

Why Art ?

Bob Geldof in his TV programme 'A Fanatic Heart', released on RTE for the centenary of 1916, makes a provocative suggestion:

One hundred years ago, a handful of Irishmen and women rose up against the British Empire. A six-day rebellion ended in their execution and elevation to near-sainthood. But are they Ireland's greatest heroes? Is the GPO Ireland's most sacred place? To me, it represents the birth of a pious, bitter and narrow-minded version of Ireland I couldn't wait to escape. But there was another version of Ireland, dreamt up by a poet... His vision was mythical, romantic, truly heroic and beautiful. That was the Ireland I could never leave behind.'

Bob Geldof agrees with Oliver St. John Gogarty: 'there is no Free State without Yeats.' Both imply that Ireland doesn't exist without art. Others have suggested that since the beginning of the 20th Century [and the founding of our Free State] we swapped British Rule for three alternative colonisations: a particular brand of 'nationalism;' a homegrown blend of 'Catholicism;' and the prevailing Western culture of 'scientific realism.'¹ You may agree or disagree, but one thing is sure: the twenty-first century is a cultural tsunami that hit the whole world and washed away most sign-posts and values which constituted the western world as we have known it up to now.

So, as we sit here in Leinster House at the beginning of 2019, when all the 'isms' of the previous century have worn thin, where do we go and to whom do we turn for a compass and a guideline on the way towards the future?

It is not for me, or for anyone else for that matter, to provide a justification for art. Art needs no justification and will survive and endure even where repudiated or indeed persecuted. The words, supposedly issuing from Nazi Germany, about reaching for a gun whenever the word culture is

¹ Tomás Mac Síomóin, *The Broken Harp, Identity and Language in Modern Ireland*, Dublin, Nuascéalta Teoranta, 2014.

mentioned, have less dramatic and more subtle forms of asphyxiation which are more regularly applied.

Let me, in the ten minutes allotted, at least try to give one good reason why art in this country must be supported and promoted at all costs.

We cannot leave the future of Ireland to politicians alone. Our great dilemma is that we are trying to prepare ourselves for a world which we will never be able to forecast. Only imagination can help us to prepare for the future. How could any of us who grew up in the 1950s, 60s, or 70s have prepared ourselves for a world of Text Twitter and Tweet?

The future is not something out there which we step into as an already designed space. The future is ourselves as we choose to become. The future is alive with possibility to the extent that we are open to change. Change occurs most profitably in the wake of fundamental shifts in our way of being. These occur mostly because someone has imagined and described them. Works of art are often the first hints we get. Artists are there to harvest possible shapes for the future, to sketch in outline what we might become.

The future is in our hands. Obviously, there are forces working, influences abounding, pressures surrounding, which diminish our autonomy and lessen our responsibility. However, it is still possible for those of us who live on this island approaching the third decade of the twenty-first century to shape our future within the limitations and constrictions which global membership of the universe imposes. There are many imperatives and considerations which should determine the steps we take, but prominent among these should be the voice of artists and the educating influence of art. This is not the only factor but it should be a decisive one. Art can provide an accurate and unflinching cardiograph of the present, with a prognosis of possibilities for the future, which politicians and leaders ignore at their peril.

There may have been other times in history when truth was made available through politics, religion or philosophy for instance, but such grand narratives have been found wanting. We have to rely these days on sleuths with a keen sense of smell. Artists are at present the best trackers we've got. 'Art is a secret logic of the imagination . . . [which] subverts actual worlds in the name of possible worlds.'² The artist may not even be aware of all that is happening through their work. In a certain sense he or she can be used as mouthpiece for the psychic secrets of the times in which they live. Art of the future has no template, no guide, no intellectual categories; it feels its way forward, finding words beyond the vocabulary of any language we currently know.

A dialogue should happen between artists and the rest of us. Others do not have the sensitivity, the authenticity, the flair for capturing such originality.

But others do have to build the future. We are those others. So, in whatever way, and to whatever extent is possible, we must become aware of the direction in which the trail-blazers are pointing. This does not mean that we have to be artists. It does not even mean that we have to appreciate art ourselves. It does mean that someone has to produce the appropriate work of art and that our socio-cultural ambience has to become infused with the understanding which such art inspires so that the movement forward which we instigate is initiated, energised, directed and informed by the spirit of that art, shaped by the space cleared for us by such work.

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January, 2019.

² Richard Kearney, *Navigations*, Lilliput, Dublin, 2006, P. 301.