

Buying the creative life: The rhetorical function of Australian quilters' magazines as advocates for choice

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Abstract

“Creative” and “creativity” may be words used indiscriminately, but they are also used deliberately for rhetorical, or persuasive, ends. This paper applies rhetorical criticism as a methodology to reflect critically on, and augment understanding of, contemporary meanings and uses of “creativity”. It draws attention to the rhetorical status of creativity as well as the contextual inflection of the word for specific audiences for whom creativity is presented as a defining attribute both individually and communally. The paper does so by examining a segment of the Australian print media representative of the industry that has grown around quilting as a form of creative expression. Objects of study are three commercially-produced, newsstand magazines: Down Under Quilts, Australian Patchwork & Quilting and Australian Quilters Companion. Each title espouses creativity as an ideal state or way of life; moving beyond that generalised view of the magazines as rhetorical texts, the paper identifies and explores a fundamental tension in the nature and meaning of creativity shaped by the magazines for their readers.

That tension arises from the simultaneous promotion of an egalitarian view of creativity as a means of personal fulfilment, and the promotion of certain modes of consumption that commodify creativity and can be exclusive. Taking two products that are commonly represented in advertising content—fabric and sewing machines—the paper discusses the acknowledgment and negotiation of this tension by the magazines through editorial content. In conclusion, the paper finds a degree of subversion by the magazines of their commercial bases, and the implicit encouragement of readers as creative practitioners to do the same.

A recent advertising campaign demonstrates the perceived value and selling power of creativity. On its Australian website, Omo washing powder encourages children to engage in messy play because it enables them to “express their creativity” (Unilever Australasia, 2009). By implication, parents who buy Omo can both allow creativity to flourish and see their children cleanly clothed. The invocation of creativity as an innate and higher-order attribute begs many questions about contemporary rhetorical, or persuasive, uses of the word, and the meanings and understandings shaped by those uses.

This paper makes a contribution to answering these questions by examining the ways in which creativity and the creative life are presented by a segment of the Australian print media: magazines for quilters. It arises from a larger study (Williamson, 2009) about the ways in which these magazines shape creativity and the creative life for their readers, and encourage their readers to identify as essentially creative beings. Objects of study were three commercially-produced, newsstand magazines that overtly

promote, reflect upon and shape creative practice: *Down Under Quilts* (DUQ), *Australian Patchwork & Quilting* (AP&Q) and *Australian Quilters Companion* (AQC). These are special-interest magazines, which “encourage readers to conceive of themselves as members of a distinct group linked to certain modes of consumption” (McCracken, 1993, p. 257). Each selects and inflects its content somewhat differently from competitor titles, which attests to the increasing fragmentation of the magazine market, but creativity is the defining and shared characteristic of the communities of readers bound by the magazines. Advertising and editorial content of all issues of *Down Under Quilts*, *Australian Patchwork & Quilting* and *Australian Quilters Companion* up to 2005 (a total of 228 issues) was used as primary source material.

The study approached quilters’ magazines as rhetorical artefacts, and occurred within the framework of rhetorical criticism. Many extended, discursive definitions of rhetoric inform understandings of contemporary rhetorical criticism as a broad area of enquiry, but uniting these definitions are notions of *choice* and *change* for an audience: rhetoric may engender action, thought or certain views of the self, others and the world. It is “the art of using language to help people narrow their choices among specifiable, if not specified, policy options” (Hart & Daughton, 2005, p. 2). The study drew on three methods of rhetorical criticism—traditional, genre and narrative (as outlined by Foss, 2004)—to determine how the magazines respond rhetorically (persuasively) to their readers as creative practitioners. It identified the dominant appeals made to readers, the types of content offered to readers, and the distinctive textual features of content, including the use of narrative to model behavioural and creative norms. The study revealed a fundamental tension in the nature and meaning of creativity shaped by the magazines, which is manifest in representations of fabric and sewing machines across advertising and editorial content. That tension, and its negotiation, is explored in this paper.

Sewing, quilts and the commodification of creativity

In their alignment of sewing with creativity, magazines for quilters are part of a robust commercial trend. ABC News reported that, in August 2009, “UK retail giant Tesco . . . sold two sewing machines every minute in one week—an increase of 198 per cent over the same period last year”. It added that “Aussies [too] are picking up the needle and thread by the droves”, and that fabric and sewing machine sales were increasing (Collerton, 2009). Cited was Australian Sewing Guild president Sue Neall’s view that people were increasingly sewing their own clothes for three reasons: “price, creativity and fit” (Collerton, 2009).

That sewing is motivated by creativity as well as practical considerations is nothing new. Schofield-Tomschin (1999) demonstrates that since the advent of the sewing machine in 1853, women have sewn at home for reasons variously practical and personal. Prominent among the former are thrift, but confirmed during the 1990s as a stronger motivation was creative fulfilment, allied with relaxation. While predicated largely on the sewing of clothing in the United States, these findings relate more widely to home sewing undertaken by choice rather than necessity during times when affordable, mass-produced items are available. They also relate to lifestyles in which women carve out spaces for creative fulfilment that becomes therapeutic.

Sewing as creative fulfilment is a tenet of the industry that has developed around quilting and has taken the quilt far beyond its originally utilitarian function as a

blanket. From the 1970s, the quilt was removed from its traditional domestic context and reconceptualised as an artform (Peterson, 2003); quilting flourished as a medium for design and expression, initially in the United States and then in Australia. Quilting strengthened as a popular pastime, especially for women, and now takes many guises, although it is the design of the upper, decorative layer of the quilt that is generally the means by which the quilter demonstrates her talent as a designer through choices of colour, shape and pattern, and her technical skill.¹ While practised largely as a leisure pursuit, quilting offers opportunities for professional-level engagement through teaching, writing, publishing, event management and so on.

Reflecting, and contributing to, this phenomenon in Australia has been the emergence of newsstand magazines primarily for local quilters. The first, *Down Under Quilts*, began in 1988 and was followed by others, including *Australian Patchwork & Quilting* (1994) and *Quilters Companion* (2001, retitled *Australian Quilters Companion* in 2003). Each of these magazines provides, in different combinations and to varying degrees, instructions for making quilts. Additionally, each includes discursive reflection on quilting life in narratives of quilt production (“quilt stories”, as defined by Foss & Foss, 1991, p. 274) or of professional development (profiles).

For readers of these magazines, creativity has a literal meaning (making something with originality) but is also advocated as an ideal state, or way of life. Both advertising and editorial content consistently prove the many and varied satisfactions of accepting and nourishing the creative self, in large part through feature articles that cite the personal and social rewards of making quilts. The magazines also continually reinforce that creativity is available to all; the creative self is innate, even if it lies dormant. Profiles, which commonly narrate how their subjects came to live lives defined by creative practice (often unexpectedly), demonstrate this repeatedly across the magazines.

Inescapable from even a cursory glance through the magazines, however, is that giving oneself over to creativity is a commercially grounded process, at least as far as advertising content goes. A great variety of quilting aids is advertised, including computer software, machines, tools and other products. Advertisements reflect that technology, however manifest, can extensively encroach upon quilting practice, should the quilter allow it to do so (Behuniak-Long, 1994). *Down Under Quilts*, *Australian Patchwork & Quilting* and *Australian Quilters Companion* offer ample evidence of their commercial affiliations and foundations, whether tacitly through the publication of advertisements or more explicitly by, for example, the favourable review of machinery advertised in a certain issue. The overt, collective message of the magazines is that quilting is a form of creative practice predicated on certain modes of consumption.

Two types of full-page advertisement appearing regularly across the magazines illustrate that two products are prominent in these modes of consumption. The first type is for fabric, the quilter’s “raw material”. Fabric advertisements exploit arresting visual composition to display named ranges of coordinated fabrics that are custom-made for quilting and offer a reliable basis upon which design decisions relating to colour and pattern can be taken. The second type is for sewing machines. Here, technology is presented as a catalyst for creativity or even a repository for it. To

¹ This paper uses feminine personal pronouns when referring to quilters because the great majority of quilters represented on the pages of *DUQ*, *AP&Q* and *Australian Quilters Companion* are women; however, the paper acknowledges, as do the magazines themselves occasionally, that not all quilters are female.

illustrate by examples, on the back cover of *Down Under Quilts'* June 1988 issue, an advertisement states that "Pfaff presents creative computer power that frees your imagination"; in *Australian Patchwork & Quilting's* November 2005 issue, another states that "the Pfaff creative 2134 opens the world of creative possibilities" (p. 35). Buying fabric and machinery presumably guarantees that the quilter will attain aesthetic and technical standards that are acceptable within the communities formed by her magazines; it may supplement her creativity or even replace it to some degree.

These representations of the creative ideal are far removed from the egalitarian notion of creativity as innate and available to all. Custom-made quilt fabric can cost A\$25 per metre; a quilt can represent several hundreds of dollars in fabric alone. Sewing machines with sophisticated technical and design options can cost up to \$8,000. Advertisements, predictably, say nothing about the potential exclusivity of quilting when it is translated into dollar terms.

Editorial content avoids direct criticism of what can be seen as the commodification of creativity, but it does suggest unease from time to time. Discourses of guilt, addiction and obsession, found more widely in popular culture, are used lightly by magazine writers to express the quilter's relation to her craft and establish common ground with her; these discourses may also reflect that realising creative ambitions, especially when these involve the purchase of fabric, is dependent upon such mundane matters as the size of family budgets, which is potentially contentious for the quilter in the broader context of her life (Williamson, 2008). Such discourses, and anxiety about the cost of quilting, are well established among quilters, as demonstrated by ethnographic studies undertaken by Grahame (1998) and Stalp (2007), and in this sense the magazines reflect authentically the communities to which they address themselves. What is notable about *Down Under Quilts*, *Australian Patchwork & Quilting* and *Australian Quilters Companion*, as rhetorical texts, is that advertising and editorial content co-exist in such ways that certain modes of consumption are overtly promoted but simultaneously subverted. That this is so becomes clear from a close reading of editorial content that comments on the roles of fabric and sewing machines in the creative process.

As a commercial commodity, fabric is of multitudinous variety. The convergence of the creative and commercial, and the acquisitive reality of making quilts, is expressed by prominent Australian quilter Margaret Rolfe (1994, p. 27) in *Down Under Quilts*:

First I think of a design, and gather all likely bits of fabric that I have already. Then I discover there is not enough of a particular fabric that is really perfect, so I must either buy more or a substitute. Or else I find that there is a gap in the pieces I have collected, so again I must buy more. Off to the shops and the mail order . . . I buy extra pieces that might possibly go into the quilt . . . As well, I collect fabrics for quilts I have just vague ideas on, or because I like the fabric, or because I don't have that particular colour or print. Sometimes a lovely fabric sets off a whole new quilt idea, and having bought it, six (or more) other fabrics need to be bought. And then there is the irresistible bargain . . .

Creativity is, therefore, stimulated by fabric but also commercially situated because of it.

Rolfe's encapsulation of these two dimensions to fabric—the creative and the commercial—is echoed in editorial content across the magazines. Fabric can direct design or at least suggest possibilities; as Leigh Latimore states, "Sometimes I just look at a fabric and I see a quilt" (cited in Stretton, 2001, p. 80). Quilter as designer,

however, can be akin, or secondary, to quilter as shopper: “Then the girls went shopping! Each girl selected her own three fabrics . . .” (Quilts of love, 2002, p. 54); “The cream fabric begged me to buy the reds and green and they in turn demanded the charcoal” (Archer, 2003, p. 26); “But before she could start she had to find the right fabric. The main fabric is from the Patchook range we sell at Sewrite Burwood, where I work . . . I fell in love with the design . . . While gazing longingly at this beautiful fabric, inspiration struck” (The creative process: Fantasy quilt, 2004, p. 46). In these representative examples, editorial content accords with advertising content by equating creativity with commercial consumption.

Contrarily, editorial content repeatedly makes clear that what is available commercially may be aesthetically restrictive. Commercially available products may not suit design objectives (“. . . it was really difficult to find colours that matched that in fabric, because the shops just have whatever happens to be in fashion for the season” (Barbara Watson cited in Bevan, 2000b, p. 70)), and quilt stories report quiltmakers resorting to overseas and other sources because what they want is unavailable locally. Quilt stories also tell of quilters who purchase fabrics well before they realise their use, build up “banks” of resources independent of trends in colour and pattern, and acquire unwanted or surplus fabric through friends and relatives, garage sales or thrift shops. Projects may combine materials from retail outlets and other sources. Reports of quilters who bypass or modify the commercial foundations of quilting encourage readers to look beyond the ranges of fabric advertised on their magazines’ pages.

The magazines additionally suggest the possibility of subverting the commercial basis of quilting through anecdotes of quilters manipulating fabric to achieve aesthetic ends. Quilters tell of dyeing fabric themselves or having it custom dyed; painting, tearing, fraying or bleaching it; stitching it to create texture; augmenting it with other substances or objects; printing on it; and staining it with dirt. Across quilt stories is first-hand evidence of quilters consciously and assertively controlling their medium: “We used our scrap bag and we didn’t stop there, we painted, we machined, we embroidered, in fact made the fabric to suit our needs . . . No running to the shop . . .” (Crane, 1992, p. 24); “I always start with a range of basic fabrics and use other resources to make them mine . . . By the time I’m finished with it, I can call the fabric my own because I have literally re-created it” (Caroline Sharkey cited in Taranto, 2005b, p. 60). *Australian Quilters Companion* regularly publishes articles on the history of fabric that comment on the advantages of hand-dyeing and printing, and the rewards of making something unique and “control[ling] every aspect of the creative process involved in making quilts” (Fisher, 2003, p. 12). Creativity in these cases extends to the transformation of raw materials with which the quilter works.

Whereas fabric of some kind is necessary in quilting, sewing machines are not. Some quilters believe that traditional, or “pure”, quilting is done by hand. Quilters’ magazines acknowledge and represent this minority of their readerships, although overwhelmingly promote machine sewing through advertisements and instructional content that draws on conventions of machine sewing and emphasises its advantages (especially speed). If conflict between traditionalists and machinists is acknowledged, it is in a conciliatory vein; Julia Curran refers to “traditionalists” hostile toward machine technology and calls for broad-mindedness (“Patchwork is alive and bristling with innovation . . . let no one tell you that hand piecing or hand quilting is the only correct and traditional way to ply your craft” (1990, p. 6)); thirteen years later, *Australian Quilt Companion* states that most quilts “can be successfully completed by either hand or

machine, or even a mixture” and lists advantages for each (The basics special, 2003, p. 94). While sewing machine advertisements present a technologically utopian view of creativity, in these cases editorial content acknowledges some opposition to it.

Such opposition is sometimes less diplomatically expressed in editorial content. As with fabric, prominent quilters present views that contradict advertising content that equates product with creativity. Margaret Rolfe, to cite her once more, confirms the meaningfulness to the quilter of her sewing machine but recalls the “disturbing” sight of a pre-programmed machine sewing independently of an operator:

... I am the creative source of what these gadgets do. I create the designs, I create the combinations of colours and shapes, I create the quilts. This is why I love patchwork and quilting: it is an endless journey of discovery, a path of creativity where an answer is not pre-ordained, but comes into being as you work through from idea to finished quilt . . .

Perhaps this is the reason why quilting has become such a beloved craft for so many women. So much of our life these days seems to be predetermined, with commitments that prescribe our lives . . . But in our quilting, we are the ones in control, and we are free to explore our own creativity . . .

Hooray for the good gadgets, but let them be our servants and not our masters. (1998, p. 38)

Columnist Jenny Bowker posits that technological advances have improved quilters’ efficiency, accuracy and speed but have depleted some skill levels and design options (2004, p. 80). In response, a reader summarises her misgivings—“pressure to make all that expensive technology perform”, loss of “make-do and mend” skills, stress caused by the noisiness and speed of machines, and excessive production of quilts—and asserts that “perhaps it is time to reassess our technology and ask some questions” (Bowden, 2004, p. 49). Such apprehension about technology represents a challenge to the notion, implied by advertisements, that sewing machines necessarily ground creative practice for quilters.

Down Under Quilts, Australian Patchwork & Quilting and *Australian Quilters Companion* report cases in which accomplished quilters demonstrate informed and selective use of technology, and even rejection of it. Aesthetic objectives determine, for example, whether to use hard-edged machine quilting, as does Adina Sullivan (Bevan, 2000a); hand sewing for “softer” effects, as does Jocelyne Leath (Taranto, 2005c); or both, as does Leslye O’Sullivan (Sullivan, 1996, p. 12). Quilt stories variously cite practical considerations, such as the portability of hand-work, the speed of machines or the degree of control offered by each. Some quilt stories do overtly link superior technology with creativity and are, therefore, closely aligned with advertising content as three examples show: “I think the standard of machine quality makes a huge difference when it comes to ease, ability and creativite [sic] possibilities” (Ellie Neal cited in Taranto, 2005a, p. 69); “June took five months to make Kimberley Excitement, using a Pfaff Creative 1371” (Hamilton, 1997, p. 33); and “Eileen used her new Husqvarna Viking Designer sewing machine complete the quilt. ‘It sews like a dream,’ says Eileen” (The centenary quilt, 2003, p. 49). Overall, however, quilters are depicted as informed and selective users of sewing machines.

Creativity and its rhetorical inflection

The selective analysis of advertising and editorial content of *Down Under Quilts, Australian Patchwork & Quilting* and *Australian Quilters Companion* presented in this paper draws attention to contemporary uses and meanings of creativity as a rhetorical

construct. In the 1960s, Raymond Williams commented upon the power of “creativity” when he said that “No word in English carries a more consistently positive reference than ‘creative’, and obviously we should be glad of this, when we think of the values it seeks to express and the activities it offers to describe” (1965, p. 19). However, he cautioned that “clearly, the very width of the reference involves not only difficulties of meaning, but also, through habit, a kind of unthinking repetition which at times makes the word seem useless” (Williams, 1965, p. 19). Habitual use of “creative”, as with any word, may of course indicate imperfect understanding and vagueness of meaning; however, for the rhetorical critic, whose interest is with the use of language to engender certain actions, thoughts or perceptions, habitual use may reflect deliberate persuasive intent.

From a rhetorical perspective, “creative” and “creativity” have assumed the status of what Richard Weaver (1953) calls “god” or “ultimate” terms. An ultimate term, as summarised by Hart and Daughton (2005, pp. 155-56), conveys an abstract idea, denoted by a word easily understood and with clear connotations, it is placed high in the hierarchy of social values and, through its use, it defines rhetorical boundaries. These characteristics are present in prominent uses of “creative” in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries; examples are the Australian government’s cultural policy statement, *Creative nation* (1994), the naming of the “creative class” (Florida, 2002) and the wide acceptance of the phrase “creative industries”. Also seen here, however, can be the perpetuation of the ubiquity about which Williams complained decades earlier, and which is exacerbated by the fact that creativity can now become a selling point for washing powder. Important, therefore, is close consideration of what meanings are attached to ultimate terms, and why.

In discussing Weaver’s notion of ultimate terms, Hart and Daughton point out that the meaning of these terms depends on context and time (2005, pp. 155-56). As noted previously, the association of machine sewing with creativity and self-fulfilment for women has long been recognised and is now exploited by the industry that has grown around quilting and is represented by *Down Under Quilts*, *Australian Patchwork & Quilting* and *Australian Quilters Companion*. On the one hand, the magazines strive to engender a communal view of creativity linked with personal and social reward; on the other hand, though, the magazines tie creativity to certain modes of consumption, especially around the purchase of fabric and sewing machines, which is a potential source of anxiety or alienation for some readers. Here, then, is a tension between two rhetorical objectives—one social, one commercial—the negotiation of which becomes a distinctive feature of the magazines’ establishment of common ground with their readers. While commercial objectives are superficially dominant, largely because of the visual prominence of advertisements, magazine writers intermittently challenge, modify or reject the commercial bases of the quilter’s craft; over time, writers collectively shape an alternative creative life for the quilter, and implicitly advocate choice. Being creative can, in fact, extend to the subversion of the commercial bases upon which the magazines are predicated. Far from suffering from ubiquity, creativity emerges as a concept that is serviceable and malleable when used to persuasive ends, and that has finer-grained meanings than might have been assumed.

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