4 All consuming culture

The content and meaning of culture is human life, its sustenance and reproduction and how humans relate to each other in complex social ways. Culture primarily embraces all the shared and inherited knowledge of human beings, as well as the practical forms of social interaction. But today, culture is cornered, more and more under the dominance of giant media corporations. We have seen a merging of communications and the media with culture itself. The same conglomerates own and control the media, plus the marketing and sale of cultural products. It is increasingly hard to distinguish between the medium and the message. These media empires are indifferent to the content of their products. What counts is how many customers they attract.

The scale of the penetration by profit-seeking companies into the most intimate and deepest human needs and aspirations is a phenomenon of globalisation. London School of Economics globalisation theorist David Held has noted:

> In the past, imperial states, networks of intellectuals and theocracies were the key agents of cultural diffusion. In the contemporary world, their role has been displaced by large media industries as well as by greater flows of individuals and groups. Multinational corporations are at the heart of these interconnected processes… Their cultural reach and power is historically unprecedented.

The corporate giants' drive to capture people's buying power, continually destroys the notion that any area of life is immune to, or safe from the reach of the global market. In their frenzy, they even ride roughshod over long established dogmas of moral and political control. Record companies, for example, promote ghetto culture such as gangsta rap.

David Bollier, an independent policy strategist, shocked by the loss of what he sees as America's most ancient heritage, describes today's transformation of socially-owned physical and intellectual property as "the enclosure of the commons". He likens it to the enclosure of the common lands in Britain during the rise of capitalism.

Bollier lists various types of "common wealth" which are being captured or given away to "market interests". Some of these areas, such as property, and natural ecosystems, are dealt with elsewhere in this book. But those created by human beings, individually and socially are the stuff of culture itself. They include, as he writes, "shared, inherited knowledge such as scientific research, historical knowledge and folk wisdom, all of which contribute to the public domain and cultural traditions and norms… These resources have no officially recognised value, let alone the legal definition and protection enjoyed by private property".

The fact is that the conversion of "human" values into "exchange values" has been going on ever since capitalism became the dominant economic and social system. What is new is the destruction of even those secular domains that were considered as special and private sides of life and society. They include notions of a natural childhood, collective and personal experiences, unspoilt nature, art, education and knowledge. These have had a relatively independent non-commercial life, as part of humanity's collective culture which was until now mostly free from commerce and industry. Today they are being swamped and overwhelmed by corporate ownership and control. In *The Big Picture: Understanding Media through Political Economy*, Robert McChesney and John Bellamy Foster comment:

> All human needs, relationships and fears, the deepest recesses of the

> human psyche, become mere means for the expansion of the commodity universe under the force of modern marketing… the translation of human relations into commodity relations… has expanded exponentially.

The rise of the media conglomerates is bound up with and driven by the communications revolution of the last few decades, which has transformed culture globally. New technologies, like the Internet, mobile phones and downloadable music tap into basic needs and instincts in personal ways unthinkable only a few years ago. They enhance and extend the most basic qualities of human beings – our requirement to communicate socially.

The huge expansion of the sector has given a mass nature to a host of cultural products, many of which would have been available only to the few in the past. The number of people with access to the Internet grew by 365 million in 2003-04 An additional six percent of the world's population pushed the total who are connected to around 800 million.

Getting connected

Clickz.com, a web-tracking company, estimates that users will reach 1.1 billion by the year 2005. Britain, with over 35 million, had the fourth highest number of Internet users in the world in April 2004. Parallel to the Internet is the vast growth of mobile telephones. Worldwide unit sales reached over half a billion in 2003 and there were more than one billion subscribers by early 2004. Forecasters expect another 560 million units to be sold by the end of 2005. Chinese users sent some 15.6 billion short messages through their mobile phones during January 2004 alone, a rise of 91% over the same period last year.

The impact of being connected is changing social life irrevocably – affecting work, leisure, research, shopping, creativity and crime. Not only do people view websites and send emails, but three quarters of Internet users send digital pictures and videos, a quarter watch TV or video streams, while online banking grew 26% in 2003. This is just a glimpse of the speed of change affecting the relations between people which form the basis of all culture. The scale of the technical-information revolution was summarised by a UN Human Development Report: "In 2001, more information could be sent over a single cable in a second than was sent over the entire Internet for a month in 1997." But the same report also noted the drive behind the new technology: "Technology is created in response to market pressures, not the needs of poor people, who have little purchasing power."

The big few

Who controls, owns and determines the content which flows through the diverse high-speed channels? In the global music industry, for example, there are presently five major record label conglomerates, who control over 80% of all the titles produced in the United States and comparable percentages in the rest of the world. Warner Music, EMI Group, Universal Music Group (UMG), Bertelsmann Music Group (BMG) and Sony. These also own distribution companies that control over 80% of the wholesale market as well as having stakes in virtually all the other significant forms of media and cultural products. At the time of writing, Sony and Bertelsmann were awaiting the final EU clearance on a merger that would leave just four music industry giants. The EU initially charged the deal could lead to higher CD prices and less choice for music lovers, and could stifle the development of legal on-line music downloading. But it concluded after internal review that it did not have "sufficient evidence" of collusion or future harm to consumers.

The global film and television market in 2003 was worth around one trillion dollars, of which $63 billion was spent on filmed entertainment. But in the last decade, corporate globalisation has all but destroyed the diversity in world cinema:

- between 1992-98 US film distributors destroyed the popular film industry in Turkey where 200-300 films were made annually prior to 1992
- by the end of the 1980s, the thriving and innovative Brazilian cinema was destroyed
- Mexico dropped from producing 100 films per year to fewer than 10 by 1998

- Japan's internal market share shrunk to 37%
- in Europe, Hollywood films account for 80-90% of cinema, apart from France
- Indonesia dropped from 119 films in 1990 to 12 in 1992
- in Canada 95% of movie time is devoted to foreign (overwhelmingly US) films
- in 1986 there were 400 cinemas in Algeria. By the end of 2000 only ten were left
- African films are not distributed in Africa
- in the UK 90% of the market is dominated by five US companies and one UK distributor – with only 5 out of 20 films distributed by the UK company.

Arts Under Pressure, Joost Smiers

In Britain a Parliamentary inquiry into the film industry in 2003 heard submissions from all sectors in the film and television industry, including BECTU, the broadcasting workers' union, Phoenix Arts Centre in Leicester, the Animation Network, actor Tilda Swinton and UK film makers. What became clear was how globalisation had hit the British film industry over past years. BECTU's submission said:

> We face a continuing structural problem of a fragmented, production-led industry seeking to compete in a world market dominated by the distribution-led, integrated US film industry. The distribution process is overwhelmingly led by the US majors, with a strong interest in the production and marketing of Hollywood productions. The results are well documented. US films predominate in British cinemas and many British productions fail to achieve distribution even in the UK. Distributors, with a spread of risks and great control of rights simply do not face the crippling financial uncertainties that bedevil our indigenous, production-led industry.

The crisis in regional film theatres linked to the closure of the British Film Industry's regional programme unit was clearly acute, as a memorandum from the Phoenix Arts Centre made clear:

> The regional Programme Unit and its tiny sister department, the Exhibition Development Unit (collectively known as *bfi* Cinema Services, employing a total of nine persons) is currently under a threat of closure determined by *bfi* senior management as part of a cost-cutting exercise. If this action is carried out the consequences are likely to be extremely grave for many specialised cinemas throughout the UK.

- access to certain titles will be extremely limited
- booking terms for smaller, independent cinemas are likely to rise
- the range of cultural product will narrow
- education about the moving image, past and present, will become increasingly problematic
- purely commercial programming will become the norm
- a truly national cinema culture operating outside London will be seriously damaged.

In her evidence to the Inquiry, Tilda Swinton pointed to the failure of the UK Film Council to promote cultural film making. She noted that £18m of the budget allocated to the English Arts Council – supposedly devoted to cultural funding – was used to equip Warner and UCI multiplexes with digital equipment! She said that smaller regional arts cinemas devoted to independent film making urgently needed government support as they were "perilously threatened by the development of multiplexes dominated by Hollywood studio product".

The destruction of independent film making over the past decades finds a parallel in the world of publishing:

- in the UK the top nine publishing groups control 60% of the market
- Latin American writers are now published by global conglomerates only
- in Mexico 400 publishing houses went bankrupt between 1989 and 2003. Fewer than 10 have survived
- in the UK independent bookshops are disappearing in the face of competition from giants like Waterstones (which belongs to the media part of HMV)

- Heinemann's *African Writers Series* is promoted with glossy catalogues while African publishers have only poor quality paper and flimsy covers
- only 17% of books and magazines in Canada are of Canadian origin.

Arts Under Pressure, Joost Smiers

Monopoly control of the world market is leading to fewer and fewer titles being published. The industry's trade journal *The Bookseller* reported that HarperCollins, Britain's fourth biggest publisher, planned to cut the number of its new titles each year by about 20% by 2006. Time Warner nearly halved its list between 2000-2004 and Pan Macmillan cut new titles by seven per cent in 2004.

Media ownership

Britain and the United States are undergoing a major consolidation of media ownership. Present corporate strategies could mean that there will be only three global media corporations by 2007. One of the three will be News Corporation, owned by Rupert Murdoch. The new Communications Act in Britain will allow Murdoch to buy up ITN news, which could leave Murdoch's Sky News as the only bidder for Channel 4 news. This would leave UK broadcast news as well as important sections of the print media, dominated by Murdoch's right-wing political influence. His support for Margaret Thatcher's union-busting regime was notorious and his stable of UK tabloids (including *The Sun*) supported New Labour's election campaign.

The Communications Act was intended to "to see market principles spread to all areas of public life" in the words of media-tracking specialist, Des Freedman. Freedman points to how Ofcom, the new super-regulator, has already signalled its intent to smooth the way for further liberalisation. One of its first decisions was to appoint Luke Johnson as the new chairman of Channel 4. He is a businessman with no experience of broadcasting apart from the fact that he made his money from owning the restaurants in which TV stars eat. What are his real qualifications? According to Freedman, quoting someone who knows Johnson: "'Luke's completely money-mad. There is not a scintilla of understanding of public service broadcasting in him. He does have a sort of glamour that comes from being rich and comparatively young' (*The Guardian*, 2 February 2004). Just the sort of man to deliver public service principles in a liberalised climate. Ofcom's light touch regulation is accompanied by the highly interventionist and politicised role of government in influencing both long-term policy and everyday media content."

The Communications Act 2003 runs to a total of 825 pages. Its sponsors, Media Secretary Tessa Jowell and Trade and Industry Secretary Patricia Hewitt, have said that its purpose is to make regulation "light-touch and unobtrusive". What this means is that the big companies will be much freer to own the different areas of mass media. In summary:

- no limitation on non-European Union companies owning ITV or Channel Five
- less control on cross-media ownership and cross-platform promotion
- less control on local radio broadcasting.

New Labour succeeded in getting parliament to pass the new legislation, despite some opposition from rebels led by Lord Puttnam. A much-vaunted public interest test was introduced, which will be totally under the control of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry!

A parallel process is going on in the United States. One month before the British legislation was enacted, the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) revised its limits for broadcast ownership. The FCC voted on 2 June 2003, to relax the rules governing media ownership. These changes, which affect everything from television to radio to newspapers, allow for a fundamental reshaping of US media structure at the local and the national level. The loosening of ownership restrictions brought a host of court cases from consumer and media activists and opposition on Capitol Hill itself during the latter half of 2003. In March 2004, the US Senate voted to bar the FCC from implementing its controversial media merger for a whole year.

Highly respected TV journalist Bill Moyers in a webcast discussion explained on the Public Broadcasting Service website (www.pbs.org) how the FCC is changing the rules for media ownership. "That revolution", he said referring to the changes in broadcasting, "has brought new technologies, like the Internet, cable and satellite television. But it has also brought on the greatest concentration of media ownership in American history. Now the FCC is considering dismantling the last rules that would prevent even more consolidation. That's exactly what the media giants have been lobbying for... In the name of economic efficiency." This extract from the discussion said it all:

> Michael Copps, FCC Commissioner: If you take this to its logical conclusion, you could end up with a situation where one company owns the newspaper, the television station, the radio station and the cable system.
>
> Moyers: Michael Copps is the lone Democrat on the FCC.
>
> Copps: That may have some economic efficiencies attached to it, but I daresay it also has some profound democratic and social and political considerations that we ignore only at our own tremendous peril.
>
> Moyers: But consolidation is the trend. In 1975 there were some 1500 owners of full-power TV stations and daily newspapers. By 2000, that number had dropped to about 625…
>
> And remember the Telecommunications Act of 1996? It led to a wave of mergers. There are now 1,700 fewer owners of commercial radio stations – a one-third decline. Today, just a few players dominate. One conglomerate alone – Clear Channel – owns more than 1,200 stations and controls 11 percent of the market…
>
> Yes, it's true: the typical cable consumer today receives about 60 channels. But those so-called "choices" are determined by a handful of corporate giants… companies like Viacom, AOL-Time Warner, Disney, and News Corp.

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) was instrumental in pushing through the new legislation. In 1996, a Regulatory Reference Paper signed by 55 countries was the signal for corporations and governments to steamroller through a global information technology structure. Lievrouw and Livingstone, in their *Handbook of New Media,* note: “High level government officials seized the opportunity to rely on its negotiations to dismantle domestic political opposition and to move forward with new market strategies that would otherwise be impossible to implement.” As a result of the next agreement in 1997, the Basic Telecommunications Agreement, there was a rush to “wire up cities and the globe on an unprecedented scale”. The global telecoms system grew from half a billion telephone subscribers in 1989 to an estimated 2 billion by 2000.

But, although the gap between the richer and less developed countries’ access to telecommunications services narrowed, in some instances the difference between those who had access to information and those who did not grew even wider. Argentina, Brazil, China, Columbia, Korea, Singapore and South Africa were the chief countries accounting for the rise in telephone and Internet subscribers, but the rest of the developing world hardly got a look in, until China’s Internet usage started to soar after 2001.

The fibre-optic cables laid across the Atlantic and Pacific oceans by the year 2002 terminated in networks concentrated in 150-200 cities worldwide. As major cities, corporate offices and residential suburbs in Europe and North America are wired up, entire swathes of the globe are being virtually eliminated from cyberspace. This is most observable with respect to Africa, where many countries have fewer than 0.5 telephone lines per 100 people. In those developing countries that have seen rapid growth in telephone and Internet use, such as Latin America, services are confined to 10% of the élite residing in only three cities – Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte.

When the brand becomes the star

Looking at these sides of life, in Britain and elsewhere, we find that they are subject to a process of “McDonaldisation”. No opportunity is lost to market global brands under the guise of culture. Children’s films such as Disney’s *Monsters, Inc* and AOL Time Warner’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* are seen as a competition between Pepsi and Coca Cola. Children's books have been full of branded objects and licensed characters for years, but from just being placed, products now take starring roles. One example is Simon and Schuster's *The Oreo* [US biscuit brand] *Cookie Counting Book*, which teaches children to count down from 10 cookies while, of course, reminding them and their hard-pressed parents of something nice to eat.

Ever-sensitive to future trends and concerns, companies like McDonald's are constantly looking for new areas to extend the reach of their brand. Its fast food has come under fire from anti-obesity campaigners. Fearing that some customers may switch their allegiance, the company has launched a range of children's clothing. McDonald's brand diversification is another example of "dark marketing" to bypass restrictive marketing legislation such as that which affected the tobacco industry. It is also another example of firms exploiting pester power – parents feeling under pressure from their children.

Product placement is becoming more and more prominent as people find ways of ignoring or switching off when commercial breaks take place on television. Coca Cola paid $25 million to have characters in a TV series "down Cokes in each episode" as well as paying another $25m to be a sponsor of a reality show. The producer of one reality TV show, *Survivor*, said that he saw it as much as a marketing vehicle as a television show.

The race is on to find ever new forms of advertising to overcome resistance to it. McChesney and Bellamy Foster reported one US advertising executive who reportedly said that "consumers are like roaches – you spray them and spray them and they get immune after a while". So advertisers are also turning to "indirect" marketing. Seinfield's advert for American Express included the line: "This isn't going to be interrupted with advertising because it *is* advertising." The distinction between commercials and editorial content vanishes – the advert is the story and the story is the advert.

Virtual advertising is now possible. Products may be placed a long time after shows are actually made. Advertising can be digitally inserted in televised football matches which are not seen by the spectators at the event. Product placement is now assessed at ten levels. The ultimate achievement is when a whole episode or even a book is written around the product. British author Fay Weldon's recent book *The Bulgari Connection* was named after the famous jewellery company. A top advertising magazine praised Steven Spielberg's film *Minority Report* for "starring Lexus and Nokia… while Pepsi's Aquafina and Reebok had supporting roles".

McChesney and Foster describe what they call "a massive and qualitative leap in a pre-existing commercialism" and say that

> advertising itself is far too narrow a concept to encompass the effects of the rampant commercialism that now confronts us. Much attention is devoted today to how marketing and public relations are effectively merging, as both swallow up and direct the entire culture. In this sense the commercial tidal wave is interchangeable with a broader media torrent, or blizzard, that overwhelms our senses. The culture it generates tends to be more de-politicised, garish, and vulgar than what it has replaced.

Few arts bodies can survive without the ubiquitous sponsorship. The withdrawal of state subsidies over the last 20 years has forced theatres, orchestras, museums and others to go cap in hand to business and wealthy individuals in order to survive.

Targeting children

- children are bombarded with advertisements for junk food at the rate of 1,150 TV commercials a day
- the average child watches 20,000 adverts a year on children's television
- among food commercials, 95 per cent are for products high in fat, sugar and salt
- 48 per cent of schools now have vending machines, largely selling crisps and sweets
- in 2003 McDonald's spent £32.5 million on television advertisements, while Coca Cola spent £13 million and Pringles £7 million.

Daily Telegraph, 1 June 2004

Business sponsorship in 2002-03 rose to £120m, compared with £600,000 in 1976, according to a report by *Arts & Business*. Some 1,160 organisations received money from the private sector. The Royal Bank of Scotland, for example, sponsors arts projects and the bank's website explains the motives: "Sponsorship is a commercial, rather than a philanthropic activity, and must achieve goals which benefit the Bank. Corporate objectives aimed at raising our profile to target audiences form the basis of the decision-making process in considering what to sponsor."

Chin-Tao Wu, in her excellent book, *Privatising culture: Corporate Art Intervention since the 1980s,* describes the enormous pressure put on recipients by sponsors. Press officers are reduced to begging journalists to mention sponsors when they review an exhibition, for example. She believes:

> When government 'cosies up' to big business in the name of the people, or when multinationals dress up their commercial self-interest in the name of culture, it is ultimately left to the people to show how far they are willing to tolerate the unchecked power of big business. When other democratic means are ineffective, it is the people who alone have the collective power to resist.

Sport is big business

The commercialisation of sport over the last 25 years has known no bounds. Fuelled by TV money, football and the Olympics in particular have become big business. Clubs like Manchester United, Chelsea and Arsenal are now publicly-quoted companies on the stock market. Transfer deals have to be reported to the market first because it will affect share prices. Financial services group Deloitte & Touche estimate that European clubs and federations now generate more than £7 billion of income each season. Commercial activities like the sale of replica shirts is as big a part of the business as actually playing matches.

A handful of the richest clubs have cornered the transfer market, enabling them to buy any player they want and dominate the national leagues. Clubs themselves are bought and sold like any other company. Ramon Abramovich, who ripped off the assets of the former Soviet Union, was able to buy Chelsea and then spend £200m on players in under two years. Since 1992, when the top clubs were allowed to break away and negotiate TV rights on their own, admission charges have gone up 300%. Football attendance, previously the domain of ordinary working people, is now dominated by the reasonably well-off because of the expense involved. Those without work or on low pay find it difficult to pay for a Premier League match. Meanwhile, the game in the lower divisions lurches from crisis to crisis. The playing fields where Premier League clubs find their talent and on which the vast majority play the game, are often in a state of disrepair. Many grounds have been sold to become out-of-town shopping centres.

With the game literally awash with money, many star players have succumbed to the pressures associated with huge wages and celebrity status. In demand they certainly are. Television audiences figures for the Euro 2004 tournament were so huge that 30 seconds of airtime on a commercial break were being sold for around £200,000. David Beckham is thought to have received £16m from his endorsements in 2003-4, twice as much as Real Madrid actually paid him. As for the tournament, most of the top players seemed either too tired or disinterested to make a telling contribution. It could have been the ball that was to blame, of course. Adidas came up with a new match ball. The silver and blue sphere was likened to a "beach ball" by Spanish star Ivan Helguera.

The biggest money-spinner of them all, of course, is the Olympic Games. From their humble beginnings at the end of the 19th century, the modern Games have become very big business indeed. Television rights for the 2010 winter and 2012 summer events are being negotiated by the International Olympic Committee, who said they were confident of getting more than $3 billion from TV companies world wide. The IOC works closely with transnational corporations in sponsorship deals and sells the famous five ring Olympic symbol to the highest bidders. As for the IOC, its members enjoy a lavish lifestyle and have been known to take bribes in order to vote for a bidding city. As athletics and other sport has become highly commercialised, so too have the pressures on the participants. Drug taking is rife in athletics, and many stars had to pull out of Athens when they were caught taking banned substances. There is no doubt that for many, rampant commercialism has devalued the meaning of sport.

The blurring of distinctions

Decisions by TV executives has led to a coarsening and dumbing down of programmes. Viewers are categorised into cultural élites and a popular mass. Audience size is the sole goal, both for the state-owned BBC and its commercial rivals. Telephone voting linked to reality TV has made fortunes for production companies. *Big Brother* votes brought in £3m in the 2002 series and the makers could charge premium rates for advertising during the show. In addition, live webcast of the *Big Brother* house made the show's website a runaway success throughout Europe. In the summer of 2004 there were an estimated 70 reality and lifestyle programmes a week on TV. In the opinion of the *Daily Telegraph's* Alice Thomson (6 August 2004): "Most are couched as real-life learning experiences, professing to help turn their subjects into happier people, when all they are really doing is exploiting their misery – shaming, chastening and humbling them in front of an audience of millions."

Some *Big Brother* "housemates" exposed how they were strictly controlled during the making of the 2002 series. One participant, Josh Rafter, said even after he was voted off the programme, his movements were still monitored by security guards. He and others were made to fit into character slots which were quite alien to their real personalities. He said that participation had wreaked havoc with his emotions, warning other celebrity hopefuls that they could suffer psychological damage.

Speaking for the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), Philip Hodson accused TV companies of "playing God" with the lives of people: "It's a huge responsibility to subject people to enormous expectations and then suddenly to huge disappointment." One BBC programme, *The Experiment*, had to be stopped after six days when the students drafted in to be "guards" in a "prison" experiment started behaving sadistically towards their wards. In the US, complaints were made against a money-spinning programme in which homeless people and tramps were filmed punching each other.

BBC Radio 4 presenter John Humphrys has denounced the damaging effects of reality TV, saying "it turns human beings into freaks for us to gawp at". At the 2004 Edinburgh media festival he spoke of "a battle between people who are concerned about society and those whose interest is simply to make programmes that make money. Those who fought for the word fuck in Lady Chatterley didn't do it to make money. Now the cash registers go ker-ching every time there's a fumble beneath the bed sheets".

The blurring of distinctions which we've seen in the world of broadcasting is affecting what has been known as fine art. Ever since the Pop Art of the 1960s, the cross-over between product marketing and art has become a big area for artists to explore. Andy Warhol was a pioneer in this field, with his glamorisation of Campbell's baked bean cans, along with Jasper Johns and many others. There was of course an ironic, deconstructionist streak in Pop Art, which both celebrated and parodied the American consumerist dream.

In Britain during the late 1990s, there was a new, extreme phase, with the unashamed marketing and hyping of artists by dealers and critics. Creative productions of any kind do need to be discussed and interpreted, and exchanged in a free, uncensored market. But what has become predominant, is the purely commercial aspect and the rise of art-media empires and super stars artists who thrive on shock-techniques, kitsch, commercialism and fakery.

Just as the distinction between advertising and reporting is now blurred in newspapers and magazines, the difference between "art" and "commerce" is increasingly impossible to define. British artists of the 1990s such as Damien Hirst and Glenn Brown have unashamedly copied the work of other designers and artists without giving them recognition. Only litigation, or the threat of it, brought the original creators to wider recognition. In one case, Hirst was forced to compensate a medical model constructor. In another, Brown used an exact reproduction from a paper-back cover by Anthony Roberts.

The Saatchi phenomenon in Britain is indicative of the seamless fusion of commercialism and art. Millionaire collector Charles Saatchi's buying up of a budding artist's work immediately endows it with a huge market value. The endorsement by big money seemed almost fetishistically to endow objects with artistic or cultural merit. Saatchi, ably assisted by dealers like Jay Jopling, became the arbiter of (supposed) artistic value and success for a whole generation of artists.

The mechanism by which Saatchi's patronage produces grossly inflated prices was exposed in an investigation by Anthony Barnes in the *Independent on Sunday* (21 March 2004), who wrote: "Patronage from the former advertising guru [who orchestrated the Tory party media campaign which brought Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to power] can boost the value of an artist's work. The figures show the sums Mr Saatchi first paid for a number of then fledgling artists – and what their work goes for now. It shows as much as an 80-fold rise in value."

The 2004 Turner Prize winner, ceramicist Grayson Perry, sold a range of pots to Saatchi in 2000 for £4,000 to £6,000 each. They are now worth around £38,000 each. Ron Mueck, whose crouching boy figure was in the Millennium Dome, famously made a wax effigy of his dead father for the Sensation exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1997. Mueck sold his first work to Saatchi for £3,000. His new works now go for as much as £250,000.

Unravelling the purely commercial from the artistic seems to be more and more difficult.

At a recent "Becks Futures" show at the Institute of Contemporary Art, for example, a young artist decided to make censorship of her own work into her submission. She exhibited a framed agreement that she was banned from showing her artwork by the sponsors, Becks beer, who demonstrated their open-mindedness by allowing her to do this. She was happy to accept prize money at the same time, saying she needed it to survive.

But blaming artists for all this is like holding the messenger responsible for the message. The gross commercialisation of the art world is simply a true reflection of what is going on in society at large. In fact, some of the most successful British artists have themselves made criticisms of the commercialisation of the Saatchi and Tate Modern galleries. Jake Chapman has spoken of the "de-skilling" of serious, discursive art.

As design critic David Thompson put it in *The Guardian* (5 April 2004): "Fine art is faced with a very real problem presented by a rapidly evolving technological world, which means, in effect, a rapidly changing commercial world. What actually distinguishes 'fine' art from the advertising techniques that it parodies and appropriates?"