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The 'transformative power' of the arts

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An official ‘rhetoric of positive transformation’ seems to dominate contemporary debates around the effects of artistic engagement and creative activities in the cultural policy and educational fields. In the West, over the past thirty years, this rhetoric has been explicitly called upon to underpin and justify several policy initiatives aiming at tackling social exclusion, criminal offending, educational underachievement and health-related problems through the encouragement of artistic participation (whether as audiences or creators) among targeted groups. For example, in 2003 (at the zeitgeist moment of the rhetoric of personal and social transformation through the arts in Britain), the Arts Council England’s (ACE) manifesto Ambitions for the Arts 2003–2006 explicitly put the ‘transformative powers’ of the arts at the heart of both its ‘vision’ and advocacy agenda:

We will argue that being involved with the arts can have a lasting and transforming effect on many aspects of people’s lives. This is true not just for individuals, but also for neighbourhoods, communities, regions and entire generations, whose sense of identity and purpose can be changed through art.

(ACE, 2003: 3)

In his New Statesman Arts Lecture, delivered in July 2006, ACE’s then Chief Executive Peter Hewitt (2006: 3) claimed: ‘The arts need to be recognised both for the inherent personal value they deliver for citizens and for their contribution to other public agendas, such as education, health, home affairs, foreign policy and the economy’. Despite the acknowledged lack of evidence that the arts and creativity can achieve any of these aims,1 and the concerns over the perceived excessive ‘instrumentalisation’ of the arts and culture that have been voiced by many cultural professionals, media pundits and researchers, equally grandiose claims have been consistently and persistently made by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport – the government department with responsibilities for the cultural sector.
Similar assumptions and beliefs in the potential of engagement with the arts to bring about deep personal change underpin the ideology of ‘creative learning’, and animate the professionals who are charged with delivering that creative learning. Large scale arts-in-education programmes, such as ‘Creative Partnerships’ in Britain, define their aim as ‘raising aspirations and achievement through the transformative power of creative learning partnerships’. Indeed, in their Eleventh Report on Education and Skills, prepared in 2007, the relevant Select Committee in the British Parliament acknowledged having received ‘a vast amount of anecdotal evidence from teachers, heads and creative practitioners on the effects of being involved in creative partnerships projects, and it is clear that many feel strongly about the potential transformative power of a creative approach to teaching and learning’. Yet, the report also acknowledges that research conducted into the educational impact of the programme does not fully support the broad range of claims for profound impact made by those involved in designing and delivering ‘creative learning’ initiatives.

An ‘argumentation model’ of policy-making and the importance of ideas

The resilience of the faith in the positive transformative powers of the arts in the face of the lack of evidence points us towards the fact that official statements regarding the place of evidence in the policy formation process need to be taken with a pinch of salt. In reality, the primary driver behind the policy-making process is not always the available evidence, but rather values and beliefs (not always explicitly acknowledged) about what is valuable and the reasons why. So, the continued emphasis on the powers of the arts to change lives, regenerate localities and communities and promote creative learning is based on very longstanding beliefs about what the arts can do to both individuals and society as a whole rather than on actual evidence of impact (Belfiore, 2009).

The key ideas around the ‘transformative powers’ of the arts have been in circulation among Western intellectuals, politicians and artists for as long Western civilisation itself has existed. These ideas have consistently fed into thinking on the role of the arts in society and how politicians can best harness their powers for the good of the polity (or, as the case might be, themselves) from the times of Plato in the fifth century BC. Looking at this longstanding tradition of thinking and writing on the effects of creative endeavours on both creators and audiences might throw light on contemporary policy developments and bring to light the powerful beliefs in the powers of the arts to affect people deeply (whether for the better or the worse), to shape behaviour and even change the world that underscore the workings of Western cultural institutions, the educational system and the mechanisms for public support of the creative arts.

As Banaji and Burn (with Buckingham, 2006: 5) point out, a ‘rhetoric’ is a discursive form which is constructed so as to generate consensus and even affect specific concrete policy measures; rhetoric is also key in the production of ‘discursive frameworks’ which provide the terms and the concepts in which issues come to be discussed in the public domain. Given the discursive nature of the policy-making process, rhetoric has the power to shape public opinion, political debates and ultimately the policy process itself. In order to understand the current state of contemporary cultural and educational policies, and the centrality of the imagery of transformation through artistic engagement in the policy rhetoric in this area, we need to identify what ideas about the arts and their effect on people have become dominant in policy discourse and why.

To this end, it might be helpful to refer to an ‘argumentation model’ of the policy process, which puts the stress on the element of public deliberation and argumentation that characterises the political process in a democracy. Giandomenico Majone (1989: 1), one of the most
prominent proponents of this understanding of the policy process, explains that, ‘[w]hether in written or oral form, argument is central in all stages of the policy process’. The logical consequence of this mode of looking at the political process is that ‘facts and values are so intertwined in policy-making that factual arguments unaided by persuasion seldom play a significant role in public debate’ (ibid.: 8).

As Greenhalgh and Russell (2006: 36) point out, ‘[p]olicy making is not a series of decision nodes into which evidence, however robust, can be ‘fed’, but the messy unfolding of collective action, achieved mostly through dialogue, argument, influence and conflict and retrospectively made sense of through the telling of stories’. In this perspective, looking more closely at the origins of the prevalent ideas about the arts within the Western intellectual tradition which have fed into official policy discourses can be a useful exercise: identifying the themes that seem to predominate and those which appear neglected or silenced can tell us a lot about the priorities and central agendas of the government in power.

Negative vs positive transformation: a fundamental ambivalence in Western thought

Looking historically at the question of what artistic experiences might ‘do’ to people, we can identify, within Western culture, three main strands of thought about the ‘impacts’ of the arts (using the term loosely): a positive tradition, a negative one, and a more recent intellectual tradition centred around the rejection of the very notion that the effects that the arts may or may not have on individuals’ ethics, knowledge and behaviour should represent a legitimate grounds for the assessment of the arts’ worth or place in society.

As we have seen, ideas derived from what we have referred to as the ‘positive tradition’, and the perception of the beneficial transformation that the arts can supposedly bring about, account for most of the arguments officially endorsed in public debates around the funding and promotion of the arts and the need to encourage young people’s engagement in creative and artistic pursuits. Yet, historically, views of the effects and nature of the arts and creativity have actually been significantly more conflicting. Already in fifth century BC Athens, Plato’s dialogues (which represent the first instances of recorded aesthetic thought in the West) showed a definite ambivalence towards the arts and their potential effects. As a matter of fact, both the ‘positive’ and the ‘negative’ traditions can be seen to originate in his thought (Belfiore, 2006b).

In his Republic, Plato presented one of the most forceful and influential condemnations of the arts in Western civilisation. His argument was that the mimetic arts constitute a corrupting influence because of the hold they have on the emotional, irrational – and therefore especially susceptible – part of the soul over the more rational and, therefore, sensible part. Nevertheless, and precisely because they can affect people and behaviour so powerfully, Plato also thought that, when properly censored and selected on the basis of their edifying content, those very mimetic arts can also have a profound educational effect. By provoking correct and morally desirable emotional reactions, then, the arts (when properly administered) might prove a very useful tool for the Philosopher Kings in the education of the citizenry and the promotion of the values and forms of behaviour which are conducive to the good polity.

Plato’s writings are peppered with what are, ostensibly, similarly ambivalent comments about the nature of creativity and artistic inspiration, so that modern critics are divided between those who argue that Plato, in line with his condemnation of the moral and cognitive fallacies of poetry in the Republic, saw artistic inspiration as a form of insanity and those who (basing their conclusion on the Ion especially) maintain that Plato saw the poet as a divinely inspired creator of beauty, whose insight is only slightly inferior to that of the philosopher (Partee, 1971).
Plato’s opinion on the power of the arts to provide knowledge and insight was also mixed. On the one hand, the *Republic* denies a cognitive function for the arts on the grounds that they are merely an imperfect copy of the world, which is itself a copy of the ‘forms’ or ‘ideas’, the only true reality. As such, artistic representations are twice removed from reality and, consequently, can hardly be relied upon for the transmission of true knowledge. Yet, whilst not ‘true’ per se, artistic representations have a hold on people and, therefore, can lend themselves to being skillfully manipulated by the ruling philosophers so as to play an important educational role in the ideal state (Belfiore, 2006b).

Plato’s influential elaborations on the nature and the psychological and cognitive effects of the arts effectively present us, in nuce, with the main arguments that eventually developed into both the positive and negative traditions. There is no space here to describe the evolution over time of these two fundamental understandings of how the arts may affect those who enjoy them, so what follows will only attempt to identify crucial nodal points in the intellectual history of these ideas about the transformative powers of the arts.  

On the ‘negative’ front, Platonic concerns over the powers of the arts to corrupt and instigate socially and morally undesirable behaviours were later shared by the Fathers of the Church – the group of Christian philosophers who, between the first and sixth century AD developed the fundamental tenets of Christian theology and philosophy. The most prominent representative of this group of thinkers is arguably St Augustine (fourth century), who raised concerns about the desensitising and distancing effect of theatre on its audience, who – especially where tragic theatre was concerned – are encouraged to enjoy witnessing pain, humiliation and suffering on stage, a pastime that he saw as hardly compatible with the Christian virtue of compassion.

The endorsement of Platonic negative perceptions of the impact of the arts by the ideologues of the Church was important, in that it guaranteed their survival and continued influence throughout the Middle Ages and early modernity. The example of the venomous moral polemic launched by the Elizabethan anti-theatrical pamphleteers is indeed representative of the ways in which Platonic themes survived and were adapted to fit the cultural battles of later times. Interestingly, those very same arguments against the theatre (which centred around the claim that theatre encouraged emulation of the actions portrayed on the scene, and therefore promoted lust, violence, immoral and unlawful behaviour) have survived in our contemporary times, and are behind the very modern preoccupation with what sociologists refer to as ‘media effects’ (Barker and Petley, 2001). The mass media, particularly television, and other forms of popular entertainment such as computer games, are often criticised for allegedly promoting dangerous copycat behaviour. Because of the perceived risk of ‘social contagion’, these cultural forms are seen as a negative influence from which the young and psychologically vulnerable ought to be protected. The existence of bodies dedicated to film and videogames classification throughout the West is the result of precisely such concerns over the possibility that some cultural experiences might prove harmful for younger audiences.

Another crucial moment in the historical evolution of the negative tradition is represented by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), who ensured the survival of Platonic preoccupations into the modern, and increasingly secular, era. Rousseau indeed had studied Plato’s dialogues in preparation for his essay *Lettre à M. d’Alembert sur les spectacles* (1758), which argued against the notion that the theatre can have a beneficial moralising (or a cognitive and educational) effect on its audience. Rousseau maintained that theatre is in fact mere entertainment, and potentially dangerous entertainment at that, since it is a waste of man’s time, which ought to be devoted to the nobler pursuits of work and family.

Another aspect of Rousseau’s position which echoes contemporary concerns was the conviction that theatre might have an undesirable ‘distancing’ effect, whereby audiences who could
respond intensely and be deeply moved by the hero’s vicissitudes on stage might well find themselves indifferent to the plight of real people in everyday life. Modern aesthetic theory refers to this phenomenon as ‘psychic distance’. This is seen as problematic, in that it might well result in the kind of aesthetic contemplation which supplants direct political and moral action. In this perspective, then, rather than encouraging positive social and cultural transformation, the arts are seen as, in fact, potentially constraining change, by diverting attention and action away from reality and towards the world of the imagination.

If we move from the negative to the positive tradition, Plato, as we have seen, remains an important reference point for those theorists who posit that the arts and creative endeavours, when carefully overseen, can play a positive formative and educational role in the life of young and malleable minds. However, it is with Plato’s most illustrious disciple, Aristotle (fourth century BC) that the idea that the mimetic arts can have beneficial impacts enters Western thought – deprived of the negative undertones and the ambivalence that it had in Plato’s dialogues. In his Poetics, Aristotle argued that the experience of ‘pity and fear’ afforded by the theatre can have a cathartic effect on audiences. No further details or clarification are offered in what we have left of the Poetics, which has arrived to us most probably in an incomplete form. Scholars agree that Aristotle’s intention was to offer a counterbalance to the Platonic indictment of mimetic art (and especially theatre) in the Republic, but no consensus exists on what Aristotle actually meant when he wrote of the ‘cathartic’ powers of theatre. It is therefore unsurprising that, over time, a number of different interpretations have emerged, which eventually developed into full blown theories about the beneficial transformative powers of the arts and make up what we have termed the ‘positive tradition’ of thinking and writing about the impacts of the arts.

The most influential interpretations of Aristotelian catharsis can be grouped into three main categories, depending on whether catharsis is seen mainly as an emotional, intellectual or ethical process. The psychological interpretation of catharsis as a process of emotional release sees the aesthetic experience as an effective ‘purgation’ of undesirable or noxious feelings. This view has a long and illustrious pedigree, and is at the root of the belief in the contribution that the arts may make to healing both the body and the mind. Contemporary arts in health policies and arts-based psychotherapies – such as, for instance the psychotherapeutic theatre movement championed by Jacob L. Moreno (1975) – represent the present-day developments of the fundamental Aristotelian notion that through an aesthetic experience people can be helped to deal with and free themselves from the grip of traumatic experiences and troubling emotions.

An alternative interpretation of the catharsis that can be achieved through aesthetic experiences sees it as a cognitive process. Here intellectual confusion is purged, to be replaced by insight, clearer understanding and deeper knowledge. This view of the formative and knowledge-building effects of the arts has enjoyed a remarkable longevity within Western culture and a number of personalities were pivotal in ensuring its survival and diffusion. One of these is the Latin poet Horace (65–68 BC), who was the first to explicitly state that the very best poet is the one who can, with his verses, both delight and improve. The notion of the arts as a ‘useful delight’ is indeed at the very heart of both the idea of the transformative powers of artistic endeavours and the perception of the arts as a force for the good, and therefore worthy of support and promotion. The argument that the ‘usefulness’ of the pleasure which artistic engagement provides has specifically to do with learning, cognitive development and the process of self-improvement was a point elaborated by the Italian humanists of the Renaissance and, later, by the German philosophers of Bildung in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The latter, and particularly thinkers and poets such as Herder, Humboldt, Goethe and Schiller, played a crucial role in elaborating one of the most influential notions of education and the
formative role of aesthetic experiences in the West. These still resonate in contemporary educational theories and scholastic curricula.

The third interpretation of aesthetic catharsis is indebted to this notion of the arts as a tool for self-development, but places the emphasis on the moral, rather than cognitive dimension of the process. I refer here to the strand of thinking that posits that the catharsis or ‘purification’ in question is of an ethical nature, so that the encounter with the arts has a humanising, moralising and ultimately civilising effect. The notions that familiarity with the arts makes us better people and that a society that promotes the arts and culture is, for that very reason, a higher form of civilisation are deeply embedded in Western culture. They are indeed one of the principal justifications for state involvement in cultural matters (Bennett, 1995). The key difference between notions of the arts as a vehicle for Bildung and the theories belonging to this last group is the shift in emphasis from the personal to the societal. The arts are conceived of as a means to educate and improve the whole of humankind. It is with the French thinkers of the eighteenth century that this change of perspective takes root. Diderot, Alembert, Voltaire and the other Enlightenment philosophes endeavoured to highlight the social value of the aesthetic sphere, and advocated the production of the type of art that could instil civic values, thus contributing to the progress of humankind. They promoted a new hierarchy of cultural production, in which artistic work that had moral and civic utility was considered superior to work that aimed merely to delight or help pass the time. This ethical regard for the role of the arts in society and the attribution of a crucial moral function of guidance to artists reached its apogee with the Romantic movement. Shelley’s confident declaration that ‘poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world’ and that ‘poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man’ represent a compelling and illustrious example of this position, which through its later incarnations in personalities such as Matthew Arnold, F. R. Leavis, and more recently, Roger Scruton and Brian McMaster has had, and still has, great influence over British cultural policy-making.

Looking at the history of the belief in the powers of the arts to moralise and civilise is helpful as it reveals the less savoury and routinely ignored aspects of the ‘impact rhetoric’. For instance, the civilising effects of the arts were consistently referred to in order to defend and justify the colonial enterprise in nineteenth century Imperial Europe. The myth of the civilised European regaling the savage colonies with the gift of culture was indeed a recurring image in the writings of this period. Rudyard Kipling’s poem on the ‘white man’s burden’ to bring civilisation to the ‘half-devil and half-child’ folk in the colonies is a case in point.

The two broad intellectual traditions that we have looked at so far both centre around the effects of the arts on audiences and their resulting function in society. Whether they are seen as a social and moral panacea or a source of corruption and distraction from worthier preoccupations, in both the positive and negative traditions, cultural value is attributed or denied on the basis of the arts’ perceived impact. A third body of thinking developed in Europe around in the mid-eighteenth century, and denied absolutely the legitimacy of any link between the value of the arts and their supposed utility or perniciousness. This strand of thinking originally developed in response to the perceived subordination of aesthetic concerns to ethical, religious, political or social considerations in the discussion of the value and role of the arts in society; the incipient growth of the arts market and mass produced cultural products (and the contingent emphasis on their market value as opposed to a ‘pure’ aesthetic value); and to the rejection of the notion that any art that did not move to good and socially accepted behaviour ought to be condemned on moral grounds. Noël Carroll explains that, in this perspective, ‘art and ethics are autonomous realms of value and, thus, criteria from the ethical realm should not be imported to evaluate the aesthetic realm’ (in Belfiore and Bennett, 2008: 176). The writers in this tradition indeed suggested – as French novelist Gautier put it – that ‘nothing is really beautiful unless it is useless’
and that ethical considerations ought to be inherently extraneous to any aesthetic judgement: the value of art resides in the aesthetic sphere alone.

Interestingly, the origin of this strand of thought can be attributed to one of the great misunderstandings in history. The German idealist philosopher Kant was considered by his contemporaries as the originator of this theoretical position arguing for a complete autonomy of the aesthetic sphere from all others. In his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) Kant did write that art is ‘purposiveness without a purpose’ and that ‘neither does perfection gain by beauty, nor beauty by perfection’. He was indeed attempting to move away from classical views of art as the handmaiden of theology, or – in increasingly more secular times – politics and social reform. However, Kant remained convinced of the deeply moral nature and function of art and art appreciation, and would probably have been puzzled by the way in which nuggets of his philosophical system travelled abroad and eventually developed into the much more radical positions of the Aesthetic movement of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, epitomised by writers such as Oscar Wilde in England, Théophile Gautier in France and the pre-Raphaelite artists.

The rejection of the notion of public utility and the positive impacts of the arts as a proxy for their value has survived in contemporary cultural policy discourses, where this position is often referred to as advocating ‘art for art’s sake’. Declarations condemning the instrumental attitudes of politicians and policy-makers (who are felt to appreciate the arts purely for the contribution they can make to the political agendas of the day) abound in public debates around the arts and culture. They are often accompanied by a great deal of nostalgia for the allegedly less overtly instrumental policies of the past, even though there is in fact no evidence that ‘art for art’s sake’ ever was a guiding rationale for cultural policies.

Conclusions

Arguably, the most striking and distinguishing feature of public debates around the public value of the arts and cultural policy in the West today is the growing difficulty in elaborating a convincing argument in support of state funding of the arts by politicians, arts administrators, artists and taxpayers alike. The reasons behind the arts community’s increasing struggle to ‘make a case’ for funding are hardly mysterious but, in fact, well documented. First, these difficulties arise from the supposed crisis of the welfare state, brought about by an alleged globalisation-induced ‘retreat of the state’; second, they relate to the growing difficulties of convincingly explaining why certain forms of artistic expression should find institutional validation and support through public funding while others are left to fend for themselves in the free market.

The result of the postmodern onslaught on traditional cultural values and the institutions that represented them has inevitably complicated the formulation of any cultural policy, predicated as they always are on value judgements as the basis for funding allocation and decisions about what artistic practices to support. In this context, the cultural sector’s response to the increasingly challenging cultural and political environment has been a strategy of ‘policy attachment’ (Gray, 2002). Here the arts, although a policy area commanding small budgets and little political clout, have progressively attached themselves to economic and social agendas, thus benefiting from the larger budgets and the greater political influence of those areas of public policy. At the root of the rhetorical prominence of the ideas about the effects of artistic engagement produced within what we have called the ‘positive tradition’ is therefore their consonance with the political priorities of the government of the time.

In Britain, the arts and creativity were made key elements in the delivery of New Labour’s social policy agenda, and the arguments that have been referred to in order to build the case for the positive impacts of the arts were carefully chosen from an available pool of ideas so as to
make the case more compelling. In this process, the ideas and interpretations elaborated within both the ‘negative’ and ‘autonomy’ traditions found themselves in a rhetorically weaker position. As a result, they have been relatively neglected and absent from public debates around the social impacts of the arts, which have been articulated as reliably positive, predictable and generalisable across a wide population. Whilst the power of the belief in the transformative powers of the arts has been especially significant in shaping cultural policies, as Sefton-Green (2008: 22) points out, ‘the prospect of deep change’ is also at the root of the more recent fascination with the notion of ‘creative learning’, which, he argues, ‘taps into folk-theories around the idea of developing creative thinking’. Creative learning, indeed, ‘embodies a series of values and deep beliefs about human nature and personal development, which although at odds with some social scientific models, again derive their legitimacy from their popularity and broad principles’ (ibid.: 24). Therefore, a belief in the positive impacts of arts engagement represents another crucial ‘frame’ that contributes to the popularity of creative learning among both education professionals and policy-makers.

However, this chapter has attempted to show that the official rhetoric of cultural organisations, government and public discourses around education often tells a very partial story, and that discourses of the arts’ impact and creative learning are in fact imbued with a number of value-laden beliefs about the arts’ positive transformative powers, rather than emerging from any research-based evidence. As such, it is important that this transformational rhetoric should be subjected to close intellectual scrutiny, in order to reveal its underlying values, and the alternative views that are obscured in the processes of policy formation.

Notes

1 See Belfiore, 2006a; Selwood, 2002.
4 That is, those arts based on the imitation of reality.
5 The three intellectual traditions are discussed in much greater detail in Belfiore and Bennett (2008), on which this section of the chapter is based.

References

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