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Modelling the creative and professional self: The magazine profile as narrative of transition and transformation

Abstract:

The profile, a magazine feature article with a biographical dimension, serves not only to entertain but also to articulate the values and aspirations of communities formed around magazines. This is seen in special-interest magazines aimed at a readership united by an interest in a specific form of creative practice. To illustrate, this paper provides an overview of profiles from three Australian magazines for quilt-makers: *Down under quilts*, *Australian patchwork & quilting* and *Australian quilters companion*. The paper draws on issues from 2010 to 2013 to identify recurring narrative features of the profile, which for readers shapes 'the quilter' archetypically and presents her many variations. The paper relates its findings to rhetorical theory on narrative, and comments on the significance of its findings in the context of the creative industries.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Creative writing – Magazines – Australian magazines – Magazine profiles – Quilt-making – Creative industries – Textile arts

Introduction

Special-interest or niche magazine titles strive to form readerships around particular topics and activities, as opposed to those titles that aim for broader, mass-market appeal. Whether directed at the photographer, the pet owner or the organic gardener, niche magazines encourage readers' conception of self in highly defined ways. They 'act as a substitute or extension of the reader's own social circle of like-minded people' (McKay 2006: 2) and 'create a sense of belonging to a wider group' (McKay 2006: 3). In other words, these magazines rely on creating communities with which readers will identify.

The broad question of how the discursive content of special-interest magazines contributes to the formation of communities motivates this paper. Two perspectives, one industry-based and one theoretically-based, are relevant and symbiotic. As products of the magazine industry in general, special-interest titles draw on the generic conventions outlined in handbooks (for example, Morrish 2003; Evans 2004; McKay 2006) or more focussed guides (for example, Ricketson 2004b) on writing for and producing magazines, but they adapt those generic conventions to suit highly defined readerships. From a theoretical perspective, special-interest magazines may be considered as essentially rhetorical, or persuasive, texts. The question of identity formation and, by extension, community formation, has concerned rhetorical critics and theorists from the mid-twentieth century (Miller 1993). Driving that concern is an attempt to:

> see how communities may be understood in terms of shared beliefs, values, or visions, distinctive patterns of metaphor, common experiences or collective memories, technical vocabularies, and a host of other communal bonds manifested in their discourse … how language not only reflects but also shapes the character of particular communities (Hogan 1998: xvi).

Viewing special-interest titles as both industry products and rhetorical texts is illuminating for those who aspire to produce magazines or their content, and for those who teach in magazine studies or cognate fields, including writing.

Illustrative is a study of selected content from three Australian special-interest magazines for quilt-makers (or 'quilters'): *Down under quilts* (*DUQ*), *Australian patchwork & quilting* (*AP&Q*) and *Australian quilters companion* (*QC*).[1] Each magazine is widely available through newsagents and by subscription, and includes instructions and patterns for sewing quilts, as well as more discursive content that sheds light on what it means to be a quilter. By drawing on issues from 2010 to 2013, this paper identifies the quilter's profile as a means by which the magazines model creative and professional development within their communities of readers. The paper relates its findings to rhetorical theory on narrative and comments on the significance of its findings in the context of the creative industries.

The quilter's profile

A content staple in magazines, the profile has been called 'journalism's version of biography' (Ricketson 2004a: 1) because it provides an insight into its subject's life.

The profile has had a rich history since its origins in the 1920s (Ricketson 2004a) and now takes varying guises (Morrish 2003: 136). Closely related to the profile, and often contributing to it, is the interview. Some guides to magazine writing treat the profile and the interview separately (for example, Ricketson 2004b), but Morrish (2003: 136) regards the interview, even in its simple 'Q&A' form, as a type of profile, and White (1996: 238) notes that 'personality interviews' and 'profiles' tend to be used interchangeably, even if they do differ. For the purpose of this paper, 'profile' is used in the broader sense for those magazine feature articles with a strong biographical element. However it is manifest, the profile simulates a social space in which readers are 'introduced' to others deemed by the magazine to be of importance or interest.

The profile is also a vehicle for articulating and reinforcing the behavioural and attitudinal norms of special-interest communities. Because niche magazines confine themselves to certain topics or activities, the profiles included in them differ from those of general-interest magazines, which often take as their subjects the famous or the infamous. Of particular relevance to niche titles is the type of profile that 'aim[s] to portray a particular job or group of people, one of whom is chosen as representative' (Ricketson 2004b: 25), or that aims to portray somebody who has celebrity status within the special-interest community if not more widely. A distinctive type of profile is that found in special-interest magazines based on forms of creative practice traditionally associated with the domestic sphere and women, and which models the developmental trajectory of the creative practitioner. Through these profiles, magazines may articulate, and build repositories of, 'common experiences or collective memories' (Hogan 1998: xvi) for readers. This is seen in profiles contained in *DUQ*, *AP&Q* and *QC*.

The number, length and format of profiles differ between and even within *DUQ*, *AP&Q* and *QC*, as expected of magazines that attempt to differentiate themselves from competitors, appeal to specific readerships and periodically reinvigorate their pages. In 2010, *DUQ* profiles were present in its 'Meet a textile artist' series but then were discontinued and replaced in 2013 with 'Meet a blogger' interviews that place dual emphasis on quilters' online as well as creative life. *AP&Q* consistently has printed 'Quilter profiles'. *QC* similarly includes profiles named as such, but it also publishes what are essentially profiles under different guises, or it embeds profiles within clusters of related articles. Nevertheless, the profile continues to be represented in each title.

Most common across the magazines, and the focus of this paper, are profiles of women who have advanced their own quilt-making from hobby to vocation or career. These profiles provide such information as the extent of creative output over time, education and qualifications, publications, exhibitions, awards, and business and teaching activities. Profiles also comment on aspects of the creative process, including sources of inspiration, approaches to design and execution, and use of technology. Regardless of the many permutations of these and other details, it is the notion of 'the quilter' that provides momentum for the biographical dimension of the profile. Certain types of events and circumstances are recurringly described and serve to both shape the quilter's life archetypically and illustrate its many permutations.

Points of origin

Profiles repeatedly show that the quilter is made, not born, even if she showed an early propensity for creativity. The typical biographical trajectory for the profile is, therefore, how its subject became a quilter. In tracing origins, profiles frequently report informal, gendered education in the home, such as learning to sew from older, female family members. This may even be expressed as community norm:

> Many quilters will tell you that they first learned to sew at their mother's side and for … quilt-store owner Sophie Strohmeier, the story is the same. Her intense, almost obsessive addiction to fabric was developed at an early age while watching her mother make most of her clothes ('Quilty goodness: Sophie Strohmeier' 2011: 25).

There are many similar references to, for instance, an accomplished quilter who 'comes from a family of seamstresses and quiltmakers' ('Perfect piecing: Catherine Butterworth' 2011: 29), 'learned to sew at her mother's knee' ('Meet a textile artist: Morley Grainger' 2010: 43) or 'always loved crafts and showed an aptitude for them at an early age' and developed skills transferable to quilt-making (Smithers 2012b: 36). Gendered, familial traditions may also be placed in professional contexts, such as a quilter's origins being traced to her mother being 'a qualified dressmaker and milliner' (Spinks 2010: 34) or '[a] talented dressmaker' who 'owned a haberdashery store' (Franks 2010c: 25). All demonstrate an appreciation of a traditional grounding in domestic craft as instrumental to future creative development.

Other points of origin, notably formal education, are also identified in profiles. References to domestic science instruction at school reinforce the traditionally gendered education of women albeit outside the home, but there is recognition that these experiences did not always bode well for those who, for example, 'hated sewing at high school' (Smithers 2012b: 36) or 'shunned school sewing classes' ('Meet a quilter: Jo Hopkins' 2010: 34). Profiles may also acknowledge qualifications in art and design, including at tertiary level, which are later adapted to quilting.

Turning towards quilts

Profiles present initial experiences of creativity, craft or sewing as the beginning of, or as preludes to, a life defined by quilts. For those women without early exposure to quilt-making, profiles tend to report a turning towards the craft, variously described as something that 'grew organically' (Collins 2011: 74) or was 'a natural progression' (Kelly 2011: 99), an unexpected and sudden 'serendipitous moment' or even a 'conversion' ('Profile: Pictures in fabric: Jenny Bowker' 2011: 50, 51). A single event may be named, as with a woman who had sewn since childhood but 'turned her interest towards quilting' after chancing upon an Amish quilt in a shop (Kelly 2013: 20). Life may be seen to have changed irrevocably: attending a quilt exhibition left Kate Oszko 'completely awestruck', and she never 'looked back' (Smithers 2013b: 60). *AP&Q* establishes these experiences as the norm:

> A chance encounter, that's how it starts for most of us quilters and patchworkers – in fact for any person with something creative as a hobby – whether we see someone making a quilt, a friend hauls us along to a quilt show, or, our mothers and

> grandmothers teach us from a young age the basic skills a young lady used to 'have' to know. When our craft 'adventures' cross over into a realm where we start producing creations we never dreamed were possible, we are usually captured to the point of obsession (Franks 2010c: 24).

Both the turning towards and the intensity of commitment to quilts may be expressed through metaphors of addiction, illness or affliction. The rhetoric of addiction is well established among quilters generally, and has occurred in *DUQ*, *AP&Q* and *QC* since their inception (Williamson 2008). Profiles from 2010 to 2013 contain references to, for example, catching 'the quilting bug' (Kelly 2012: 34) or other phrases that translate commitment into popular clichés of addiction ('Jenny began a creative journey that soon became an addiction, as is so often the case' ('Profile: Pictures in fabric: Jenny Bowker' 2011: 50)).

Achieving status

Profiles cite milestones that signal a transition beyond hobbyist or amateur. Milestones are sometimes identified by the quilter herself as, for example, her 'most memorable moment' (Law 2013: 58). They include prizes and awards, scholarships, artist in residence appointments or other markers of status around creative output, or teaching, judging competitions, publishing books, running businesses or other quilt-related occupations.

Profiles may or may not refer explicitly to quilt-making having become a vocation or career, so overall they suggest a fluid perspective on whether, when and how hobby becomes a more serious commitment. In some, an occupation superior to hobby is denoted by the designation of quilters as textile artists or, for example, 'quilter, designer and tutor' (Law 2013: 58). A quilter may refer to conscious movement beyond hobby – 'When I decided to "turn my passion into my profession", it changed both my life and my lifestyle' ('Enjoying every minute: Anne Sommerlad' 2013: 74). Alternatively, readers must infer the transition. Profiles may also highlight the vocational nature of quilt-making: one presents a highly accomplished teacher's view that quilt-making is not a business because 'Put simply, it's her life' ('Profile: Pictures in fabric: Jenny Bowker' 2011: 51). Despite citing outstanding success in competitions internationally, Margaret McDonald's profile alternates between references to her 'art' and 'hobby', and conveys her humility – 'I just make quilts' (Kelly 2012: 35). Regardless of these differences, all profiles construct lives around quilt-related practice, with some indicating a level of seriousness that 'is judged in terms of a self-assessed commitment to artistic work as a major aspect of the artist's working life, even if creative work is not the main source of income' (Throsby & Zednik 2010: 15). Remuneration is rarely mentioned in profiles, and is never quantified.

That many quilters have indeed moved beyond hobbyist is shown by 'before and after' contrasts between the quilter's humble beginnings (as non-quilter or hobbyist) and her achievements (as committed practitioner). Implied here are 'rags to riches' transitions. Contrasts are sometimes accentuated by their close juxtaposition: Pam Furniss' profile states that she made her first quilt at TAFE because she knew nothing

about quilt-making, and follows immediately with 'Now Pam works on only her own original designs' ('Pam's inspiring passion' 2013: 18). Rags to riches transitions may also be expressed overtly: 'Karen's [Styles] love of quilting has grown so much since her humble beginnings that she and her husband now run two patchwork businesses' (Franks 2010a: 31). These examples also show that riches may take different forms, such as design originality or business success.

Despite modelling creative and career advancement, the magazines also take care to model inclusivity through reflection on status. As *DUQ* states, 'There is much to celebrate about our enjoyment for making quilts. Whether you are a hobbyist or have a quilt-related business, you all contribute to this world of creativity in some way' (Spinks 2011: 60). Just as many profiles designate their subjects as professionals, others designate their subjects as hobbyists. One woman's 'main objective … is to ensure patchworking remains a hobby rather than a business; something that she *loves* doing, not something she *has* to do' (Smithers 2012a: 42). Similarly, craft blogger and primary school teacher Christine Lusted has considered setting up a business but sees herself as a hobbyist (Hudson 2013: 25).

Accommodating quilts

In keeping with their inclusivity, *DUQ*, *AP&Q* and *QC* respect that quilt-related activities must be accommodated around other demands, especially family. *QC* expresses this unequivocally: 'For some of us, quilting is a business, but for many more of us it is a hobby, that meditative release that we must have for our creative sanity, but we also must fit around the commitments of work and home' (Kelly 2012: 34). Again, profiles offer 'real life' examples. Award-winning quilter Margaret McDonald, for instance, 'works full time in an executive role', and her profile discusses time management, which 'is critical in finding balance between work and her hobby' (Kelly 2012: 35). In some cases, family members may facilitate creative and professional advancement (Linden Lancaster's 'husband suggested she do her own designs') and also give it priority (Lancaster's family now 'put[s] up with her creativity taking over the house' (Franks 2010b: 72)). Alternatively, family may limit creative endeavour, as with a 'busy mum of three' who 'does her best to fit in as much sewing time as she can' (Smithers 2013a: 50), or another who abandoned quilting when 'raising five children' ('Perfect piecing: Catherine Butterworth' 2011: 29). Some quilters manage to do both: Robyn Evans 'is looking to expand her studio space so that she can offer more classes … though she still makes the time to balance family life and her quilting' (Kelly 2010: 45). Recurring messages are that family life and creative life are intertwined, and that the creative self triumphs, even if it is curtailed at certain times of life.

Family events may also be presented as turning points. Often narrated is the birth of a child, or the interruption of a career to raise children, and taking up quilt-making as a pastime, after which a new career develops:

> Sarah worked in advertising before raising her two sons, but never went back to the corporate world. Instead she taught quilting for 10 years and was then co-owner of Material Obsession for seven years, where her love of bright, vibrant fabrics and a

> fresh, contemporary approach to quilting was brought to the attention of the Australian quilting world ('A quilter's life: Sarah Fielke' 2011: 29).

As with other types of turning point, those based on family lead inevitably to quilting life.

One profile – that of Sophie Strohmeier – embodies several of the features so far identified as being typical of the quilter's profile. As already noted, Strohmeier's profile traces her origins as quilter to watching her mother sew. It also describes her as 'a true creative spirit' who saw and became obsessed with a quilt that 'spoke' to her, after which she turned towards quilts, and it includes the following:

> A lifelong interest in crafts and a fine-arts degree led to an early career in the textiles industry. During and after university, Sophie worked for a small textiles company as a designer and colourist, but this was not where her passion lay. For Sophie, her mother's influence continued even after her passing, for it was losing her mother that inspired Sophie to open her Perth quilt store … almost three years ago. 'I thought … just do what you love. Life is too short,' she says, so she embarked on a journey she could be truly passionate about ('Quilty goodness: Sophie Strohmeier' 2011: 25).

As well as acknowledging informal (domestic) influences, formal education and turning points, the profile foregrounds passion as motivation and uses the metaphor of the journey, both of which also recur across profiles.

Profiles and the narrative paradigm

DUQ, *AP&Q* and *QC* profiles are selective representations of lives. While this can be said of any biographically-based magazine feature, the quilter's profile is a vehicle for repeated expression and affirmation of the characteristics of a particular type of creative life. Over time, profiles may seem repetitive and formulaic, but from a rhetorical perspective that is their strength: they function formatively and mnemonically by continually stating and reaffirming community norms, including norms for creative and career trajectories. They shape 'common experiences or collective memories' (Hogan 1998: xvi).

Profiles in this regard may be positioned theoretically within Fisher's narrative paradigm (1987). For Fisher, narrative is 'omnipresent' and is a way of learning about and interpreting the world. Humans evaluate communication, or are persuaded, by their sense of narrative coherence and fidelity, which is an innate and rational process:

> We naturally and without formal instruction ask about any account of any sort whatever whether or not it 'holds together' and adds up to a reliable claim to reality. We ask whether or not an account is faithful to related accounts we already know and believe. On these terms we *identify* with an account (and its author) or we treat it as mistaken. We identify with stories or accounts when we find that they offer 'good reasons' for being accepted. Good reasons are elements in human discourse or performance that we take as warrants for belief or action (1987: 193, 194).

'Good reasons' are consistent with knowledge, values and ethics; they are relevant to decisions being faced; and they have effects. When people are exposed to 'an account

that implies claims about knowledge, truth, or reality', they evaluate that account innately and logically according to their sense of narrative rationality (1987: 194). Fisher concedes that other types of logic may come into play, such as logic stemming from an understanding of types of communication on which structures have been imposed, but argues that these, too, will ultimately occur within the narrative paradigm.

Profiles as biographical exemplars of quilting life are coherent and plausible, and provide good reasons for readers to identify with them. They generally span childhood to present, and even if not necessarily arranged strictly by chronology, they consistently trace the events and circumstances that result in a commitment to quilt-making in some way, a commitment that with hindsight may seem inevitable, even fated. Details of lives selected for inclusion in profiles are likely to 'ring true' for readers, whether they reflect traditionally gendered roles for women or the challenges of balancing work, family and leisure. The sense of fulfilment and achievement generated by profiles, however expressed, provides 'good reasons' for readers to accept profiles as models of aspiration.

What will be new for some readers is the idea of quilt-making as a serious occupation within their reach; however, profiles supply abundant vicarious proof that vocation or career can be launched from hobby. This occurs largely through rags to riches contrasts that draw on and perpetuate popular egalitarian notions of the capacity of 'ordinary' people to achieve the extraordinary, and that will be familiar to readers. The metaphor of the journey, which re-appears across profiles including some cited previously, engenders a sense of personal and other development, and similarly will be familiar to readers because of its prominence in popular culture. Even if the metaphor is not used, profiles reconstruct quilters' careers in such ways that the reader can discern beginnings, landmarks and destinations.

Profiles and the creative arts

Moving beyond Fisher's narrative paradigm to an industry context, *DUQ*, *AP&Q* and *QC* profiles from 2010 to 2013 can be seen to foreground defining features of careers in the creative arts. Taken together, profiles illustrate that many quilt-related careers are non-traditional and non-linear; that is, they do not involve 'full-time, continuous involvement in the workforce, typically starting in one's 20s, following the completion of formal education, and ending with total and permanent withdrawal from the workforce some 40 or 50 years later at retirement' (Valcour, Bailyn & Quijada 2008). As Bennett notes, this

> traditional, linear career model has little relevance to the cultural sector, wherein people self-manage their careers in what have been described as protean careers … Protean careerists expand their work behaviours, competencies and connections in search of success which is determined not in the eyes of others, but in terms of self-identity, psychological success and the satisfaction of personal and professional needs (2007: 135–36).

Profiles show that quilters combine their own creative practice with other occupations, whether quilt-related or not, to varying degrees over time. In this sense, quilters have portfolio careers, 'characterised by a variety of work arrangements, some involving original creative work, some applying skills more widely, some requiring team participation, some taking time out from creative work for further study, travel, research, and so on' (Throsby & Zednik 2010: 13). As well as portraying such careers, profiles sometimes distil key characteristics of them, including through first-hand reflection: a 'business' is 'a combination of various small things all adding together to mean I am able to work from home, be creatively energised, spend more time with my kids and live a more meaningful life' ('Profile: meet the founder of Whipup.net, Kathreen Ricketson' 2012: 46), and the development of a quilt-related career is 'a very long, indirect path' ('Keeping true to herself' 2013: 44). Frequent references in profiles to quilters' passion for what they do, even if expressed in clichés of addiction, connote personal commitment and satisfaction as driving forces for career development that is organic and responsive to, and accommodating of, personal circumstances. *DUQ*, *AP&Q* and *QC* do not use the terms non-traditional, protean or portfolio, yet they do model the motivations and patterns of these careers.

Profiles collectively also present an expansive view of quilt-related careers. The professional quilt-maker in Australia is presumably a rare being: the number of professional practising artists in 2009 was estimated at 44,000, of which the number of craft practitioners, which includes but is not limited to textile artists (including but not limited to quilters), was estimated at 3,800 (Throsby & Zednik 2010: 17). *DUQ*, *AP&Q* and *QC* do refer to some quilters as artists but overall alert readers to the many and varied professional opportunities available to them. As *AP&Q* comments, '[m]any quilters are blessed with being able to turn their passion into an occupation. Whether they're fabric designers, pattern designers, machine quilters or shop owners, people in the quilting industry are fuelled by their passion for quilting' ('Blessed be the quilters' 2010: 23). Even if the magazines' consistently positive tone belies the frustrations inherent in establishing a non-traditional career, profiles taken together do present a realistic view of working life in their acknowledgment of the many permutations of careers based on creative practice.

Concluding comment

Since their first issues, *DUQ* (from 1988), *AP&Q* (from 1994) and *QC* (from 2001) have included profiles or other feature articles with biographical dimensions that give readers insights into the lives of practising quilt-makers (Williamson 2009: 148-49). This paper has demonstrated that the profile, a content staple of magazines generally, continues to be represented in *DUQ*, *AP&Q* and *QC* from 2010 to 2013, and in these magazines has distinctive narrative characteristics. Profiles admittedly vary across and within the magazines, yet preponderant are those that convey transitions made by women who come to identify creative practice – quilt-making or related activities – as a defining feature of self. These profiles repeatedly and plausibly provide 'real life' insights into quilt-making as both popular pastime and as career. The enduring

message from magazine to reader is that the quilter is made; she undergoes a process of 'becoming', after which potentially are other transitions in her creative self, including from hobbyist (home) to professional (industry) practitioner. It is largely through profiles that *DUQ*, *AP&Q* and *QC* prove the capacity of women to make this transition and to identify themselves as essentially creative beings, however that may be manifest. As such, the magazines have an essentially rhetorical function in terms of forming a community of readers based on a shared identity – that of the quilter – and the behavioural and attitudinal norms, including career norms, associated with that identity.

Endnote

1. Some inconsistencies occur in the 'Works cited' listing below of magazine articles used as primary source material for this paper. Each magazine numbers issues differently: by a single issue number on the cover (*DUQ*), by a volume and issue number on the cover (*AP&Q*) and by an issue number on the cover plus a volume and (different) issue number, as well as a month, on the contents page (*QC*). All identifying information has been provided in 'Works cited', according to each magazine's conventions.

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