Industry and the Creative Mind
Classroom Discussion questions by Sandra Tomc

My book looks at a phenomenon we all know about:  the extent to which artists are regarded as eccentric outsiders.  Traditionally, historians and artists themselves have understood such constructions as originating in the Romantic period and as being part of the artist’s rebellion against a commercial marketplace for cultural objects.  The true artist was the artist who renounced the conformist trash being produced by a “mainstream” capitalist culture machine and who struck out in his own antic directions. But *Industry and the Creative Mind* suggests that scholars and artists have potentially misunderstood the relationship between the eccentric artist and the mainstream commercial entertainment business against which he mythically rebels.

We can get a particularly sharp sense of this misunderstanding by looking at the peculiar cultural environment of the early nineteenth-century United States where the existence of eccentric author mythology predated the existence of a marketplace for cultural materials. Significantly lagging behind Britain and Europe in its development of a modern commercial arena for literary and entertainment goods, the primitive early nineteenth-century United States culture field developed a powerful mythology of rebellious and eccentric authorship in the absence of any machinery against which the rebellion of such figures might have been defined.  Instead of serving as a repudiation of “mainstream” culture, the Romantic artist in the United States emerged, in the middle of the nineteenth century, as a fundamental building block of modern America’s intensely capitalistic print entertainment industry.  The logic behind this foundational function of the Romantic outcast lay in this figure’s renunciation of commercial and exchange value.  Understood as an entity destined by nature for rebellious impoverishment and exemption from middle class norms, the figure of the eccentric artist and the whole Romantic mythology that he engendered and supported made it possible to discount creative writers (those who actually wrote all the entertainment and literary texts) as productive members of the entertainment business.

Put simply, Romantic writers were a source of unrecognized “savings” for the publishing industry, in the sense that they didn’t, according to both themselves and audiences, need to be paid. They could thus function as a bedrock in the formation of publishing business models whose great profitability derived from the fact that they completely discounted from their economies the main personnel responsible for the production of books and magazines – writers.  Accordingly, *Industry and the Creative Mind* begins by looking at the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century proliferation of Romantic author myth in the United States and the avid adoption of poses of Byronic anguish among American writers.  It then goes on to look at how these figures, which were immensely entertaining to audiences, attractive to authors, and profitable to publishers, played a central role in the development of American print entertainment modernization in the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s.

The ideas contained in this book are extremely interesting to students right now, partly because the internet has encouraged similar economies.  User-generated websites make large (often obscene) amounts of money for advertisers and software entrepreneurs while paying those who actually write their content nothing. By asking questions about the “worth” of creative writing and the “worth” of mental or artistic labour, the book asks students to engage in questions important for the future of their own intellectual output and its “costs” in an economy that continues to depend on a public failure to make connections between seemingly “eccentric” personal expression and the business of publishing and distribution.

For discussion:

Most of us are attracted to the myth of the outcast artist.  Why do you think that is?  Why does it give us pleasure to contemplate suffering or poverty if it’s in the name of art?  Does this seem perverse to you? Why do we so powerfully associate artistic endeavor with rebellion and non-conformity?