

Research Article

Open Access

Rene Mäe*

The Creative Industries: a discourse-theoretical approach

DOI 10.1515/irsr-2015-0007

Received: December 1, 2014; Accepted: February 15, 2015

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to examine the emergence of the idea of the creative industries in a particular former socialist country – Estonia. Instead of regarding the creative industries as an economic sector, the article (re)conceptualises it as an ‘empty signifier’. The paper borrows its central theoretical concepts (hegemony, empty signifier, floating signifier) from post-Marxist discourse theory and employs them to explore the ways in which the creative industries are *instituted* within particular social, discursive or political struggles. The article proposes that Laclauian (or post-Marxist) discourse theory can raise some new fruitful methodological problems and challenging research directions among the researchers of the creative industries and cultural policy, especially in the Eastern European context.

Keywords: creative industries, discourse theory, Eastern Europe, power, hegemony, empty signifier

Introduction

This article is concerned with the critical evaluation of the ‘creative industries’ (CI) – most often conceived as a policy idea which most powerfully emerged during the latter part of the 1990s in Great Britain and has since then spread globally (Hartley, 2005; O’Connor, 2010, 2011; Ross, 2009; Hesmondhalgh, 2013). Throughout its ‘mercurial career’ (Ross, 2009: 15-52), the CI have complicated the relationships between culture, the economy (or economics) and the world of creative, cultural and artistic work in crucial ways. This is well documented by the substantial volume of academic research devoted to the CI around the world – in Great Britain, the USA, Europe

and Asia (e.g. Garnham, 2005; Keane, 2013; Ross, 2009; Power, 2009; Švob-Dokic, 2005; Pratt, 2009; Flew and Cunningham, 2010; O’Connor, 2011). Much of the research on the CI has either been critical of the ways in which this idea has been (too vaguely or rigidly) defined and classified; sceptical about its too optimistic, uncritical and hasty embrace into national, cultural, urban and economic policies throughout the world (especially within the European Union); the extensive managerial language that goes with the CI or their role in the gentrification of urban spaces.

There is an enormous variety of promises and problems that the term CI has been tied to by academic researchers, cultural ministers, marketing gurus, creative industries experts, artist and activists. It is true that we can dispute whether the CI are ‘a distinctive economic grouping, a framework of conjoining certain types of intellectual labour, or, simply a shapeless policy construct’ (Banks and O’Connor, 2009: 366). We can likewise question whether one industry or another (performance arts, IT, advertising) should be part of the official national CI policies; whether the statistics on the CI (jobs, income, turnover etc.) are comparable between countries or regions; or whether the CI *really* have all the various enriching or destructive powers and potentials that are attributed to them.

The present article, however, is concerned with the fact that in this *mélange* of interpretations, interests and struggles, there is a clear lack of explicit and more general theoretical and methodological discussion about the ways we study the CI. Thus, rather than contributing to more specific debates about the promises, deficiencies and powers of the CI this article poses two different questions: how has the CI become a signifier so ubiquitous to connect the various cultural, economic, social, political etc. goals? And second, what kind of methodological and theoretical tools could we employ to evaluate the specific ways *how* CI emerge as a concern or a problem in particular contexts?

The empirical focus of this article is Estonia, a post-socialist Eastern European state where the creative

*Corresponding author: Rene Mäe: E-mail: rene.mae@tlu.ee

industries as an official policy theme/idea emerged more or less a decade ago. According to the official definition used in Estonia, the CI is an ‘economic sector’, which is based on ‘individual and collective creativity, skill and talent’ and is regarded important because of its ‘potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property’ (Kultuuriministeerium, 2014). As elsewhere in the world, the CI in Estonia have figured as a salient keyword in various public debates, cultural policy documents, and development plans. In the course of this development, many questions have been raised about its role and potential in contemporary cultural and economic policy, in urban development and as a new field (or an industry) for artists, cultural workers and creative entrepreneurs to make their living in. Most importantly, the CI have commonly been seen as something that can bring Estonia and its economy, global image and popular, national and entrepreneurial culture closer to the Western, ‘developed’ world.

The CI in Estonia have been subject to statistical mapping (Eesti Konjunkturiinstituut¹, 2005; 2009, 2013); have figured as a central theme in many conferences, seminars, special issues daily and weekly newspapers, policy documents and art exhibitions, not to mention the creative incubators, centres and funding schemes that have been established (for general information see Loov Eesti², 2014). In the midst of all these activities around the CI in Estonia, however, scholarly interest toward the CI has been practically non-existent. Hence, we might say that the paper tries to fill two somewhat more general goals. First, to offer some methodological-theoretical discussion and introduce some new conceptual tools which could be used to study the institution of CI in particular empirical contexts. Second, to illustrate how these concepts could be put into practice.

¹ *Eesti Konjunkturiinstituut* (EKI, or in English, the Estonian Institute of Economic Research) defines itself as a ‘centre of excellence compared with other for-profit organisations, as it operates under a private legal status dedicated to applied research. The primary aim of EKI is, through its research, to further develop the Estonian economy. EKI gathers socio-economic data, processes and analyses it in a manner which allows high quality inferences to be drawn and macro as well as microeconomic decisions made. This information is available for purchase from EKI, to enable leaders and entrepreneurs to make appropriate decisions within the prevailing market arena’ (Eesti Konjunkturiinstituut, 2014).

² *Loov Eesti* (or in English, Creative Estonia) ‘is an initiative aimed at promoting and developing the creative industry sector in Estonia’ (Loov Eesti, 2014).

The creative industries as a discursive object

According to the perspective taken in this article, *the very ways* in which the CI become the object of discussion, research and intervention must be seen as something to be explained and problematized. We could here borrow Michel Foucault’s notion of *problematization* as it has been reworked by Jason Glynos and David Howarth in the context of political/ post-Marxist/ post-structuralist discourse theory. The concept of problematization refers to an approach that takes its object(s) of study as constructed and maintains that ‘a range of empirical phenomena has to be constituted *as* a problem, and the problem has to be located at the appropriate level of abstraction and complexity’ (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 167). From this also follows the main theoretical assumption for our empirical research – the CI are, first and foremost, constituted discursively and should be seen as a kind of problematisation of various empirical phenomena. The vitality of this assumption is that we can study practices like describing, researching, measuring, mapping, and surveying that condense around the signifier CI as something that at the same time constitute this very object.

Thus, doing discourse analysis from this viewpoint is not an analysis of the representation of a particular issue (how the CI are represented in the media, for example) but instead aims to show ‘how that representation – and the objects of discourse assumed by it – is made possible in the first place’ (Dahlberg and Phelan, 2011: 14). This theoretical foundation is borrowed primarily from the work of Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe (Laclau 1996, 2005, 2014; Laclau & Mouffe 2014 [2001]; Mouffe 2005). Within this framework the distinction between the discursive and non-discursive is discarded. Instead it is asserted that every meaningful object is inevitably an object of discourse. Discourse is understood here as an outcome of articulation which is a practice of creating ‘a relation among elements such that their identity is modified’ as a result of this (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014: 91).

When we compare post-Marxist discourse theory with Norman Fairclough’s (e.g. Fairclough, 1992, 1995) version of critical discourse analysis, we see that the latter makes a distinction between non-discursive social structures and social life that possesses semiotic dimensions (i.e. discourses). This leads him to a relatively narrow definition of discourse (and also text), where discourses become merely the meaning-makings and -reproductions within text and speech. Hence, the research becomes

confined by the question how speech acts relate to ‘wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes’ (Fairclough, 1995: 132). From a Laclauian perspective, however, no meaningful object can exist outside discourse – culture, economy and society can and should be analysed as discourses, as articulations of various objects and practices.

Hence, the practices of describing, measuring and mapping the CI should not be seen as something external (or extra) to the concept of the CI but should be seen as something that constitutes it. Instead of presuming that we already know what CI are and would just start to analyse how they are represented in ‘the media’, we look at the political dimension instead – the ‘acts of hegemonic institution’ (Mouffe, 2005: 17) that lie behind this signifier in different contexts. Analysing discourse in this sense, we are thus not ‘restricted to the areas of speech and writing’ but rather treat discourse as the ‘primary terrain of the constitution of objectivity as such’ (Laclau, 2005: 68). All meaningful objects, from the Laclauian viewpoint, are the result of the signification process since all of these objects are ‘always given to us in discursive articulation’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: 85). This is not merely to claim that what we mean by the CI is different in different contexts (countries, periods, cultures, societies etc.), but that the search for meaning is itself at the same time constitutive of the CI. As Laclau and Mouffe put it:

The use of a term is an act – in that sense it forms part of pragmatics; on the other hand, the meaning is only constituted in the contexts of actual use of the term: in that sense its semantics is entirely dependent upon its pragmatics, from which it can be separated – if at all – only analytically. That is to say, in our terminology, every identity or discursive object is constituted in the context of an action (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987: 83).

What we are dealing with here is *not* ‘the simple critique and deconstruction of texts, practices and institutions’ (Howarth and Glynos, 2007: 5) but instead the analysis of ‘the reproduction and transformation of hegemonic orders and social practices’ (ibid.). The two central concerns for post-structuralist discourse theory – power and hegemony need to be introduced here. As the discourse theorist David Howarth, drawing on Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe and many others puts it, ‘power is an ontological feature of social practices and relations [...] because all social forms are the result of political struggles and decisions’ (Howarth, 2009: 310). The same goes for the study of policy-making and policy implementation and the understanding of power as something that ‘constitutes and produces practices and social relations’ and hegemony as ‘a kind of political practice that captures the

making and breaking of political projects and discourse coalitions’ (ibid.). The concept of the ‘empty signifier’, as Laclau conceives it, is particularly useful to help us to illuminate the complex entanglements of power, hegemony and policymaking and to understand how the ‘creative industries’ are instituted differently in particular discursive/ social struggles.

Creative industries – an empty signifier?

The ‘Empty signifier’ (ES) as a theoretical concept is best exemplified by Ernesto Laclau’s essay *Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics* (1996). An ‘empty signifier’ is neither a signifier that is ‘attached to different signifieds in different contexts’ nor merely an ambiguous, too deficient or excessive signifier to be able to signify. An ES is actually a ‘signifier without the signified’ (Laclau, 1996: 36). To explain how this is possible, Laclau explores the fundamental mechanics of signification as such. Taking the Saussurian path, he attests that signification is differential – i.e. signification systems are systems of differences and the identity (and meaning) of all the elements is dependent on the ways in which the *limit* of a system that distinguishes one system from another is established in practice. From this follows that all these systems (which we can call discourses) need a limit – otherwise we cannot speak about meaning at all. The problem now is that all these limits are not neutral but *exclusionary* and also temporary, unstable, ambiguous, etc. Additionally, all systems of signification structure themselves ‘around an empty place’, which means that the relations between particular signifiers and signifieds is not determined by some fundamental or essential force such as ‘society’, ‘culture’ or ‘economy’.

From these presuppositions, Laclau goes on to show that the most important dimensions and functional qualities of empty signifiers appear in connection to power and hegemony. The particularity of the ES occurs in its attempt to show itself as something that can *overcome* this differential nature of signification and thus become a kind of totality that is able to exist outside the limits of signification. The *emptiness* of the ES derives from the movement wherein particular signifiers, by figuring as incarnations of the ES, are emptied of their particular and differential meanings in other articulations. All signifiers that a particular ES attempts to incorporate have to give up their differential identity for the ‘purely equivalential identity’ of the ES.

From here we should move forward with Laclau, who urges us to ask: what determines ‘that one signifier rather than another assumes in different circumstances that signifying function’ (Laclau, 1996: 40)? The answer clearly is that it is determined by the dynamics of power and hegemony. As he puts it, ‘not in any position in society, not any struggle is equally capable of transforming its own contents in a nodal point that becomes an empty signifier’ (Laclau, 1996: 43). He observes that empty signifiers most often emerge in the situation of a ‘radical disorganization of the social fabric’, i.e. at a time when there is a need for *order*. This order, however, has no specific content but is rather something that needs to be realised and filled within and through discursive struggle. To put it in the words of Laclau, ‘various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack. To hegemonize something is exactly to carry out this filling function’ (Laclau, 1996: 44).

Employing the concept of the ‘empty signifier’ in the analysis of the CI, we could observe, for example, how the signifier CI begins to dominate the ways in which we articulate (creative, cultural and artistic) work, entrepreneurship, national economy, globalisation, culture, education, innovation, societal change etc. Or more specifically, we could observe how the careers and the nature of the work of fashion models, musicians, IT-workers, artists and many other occupations are conceived specifically as examples of work in *the creative industries* (or as the careers of the ‘creative class’) and not in the fashion or music industry, for example. Historically, all these professions have had and still have their identities either in the world of fashion, music, the arts, etc. The same goes for cultural institutions and practices (theatre, performance arts, fine art, film, etc.) as well as particular urban spaces, places and events that have come to incarnate the CI. The equivalential chain that the ES creates and connects can potentially be extended infinitely – everything and everybody can potentially figure as an ‘example’ or an ‘element’ of the CI.

To move closer to the project of the CI as it has appeared in the *Estonian* context, we should now ask: why has the CI as a policy project appeared so powerfully at this particular time period (in the mid-2000s)? Could we identify some kind of ‘disorganization of the social fabric’ that the CI have worked to (re)order? A tentative answer to this question could be that in the mid-2000s when Estonia joined the EU, there was pressure to ‘create order’ in many cultural political issues, especially the ones that fell between the ‘culture’ and ‘economy’; ‘art’ and ‘entrepreneurship’, etc. In many important respects,

this meant that there was a struggle to lose many ‘post-socialist’ notions of culture and economy (as distinct, as conflicting, as mutually excluding) and bring them closer to ‘Europe’, to ‘the West’ or the ‘developed world’, etc.

Taking the discourse-theoretical tools outlined above, I will now illustrate how these might be put into practice. I will start by drawing the focus on some terminological aspects that have occurred in the translation of the CI into the Estonian context.

Culture, economy and industry: the translation of the creative industries in postsocialist Estonia

The term that is mostly used to denote creative industries in the official documents in Estonia is ‘loomemajandus’³. As the English word ‘industry’ corresponds to the Estonian word ‘tööstus’, it would seem more germane or expected to use the terms ‘loovtööstus’ or ‘loovtööstused’. In English the word “industry” seems to hint at an economic sector or domain, whereas the word “tööstus” in Estonian connotes heavy or mass industry. Justin O’Connor (2005), who studied the adjustment of the culture and creative industries idea in St. Petersburg, similarly observes that the word ‘industry’ suggests factories and mass production in Russian (also see Primorac, 2006a). The similarity presumably comes from a shared soviet legacy, where industrialisation meant extensive heavy industry set up by the totalitarian regime, the large-scale immigration of the working class from other parts of the Soviet Union, etc. O’Connor further notes that the artists and cultural workers who took part in his study demonstrated hostility towards a ‘culture industry’, due to ‘the term’s perceived undermining of the legitimacy of the “artist” (O’Connor, 2005: 51). Indeed, it seems probable that in post-socialist conditions, the economically grounded opposition between the mainstream/popular culture and what one might call ‘real art’ (or ‘culture’ in a narrow sense), still has resonance, unlike, for example, in Great Britain. In Estonia, many of the more forcefully negative reactions against the introduction of CI made by the Ministry of Culture, drew upon the evergreen opposition of commercial vs. authentic art (or cultural production), which originates from an elitist understanding of culture. Anders Härm, an Estonian cultural critic wrote the following in his 2010 article *When Culture Becomes a Pendant*:

³ A direct translation of ‘loomemajandus’ would thus be ‘creative economy’ (or ‘creation economy’) since from Estonian ‘loome’ translates into English as ‘creation’ (n.), ‘loov’ can be translated as ‘creative’ (adj.) and ‘majandus’ as ‘economy’ (n.).

The rhetoric of creative industries only has one goal – to blur the boundaries between culture and economy and capitalise the cultural domain, shifting it from a public service to the domain of business and therewith making it possible for the government to cut back on the culture budget (Härm, 2010).

In the 1980s, debates were held in Western Europe concerning the possibilities of conciliation between the ideals of traditional cultural policy and the system of capitalist cultural production, or finding ways of developing the first within the latter (see also O'Connor, 2010: 21-30; Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 165 ff). In a totalitarian Estonia (and the Eastern Bloc in general), these kinds of democratic debates were obviously not the order of the day. Precluding them was the prevailing political regime as well as a system of production very unlike the Western free market economy. Matters didn't change much until 1991, when Estonia regained independence. It is therefore not surprising that the cultural-political discussions held in the beginning of the 1990s only handled limited traditional issues such as the subsidising of arts, the founding of museums and the reorganisation of the overall system of cultural reproduction. Economic aspects entered the cultural-political debate only regarding the questions of sponsoring cultural events and institutions. Egge Kulbok-Lattik has examined the historical development of Estonian cultural policy throughout the 20th century and brings forth the main characteristics of the 1990s cultural policy as follows:

...inconsistent cultural legislation; uneven distribution of national subsidy; a relative feebleness of the third sector; the sale of soviet cinemas and other buildings that had up to then served a cultural function, the decline of the prestige of official and state-subsidised culture and the growing presence of commercial culture (Kulbok-Lattik, 2008: 140).

From the middle of the 1990s, a course was taken towards a more elitist-conservational cultural policy. In 1998 a document titled 'The foundations of cultural policy' was approved, which Kulbok-Lattik claims to have in many respects disrupted the Estonian postsocialist transition period. The new official cultural policy mainly worked on maintaining the national cultural institutions (theatres, museums etc.) but as a rule didn't fund new cultural initiatives. The introduction of the idea of the CI by the Estonian Ministry of Culture in the middle of the 2000s is in Kulbok-Lattik's view the next potential breaking point of the national cultural policy.

Coming back to the issue of translating the term *creative industries*, we could similarly ask: what is the function fulfilled by replacing the word 'industry' with the

word 'economy'? Could it be said that 'economy' was the preferred option in order to avoid the negative undertones of 'industry'? Or perhaps, more importantly, is it more likely to have been chosen because 'economy' is a much broader and crosscutting term, allowing it to envelope a markedly larger amount of objects and practices? The potentiality of creative industries to incorporate objects and practices so various would be considerably smaller if it was actually called a 'creative industry'. Compared to 'creative industry', the term 'creative economy' affords a much easier opposition of culture and economy (or art and commerce), allowing for the associations to be made between the CI and the national economy, economic competitiveness, the growth of national reputation, its role either in the midst of economic prosperity or economic crises.

The head of the department of personnel and development at the Estonian Ministry of Culture, who has also been responsible for the official development of the CI in the ministry, notes that 'the selection of the Estonian term [loomemajandus] is good in the sense that only with this one term we can cover many levels and do not have to distinguish the cultural and the creative industries' (Sarv, 2013: 10). If we look at another quote from a previous vice chancellor of the Ministry of Culture, we can see a similar logic working already in 2006:

The point has not only been in the selection of words but also in the content of words. From the beginning, Estonia has seen the creative industries in a wider context. What does the creative industries mean in the wider sense? *Creative economy* shows the ways how traditional industries and economy can profit and get support from creative domains. Creative entrepreneurship in general, creativity and culture play an important role in shaping the image of the country, in tourism etc. (Siil, 2006).

We can observe similar tactics when we consider the official decision to go with 'loome' (creation) instead of 'kultuur' (culture). As several authors have already demonstrated with regards to Great Britain (Hesmondhalgh and Pratt, 2005: 5; O'Connor, 2010: 53-56), it can be assumed that the use of 'creation' has allowed distance from the elitism associated with 'culture' and 'arts' – an undiluted example of this is the slogan 'everyone is creative' (see McRobbie, 2004; Banks, 2007: 69-93; Osborne, 2003), where creativity isn't a privilege of the few, but a right and internal propensity of all, a potentiality that should be filled to help enrich both culture and economy. It is also possible to connect 'creation' and 'creativity' with innovation, novelty and forward thinking, therewith tying 'culture' with the notions of tradition, the archaic, or even stagnancy.

It is now clear that ‘culture’ and ‘economy’ are the two central signifiers that contribute to the active discursive struggles around the CI. In Laclauian terminology, we can see these as ‘floating signifiers’. While the abundance of meaning is characteristic to the floating signifier, it is in the course of floating that the signifier is *emptied* of meaning. Floating signifiers could be grasped as signifiers that occur in opposing discursive chains, and at the same time the signifier and the signified are only loosely related – ‘if the signifier was strictly attached to one and only one signified, no floating could take place’ (Laclau, 2014: 20).

Culture can at once mean national culture, the product of cultural industries or the organisational culture – just like a creative worker can be a conductor of the national orchestra, an art director in an advertising agency or a curator of an art gallery. And the floating nature of ‘culture’ (or ‘creativity’, ‘knowledge’, ‘economy’) is crucial for establishing a particular system of signification (or a discourse) such as the ‘creative industries’. To illustrate this point, I’d like to consider another example from the Estonian context, which yet again comes from the current vice chancellor of the arts at the Ministry of Culture:

the creative industries have their *natural* role to fill in cultural as well as in entrepreneurial policy. The aim is not to subject the cultural domain to the rules of entrepreneurship. Rather, *the essence* of this economic formation is to gain its input from culture and then create income, profit and new jobs. A responsible cultural policy assures that there is enough talent, who in turn create new cultural layers, on which in turn the creative industries can base their growth and ideally, the rest of the economy. The creative industries can exist and function only when a rich and diverse cultural environment supports them (Oreškin, 2014, emphasis added).

The quote elegantly ties together the ‘cultural domain’, the ‘rules of entrepreneurship’, and the goals of ‘cultural’ and ‘entrepreneurial’ policy. But what is more important here is that it also conceives the CI as something *natural* with its own *essence* or *being*. It conceives the CI as something that in a clear and unambiguous way fill many of the lacks and deficiencies the ‘society’ is experiencing – economic input, new jobs, new talents, new cultural ideas, a diverse cultural environment. This is a clear, almost like a model example that supports our claim that the CI should be taken as an empty signifier.

Up until this point, we have considered terminological aspects of the Estonian CI. I would now like to also consider some temporal aspects of the CI as it has appeared in Estonia.

Creative industries – something that has always existed?

In 2006, shortly after the first CI mapping survey was conducted and published in Estonia, a special issue *Creative Industries – What, for whom, and why?* was published in the Estonian daily *Eesti Päevaleht*. The editor of this issue problematizes the CI in the foreword as follows:

Why go on about something of which we are not even certain whether it exists or what it is? Even more – publish a special issue on the topic? Maybe creative industries is just another new word for something that has always existed – it might come as no surprise that creating culture also has an economic aspect to it (Randviir, 2006).

The reason why this quote is important is that it clearly shows how the relationship between meaning and action is obscured, and how CI is regarded as something that can have a non-discursive, cross-historical, universally valid identity. It is implied in this example that CI can be analysed from an extra-discursive position – i.e. as something that ‘has always existed’ independently of particular acts of meaning making. To consider a similar but more recent example, we can look at how the current minister of culture of Estonia Urve Tiidus conceptualises the CI in the special issue *The Paradoxes of the Creative Industries*, published in an Estonian weekly *Sirp*. She claims that

the concept of creative industries actually emerged in the beginning of the 1990s. Indeed, it entered our official language use with a delay of 20 years, but in real life it has been going on for a long time now: people have been doing creative work and also selling its products successfully (Karulin, 2014).

Or to take another example from a former vice chancellor of the Ministry of Culture, who even claims that the CI should be understood as something ‘that has united culture with other domains of life for hundreds of years’ already (Siil, 2009: 6). There are plenty more analogous examples that follow the same logic – i.e. they conceptualise the creative industries as an object that is claimed to have existed long before the particular signifier CI appeared. Even the first CI mapping document conducted in Estonia states that ‘various terms have been used to describe the object of present study – cultural industry, copyright industry, creative economy, creative industries’ and draws the conclusion that ‘the diversity of terms stems from the diversity of the domain – it is related to culture, economy, copyright, creative workers’ (Eesti Konjunktuuriinstituut,

2005: 3). The mapping document also asserts that studies that have mapped and analysed creative industries in the rest of the world have been conducted even since the 1970s. But at the same time, the *official* definition being currently used in Estonia is actually almost a verbatim translation from the definition introduced in Great Britain in the 1990s:

...an economic sector that is based on individual and collective creativity, skills and talent, and is capable of creating welfare and jobs through the generation and use of intellectual property (Kultuuriministeerium, 2014).

...those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property (Department of Media, Culture and Sport, 2001).

Regarding this operation through discourse theory, however, one could say that it is the other way round – the so-called ‘diversity of the domain’ (that the mapping document claims) arises from the fact that the *hegemonic signifier* CI becomes threatened by what such an act of signification excludes. Or to put it more precisely and to refer to the logic of the ‘empty signifier’, the elements (signifiers) it uses (e.g. copyright, creativity) it can only borrow from other discourses where all these signifiers have differential identities.

This kind of inconsistent and sometimes contradictory use of terms can be found in most of the creative industries mapping documents, in the official speeches and presentations of the ministers, policymakers, cultural managers, entrepreneurs as well as artists and activists. But instead of judging it somehow negatively or scorning it, I want to argue that these are aspects that are not exclusively related to the CI. Conceiving the CI as an ideological, imprecise and propagandistic invention of neoliberal cultural policy (and politicians) is a common approach that has been taken by many prominent CI researchers (cf. Garnham, 2005; McGuigan, 2010). This clearly is not the path we want to take here. Instead, we borrow here from Laclau’s study of populism and argue that the CI should not be criticised on the basis of their ‘vagueness, [their] ideological emptiness, [their] anti-intellectualism, [their] transitory character’ (Laclau, 2005: 13), etc. Instead, it should be shown how that inconsistency, blurring and making things vague is actually the very condition of political action (Laclau, 2005: 18). This is now a good moment to move towards considering the CI in connection to the idea of the ‘transitional society’.

The creative industries: a path to the developed world?

‘Transition’ is a concept, which was (and somewhat still is) used both in sociological research and as a key term to make sense of the Eastern Bloc in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This axiological and teleological term is representative of a movement from a condition that is considered negative to one which is thought of as positive. Where Eastern Europe was concerned, this was the planned economy being replaced by free market economy, etc. (Lauristin 1997; Kennedy 2002; Petrov 2014). The idea of a transitional society is made possible by contrasting the East and the West, where the identity of the first has, in a normative sense, already been designated (as something the East *should* do in order to *stop* being a transitional society).

As we, drawing on Laclau, discussed above, empty signifiers emerge most often when there is some kind of a disorganisation of the ‘social fabric’. Following this suggestion, I argue that reflecting on the idea of Estonia being a ‘transitional society’ can trigger many important points/questions in the analysis of the creative industries. One of the crucial moments in this idea of transition is that it ‘not only functions as, to use a term from discourse theory, the “nodal point” in an explanatory framework which structures and standardizes empirical data’ but that ‘it also has turned into a historiographical signifier, which encompasses a defined period after the fall of communism’ (Petrov, 2014). What is crucial here, is that all these universal values, principles and ideas (e.g. democracy, market freedom, but also the economy and culture) only become meaningful within particular articulations. This is particularly the place where the concept of the ‘empty signifier’ becomes useful and helps us to conceptualise the CI as an ‘empty signifier’ that commonly works as something that fills many of the lacks of the post-socialist society. To consider an example, we could look back at the year 2009, when the now former Estonian minister of culture Laine Jänes wrote in the first issue of the *Creative Estonia Newspaper* that

Everywhere in Europe it is now understood that the old economic model is becoming history. Everybody has turned their eyes on the potential of cultural creativity to enrich the economy [...] It is short-sighted to speak about the model of economic production relying on cheap subcontracted workforce as a competitive advantage at a time when the most successful countries of the world produce ideas, solutions, emotions and experiences instead of things. It is not important anymore where the production line or the service centre is, but the place where design and conceptions are born (Jänes, 2009).

It seems as if the former cultural minister of Estonia had attended the Creative Industries conference in Vilnius in 2003, where Chris Smith, the British Secretary of Culture, Media and Sport claimed that:

...we are living through a new economic revolution in the advanced economies of Europe. We have moved [...] over the centuries, from an agricultural economy to an industrial manufacturing economy to a service economy. And now I believe that we are beginning to move from a pure service economy to an economy that is based very substantially on creativity. And that is not just true of the economies such as the United Kingdom, which have for many years had the advantage of the free market entrepreneur system. I think it is also true of economies in developing countries (Smith, quoted in Tomić-Koludrović and Petrić, 2005: 7).

The way the story of societal and economic change is told – with an inevitable movement towards the *creative* economy – is certainly neither unique to Estonia nor tied strictly to the idea of the creative industries (however we define it). But what is important to note in these two examples is the opposition that is created between the ‘developed’ economies and ‘advanced’ economies and how this figures as the central one that is used as a justification to support, embrace and develop the CI as something completely natural and positive for ‘everybody’, for ‘us’, for ‘Europe’, for the ‘developed world’. The old economy and old forms of working (for cultural workers) are shown as something stagnant and invaluable or something rudimentary that will be overcome by the effective appropriation and embrace of the CI. From a Laclauian viewpoint it is clear, however, that whatever is to be ‘accepted as the ‘natural’ order, jointly with the common sense that accompanies it, is the result of sedimented hegemonic practices’ (Mouffe, 2013: 2). Or to put it another way: this ‘naturalness’ (of the creative industries) needs to be achieved discursively – through the process of hegemonic signification.

Concluding discussion

The article has tried to show how the post-structuralist (or post-Marxist) understanding of discourse offers an alternative to the approach that considers creative industries to be something given even before the research has properly begun, an object outside and independent of the realm of discourse, graciously allowing itself to be examined from all angles. The CI clearly presents a challenging and peculiar object – it is a signifier that can be employed as effectively by bureaucrats and artist-activists alike. While for the former the CI as a signifier might be the one that stands for the capitalist exploitation of intellectual, artistic and cultural labour in the post-Fordist

era, for the latter might be *the* opportunity to promote the CI as *the* place for new livelihoods for artistic and cultural workers to strive for. But according to the perspective we have analysed the CI from, it is not reducible to neither of them.

It should be clear from the research presented above that the CI is not the inevitable or only one for the articulation of these various elements (e.g. art production, creativity, economy, culture, creative worker) it incorporates. Instead, it is a historically specific way of conceiving the unity of these elements. Moreover, it also plays out differently in different temporal, geographical and political spaces. What this article has attempted to demonstrate is that the active signification process taking place around the signifier CI in the form of commentaries, mapping surveys, scholarly research and daily media production, should not be conceived as ‘merely’ descriptive acts but as something that create the terrain where the *objectivity* of the CI is constituted in the first place. Or to put it differently: the question is about the institution of the CI in a particular empirical context (Estonia), where it emerges as an object to be *problematized*.

The CI have pervasively been linked with the issues concerning the peculiarities of contemporary ‘culture’, ‘economy’, ‘society’ and ‘policy’. All these signifiers, however, do not have a universal or a definite meaning. On the contrary – all these signifiers work differently in particular discursive contexts. As we saw in the case of Estonia, there are affinities between the temporal aspects and the formal translations of the CI-related terms. This is the reason why the critical CI analysis should in many important respects take into account the peculiarities of post-socialist transition, critically examining the concept of ‘transition’. We saw above how the assumption of Estonia being a *transitional* society could be seen as something that plays together with the particular ways in which the term ‘creative industries’ has emerged as an *empty signifier* – as something that can work as a shorthand fix to many of the ‘problems’ that haunt post-socialist countries (which Estonia also clearly is) – be they inadequate economic growth, the lack of foreign investments, insufficient technological development or just bad reputation. If we, as social researchers see the CI as a ‘normal’ outcome in the process of transition, we are implicitly following the axiological, normative and teleological model that the concept is largely based on.

The reason this paper has been more oriented to methodological-theoretical concerns and less to a detailed analysis of empirical material should also be partly related to the Eastern European problematic. In Eastern European countries (especially those that belong

to the EU), the CI have been an idea imported to national cultural policies from the West – e.g. influenced very much by the European Union *Culture 2007-2013* and the *Creative Europe* programmes. In this state of affairs, I would like to propose that Eastern European CI researchers should be less concerned with offering ‘more empirical data about the CI’ or revealing ‘the actual scope and volume of the CI’ in particular national contexts (or economies). As Nataša Kovačević has noted – since Eastern Europe is geographically, politically and culturally so close to the Western Europe as well as the US, the ‘acceptance of Western models has, overall been far smoother, more voluntary, and more urgently executed than in other colonial localities’ (Kovačević, 2008: 4). She goes on to argue that for ‘this voluntary – and largely unrecognized – self-colonizing tendency vis-à-vis the West’ Eastern Europe should be distinguished from ‘other targets of Western colonialism’ (*ibid.*: 5). I would argue that this claim could have methodological consequences also for the further study of the CI and presumably also many other (cultural) policy ideas.

However, the question how the various theories of post-colonialism or post-socialism could (or whether they even should) be brought together to form a unified methodological framework remains to be answered in future research. What this article nevertheless proposes is that instead of taking the already existing theoretical and methodological frameworks, the researchers of the CI should employ their own theoretical terms and methodological approaches and choose them according to the particular and acute discursive and social struggles where the CI emerges. It is possible to do so if the discursive practice around the CI is not regarded as ‘merely different interpretations’ about ‘the same object’. Instead, it should be recognised that creating links and connections between particular signifiers and signifieds is a process that is imbued with power and hegemony.

Acknowledgements: This research was partly done under the European Union Framework Programme Erasmus Mundus BACKIS (2012-2741/001-001-EMA2) and partly supported by the European Social Fund’s Doctoral Studies and Internationalisation Programme DoRa, which is carried out by Foundation Archimedes.

References

Banks, M. and J. O’Connor (2009) ‘Introduction: After the creative industries’. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 15(4): 365-373.

- Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2001) ‘Creative Industries Mapping Document’, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/creative-industries-mapping-documents-2001> (30.11.2014)
- Eesti Konjunkturiinstituut (Estonian Institute of Economic Research) (2005) ‘Eesti loomemajanduse kaardistamine ja analüüs’ (‘The Mapping and Analysis of Estonian Creative Industries’), <http://www.andmemasin.eu/reports/failid/505-eesti-loomemajanduse-kaardistus-ja-analuu-sissejuhatus.pdf> (30.11.2014)
- Eesti Konjunkturiinstituut (2009) ‘Eesti loomemajanduse olukorra uuring ja kaardistus’ (‘The Mapping of Estonian Creative Industries’), <http://ki.ee> (30.11.2014)
- Eesti Konjunkturiinstituut (2013) ‘Eesti loomemajanduse olukorra uuring ja kaardistus’ (‘The Mapping of Estonian Creative Industries’), <http://ki.ee> (30.11.2014)
- Eesti Konjunkturiinstituut (2014). ‘Basic info’, <http://ki.ee/en/index.html> (30.11.2014)
- Fairclough, N. (1992) *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge; Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1995) *Critical Discourse Analysis: the critical study of language*. London: Longman.
- Flew, T., and S. Cunningham (2010) ‘Creative Industries after the First Decade of Debate’. *The Information Society*, 26: 113-123.
- Garnham, N. 2005. ‘From cultural to creative industries: An analysis of the implications of the “creative industries” approach to arts and media policy making in the United Kingdom’. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 11(1): 15-29.
- Glynnos, J. and D. Howarth (2007). *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Härm, A. (2010) ‘Kui kultuurist saab ripats’ (‘When culture becomes a pendant’). *Eesti Päevaleht*, December 13, <http://epl.delfi.ee/news/arvamus/kui-kultuurist-saab-ripats?id=51288349> (30.11.2014)
- Hartley, J. (2005) ‘Introduction’. In: Hartley, J. (ed.) *Creative industries*, pp. 1-39. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. (2013) *The Cultural Industries* (3rd edition). London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. and A. Pratt (2005) ‘Cultural Industries and Cultural Policy’. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 11(1): 1-13.
- Howarth, D. (2009) ‘Power, discourse, and policy: articulating a hegemony approach to critical policy studies’. *Critical Policy Studies*, 3(3-4): 309-335.
- Jänes, L. (2009) ‘Kultuur loova majanduse südamet’ (‘Culture in the Heart of the Creative Economy’). *Loov Eesti leht*, 1: 2.
- Karulin, O. (2014) ‘Urve Tiidus: “Kriisid on elu pärisosa” (‘Crises as an Essential Part of Life’). *Sirp*, April 3, <http://www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/c9-sotsiaalia/2014-04-03-17-13-37/> (30.11.2014)
- Keane, M. 2013. *Creative Industries in China*. Cambridge; Malden, MA.: Polity.
- Kennedy, M.D. (2002) *Cultural Formations of Post-Communism: Emancipation, Transition, Nation, and War*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kovačević, N. (2008). *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial discourse and Europe’s borderline civilization*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Kulbok-Lattik, E. (2008) ‘Eesti kultuuripoliitika ajaloolisest perioodist seerimisest’. *Acta Historica Tallinnensia*, 12: 120-144.
- Laclau, E. (1996) *Emancipation(s)*. London; New York: Verso

- Laclau, E. (2005) *On Populist Reason*. London; New York: Verso.
- Laclau, E. (2014) *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*. London; New York: Verso.
- Laclau, E. and C. Mouffe (1987). 'Post-Marxism Without Apologies'. *New Left Review* 1/166: 79-106.
- Laclau, E. and C. Mouffe (2014 [2001]) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (2nd edition). London; New York: Verso.
- Lauristin, M. (1997) 'Contexts of Transition'. In Lauristin, M. et al. (eds.) *Return to the Western World: Cultural and Political Perspectives on the Estonian Post-Communist Transition*, pp. 25-40. Tartu: Tartu University Press
- Loov Eesti (2014). 'Creative Estonia', <http://www.looveesti.ee/creative-estonia.html> (30.11.2014)
- McGuigan, J. (2010) 'Creative labour, cultural work and individualisation'. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 16(3): 323-335.
- Ministry of Culture (Republic of Estonia) (2014). 'Creative Industries'. <http://www.kul.ee/en/activities/creative-industries> (30.11.2014)
- Mouffe, C. (2005) *On the Political*. London; New York: Verso
- Mouffe, C. (2013) *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. London; New York: Verso.
- O'Connor, J. (2005) 'Creative Exports. Taking Cultural Industries to St Petersburg'. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 11(1): 45-60.
- O'Connor, J. (2010) *The Cultural and Creative Industries: a literature review* (2nd edition). London: Creativity, Culture and Education.
- O'Connor, J. (2011) 'The Cultural and Creative Industries: A Critical History'. *Ekonomiaz*, 78(1): 24-45.
- Oreškin, R. (2014). 'Loomemajandus peab saama uue majanduse pärisosaks' ('The creative industries must become a true part of the economy'). *Sirp*, 03.10.2014, <http://www.sirp.ee/s1-artiklid/c9-sotsiaalia/loomemajandus-peab-saama-ue-majanduse-parisosaks/> (30.11.2014).
- Osborne, T. (2003) 'Against 'creativity': a philistine rant'. *Economy and Society*, 32(4): 507-525.
- Petrov, K. (2014) 'The concept of transition in transition: Comparing the postcommunist use of the concept of transition with that found in soviet ideology'. *Baltic Worlds* 1: 2014, <http://balticworlds.com/in-transition/> (30.11.2014)
- Phelan, S. and L. Dahlberg (2011). 'Discourse Theory and Critical Media Politics: An Introduction' In: Dahlberg, L. and S. Phelan (eds.) *Discourse Theory and Critical Media Politics*, pp. 1-40. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Power, D. 2009. 'Culture, creativity and experience in Nordic and Scandinavian cultural policy'. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 15(4): 445-460.
- Pratt, A. (2009) 'Policy Transfer and the Field of the Cultural and Creative Industries: What Can Be Learned from Europe?' In: Kong, L. and J. O'Connor (eds.) *Creative Economies, Creative Cities: Asian-European Perspectives*, pp. 9-23. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Primorac, J. (2006) 'Creative Industries and Cultural Policies – Key Issues in Southeastern European (SEE) Context'. Paper presented at the 4th International Conference on Cultural Policy Research. <https://bib.irb.hr/datoteka/255306.Primorac-iccpr2006.pdf> (12.09.2014)
- Randviir, A. (2006) 'Loomemajandus – Mis, kellele ja milleks?' ('Creative industries – What, for whom and why?'). *Eesti Päevaleht*, September 30, <http://epl.delfi.ee/news/kultuur/loomemajandus-mis-kelleleja-milleks?id=51058401> (30.11.2014)
- Ross, A. (2009) *Nice Work if You Can Get It. Life and Labor in Precarious Times*. New York; London: New York University Press.
- Sarv, J. (2013) 'Mõistetest ja mõistmisest: barjäärid loomemajanduse kommunikatsioonis' ('On terms and understanding: barriers in the communication of the creative industries'). *Kaja: Kommunikatsiooni ja suhtekorralduse ajakiri*, 11: 9-10.
- Siil, R. (2006) 'Elus on igal asjal ka majanduslik külg' ('In life, everything also has an economic side'). *Eesti Päevaleht*, September 30, <http://epl.delfi.ee/news/kultuur/ragnar-siil-elus-on-igal-asjal-ka-majanduslik-kulg?id=51058402> (30.11.2014)
- Siil, R. (2009) 'Loomemajandus on kultuuri ja majanduse loomumane kooslus' ('The creative industries as an intrinsic union of culture and economy'). *Eesti rahvakunsti ja käsitöö liit: Teataja*, 23: 6.
- Švob-Dokić, N. (2005) (ed.) *The Emerging Creative Industries in Southeastern Europe*. Zagreb: Institute for International Relations.
- Tomić-Koldrović, I. and M. Petrić (2005). 'Creative Industries in Transition: Towards a Creative Economy'. In: Švob-Dokić (ed.) *The Emerging Creative Industries in Southeastern Europe*, pp. 7-23. Zagreb: Institute for International Relations.

Bionotes

Rene Mäe received a MA in Sociology from Tallinn University, Estonia in 2012. His research areas include cultural policy studies, discourse theory and cultural work. Currently he is a PhD student in Sociology in Tallinn University, Estonia and a visiting doctoral student in Tbilisi State University, Georgia. His doctoral research deals with representations of cultural, creative and artistic work in 2000-2010s Estonia, particularly in connection to the concept of the Creative Industries.