions about where creativity is located, where it is likely to emerge (Gibson 2010, 1–2).

According to this author, four essential questions have yet to be addressed. Firstly, what specific challenges are facing “creative” producers in peripheral zones? Secondly, what relations exist between peripheral areas and the central belts that concentrate dominant “creative” players? Thirdly, how is the singularity of peripheral cultural productions affected when they are integrated into international markets? Lastly, from an epistemological point of view, how might research on the “creative industries” break away from “a capitalist-orientated language of firms, growth, employment and export and instead [value] the communitarian purposes to which creativity can be put” (Gibson, 2010, 7–8)?

3. Aims and means of the case study

Moving on from these wider theoretical issues and the challenging questions that Chris Gibson poses, three broad lines of enquiry were established for the case study I conducted in the Shetland Isles.⁷

Firstly, what level of influence and penetration had the discourse—and doctrine—of “creative industries” reached in this peripheral area, for cultural producers (in the broadest sense), political players, as well as among the wider public? Secondly, what discrepancies might be observed between the propagation of this discourse and specifically local realities, especially with regard to Shetland's socio-economic situation and public policies? Thirdly, what mediations could be identified linking this singular configuration and more general phenomena and tendencies (in particular the hypothetical new stage of cultural industrialisation analysed elsewhere)? In order to attempt to address these questions, two main research methods were used (Matthews 2015, 18–20).

First, I collected a large amount of secondary data: factual, historical and statistical (such as demographic or economic indicators). This step of my work entailed compiling and “cross-examining” a number of official reports published by national institutions (universities, ministries, Scottish or British economic development agencies), European organisations (defining policies towards peripheral zones), as well as documents produced by Shetland Arts or the SIC, dealing with public policy in the cultural area (and beyond), their assessment and changes over the past thirty years. The archives of local publications *Shetland News*, *The Shetland Times*, *The New Shetlander* and *Shetland Life* were another source of data. Last but not least, I also drew information from a wide range of “ancillary” works: essays and literary productions covering subjects such as Shetland music, youth experiences, community history, personal travels, alcohol and drug usage, not to mention Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, part of which was based on ethnographic work undertaken in Shetland in the early 1950s. All these sources are referred to in the bibliography.

Second, I carried out over forty semi-directive interviews with political and cultural players: local elected representatives; national MPs, members of the local opposition, trade-union

⁷ I use the term “case study” in regard to the fact that this research was undertaken within the framework of a three-year long program, supported and financed by the French ANR (Agence Nationale de la Recherche) and led by Philippe Bouquillon and including around 20 academics. This program questioned the theoretical and practical implications of the “creative turn” for cultural producers, industrial players and public agencies. Other terrains for cross-sectorial analysis included Mauritius, Pakistan, South Korea, as well as the French cities of Lille, Lyon and Nantes. Investigations pertaining to specific sub-sectors in France, Italy, Spain and Canada were also carried out: secondary and higher education, fashion, design, audiovisual production, recorded music.

leaders, SIC cultural and economic development spokespersons, heads of local economic development and cultural agencies, representatives of the Shetland College, other teachers and trainers specialised in the field of cultural and “creative” industries, *Mareel* stakeholders and opponents, local entrepreneurs and “creative” workers (architects, graphic designers, writers, journalists, artists, photographers, film and video producers, musicians, etc.), members of youth associations. Most of these interviews were conducted in and around Lerwick, but I also exchanged with individuals and groups based in the island communities of Fetlar, Unst and Fair Isle. A number of less formal discussions complemented these interviews with inhabitants of Burra Island, where I resided for five months.

My interview guide primarily allowed each interviewee to clarify the following points: function or activity; conception of Shetland culture or cultural identity; appreciation of the situation of the local cultural and “creative” industries; appreciation of the challenges facing these industries due to the islands' peripheral location; position with regard to “creative industries” discourse; knowledge and appreciation of local cultural policies; knowledge and appreciation of the *Mareel* project; appreciation of this project's connection with “creative industries” discourse.

At this point, I must reiterate the fact that the past decade has seen an inflation of public statements highlighting the potential of the “creative industries” for Shetland's future development. This owes largely to organisations such as Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Promote Shetland, and the Shetland College. Alongside Shetland Arts and some elements of the SIC, these institutions appear to share both a common agenda and a corpus of references to academic and consultancy-based publications (often commissioned by national and supranational institutions). Here is how the author of a report published by a London-based “creative place-making” agency acknowledged Shetland Art's endeavours:

Outside the main cities and in a rural context, the work of the Shetland Arts Trust over the last couple of decades has ensured a Cultural Planning approach which places cultural development in a key position—allowing it to impact on economic regeneration, tourism, planning, education and other key components of community development. (Ghilardi 2005, 18)

Interviewees from the aforementioned agencies and institutions all claimed to have read at least excerpts from the works of Richard Florida. All showed enthusiasm for slogans such as “embrace the digital age”, “join the knowledge society”, or “integrate the creative economy”. Eagerness to take part in what are perceived as open avenues for economic development is most obvious in institutional documents such as the *Shetland Cultural Strategy* and the *Shetland Brand Pack*. My empirical investigations sought to confront these representations with the real conditions which characterise these industrial sub-sectors—apprehended via the strategies of local cultural and “creative” producers, the tangible forms of public support they receive, and in regard to the reactions of Shetland inhabitants towards the hypothesis that these industries contribute to economic development.

As it has been suggested by the authors of a report entitled *Creative Economy and Cultural Entrepreneurship in Rural Europe*, the very notion of public policy in these areas now rests on two assumptions: first, that creativity can be encouraged and guided; second, that cultural practices withhold both an intrinsic value, and an instrumental value, “as a driver of economic development, employment and regional identity” (Suutari et al. 2010, 6). These authors soon come to the following question and proposals: “can creativity be enhanced or governed by policy tools in a way that it does not harm or eventually quell the original creativity in rural areas? If the answer is yes, the challenge is to deliberate what kind of policy improvements and tools are needed to meet the needs of creative practitioners, and simultaneously, we need to determine how to lever creative resources to develop the regional and rural economy” (Ibid. 9). Here is not the place to discuss the affirmative answer that the authors implicitly provide to their first question. However, it's obvious that public action conceived as a form of management of the “creative industries” ought to establish strategic orientations which take into account the needs of “creative” players and contribute to channelling a signif-

icant part of their production towards outlets that have a positive impact on local economic growth (prototypes, partnerships, exports, etc.). Part of my research therefore focussed on the position of local government and other public agencies in Shetland, with regard to these hypothetical orientations. To what extent is this dual assumption integrated into the specific procedures and programs they carry out? Do the institutions observed actively and intentionally implement this new “turn” in public policy?⁸

4. Lessons from the periphery

Two levels of analysis emerged from this particular investigation, both of which follow on from the more general works I've contributed to, over the past ten years.

On the one hand, Shetland's relatively marginal configuration provides some insight into the general level of propagation of the “creative industries” doctrine—*how* and *how much* has it penetrated into a community and territory that presents a number of apparently exceptional historical, geographical, cultural, political and socio-economic characteristics? Recent proposals from key French scholars in the field of political economy of communication point to the fact that “creative”—and “collaborative”—industrial paradigms are based on forms of faith, but also spark off distrust and resistance (Bouquillion, Miège and Mœglin 2013). Regarding these phenomena, my research sheds light on dynamics and antagonisms that are undoubtedly less visible in central and metropolitan areas, but which remain significant in terms of the heuristic value of the notions of “creative” industries / economy.

Moreover, attempts to introduce the discourses, practices and politics of “creative industries” in the Shetland Isles can be questioned in regard to the shifting relationship between culture and economy. This second level of analysis suggests considering Shetland's plight as a parable of wider socio-economic evolutions, regarding mediations between the material basis of society and cultural or ideological productions. This allows us to examine how the conclusions of this case study contradict, confirm or further qualify the hypothesis of a reinforcement of the cultural industries system (Bouquillion and Matthews 2012, 5–9; Matthews 2014, 41–52).

4.1. A discourse both variably mobilised and received

In the introduction of his book *Creative Economy, Creative Industries, des Notions à Traduire*, Philippe Bouquillion points out how this discourse can be traced back to earlier programmatic and holistic visions, such as those elaborated around “information highways” in the 1990s. Indeed, all share the characteristics of “grand projects”, profoundly inspired by liberal or neo-liberal thinking, but in which the State plays a significant role, “promoting a framework globally favourable to industrial interests” (Bouquillion 2012, 40). Significantly, this author also notes that this enchanted vision, blending creativity with cultural and economic globalisation, is based on “the integration of knowledge, skills, elements of traditional culture within the industrial and commercial processes that transform these elements into commodities that can be exchanged on the global marketplace” (Bouquillion 2012, 41). Therefore, “more than it was the case in earlier projects, themes developed [in this discourse] are simultaneously targeting developed nations, countries of the South and emerging nations” (ibid). The results of the Shetland case study complete and refine these propositions on two accounts.

Firstly, they confirm the deeply diffusionist inspiration of this new “grand project”, illustrating how it aims to encompass rural and peripheral zones within Northern nations, which the dominant literature tends to reduce to their most metropolitan areas. The case of Shetland is particularly interesting from this point of view, because of the strength of these “elements of traditional culture” and their importance for local applications of the “creative industries” discourse. Secondly, my investigations into public policies in Shetland confirm the somewhat

⁸ Four indicators were used in order to look into strategic orientations: firstly, the definition, since 2004, of a “Shetland Cultural Strategy” (renewed in 2009); secondly, an optic fibre telecoms network project, “Shetland Telecom”; thirdly, the setting-up of a “Shetland Brand”; fourthly, key actions implemented by the Shetland College (and, to a lesser extent, by the Trusts).

paradoxical nature of the liberal inspiration behind this new “grand project”—in regard to central position of public authorities and agencies, which are expected to guarantee optimal conditions for “culturepreneuriat” to thrive (in theory, at least). The scope of this case study allowed me to fully cover these local “governance” structures, revealing the complex layers of local public bodies whose actions offer contrasted translations of impulses and guidelines coming from central institutions, national (Scotland and UK) or supranational (EU).

Although my research highlights the relatively atypical political configuration of the Shetland Isles (and indeed its particular historical and socio-economic contexts), this study carries a more general significance. In Shetland, the programmatic vision of social and economic renewal via “creative industries” unfolds through a series of symbolic negotiations and tactical manoeuvres, intense controversies and improbable alliances (Matthews 2015, 78–101). One can observe a specific and localised version of what Philippe Bouquillion describes as a central characteristic of “grand projects”: “dissensions and hesitations around the themes [of creative industries and economy] illustrate the fact that, like prior grand project proposals, we are faced with a ‘disputed social construct’ (Lacroix, Miège and Tremblay 1994), which integrates interests that have areas of convergence and divergence” (Bouquillion 2012, 40). This confrontation / juxtaposition of interests which appear to be temporarily articulated within the perspective of “creative industries” seen as a “crisis-exit solution” (Bouquillion 2012, 5), transpires clearly on this terrain. The transposition of debates originating in metropolitan places of political, economic and ideological power, is precipitated by specifically insular initiatives and reactions, notably on the part of public policy “recipients”—citizens or cultural producers (Matthews 2015, 101–110).

In effect, this new “grand project” (embodied by the building of *Mareel*) occupied a significant and problematic place in the local public sphere, which could be observed in both generic elements of discourse and more diverse representations of its tangible applications within the community (Matthews 2015, 111–129). It's interesting to note that only one other theme provides a similar object of fantasy, fear and hope: that of “sustainable development”, mobilised in negative and positive representations of an extensive wind-farm project, *Viking Energy*. Bearing in mind these interconnected layers whereby the “creative industries” discourse is mobilised and received, my analyses lead to four key conclusions.

Firstly, clear forms of belief in this programmatic vision can be observed, even if this adherence may be partly simulated. My analysis of the *Shetland Cultural Strategy* illustrates the paradoxical characteristics of local versions of the “creative industries” discourse. Hence, among advocates of economic and social regeneration based on these activities, the notion is sometimes forsaken, in favour of terms such as “digital economy” or “social enterprise”. The most enthusiastic partisans of this discourse—those for whom public funding is often perceived as a disincentive for creative entrepreneurship—are nonetheless generally unable to identify its tangible applications within their own activity (whether productive or “supportive”). With the exception of initiatives in the textiles sub-sector, very few mechanisms could be pinpointed that actually encourage cultural production towards positive outputs for local economic growth. In some cases, these players appeared to seize the interview as an occasion to defend Shetland's track-record, to “prove” it deserved to be qualified as “an archipelago of creative excellence”, however much fantasizing and extravagant bids this entailed (Matthews 2015, 99–100). Moreover, my investigations illustrated various means by which the “creative industries” discourse was used in order to justify rents collected by various groups from petrol or gas revenues or via the allocation of these public resources towards infrastructure expenses. This is clearly the case with *Mareel*, and for the *Shetland Telecom* project, as the head of Shetland Arts pointed out: “If you consider the investment in the fibre optic cable, creative industries is cited as one of the key reasons for that.” Its significance for the strategic communications of oil and gas companies operating at Sullom Voe (such as *Total* and *BP*) were openly recognised by the person in charge of this project, hence pointing to mechanisms whereby these players are able to recover part of their contributions to the reserve fund.

Secondly, it transpires that these discursive productions simultaneously induce and translate significant material transformations. Indeed, from the early 2000s the SIC supported

changes in Shetland Arts' executive strategy, aiming at increasing the organisation's financial autonomy and securing profits (via *Mareel* or intellectual property investments). One might be tempted to see evidence, here, of a clear policy on behalf of the local government, implementing the "creative industries" doctrine. However, this case actually appears to depict an example of the convergence of interests that characterise the "controversial social constructs" discussed above. It shows precisely how a notion such as "creative industries" can be punctually mobilised by players within the scope of singular and limited projects (in this case, the efforts deployed by Shetland Arts management in favour of a new cultural facility), while being grafted on to more general political, social and economic trends (as it happens, the pro-austerity agenda embraced by local politicians after the 2010 general elections) (Matthews 2015, 83–87).

One of the key merits of Patrice Flichy's analysis of "the Internet imaginaire" is to have finely illustrated how the utopian vision of "information highways" was gradually assembled. From limited network-based projects and novel digital services in the fields of health and education, to the formulation of a supposedly emancipatory political vision, the realisation of this new "grand project" effectively went hand in hand with a fabulous extension of commodification, among a broad range of human activities (Flichy 2001).

Perhaps it is at this level that one finds a core truth of the oft evoked, yet rarely defined notion of a *transition* towards "creative" industries or economy. Indeed, if one considers the sub-sectors of clothing textiles, crafts or recorded music, in Shetland and over the past twenty-odd years, none of these actually have "transited"; if these fields have undergone some changes in their modes of production and capitalisation, or with regard to labour organisation, it makes no sense to affirm that they have mutated to become more "creative". However, because of their integration within the *Mareel* apparatus, and their summoning by its promoters, they indirectly contribute to a more general movement: the extension of capitalism within the communication and cultural industries, which has notably been accomplished via the privatisation of equipments and services that were fully or partially socialised after the second world war. Such is the plight of the long-awaited cultural centre (even if expectations were not equally high among all Shetlanders): indeed local citizens have obtained it, but at the cost of their cultural funding and support agency, Shetland Arts, being transformed into a "social enterprise", in other words, a commercial entity whose key aims include securing profits via the sale of popcorn and cinema tickets (Matthews 2015, 112).

Thirdly, if the advocates of "culturepreneuriat" and the local economy's "creative turn" are indeed present, my research shows that their influence on Shetland's key political players (SIC members and executive, MP and MSP) is relatively weak. Although local political leaders certainly cannot be accused of attempting to censor this discourse, they don't seem particularly eager to translate it into tangible applications (Matthews 2015, 85). Some interviews, or indeed public meetings specifically dealing with the topic of "creative industries", provide opportunities for political players to affirm its relevance for social and economic regeneration, but on the whole, they prefer to delegate the issue to the more or less autonomous institutions that are Shetland Arts and the Shetland Amenity Trust⁹. At first glance, this may seem characteristic of the arm's length principle that has guided cultural policy in Britain ever since John Maynard Keynes founded the Arts Council in 1946. But when one takes into account, firstly, the "consanguinity"¹⁰ between SIC elected representatives and members of the various trusts, and secondly, the financial dependency all these structures share towards the

⁹ In 2010 the SIC's cultural "portfolio" was merged with that of economic development, which could be seen as evidence of a wider reorientation of local policy, in line with the "creative industries" doctrine. However, my interview with Economic Development Officer indicated how little his service was actually interested in cultural and "creative" questions. Lack of viable statistics, approximations, absence of targeted measures: as many elements that confirmed the SIC executive's choice of leaving these matters to the aforementioned organisations, whilst stressing that trusts would have to considerably reduce their spending over the following years.

¹⁰ I refer here to the frequent rotation of persons nominated as board members of the various trusts and elected members of the SIC. Following public objections, the mode of nomination of trustees of the Shetland Charitable Trust was reformed in 2011, although the extent of changes introduced remained questionable for a number of my interviewees.

Shetland Charitable Trust (which manages oil and gas revenues), it seems clear that the main political players are relatively indifferent or even defiant towards the “creative economy” discourse.

In short, my observations point to a certain hesitation, in the local political arena, between declarations and measures which one might call “neo-liberal” or “pro-austerity”¹¹, on the one hand, and appeals to pursue and even amplify dependency on energy resources, on the other (hence supporting existing redistributive structures), by potentially replacing oil and gas rent with revenue from electricity production and “exports” towards mainland UK (via the large Viking energy wind-farm).¹² Some influential local players simultaneously argue both ways, which illustrates the limits that “creative industries” discourse and doctrine face in this territory, but also underlines the general weakness of alternative political scenarios.

Fourthly, my investigations revealed varied forms of evident defiance towards the “creative turn” and its potential implications on public policies. In some cases, one could even talk of resistances, which cannot be solely explained by Shetland's socio-economic, political and historical singularities. These oppositions were first and foremost visible via the indifference and hostility of a significant section of the local population towards the *Mareel* project—or, at the very least, disbelief in Shetland Art's projections (Matthews 2015, 119–127). More generally, I observed how notions such as “creative class” or “creative territory” were rarely mobilised by the numerous cultural workers and producers I met and exchanged with, not to mention the wider insular population. On the contrary, somewhat traditional expectations were regularly voiced, with regard to cultural democratisation and/or market failure corrections. Although my inquiries into the rationale guiding local public policies highlighted considerable wavering and uncertainty, the principle of public services contributing to the equality of access to both cultural offer and practice, as well as to artistic training, remained strongly recognised at the time of my research (Matthews 2015, 105–106).

On another note, it's worthwhile briefly considering the *Shetland Telecom* project, a significant investment taken on by the SIC in order to link up with existing optic fibre connections between the UK and Faeroe Islands, hence providing far higher internet debit for individual users and companies than that offered formerly by *BT* or other providers (that repeatedly declined making the infrastructural improvements due to their cost).¹³ This important public investment was indeed justified by the erstwhile principle of providing all citizens equal access to communication services. Clearly, in specific fields such as film distribution, *Mareel's* two cinema halls will rationalise the existing offer, and one might indeed wonder how Shetland might stay clear of wider “neo-liberal” trends affecting the rest of the UK. However, when one links statistics pertaining to Shetland's cultural production and my study of local public policies, it's obvious that these last can only be deemed inefficient *if this public action explicitly aims to apply the precepts of the “creative economy” doctrine*. On the other hand, they remain relatively efficient *if their aim is to support cultural production and consumption within a wider perspective of social redistribution and access to cultural goods and services*.

These objective oppositions to the “creative” doctrine are by no means specific to Shetland. Similar phenomena can be observed throughout Scotland, and indeed beyond. One key perspective of resistance towards the “creative turn” transpires in Susan Galloway's analysis of the situation that arose in Scotland following the devolution process:

In recognition of the cultural importance of the media industries in a Scottish national context, there is a growing public debate about both ownership and control, whether existing companies and organisations adequately serve ‘national’ interests, and whether

¹¹ This orientation transpires clearly in budget cuts facing areas such as education, public transport, culture and leisure equipments.

¹² Numerous contradictions of the same order appear within the *Shetland Cultural Strategy* documents. For instance, its renewed version (2009–2013) stated that public agencies had a duty to support craft industries facing decline, notably via training schemes, but the same section added that development policies in the field of heritage and “creative enterprises” needed to be economically “appropriate” (Matthews 2015, 83).

¹³ Nonetheless, these last remain in a position to collect rent via existing contracts and other legal entailments; *Shetland Telecom* merely owns the infrastructure and not the concession to charge for usage.

new forms of either ownership or institutional structure are required in order to achieve desired cultural and democratic goals. In other words in Scotland cultural (and political), rather than economic considerations are driving discussion about public policy intervention within key parts of the creative industries. Whereas UK creative industries thinking presents the national interest solely in terms of wealth creation, in Scotland, within areas of the commercial creative industries—such as the press and publishing—the argument is made that the national interest is in conflict with the commercial interests of (usually) externally owned companies. [...] The goals this policy sought to achieve were cultural, but also democratic—to enable the freedom of expression both of writers and the reading public, whose access and choice would otherwise be constrained by market forces. The aims were cultural, but the instruments used were those of economic intervention. Although certainly not regarded or labelled as such in the 1960s, by any other name this was a cultural industries policy. [...]

Given that the UK creative industries/creative economy model arose in a particular set of circumstances and appears already to have become a casualty of its intellectual weaknesses, it may be redundant to consider whether it should be transferred elsewhere. But it is precisely at this time, when creative industries/creative economy thinking reaches its endpoint in England that in Scotland the restructuring of government support for the cultural sector is proceeding—firmly based upon creative industries/creative economy thinking and with a name to match—Creative Scotland. Given the context I have briefly described, the construction of a new cultural institution based on these principles is proving to be problematic. (Galloway 2008, 4–5)

Given the importance of the public sector in the local economy, and the variety of mechanisms supporting the cultural sector, these remarks are indeed relevant to Shetland's situation—despite the incoherences of local government policy restructuring, and the limitations it encounters. This research again confirms the theoretical shortcomings of these notions, the heterogeneity of the sub-sectors it assembles, and the fantasy of forecasts advanced by the doctrine's advocates. By the same token, if an in-depth study of the two versions of the *Shetland Cultural Strategy* reveals a lack of factual and statistical precision, the hybrid nature of many recommendations and deep antagonisms around the definition of Shetland's cultural specificities also transpire (Matthews 2015, 46–56).

To summarise these contradictions, it's tempting to suggest that they oppose those in favour of preserving an elusive cultural identity, on the one hand, and the partisans of an abstract and metropolitan creativity, on the other hand. One could even consider, with some notorious opponents of *Mareel*, that the “creative industries hub” embodies a discourse “imported from *outwith*”, what's more, only relatively recently. However, this interpretation is debatable, not only because a number of local players were actively defending a transformation of the local economy partly based on “applied arts” as far back as the early 1980s (Matthews 2015, 61–62). In the next section I will illustrate how materialist analysis might provide a clearer understanding of these antagonisms. For the while, my conclusions confirm Philippe Bouquillion's proposition whereby one of the central applications of this “grand project” is precisely to conceal the socio-economic antagonisms, which nonetheless constitute its objective ingredients:

With the creative economy and industries, class conflicts are avoided and divergent economic interests are reconciled. [...] The term reduces the complexity of social relations, individualising them and defining them from a purely economic viewpoint, insofar as social relations and human beings are envisaged via the prism of creativity, which becomes the key “asset” of contemporary individuals, the key component of their “human capital”. [...] In the era of the creative industries and economy, social complexity and conflicts are dissolved via communication—a legacy of the information society—and creativity, which is the contribution of these new notions (Bouquillion 2012, 40).

4.2. A Shetland Parable

From the beginning of this study I was concerned that the terrain's singular characteristics might hinder broader reflections, pertaining to transformations in contemporary capitalism

and how these last are both translated and precipitated in the spheres of cultural production and consumption. Upon completion of this research, Shetland's "cultural question" may be reformulated as follows: are there cultural practices specific to this archipelago and its inhabitants, whose historical conditions of elaboration might be identified, and which remain alive despite (or perhaps through) distortions and convulsions linked to the transformation of their social and economic base? I propose that a materialist analysis of this question can also contribute to a better understanding of certain elements of more general processes. Two points must however be clarified, beforehand.

Firstly, in several respects, Shetland's situation appears to echo the historical limits that capital has encountered within the process of cultural production, "either by the inherent contradictions of the process itself or by external forces" (Garnham 1979, 140). Let's not forget that until recently, to a large extent, means of cultural distribution were not controlled by private capital¹⁴: vernacular literature and poetry, music, crafts, performance arts, as well as a significant part of textile transformation activities, had effectively "side-stepped" industrialisation. What's more, if one refers the terms of Nicholas Garnham's analysis, an instrument which has repeatedly been used in order to reduce limitations on capitalisation, i.e. the State, was either particularly passive on a local level (before the 1970s), or strongly oriented towards policies of redistribution, quasi free access and the construction of publicly owned facilities (in which traditional forms of representation and practice held a key place). Indeed, only over the last fifteen or twenty years has the transformation of Shetland Arts into an organ of cultural entrepreneurship been felt—albeit lightly. One might object that none of these elements are surprising: a market of thirty to fifty thousand inhabitants was hardly a strategic economic stake; in any case, until the 1980s cultural consumption and production remained to a large extent under-commodified and under-industrialised in this territory.

Secondly, if one can see that the emergence of cultural industries in the Shetland Isles is relatively recent, one must stress that this evolution was accompanied by sudden and deep social and economic changes, directly linked to the Sullom Voe oil terminal, and the massive injection of financial resources within the complex system of local government. A materialist analysis of Shetland's "cultural question" must begin by recalling both the relative importance of pre-industrial cultural forms or "residual cultures" (Williams 2005), and the particularly artificial character of the local social and economic configuration. This raises the question of why it might be considered more artificial than another. For instance, if one takes the Shetland Isles and the Outer Hebrides—two communities and territories that are historically and geographically comparable—a key element strikes the observer: over the past thirty years one of the two has been able to stabilise its population, whereas the other inexorably declines (Matthews 2015, 25). Each year, despite its somewhat unenviable location, Shetland attracts new inhabitants (albeit at a slower rate than in the early 1980s). External immigration provides labour in the fields of fishing and aquaculture, catering, construction and, of course, oil and gas. Internal immigration brings numerous "creative" workers, as well as public sector executives, management and qualified employees in oil and gas, hospital and school staff, academics, social workers, etc.¹⁵

My proposal holds in three simple observations. Firstly, as I stated above, virtually no one travels via Shetland. The "trickling down" of the oil rent among other economic activities (including aquaculture and fishing, which remain important), has evidently supported this demographic stabilisation. Secondly, materially productive activities—i.e. those that directly or indirectly generate resources (natural or produced commodities) which are consumed by the local population in order to fulfil its needs—occupy a minority of active inhabitants. The majority is employed in services, which have arguably become essential to maintain the local population, but whose very existence rests upon rent diverted from the commerce of fish and

¹⁴ Only the regional press, with the erstwhile *Shetland News* and the *Shetland Times* group were historical exceptions to this rule, and the latter has resisted several acquisition attempts by British groups since its inception in 1873.

¹⁵ I for one can certify that in Burra, my presence was neither surprising nor even vaguely picturesque for the local inhabitants: a researcher should have no fears about "melting into the Shetland crowd" and certainly won't be taken for a spy, unlike Erving Goffman in Unst, in 1950!

oil or gas. Thirdly, the significantly high cost of this community is undeniable: unless one were to imagine drastic changes to their diets, the twenty-three thousand inhabitants could certainly not depend on their own agriculture and livestock farming. Climatic conditions and contemporary comfort requirements contribute to the fact that the inhabitants' energetic consumption per capita is among the highest in the UK. Yet, despite wind-farm projects, this territory is currently dependent on oil and gas, both for the supply of Lerwick's 67MW power station and that of domestic heating fuel (used by many households all year round).¹⁶ It's somewhat ironic (and indeed a clear sign of short-sightedness) to think that the Sullom Voe terminal wasn't equipped with a refinery: all fuel used for domestic heating, as well as petrol products for motor vehicles must be "imported" from the South, making their cost significantly higher in Shetland than on the UK mainland! These factors make some cynical observers point out that the archipelago's economy would work a lot better without most of its inhabitants.

One might object that these considerations are superfluous, in regard to principles of national wealth redistribution and access to public services, on UK and Scottish national levels, and that these last must allow the populations of Shetland and of the Outer Hebrides to develop evenly. In such a framework, indeed, the question of the "cost of the community" would be irrelevant. Yet in actual fact, the political orientations and structures, which now characterise the UK have transferred significant responsibilities towards local authorities, in fields such as health-care, transport, social and educational services, whilst consecrating the market as the legitimate agency of consumer goods' distribution (including energy and foodstuffs). It's within this historically determined context that one can qualify the socio-economic configuration as being highly artificial, resting upon rents linked to the commerce of external products and on the productive labour of a minority of the population.

Let's now move on to the "cultural question" itself. My research confirmed how the question of a "Shetlandic" cultural identity divided local inhabitants, identification of specific sub-cultural traits frequently remaining an object of symbolic struggles. The hypothesis I propose is that the malaise surrounding their definition mainly results from the unsettling of the material basis of dominant traditional cultural forms—traces of which may indeed be found in elements of "residual cultures".¹⁷ According to my investigations, if a cultural particularity is to be found today—whether "alongside" phenomena that can be observed elsewhere in the UK, or amplifying these last—it pertains principally to two factors.

Firstly, with regard to cultural forms and products, Shetland's "imprint" appears to be materialised in artistic and literary contents, as well as textile and musical works, which are indeed characterized by "traditional" practices. But as soon as one has stated this, it must of course be specified that these "traditions" are in fact only eighty to one-hundred-and-sixty years old. Cultural forms that existed prior to the mid nineteenth century were *de facto* erased and rewritten over the following period, marked by the industrialisation of fishing and the relative emancipation of a population, which had been under the yoke of the merchant-lairds' "Shetland Method" for several centuries. Moreover, throughout the past fifty years, these "traditions" have been defended and passed on in a much more authoritarian manner than one might imagine at first glance, often against whole segments of the population, and by the means of an unusual (and even vaguely threatening) institutional and political complex (Matthews 2015, 40–46).

Secondly, on the level of cultural usages, a clear inclination to group practices can be observed, whether in partly improvised musical "sessions", or in festivities where the insular community "stages" itself: Folk Festival, various Up Helly Aas, Spring and Summer festivals like the Big Bannock, dog trials, regattas and country shows, etc (Matthews 2015, 52–53). These collective representations are inevitably fueled by the consumption of large quantities of alcohol and, in some cases, other narcotics, which obviously cannot be counted *per se* as

¹⁶ Peat is still used as a fuel, but only by a minority of local inhabitants, owners of peatfields and generally living outside the Lerwick-Scalloway "centre belt" which concentrates the majority of Shetland's population.

¹⁷ Dialect poetry and literature, traditional music and knitting evidently "cohabit" with mainstream cultural practices such as video games, televised sports or on-line audio-visual content usage.

an insular particularity. However, the practice of group intoxication appears to be somewhat exacerbated, as is indeed recognised in the *Shetland Cultural Strategy*, which timidly recommends “acknowledging aspects of culture that can be potentially harmful to health and well-being”.¹⁸ Statistical analysis showed that the Shetland population group was consistently above national averages for alcohol-related accidents and violence, and under-age drinking, while a number of studies have focussed on proportionally high heroin and crack cocaine usage (Matthews 2015, 49)¹⁹.

These two elements appear to be the striking features of a specifically “Shetlandic” response to broader processes mediating material relations of production and cultural practices—in this case via an intricate network of distorting mirrors. Group drunkenness and its processions, those public representations of a fantasised earlier cultural stage, maintained in a state of artificial life thanks to gas and oil rents, might they not both be symptoms of collective weakness and guilt? If there existed some form of Shetland collective ego, this thought of Horkheimer and Adorno's could apply to it in a most paradoxical way: “The narcotic intoxication which permits the atonement of deathlike sleep for the euphoria in which the self is suspended, is one of the oldest social arrangements which mediate between self-preservation and self-destruction, an attempt of the self to survive itself” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 33). Shetland revelers do not so much turn towards the promise of an irresistible pleasure that the chants of the Sirens contain, and which the proto-bourgeois Ulysses faces in this extract of *Dialectics of Reason*. Their musical binge rather resembles the gesture of an ostrich plunging its head into the sand, in the face of danger. Self-conservation and self-destruction aren't mediated but merged (Matthews 2015, 37–40).

By tying themselves to the oil industry in order to ensure their survival, Shetlanders have become condemned to live with the barely veiled secret of their insecurity and productive shortcomings. Avoiding to contemplate the reality of the oil rent's inescapable end goes precisely hand in hand with the fantasy of a cultural identity that spares people the need to reassess their history—beginning with the second half of the nineteenth century when, freed (by the intervention of British central government) from the merchant-lairds' oppression, Shetland workers entrusted their political fate to a new leading group (who descendants are still present), while embracing the wage system within the fishing industry.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the lack of productive investments (except in the fishing sector, which is now largely in the hands of a local oligopoly), the gradual buying up of aquaculture by large Scandinavian groups, and the weakness or absence of oppositional political forces, have contributed to reinforce the material dependency of most inhabitants. During this same period, the cultural industries arrived, blending their intoxicating Sirens with the reconstituted fiddle reels of Tommy Anderson.

¹⁸ Another illustration of this phenomenon could be noted when the 2014 edition of *Lerwick Up Helly Aa* was filmed and broadcast live via Internet for the first time. Promote Shetland hoped, this way, to encourage the growing international recognition of the fire festival. In the days before the event, strict guidelines were given to the organising teams in order to limit the recording of images portraying the drunkenness of participants. Despite these precautions, the live video showed numerous scenes of frantic debauchery (<http://www.shetlandtimes.co.uk/2014/01/17/committees-warning-to-up-helly-a-squads/> consulted 20/01/2014). A comparison of occurrences of the term “alcohol” over a twelve month period in the archives of the weekly newspapers *The Shetland Times*, *The Orcadian* and *Hebrides Today* offers another indication of this tendency: 52 occurrences for the Shetland paper, against a total of 12 for the two other publications.

¹⁹ According to the Scottish NHS 2006 “Alcohol Profile Shetland” report, the rate of offenses linked to alcohol is of 19 offenses for 10,000 inhabitants, which is 5 points higher than the Scottish average. 18.5% of alcohol tests required in the event of road accidents were either positive or refused, a figure far superior to Scotland's 3.5% average. Considering that this specific offense is counted separately, its rate is of 34 offenses per 10,000 inhabitants (12 points higher than the Scottish average). By compiling data from NHS Shetland and the Scottish government (Shetland Partnership Single Outcome Agreement 2013), I found that 6.5% of A&E admissions due to alcohol consumption in Shetland, in 2010–11, concerned persons aged 12 to 18. By comparison, the figure for the same year in England is 1.6% (source: <http://www.hscic.gov.uk/catalogue/PUB10932>). According to an investigation by *The Guardian*, heroin usage in Scotland concerns roughly 1% of the adult population. Shetland has approximately 600 regular users, a rate three times higher than the Scottish average (*The Guardian*, 23/04/2008). During that same year, Shetland was the only area of the Highlands and Islands region where police seized crack cocaine (*The Shetland Times*, 20/03/2009).

Some local inhabitants have inherited the versatility that characterized their ancestors—“fishermen with a croft”, as the saying goes—and this is perhaps an understatement for “poor workers” who combine several activities (wage-earning or free-lance), as in the rest of the UK. But the Shetlander's supposedly industrious nature is now largely diluted. Once often dedicated to community projects and mutual assistance, notably among fishermen (Matthews 2015, 25), this legendary resourcefulness now principally transpires in private capitalisation strategies. Like elsewhere in Britain, the dominant political agenda since the 1980s has favoured the extension of home-ownership among the working class (*de facto* greatly enlarging the estates of banks and other financial institutions), whilst encouraging an increase in small trade and service companies—which resonate with a tradition of family enterprises in the fishing industry. Although these phenomena do not necessarily provide for the individual or his/her family's needs—in the same way that a simulacrum of home-ownership doesn't guarantee security of accommodation—they have clearly contributed to the accelerated dislocation of forms of organic solidarity that still characterised this community in the era when Erving Goffman was conducting fieldwork for his PhD thesis. Like other peripheral regions of the UK and the most marginalised urban areas, these phenomena have been accompanied by a growing disaffection with politics (Hall 2008). In the specific case of Shetland, the social cost of policies implemented since the end of the 1970s on a national level has certainly been reduced by oil and gas rents, but this temporary opportunity evidently hasn't given rise to an in-depth public debate in view of defining a long-term project for social and economic development. The SIC's decision to place a significant part of Shetland's reserve fund in high-risk financial investments, which collapsed during the 2008-09 recession, offers a clear illustration of the local political elite's lack of vision. Likewise, despite obvious relations between the latter and the large fishing company bosses, Shetland's representatives at successive EEC, then EU negotiation rounds have regularly endorsed the downsizing of the “Shetland box” fishing zone and quotas. Even episodes such as these, only a small minority of the insular population has publicly taken a stand against the SIC's immobilism, and to this day the management of revenues stemming from the Sullom Voe terminal remain shrouded in secrecy, details of agreements linking the islands to multinational oil and gas companies being confidential. The inflation of discourses presenting the “creative” industries as a “crisis-exit solution”, over the past ten years, is finally rather laughable: advocates of the “creative turn” have never seriously threatened the local ideological status quo, and now the most fervent are anyhow effectively neutralised, absorbed by the management of *Mareel*.

5. Conclusion

At the outcome of the evocation of this case study, I wish to cite a short extract of what is undeniably one of the earliest erudite texts in which Shetland plays a significant, yet brief role, the Orkneyingers Saga. This medieval narrative relates roughly four centuries of the history of the Orkney Isles, following the time when the King of Norway claimed this archipelago, around 800 AD. Composed by anonymous authors, the saga blends fictional elements with more recognised facts, which give it the value of an historical document, according to specialists (Renaud 1988; Smith 1988).

The Orkneyingers Saga notably recounts the deeds of Einar, founder of a dynasty that ruled over Orkney and Shetland for several centuries, after having overcome a group of Danish vikings that were in the habit of looting the Norwegian colonies established in both archipelagos. This excerpt begins with the proposal that Einar makes to his father Rognvald, to head for the isles in order to restore peace:

Einar went forward, the youngest of his sons, and said, « Wilt you that I go to the isles? I will promise that I will never come back into your eyesight; besides I have here little good to part from, and it is not to be looked for that my thriving will be less anywhere else than here. »

Einar sailed west to Shetland, and there folk gathered to him; after that he went south into the Orkneys, and held on at once to meet Kalf Treebeard and his companion Skurvy.

There a battle arose, and both those Vikings fell. Then this stave was sung:

« He gave Treebeard to Trolls.

Turf-Einar slew Skurvy. »

After that he laid the lands under him, and made himself the greatest chief. He first of men found out how to cut turf out of the earth for firewood, for they were ill off for wood in the isles. Einar was a tall man and ugly, one-eyed, and yet the sharpest-sighted of men. (Vigfusson 2012, 7)

In this short extract, we see lord Einar establish his authority over the Norwegian colonies of Orkney and Shetland, by crushing the Danish pillagers. But let's pay attention to the surname, Turf-Einar, which he is given in the verses of a long forgotten victory song, and to the short explanation that follows it. The ultimate cause of his popularity becomes quite obvious: the saga attributes to this character the crucial discovery of the combustible qualities of peat—a key historical innovation for these hostile archipelagos, deprived of fire-wood and located on the edge of the Norse sphere of influence. This evolution, essential in terms of means of production, was indeed followed by a significant increase in Norwegian colonisation and by the long-lasting implantation of their legal and parliamentary system—of which the “Lawting Holm” archaeological site, located near Lerwick, still stands to this day as a “concrete” testimony (Smith 1977, 203–204).

This historical “detour” leads me to suggest that one might consider the socio-economic configuration of this small, remote territory as a parable of the situation of the Western world in general. If this case study doesn't allow us to either confirm or refute the hypothesis of an extension and reinforcement of the cultural industries' system, it can however illustrate the relevance of materialist analyses of the relations between culture and what we still call, for want of a more adequate term, the socio-economic sphere.

Visionary lord Einar and the industrious Shetlanders of the ninth century solved an essential material problem. The laudatory song came afterwards. I would argue that likewise, critical approaches in the field of communication and cultural studies must now place first the solving of the fundamental questions that face humanity—starting with those of energy supplies and of the contemporary forms of pillaging that characterise relations of production. This entails firmly denouncing the premature celebration of “creativity” and “collaboration” which is shared by proponents of the “creative industries” discourse and many contributions to the abounding narratives of “participatory culture” and “cognitive capitalism” (Bouquillion and Matthews 2012, 9–15; Matthews 2014, 53–67).

During a public intervention at Westminster university in 2014, evoking his long-standing theoretical differences with mainstream approaches in cultural studies, Nicholas Garnham delivered what appears to be a suitable conclusion to this “Shetland parable”, which I gladly reproduce here by way of an incentive for further reflection:

The other problem—and I still think this is the case—was that I thought the cultural studies people [...] were exaggerating the effects of what is narrowly called cultural practice on life in general and its development. For all the talk of an information society and so on and so forth, if you look at current debates about where our society is going, the important developments are not cultural, they are not the development of social media or anything; I mean that is the froth on the surface. The things that underlie it are things like shifting demographics and levels of productivity growth in the economy. If you look at the global economy, for all the talk about culture and information, what are the things that most concern people? Energy production, access to clean water. The big fortunes are being made not in high-tech or the digital economy but in mining. The biggest problem facing the global economy is physical transport infrastructure—a shortage of port capacity and railway lines—moving things about. (Fuchs and Garnham 2014, 115)

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