

# The Creative Virus

by Andrew Curry

In October 1995, I was asked to give a keynote address at the 'Making Waves' event in Brighton. At the time, I was running and developing an interactive television service in the not always sympathetic environment of a cable television company, and had the previous year published a co-authored book on the recent history of the BBC. As a result I was grappling with questions about how, why, and when creative organisations were creative. The speech gave me a chance to explore some answers.

## Insert 1: The War of the Worlds (Orson Welles)

And as they say: the rest is history.

As we know, with fifty years of hindsight, this wasn't a report of an invasion from Mars, but the youthful Orson Welles and his Mercury Theatre Company, and their adaptation on CBS of HG Wells' book *The War of the Worlds*.

The broadcast had the sort of results that sensible people can only deplore. People who heard it fled their houses in panic. They took to the roads in their cars. Across the country, they huddled in churches against the invaders. Police switchboards were jammed. And some people even claimed they had seen the Martians.<sup>a</sup>

They must have felt pretty silly the morning after.

It made Welles' reputation. *The War of the Worlds* took him to Hollywood to make *Citizen Kane*.<sup>b</sup> As for Trenton New Jersey, it was the most media attention the town got until Bruce Springsteen was hailed as the new Bob Dylan 40 years later.

For the broadcast was, of course, as effective, as shocking, as any piece of drama, ever.

I don't want to take anything away from it, for it was undoubtedly a piece of wicked creative work.

But what I do want to do this morning is to argue that creativity is essentially a product of social circumstances. And that our task, as creative people, is to spot the circumstances when creativity is most likely to flourish, and push them to the limits.

I also happen to believe that we are lucky to be living through one of the rare times when for once - because of technological confusion, social uncertainty, and even millennial panic, opportunity and circumstance are running in the direction of the creative, and not the other way around.

In doing this, I'm going to be sharing with you some ideas I've been developing while launching and running Britain's first interactive television project for the cable company Videotron.

For it seems odd to me that our notion of creativity is still bound up - to an enormous extent - with the idea of the brilliant individual.

The durability of the idea is probably down to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries managed to create the notion of the wayward but misunderstood genius, sometimes taken by the muse, sometimes abandoned by it, who needed to be understood by his fellow men and women as somehow different from them.<sup>c</sup>

This was handy for Coleridge, for he didn't like working very much and spent much of his life addicted to a variety of relatively interesting drugs, which he was obliged to take, naturally enough, for medical reasons. By creating for himself the concept of the brilliant but misunderstood genius, likely to be struck at any moment by another masterpiece, he was able to live off his friends and have them tolerate his habits.

But it's odd that we should still go along with this idea, since in almost all other areas of life we have given up such antiquated notions in the face of the onslaught of structuralism and post-modernism.

Yet, when you look at books on the creative act, over and over, they talk about individual circumstances. Cherry Potter, for example, in *Image Sound and Story*, discusses the importance of "aloneness" and "inactivity".<sup>d</sup> And we know from Michael Crick's biography that the distinguished author Jeffrey Archer finds himself unable to write without a clear desk, a jar full of newly sharpened HB pencils, and a cricket sweater.<sup>e</sup>

I take a different view of it. I think we have to understand two things about the creative process.

The first is that creativity is a virus.

What we know about viruses is that they are incredibly hardy and incredibly adaptable. If they find themselves suppressed in one form, they will mutate into another. When conditions aren't favourable, they are able to remain dormant, and they are able to spot the best carriers. And, thirdly, they like to travel.

I think I'm probably talking to a roomful of carriers this morning - and one of the things I'm going to speak about is the circumstances that helps the creative virus travel.

The second thing is that although my view of these processes is that although the creative is shaped by social processes, the individual *does* matter.

One of the things we learn from the theory of complexity is that the development of technologies - the difference between the ones that succeed and the ones that fail - is typically the result of a number of critical small decisions made early in the development stage.<sup>f</sup> So the creative person has leverage at that stage - they are able to transmit their own values into the process that's going on around them. At some times those processes are more receptive than at others.

And I'm going to turn now to three issues that I think are critical to creativity: connections, attitude, and - inevitably - money. If you think it's odd that technology isn't in that list, as you'll see, it's because what people do with the toys that makes the difference. It's also quickly apparent that it's hard to

work out where one of these categories stops and another starts - they all end up bound up together.

Connections, I think, are the very heart of creativity: for they involve people linking together ideas, or people, that haven't been linked together before.

### **Insert 2: On The Town<sup>g</sup>**

I love this first sequence of *On The Town*; I love the energy of it, and I love the fact that now it feels almost like a prototypical pop video, focussing on the characters and their world rather than a story.

It was Kelly's first film as director (sharing with Stanley Donen), and he set out from the start to make it different. I think there are two things he brings to *On The Town*, two connections that he made, that make the film different. The first is that most musicals had up to that point been pretty upmarket affairs - we always think of Fred Astaire as being in metaphorical black tie and tails - and Kelly set out to give a song and dance to ordinary characters, sailors and working girls. The second is that he took the musical out of the studio, using new lighter cameras to film on location - and in ordinary places like the Brooklyn Docks.<sup>h</sup>

He was able to do this, in part, because his technical mastery both of dance and cinema was immense, and because he was working with people every bit as skilled as he was. As David Mamet has written, "The purpose of technique is to free the unconscious".<sup>i</sup>

The importance of traditional craft skills is sometimes overlooked, and it seems old-fashioned of me even to mention such things, But we know that the Beatles would not have been half as innovative had they not ended up working with the veteran producer George Martin at a critical stage in their careers; and Martin became in some ways the Fab Four's amanuensis, able to articulate technically the ideas which were spilling out of John and Paul. Think for example, of the baroque brass section on Strawberry Fields Forever. It was Paul's idea; but George Martin told him how he could do it.<sup>j</sup>

When I watch the broadcasting industry shedding its most experienced staff, and then listen to executives deploring the fact that the new stuff doesn't seem to work as well as the old, I can only think to myself that they only have themselves to blame.

And the third type of connection I'd like to mention is the importance of place, a place where people can bump into each other, bump along with each other, informally. I don't think that punk would have happened in quite the way it did without Malcolm and Viv's shop, at 430 Kings Road, at World's End in Chelsea.<sup>k</sup> Without, for a moment, wanting to compare myself to Malcolm MacLaren, I know that Videotron's interactive television department in the UK has developed faster than our colleagues in Canada because we have been compressed into a small space where everyone has had to be willing to do anything, whereas our Canadian colleagues are spread across three departments in three companies, each taking specific responsibility for specific aspects of the process.

Connections are about borrowing something unfamiliar and arranging for it to collide with the familiar. In the words of Eden Philpotts. "The world is full of magical things waiting for our wits to grow sharper".<sup>l</sup>

But connections are useless without attitude. Creativity causes the potential for change, and people don't like change.

It Takes a Train to Laugh, It Takes A Lot to Cry, originally called The Phantom Engineer, was one of

three songs which Bob Dylan premiered at the Newport Folk and Blues Festival in 1965.<sup>m</sup> Paul Rothchild - later to produce The Doors and Janis Joplin - was on the mixing desk. Electric folk was a new concept, and as the band kicked into the song, the sound was awesome.

### **Insert 3: It Takes A Train to Laugh, It Takes A Train To Cry (Bob Dylan)**

Joe Boyd, who was production manager, said, "It knocked people back in their seats". The next thing that happened was that Pete Seeger and Alan Lomax, two of the luminaries of the American folk movement, and members of the Festival's organising committee, came backstage to tell him, "It's too loud. Turn it down". The trouble was, Rothchild was out in the middle of the audience, and it would have taken about ten minutes to reach him. Meantime, Dylan was being booed by at least half the audience.<sup>n</sup>

The truth was, he didn't care - or at least gave the impression of not caring. A year later, at the Royal Albert Hall, Dylan was booed again, this time by British audiences. One member of the audience, famously, called him Judas. To which Dylan said, "I don't believe you", and turned to his backing band, ready to launch into "Like A Rolling Stone", with the terse three word instruction, "Play fucking loud".<sup>o</sup>

By the way, the connection that Dylan had made here seems obvious to us now, but was revolutionary at the time. As Bruce Springsteen recalled years later, when he heard "Like A Rolling Stone" for the first time, it was "the toughest music I ever heard".<sup>p</sup> As Springsteen put it, "Dylan showed us that just because the music was innately physical did not mean that it was anti-intellectual". What he did, if you like, was to mix sex and sensibility.

I had the same experience of a revelation of how the world could be, when I heard for the first time, many years after they were first broadcast, the radio ballads made for the BBC by Charles Parker and the folk singer Ewan MacColl. Parker did something in the late 1950s which, again, seems obvious to us now. He took a mobile tape recorder out into the field and recorded ordinary people speaking. That wasn't the revolution. His revolution was that he then broadcast those voices in the subsequent documentaries.

At the time this wasn't done. As Parker recalled later, producers wishing to include ordinary people in their programmes would drive off in a "bloody great Humber" (Parker's phrase, not mine), and record them onto shellac disc. They would then return to London, transcribe the words that had been said to them, and get actors to read them, and these recordings of the actors would be included in the programme.

Parker realised that with the Uher tape recorder, people could be heard speaking for themselves, and he also eliminated the presenter by linking the programmes with specially commissioned songs from Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger. The BBC was horrified, and even more horrified when they realised that to record the first programme he'd been out of the office for six weeks instead of the customary one to two. But Parker was a member of life's awkward squad, and his radio ballads also won prizes, which at least postponed the day that the BBC got round to firing him.

I would have played you an extract of one of the radio ballads today, but they have been allowed to go out of print.<sup>q</sup> Given that they are significant part of the history of our audio-visual culture, one might imagine that the BBC would feel it was worth trying to keep them available to the public: in the new leaner, fitter, and apparently more accountable Corporation, it would seem not.

Thirdly: it's not possible to talk about creativity without talking about money:

#### Insert 4: Ornithology (Charlie Parker)

Bebop was pretty complicated stuff for a jazzer to play in the nineteen forties. The trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie was once asked why, and responded with one of the best one-liners ever about the relationship between money and creativity: "If the white man can't play it, then he can't steal it".

Gillespie and Charlie Parker had watched white bandleaders of the 30s - people like Paul Whitehead - take the best ideas of black musicians and make money out of them by turning them into commercial dance music. Bill Haley and Elvis did the same with black rhythm and blues, and Led Zeppelin, too, shamefully, with the work of the American bluesman (at least Cream and Eric Clapton paid royalties to Willie Dixon and Howling Wolf).

Gillespie and Parker weren't secretive about what they were doing; musicians were invited to jam with them. But most couldn't do it; the changes were too fast, and too complicated. Parker, maybe, died too young to benefit, but Dizzy, and Miles as well, were able to make a good living from their skills.

Again, the French New Wave was praised for its innovation; light cameras, jump cutting, and so on. And that was one of the reasons it was successful. But the other reason was that the New Wave films were commercially successful.<sup>f</sup> Their production costs were around a quarter of the conventional French film being made at that time, but once *Bout de Souffle* was a box office success it didn't take producers long to work out that these new young directors could make them money with their new approaches, and start offering them projects.

It works the other way, too. Edward Dmytryk's film, *Crossfire*, which deals with the subject of anti-semitism in the US Army after the war, was widely praised for the long shadows and noirish look of the film, which seemed, the critics said, perfectly to complement the subject matter. That's not how Dmytryk remembers it.<sup>5</sup> His line was that he had a fourteen day shooting schedule for the movie, and the lighting was designed that way to halve the number of set-ups he had to get through.

And the other aspect of money and creativity is that people who're intent on creating will take any money to do it, almost no matter what it is intended for. When Michael Powell made *Peeping Tom*, it was almost six years since his last real success, and his partnership with Emeric Pressburger had broken up. At the time, there was a small boom going on in British horror films, and Powell sold *Peeping Tom* to the producer as a film which would appeal to this market. Powell said they'd seen the script, but I don't think he can have known what he was going to get.

If the producer didn't know what he was going to get, then nor did the critics. *Peeping Tom* had some of the worst reviews ever committed to print.

It is a long time, wrote C.A. Lejeune in *The Observer*, since a film disgusted me as much as *Peeping Tom*. Isobel Quigley in *The Spectator*: It turns out to be the sickest and filthiest film I remember seeing. And again, Derek Hill in *Tribune*: The only really satisfactory way to dispose of *Peeping Tom* would be to shovel it up and flush it down the nearest sewer.<sup>t</sup>

I think we can assume that they didn't like it.

People didn't like bebop much either: "Bebop sounds to me like a hardware store in an earthquake", wrote New York columnist Jimmy Cannon. The A&R man John Hammond said, "Bebop is a collection of nauseating cliches, repeated *ad nauseam*". The band leader Tommy Dorsey was quoted as saying,

“Bebop has set music back twenty years”. And even Louis Armstrong said that the boppers were playing the wrong chords.<sup>u</sup>

I think we have to face the fact that most of the time, creativity is a pain in the neck. It involves change. Discomfort. Irritation. People don't like you for it.

So does it matter? Why should we care about creativity?

I think it matters because creativity is a dream of freedom. It is a vision of the impossible. It is like Prometheus - stealing fire from the gods to give it to the people. It is liberating. It is disorderly. It is subversive.

No wonder people don't like it much. No wonder so many people spend so much time trying to suppress it. And suppressing it is an easy thing to do. In her book *The Change Masters*, Rosabeth Moss Kanter lists ten ways to prevent change.<sup>v</sup> I haven't got time, now, for all ten, but the top five make amusing reading:

Number five: Regard any new idea from below with suspicion - because it's new, and because it's from below.

In fourth place: Express your criticism freely, and withhold your praise. Let people know they can be fired at any time.

In this week at Number Three: Make sure that people count everything that can be counted, frequently.

Number Two: Make decisions to reorganize or change policies in secret, and then spring them on people unexpectedly.

And this week's Number One - any week's number one: Above all, never forget that you, the higher-ups, already know everything worth knowing about this business.

Because Rosabeth Kanter is on the side of the angels, I doubt it has occurred to her that some organisations might introduce change specifically to make their organisations less creative. I find it hard to believe as well. But if you've lived through the implementation of Producer Choice at the BBC you may recognise some of those measures which Kanter lists.

And it is true that not all innovation is creative - not in the life enhancing and horizon expanding way that Dizzy Gillespie, or Gene Kelly, or Orson Welles, would recognise it. In the world of interactive television, we are about to become parties to a struggle between competing visions of the future. One, from the telephone companies, is of a world on demand, where people are defined and digitised according to what they buy. The other, loosely based around some of the notions of the Internet and some ideas from games and from television production, is of a social and participatory electronic world, of play and pleasure. We are just at that early stage where individual views and opinions can still make a difference in the design of the digital boxes which are about to go into people's homes. There's maybe eighteen months before an industry standard emerges and we are locked in to one model or another.

Finally, what types of structures do we need to make the most of the creative opportunities around us?

I think they have four principal characteristics.

They are Porous - they leak ideas both in and out. And they're flat as well. I believe that creativity is a profoundly democratic process, built on teamwork, on equality, on respect. Not every organisation in the world understands this.

They are Persistent - even when things are going badly. In football, the striker who's lost form still gets themselves into the box waiting for the pass to come. They know that sooner or later they'll be in the right place to score, and they'll get their touch back.

They are Partnerships. They seek out people who share their vision. They make connections wherever they can.

Porous, Persistent, and Partnerships.

And perhaps the War of the Worlds is an example of this. The Mercury Theatre Company had got a 26-week run out of CBS, but it hadn't gone that well. And no-one who'd worked on this show thought it was much good, and the slot they were in competed directly with the most popular show in the States. The Mercury theatre was getting a 4% share against the Chase and Sanborn show's 37% - a bit like World in Action scheduled against EastEnders.

But the one original idea in War of the Worlds was its construction as a series of news bulletins - a fairly new media form in America at the time - and Welles had also insisted on stretching the musical interludes so they sounded like a typical evening's radio, and the actor who played the reporter listened to the reports of the Hindenburg disaster until he got the incredulity just right, and they hammed it up for what it was worth. And it happened that around fifteen minutes in, *The Chase and Sanborn Show* went to a guest slot, and viewers tended to graze around their dials for a few minutes. It was exactly the right time to hear urgent news of aliens at Grover's Farm and a state of emergency in New Jersey. It was probably luck, but it may have been intuition. Or it might have been opportunity.

And Opportunism is the final characteristic of creative teams. Creativity can happen anywhere, provided we can transcend our imaginations. It can happen in the most unlikely places.

And by way of proof of this, I want to finish this morning with a clip of Marie Osmond reciting a Dada-ist nonsense poem on American network television. This is the same Marie Osmond who used to duet with her brother Donny and had a hit in the early seventies with Paper Roses. And it's the same Dada which was an avant-garde artistic movement in Europe during the Great War and after.

The story is this. Marie Osmond had been invited to host a special edition of *Ripley's Believe It Or Not!*, syndicated across the States, on sound poetry, and as part of her duties she was asked to recite the first line of *Karawane*, written by the Dadaist Hugo Ball. Marie Osmond was incensed by the implication that somehow she was too dumb to do the whole thing, so she memorized the whole lot and then recited it on air.<sup>17</sup> The result is extraordinary:

#### **Insert 5: "Karawane" (Marie Osmond)**

[ends]

- a Simon Callow, *Orson Welles and the Road to Xanadu*.
- b Peter Bogdanovich and Orson Welles
- c Richard Holmes, *Coleridge*.
- d Cherry Potter, *Image Sound and Story* 196. London, Secker & Warburg, 1990.
- e Michael Crick. *Jeffrey Archer: Stranger Than Fiction*.
- f M. Mitchell Waldron, *Complexity*, . London, Penguin, 1994.
- g *On The Town*, directed by Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly. MGM, 1949
- h David Parkinson, "Dancing In The Streets", in *Sight and Sound*. Volume 3, 1, January 1993. Peter Wollen, *Singin' In The Rain*. London, British Film Institute, 1992.
- i David Mamet, "On Directing Film", in *A Whore's Profession*, 350. London, Faber and Faber, 1994.
- j Ian MacDonald, *A Revolution In The Head*. London, Pimlico, 1994.
- k Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming*. London, Faber and Faber, 1991.
- l Quoted in John Sculley and John A. Byrne, *Odyssey*.
- m "It Takes A Train To Laugh, It Takes A Lot To Cry", on Bob Dylan, *Outtakes and Obscurities*. CD
- n John Bauldie, (ed), *Wanted Man*, 59-66. Black Spring Press, 1990. Clinton Heylin, *Behind The Shades*, 136. London, Penguin, 1991.
- o Clinton Heylin, *op cit*, 165-166.
- p Bruce Springsteen, in Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman (eds), *The Dylan Companion*, 286. London, Macmillan, 1990.
- q [2008] All of the Radio Ballads have since been reissued on the Topic label.
- r Louise Malle, *Malle on Malle*. London, Faber and Faber.
- s Edward Dmytryk. *On Filmmaking*. Boston & London, Focal Press, 1986.
- t Michael Powell, *Million Dollar Movie*, 400-401. London, Heinemann, 1992.
- u Ross Russell, *Bird Lives!*, 173. London, Quartet, 1976.
- v Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *The Change Masters*, 101. London, Unwin, 1985.
- w Sleeve Notes to *Lipstick Traces*, LP, Rough Trade R2901. Companion to Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*. London, Viking, 1989.