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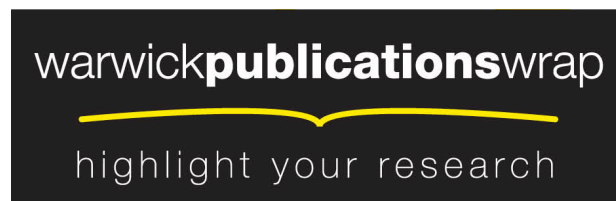
Rethinking the Social Impacts of the Arts

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Abstract

The paper presents a critical discussion of the current debate over the social impacts of the arts in the UK. It argues that the accepted understanding of the terms of the debate is rooted in a number of assumptions and beliefs that are rarely questioned. The paper goes on to present the interim findings of a three-year research project, which aims to rethink the social impact of the arts, with a view to determining how these impacts might be better understood. The desirability of a historical approach is articulated, and a classification of the claims made within the Western intellectual tradition for what the arts 'do' to people is presented and discussed.

Key words: social impacts of the arts, cultural history, civilising mission, intellectuals and cultural policy, unconscious and un-measurable impacts, negative impacts; evidence-based policy.

Introduction

One of the consequences of government funding of the arts, a consequence that resounds perhaps even as much as the art itself, is the public debate about its social value. Without funding, without the provocation of a cultural policy that privileges and legitimises some manifestations of art rather than others, the debate about value would most likely become a recondite affair, conducted - if at all - by *cognoscente* far away from the noisy arena of public policy. Of course, from time to time artists, whether funded by government or not, are always going to offend elements of public sensibility, and this is going to provoke public debate. But even then, it is often the legitimisation bestowed by government that becomes the focus of the debate. We can say, therefore, that it is the existence of a government-funded cultural policy and of the status thus bestowed on the arts that is to a large extent responsible for public discussion of their value. As we shall see, it was not always thus, but it does appear to be a feature of the present times.

The fact that cultural policy promotes this debate about value is obviously welcomed by those who work in or value the arts themselves and wish to see the arts as a vital and invigorating part of the public sphere. However, the association of this debate with the issue of government funding has come at a cost. Instead of a rigorous exploration of the complex issues involved, a rather simplistic debate has taken place, which has focused on measurable 'impacts' of the arts and which has left a number of fundamental assumptions unchallenged.

This, in part, can be attributed to the imperatives of 'evidence-based policy making', which has become something of an orthodoxy in Britain in most areas of domestic policy and which has therefore to a large extent determined the terms of the public debate about the arts. As Chris Smith, a former Secretary of State for Culture has said of arts funding, '[t]his is not something for nothing. We want to see measurable

outcomes for the investment which is being made' (DCMS, 1998). A more recent statement by another previous British arts minister, Estelle Morris, gives an even clearer illustration of how the terms of this debate have been cast:

> I know that Arts and Culture make a contribution to health, to education, to crime reduction, to strong communities, to the economy and to the nation's well-being but I don't always know how to evaluate it or describe it. We have to find a language and a way of describing its worth. It's the only way we'll secure the greater support we need (Morris, 2003).

These statements tell a story and at the same time reflect some of those unquestioned assumptions mentioned above. First of all, the phrase 'Arts and Culture' suggests that there is a shared understanding of what actually constitutes 'the arts'. But even a cursory glance at both academic literature and policy documents reveals that this is far from the case. The erosion of cultural authority, or, to put it another way, the pluralisation of authority, which has been such a striking feature of intellectual life in the 'postmodern' world, has bequeathed an array of competing notions of the arts that all stake their claim to legitimacy.

So, for example, the idea of the arts as essentially European high culture, though no longer hegemonic as it once was, still finds expression in some of the major art houses around the world and in the writings of conservative cultural critics, like Roger Scruton (Scruton, 1998). In other contexts, such as the national Arts Councils and Ministries of Culture of Europe, this idea has been modified by a rhetoric of cultural diversity, although the diversity thus legitimised is often of a highly selective kind, relating to specific forms of ethnicity. A different concept of cultural diversity, such as that promulgated by Chris Smith in his book, *Creative Britain*, puts the emphasis on the 'good of its kind', where all forms of culture are equally valid but the best within each raises it to the level of art (Smith, 1998, 3). However, in anglophone 'cultural studies', the very idea of 'the arts' is often the object of thinly disguised hostility,

forever associated with elitism and pretensions of social superiority (Lewis & Miller, 2003). Instead, popular culture is valorised, and 'the arts' become the forms of culture that most people consume - that is to say, the products of the cultural or creative industries. For John Carey, writing in his latest book, *What Good are the Arts?*, the only possible conclusion is that 'a work of art is anything that anyone has considered a work of art' (Carey, 2005, 29). In the face of all this uncertainty, the solution in policy debates has often been to avoid the problem altogether by falling back on institutional definitions, where the arts simply become whatever the arts funding system happens to be supporting at the time. However, unless we can be clear about what we mean by the arts, we are not going to get very far in understanding either their value or their 'impacts'.

A second assumption that can be inferred from Morris's statement is that experiences of the arts are in some way commensurate; that it is, in other words, possible to generalise about peoples' experiences of the arts within art forms, across art forms and across a diverse population. But is this really the case? Can, for example, the reading of a novel like Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* be in any way commensurate with reading Jane Austen? Can the experience of looking at a painting be meaningfully compared with that of listening to a piece of music on an iPod? And, as numerous studies have shown, from Pierre Bourdieu to Paul Willis, the value or impact of a work of art will vary enormously, according to all the factors that make up a person's identity, including age, class, health, wealth and so on.

A third assumption is that the arts, whatever we mean by them, do actually produce positive social impacts and these, to use Morris's words, relate to 'health, education, to crime reduction, to strong communities, to the economy and to the nation's well-being'. Arts Council England asserts that the arts 'have the power to transform lives and communities' (Arts Council England, 2002, 2). Smith even tells us that 'they are

one of the main factors by which we assess a civilisation' (Smith, 1998, 49). A corollary of this is that the arts produce no negative impacts or, if they do, they are so negligible that they are not worth mentioning. But do the arts really have these transformative powers? And, if they do, is it not possible that the transformations they induce may have negative as well as positive consequences?

A fourth assumption is that these positive impacts can be proved. It is this that is behind Smith's call for 'measurable outcomes' and the proliferation of both economic and social impact studies, which purport to provide the evidence that evidence-based policy-making demands. Public debate about the value of the arts thus comes to be dominated by what might best be termed the cult of the measurable; and, of course, it is those disciplines primarily concerned with measurement, namely, economics and statistics, which are looked upon to find the evidence that will finally prove why the arts are so important to individuals and societies. A corollary of this is that the humanities are of little use in this investigation.

However, as we have argued in a previous paper, economics can only take us so far. (Bennett, 2005, 455-58). They can tell us that the arts produce economic impacts and they can (though rarely do) tell us how great or small these impacts are in relation to other areas of human activity. But unless we see economic function as the primary purpose of the arts, then economics can have little to tell us about their intrinsic value. Similarly, economics can show that the arts may have 'positive externalities' and that, if they do, this can be a justification of public subsidy. But what economics cannot do is tell us how the externalities attached to the arts actually do enrich individuals and societies. As Craufurd Goodwin has noted in his introduction to a special issue of *History of Political Economy* on the case for public support of the arts, 'the conviction that the arts were a vital and enriching element in human life'

was for economists as for anyone else 'visceral as much as analytical' (Goodwin 2005, 399).

A fifth assumption, made explicitly by Estelle Morris and widely shared by those working in the subsidised arts sector in Britain, is that proof of impacts can safeguard and increase government funding of the arts. This has had three consequences. First, public discussion about the impact of the arts has to large extent become inseparable from the discussion of their funding. Secondly, research on both value and impacts has usually been underpinned by an advocacy agenda, even when the research agenda has been disguised as one of dispassionate enquiry. The challenge, therefore, has not been to establish whether or not such impacts exist, but to come up with evidence that they do. It is a challenge that not only consultants have risen to, for which they have been amply rewarded, but also academics who should have known better, and it is this that has resulted in the proliferation of methodologically unsound impact studies that have been the subject of some quite extensive scholarly critique (eg. Hansen, 1995; van Puffelen, 1996; Belfiore, 2002; Merli, 2002). Thirdly, considerably more time and resources have been spent on looking for 'proof' of impacts than on actually trying to understand them.

A final assumption on which we would like to comment, also explicitly made by Morris but shared amongst others by the present UK Secretary of State for Culture, Tessa Jowell (2004), and by the think-tank Demos[1], is that a new language is needed for discussing the value of the arts. This call for a new language is clearly a tacit admission of the failure so far to find 'proof of impacts' that can command assent in the competitive struggle for limited resources. However, in linking this 'new language' so closely to funding issues, as Morris and the Demos pamphleteers both do, there is

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[1] See Holden 2005.

a real danger that we will end up not with a more nuanced understanding of the value of the arts but with more advocacy disguised as research and yet another round of policy-based evidence-making.

The questioning of the assumptions outlined above has been integral to a three-year research project currently underway, in which we are aiming to rethink the social impact of the arts, with a view to determining how these impacts might better be understood. The project is being jointly funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and Arts Council England, on the clear understanding that the research is autonomously conducted and the research agenda detached from any advocacy concerns that the sponsors may have. We see this as a model of good practice in research funding, which contributes to both the integrity and the rigour of the research process.

What follows are the interim findings of the first part of the project, in which we undertake a critical-historical examination of claims that have been made for both the social value and impacts of the arts, with particular reference to poetry, the novel and theatrical performance. In later stages of the project, we shall be investigating the factors that affect the experience of readers and audiences; we shall be defining further the terms of our analysis, in particular what can be said to constitute the 'novel' and 'theatrical performance'; we shall rethink approaches to impact evaluation; and, finally, we shall attempt to bring together these different aspects of the project together through the formulation of case studies. The project may also be extended into an investigation of the social impacts of research in the humanities.

Claims for the Arts: From Catharsis to Autonomy

A crucial element of the project is the investigation of the Western and mainly European intellectual tradition, and the belief in the 'transformative powers of the arts' – whether positive or negative – that seem to be at the very heart of it. The goal of the exercise is to produce a taxonomy of impacts and a classification of the various claims that have been made, over time, for how the arts affect both individuals and society. A clearer understanding of the intellectual origins of contemporary claims for the arts can help to restore an element of depth to present cultural policy debates. The understanding thus gained will contribute to a better grasp of what the role of the arts is in today's society, and help us towards the elaboration of their importance beyond narrowly conceived ideas of performance measurement and target-setting.

The time-span covered by our review broadly corresponds to the duration of Western civilization itself. The range of claims have been explored by using – as evidence – texts from the literary, philosophical and political literature produced within the Western, but mainly European, intellectual field from the times of classical Greece (V-IVth century BC) to the present day[2]. For obvious reasons, the list of thinkers consulted is not exhaustive, and aims at being representative rather than comprehensive.

Before we discuss the categories of claims we have identified, a few clarifying notes need to be made. As already mentioned above, the present study requires a careful definition of the terms we use. In other words, what do we mean by 'the arts' and 'culture'? How do we conduct a rigorous discussion of the effects of artistic artefacts of a very diverse nature by separating them into genres, (such as the novel, poetry, various musical forms), when those genres are historically specific? Postmodern

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[2] The rationales for this delimitation of sources, as well as other methodological considerations are fully expounded in Belfiore and Bennett 2006.

theory has shed light on the constructed nature of artistic and cultural forms, especially those that the cultural establishment ratifies as 'art'. The efforts made within the sphere of aesthetics to provide a valid and coherent definition of art exemplify this very well. The question 'what is art?' has been puzzling theorists for centuries. (Davies 2001, 169-171; see also Harrington 2004, 23). Indeed, the time-specificity of definitions and understanding of art – and of individual art forms – is a particularly significant issue for a research project that deals with such a broad time-span as the one adopted in this study. For instance, in V century BC Athens, the very notion of the quest for a definition of art would have probably appeared altogether puzzling. For there is no word in the ancient Greek language, whose meaning corresponds to our 'art' or 'arts'. Consequently, we have adopted a flexible and inductive approach to our own definition of the term 'the arts' by accepting the understanding of the term adopted by the writers themselves, in order to accommodate changing notions and concepts of what the arts are. Whilst striving to preserve the historical sensitivity of the arguments put forward by these writers, we have also attempted to highlight their implications for contemporary debates over the nature of the arts and their function in society.

The distinctive advantage of a historical approach to the understanding of the impacts of the arts is precisely that it brings to light the complex nature of the disquisitions that have taken place in the past around the arts and their effects. In particular, looking at these debates through a historical lens has allowed us to bring to light and examine problematic issues, which are rarely subjected to scrutiny in present-day policy debates. For instance, our research shows that the rhetoric of the civilising powers of the arts was systematically employed, in XIX century Europe, to provide a moral justification for the colonial enterprise. The *leit-motif* of the torch-bearing European continent bringing the light of civilization to as yet uncivilised

countries overseas, and the related notion of what Rudyard Kipling famously dubbed 'the white man's burden' (to spread said civilisation) indeed recur time and time again in the literature of this period. Moreover, quite often, this rhetoric of the civilising mission of imperial nations was subscribed to not just by the colonisers, but by the colonised too (Mann 2004 2-3). This, in turn, had significant consequences, for it contributed to slowing down the processes by which oppressed colonies began to press for de-colonisation. Similarly, the idea that the arts can help shape people's beliefs and sense of identity has had a central place in the development of the arts and culture for propaganda purposes in non-democratic and totalitarian political systems throughout history (the Fascist, Nazi and Soviet regimes being only the most recent, if striking, examples).

Therefore, a historical approach of the type we have advocated in this paper - far from proposing a 'total history' and a search for some broader metanarrative or overarching principle to explain the evolution of thinking about the arts and cultural policy - aims rather at the very rejection of such a totalising scheme. We have, in fact, attempted to concentrate our analysis on describing differences, transformations, contingencies, continuities and discontinuities in the ways in which a kernel of basic beliefs and theories about the ways in which the arts can affect human beings have changed over time and in accordance with the political, cultural and intellectual climates of the time. This has been, therefore, an exploration of trajectories of ideas, which very rarely evolve in a straightforward and easily traceable manner. Nor was our intention to present a teleological view of the evolution of Western aesthetic thinking and indulge in a false progressivism. On the contrary, the most useful contribution a historical perspective can make to the study of the ways in which the arts impact on people is precisely to help problematize commonly and a-critically held assumptions and to challenge canonical understandings of the effects of human interactions with artworks.

In conducting our research, thus, we were very much aware that, as Michael Howard (1991, 11) points out, "there is no such thing as 'history'. History is what historians write, and historians are part of the process they are writing about. We may seek for what Jocob Burkhardt described as the 'Archimedean point outside events' which would enable us to make truly dispassionate judgements and evaluations, but we know we cannot find it". As such, we are conscious of the fallacy of any attempt to draw 'lessons' or 'truth' from history (Howard 1991; Jenkins 1991); the aim of the present enquiry is not, therefore, to derive from the historical narrative a-historical or a-political conclusions that can 'explain' the present or direct us towards a better future. Yet, as Howard (*Ibid*, 13) explains, the historian, whilst working within the limits necessarily imposed by his or her cultural environment, can and should "ensure that our view of the past is not distorted by fraud, by evident prejudice or by simple error". One of the true lessons of history, thus, is precisely that one ought never to generalize form misguiding premises that are founded on inadequate historical evidence. Adopting a historical perspective to illuminate contemporary debates around the impacts of the arts is therefore more an exercise in developing an awareness of their complexity than a search for a 'truth' that can easily presented in bite-sized bullet points.

The adoption of a historical perspective, then, has the advantage of revealing that our commonly accepted notions of the positive impacts of the arts are indeed based on a misleading simplification of a rich and diverse body of intellectual elaborations. For instance, looking at this body of thinking and its development over the centuries, it soon becomes clear that views of how the arts relate to society and views of their transformative powers have always been at the centre of highly politicised debates. This observation has, in turn, interesting reverberations on the present situation, for the cries against the excessive politicization of the Arts Council, and the laments over the excessive pressures and demands placed by governments of today over the

subsidised arts[3], when seen in a long-term historical perspective, lose their polemical edge. 'Instrumentalism' is, as a matter of fact, 2,500 years old, rather than a degeneration brought about by Britain's New Labour. The arts have been used as a tool to enforce and express power in social relations for as long as the arts themselves have been around. We would argue, in fact, that the first lucid, cogent and systematic theorization of instrumental cultural policy can be found in Plato's *Republic* (Belfiore 2006).

Finally, it is important to explain that our proposed categories of impacts have been identified through an *inductive* method, that is, through a process that consists of inferences that go from the particular to the general. The adoption of an inductive methodology meant that the relevant literature was analysed with a view to identifying recurring themes and claims. Those claims that seemed to recur with consistent regularity where then harnessed together under an appropriate 'category of claim' made for the arts and for their social function. The categories of functions here identified therefore represent generalisations inductively obtained from examining the work of over one hundred and fifty philosophers, writers, intellectuals, poets, artists, etc. (though, due to obvious limits of space, they cannot all be reviewed here).

The inductive approach described above led us to the identification of a number of broad categories of claims. As can be expected, each of the broad headings we identified includes a number of sub-categories, so that a great degree of diversity and complexity can be found within any one category. An exhaustive discussion of the content of each of the categories of impacts is unfortunately beyond the scope of the

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[3] As was already mentioned, John Tusa (2000 and 2002) and Andrew Brighton (1999 and 2006) represent typical examples of this position in the British context.

present paper[4]. Hence the discussion will focus on some of the broader and central arguments in this centuries-long discussion over the power of the arts to affect us, with a view of providing an illustration of the main positions in the debate.

The entire taxonomy is fundamentally based on the identification of three main strands of philosophical elaboration around the effects of the arts. The first may be termed the 'negative tradition', which suggests that the arts are a corrupting or distracting force in society. The second can be called the 'positive' tradition', which contends that the arts have a number of different beneficial effects. The third strand, in contrast, represents a rejection of such pragmatic understandings of art, and maintains that the value of the arts should rely on aesthetic considerations alone, and not be equated with or depend upon their utility or any other practical or ethical concern.

The 'negative tradition'

The first category we have identified harnesses together writings that argue that the arts represent a negative influence, on either the epistemological or the moral plane. The kernel of both sets of arguments can be ultimately traced back to the writings of the Greek philosopher Plato (V century BC). The belief in the alleged epistemological and cognitive powers of the arts is deep-seated within Western consciousness. In Ancient Greece, for instance, the literary works of the tragic dramatist and of Homer were held as a respected and honoured source of knowledge and understanding, as well as a guide in a diverse range of social and moral matters (Dué 2003). Nevertheless, in his *Republic*, Plato offers the first powerful rejection of such trust in the epistemological role of the arts, arguing that the poet and the artist have no

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[4] A thorough and detailed discussion of each of the categories of impact and of the methodology followed for their identification can be found in Belfiore and Bennett 2006.

privileged access to superior knowledge and understanding; hence, it would be misleading to expect artworks to transmit any form of intellectual or moral teaching. In Plato's own stern words, "An image-maker, a representer, understands only appearance, while reality is beyond him" (Plato 1993, 352).

Despite the endurance of the belief in the cognitive powers of the arts, the denial of the possibility that experiencing the arts may allow privileged access to knowledge and truth have persistently been voiced in the centuries that separates us from Plato. Perhaps surprisingly, such denials sometimes came from artists and writers themselves. Baudelaire, for instance, wrote: "Truth and songs have nothing to do with one another"; this was because "the artist depends on nobody but himself … He is his own king, his priest and his god" (in Passmore 1991, 106). In other words, the artists' works, according to Baudelaire, refer to nothing beyond themselves, and therefore cannot guarantee access to any superior sphere of knowledge and understanding.

At the root of this questioning of the connection between art and knowledge is the difficulty of explaining the content as well as the processes of knowledge-production and transfer, that the arts are said to generate. Indeed, the claim that the arts produce and communicate new knowledge implies the production of new truths and ideas that did not exist before their embodiment in works of arts. However, it has been suggested that the truths that are commonly held to be communicated by works of art are usually very general truths that relate to human nature and life, thus often representing little more than truisms. If this is indeed the case, then, no new knowledge is effectively being created - rather, commonly held truths are being reiterated (Carroll 2002, 4). For sceptics, the arts can at best put forward *hypotheses*

about human behaviour and motivation, which it is up to the individual to put to the test and verify (Hospers 1960, 45)

If we move form the epistemological to the moral sphere, we find that the intellectual origin of the concern for the potentially corrupting or distracting powers of the arts can also be identified with Plato's stern indictment of poetry and theatre in the *Republic*. The platonic censure of the mimetic arts proved most influential, especially amongst an illustrious group of philosophers who, between the I and VI centuries AD, worked to organise Christian values and belief into a coherent doctrine and a solid body of philosophical thought. It was indeed the Fathers of the Church who first gave Platonic precepts a Christian spin and expressed that Christian hostility to poetry and, in particular, the theatre, which remained central to Early Christian misgivings over the enjoyment that is to be found in the arts. In particular, an important and influential aspect of Plato's suspicion of poetry and theatre that became central to Christian attacks on the arts was the belief that the enjoyment of those artistic forms necessarily brought with it a heightened disposition to imitate in real life the actions they depicted. This belief remained, for centuries, an important ingredient in the prejudice against the stage that culminated, in England, in the venomous writing of the Puritan anti-theatrical pamphleteers whose work stretched from the XVI to the XVIII century. John Northbrooke, one of the most prominent personalities in the Puritan polemic against the theatre, in his *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes* (1577) provides a good example of the Puritan 'argument' against the theatre:

> I am persuaded that Satan hath not a more speedie way and fitter schoole to work and teach his desire, to bring men and women into his snare of concupiscence and filthie lustes of wicked whoredome, that those places and playses, and theatres are (in Truman 2003, 57)

Whilst the arguments and vehemence of the Puritan polemic against theatrical performances appears in many respects excessive and outdated, it is important to observe how the fundamental idea that certain types of performances might be damaging to impressionable or young minds and encourage emulation of undesirable behaviour is pretty much still alive today. Sociologists and psychologists have been working for the past thirty years to illuminate the phenomena of 'copycat behaviour' (the so-called 'Werther effect'[5]) generated by violent films and the popular media. Because of the body of evidence and academic research into cases of 'social contagion', "greater judgement and caution is now sometimes exercised by the media in the way real or fictitious violence, especially suicide, is depicted on screen or reported in newspapers" (Bokey and Walter 2002, 397).

A distinct strand of thinking within the negative tradition suggests that, rather than outright moral corruption, indulging in artistic activities can have the undesirable (and ethically problematic) effect of distracting us from worthier concerns or from the moral duty of direct action when the circumstances require it. George Steiner, for example, speaking in 1996 at the Edinburgh Festival, expressed precisely such a worry:

> Personally, I cannot shake the intuition that minds and sensibilities shaped by aesthetics, by their identification with fictions, by their enchantment with the past (an entrenchment which defines a humanistic pedagogy and culture), may be inhibited from any active, concrete involvement in the anguish and demands of the present. The cries of Lear might blot out those in the street outside your window; Gieseking [*sic*] at Debussy may make it well-nigh impossible to hear the terror, the thirst of the victims on the way to Dachau in the Munich suburbs (Steiner 1996).

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[5] This refers to the spate of suicides that were said (probably erroneously, according to Thorson and Öberg 2003) to have taken place following the publication in 1774 of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. In this novel, the eponymous hero commits suicide after a prolonged period of unrequited love.

Steiner is here is voicing doubts about the widespread belief in the moralizing and humanizing powers of the arts that are shared by many of the thinkers writing within the tradition under discussion here. As Karen Hanson (1998, 214) observes, the faith in the humanizing role of the arts is inevitably undermined by the "the emblematic, but historically real and genuinely problematic figure of the cultivated Nazi officer". As John Carey (2005, 140 ff.) polemically points out, not only was Hitler passionate about the arts, he was also adamant about their civilising role.

The 'positive tradition':

The 'positive' tradition of thinking about the impacts of the arts comprises a number of different categories of claim, ranging from the cathartic effects of the arts, to their positive impacts on health and well being, to their progressive social and political force, and so on. However, all these claims can ultimately be seen as originating from a number of theories on the beneficial effects of the arts that represent distinct developments of the notion of dramatic catharsis elaborated by Aristotle (384/3-322/1 BC). In his *Poetics*, Aristotle explained that experiencing pity and fear through the events witnessed on the stage has a cathartic effect on the audience. Precisely by what mechanism this happens, and in what sense audiences leave the theatre 'purified' by the performance, is not at all clear from what has survived of the *Poetics*. Unsurprisingly, a host of different readings of Aristotle's notion of catharsis have been elaborated throughout antiquity, by the Renaissance Humanist movement, and by modern scholarship. Each of these interpretations subsequently developed into theories of the healing, edifying, or educational, powers of the arts, each of which can be seen as a distinct category of impact (see Belfiore and Bennett 2006).

Elsewhere (Belfiore and Bennett 2006) we have thoroughly analysed the complexities of Aristotelian thinking about theatre and the arts, and their importance

in the development of later thinking about the ways in which the arts impacts upon the individual. For the purpose of the present paper, we can summarise and simplify the intellectual legacy of Aristotle by identifying three principal interpretations of his notion of 'catharsis': as an emotional, intellectual, or ethical process. Each of these interpretations eventually developed into full blown theories positing the therapeutic, humanising and educational functions of the arts.

The understanding of dramatic catharsis in *psychological* terms as the mechanism through which audiences are 'purged' of violent passions as a result of the theatrical experience has developed in a number of directions over the centuries,[6] yet provides the intellectual kernel of many theorizations of the powers of the arts to enhance well-being and promote psychological healing. The development of psychotherapeutic theatre by the likes of Jacob L. Moreno (1889-1974), as well as art therapies more broadly, represent important evolutions of this line of thinking about the beneficial effects of the arts on the human psyche. The idea that enjoyment of the arts has a central role in the promotion of emotional and physical wellbeing is today commonly accepted, to the extent that it has been suggested that creativity and cultural pursuits have an important evolutionary role to play, more so, in fact, than traditional biological factors (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, 318). In addition, because they amuse and entertain us, the arts have also been credited with contributing to man's happiness. This is how William Morris (1966[1886], 84) described what he saw as the fundamental function of art:

> … the Aim of Art is to increase the happiness of men, by giving them beauty and interest of incident to amuse their leisure, and prevent them wearying even of rest, and by giving them hope and bodily pleasure in their work; or, shortly, to make man's work happy and his rest fruitful. Consequently, genuine art is an unmixed blessing to the race of man.

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[6] This explanation of catharsis is based on the notion of 'psychic discharge', whereby pent up emotions in the spectators find an outlet as well as emotional release through the theatrical performance.

The *intellectual* interpretation of the cathartic process postulates that catharsis ought to be viewed as a cognitive process (as the purgation of intellectual confusion), whereby the aesthetic experience results in clearer understanding and in the acquisition of knowledge. A crucial figure in the development of this view of the educational powers of the arts (and poetry in particular) is the Latin poet Horace (65-8 BC). Building on Aristotle's defence of poetry from the Platonic censure, Horace argues, in his *Ars Poetica*, that poets can either be useful – *prodesse* – or delight – *delectare* – with their works. However, the truly great poet, whose reputation lives forever and who is granted an almost god-like status in society, is the poet that successfully combines the two, to produce poetry that can, at the same time, delight and improve (Blackeney 1928). By very tortuous trajectories, the idea of the arts as a form of 'useful delight' became central to European thinking on the function of the arts. Through the writing of the Italian Humanists of the XVI century and the German philosophers of *bildung* of the XVIII and XIX centuries - just to mention two of the crucial routes - the dyad *prodesse et delectare* developed into fully articulated theories of the civilising and educational functions of the arts.

The *ethical* interpretation of Aristotelian catharsis posits that the main function of tragedy (and the argument was, over time, extended to the arts more generally) is moral education, by teaching audiences to restrain their emotions through a series of examples and counter-examples portrayed on the stage. By witnessing the vicissitudes and sufferings of the tragic heroes, the audience found their own moral strength enhanced whilst also receiving, through useful models, guidance on how to behave in similar circumstances. This moral view of the cathartic mechanism, and Horace's proclamation that the task of true poetry was to amuse and edify, were brought together by the Italian Humanists in the XV and XVI centuries and harnessed into a coherent articulation of the powers of poetry to provide moral teachings.

The move from a perspective focusing on the individual to one that argued for the positive moral influence of art upon the whole of society is the legacy of the *philosophes* of the French Enlightenment. The group of writers usually referred to by this label – Diderot, Marmontel, Alembert, Condillac, and Voltaire – coherently put forward a radically innovative theory of the social value of the aesthetic sphere, and advocated an art which could forge citizens imbued with moral and civic values and virtues. In other words, they postulated that art should be used for the education and moral improvement of mankind (Saisselin 1970, 200). A crucial step in this process was the *philosophes*' attribution of moral value to public utility, and the establishment of a link between such public utility and the call of the artist. This represents a point of departure from previous elaborations of the moral functions of poetry, which tended to focus primarily on processes of individual self-improvement and self-fashioning.

The social and political character of the influence attributed to the arts is also central to Romantic theories of culture, whose legacy has proved not only enduring, but also particularly significant in the theoretical elaboration of the main rationales for state involvement in the arts and contemporary cultural policy.[7] Particularly influential were Romantic notions of the poet as interpreter of transcendental or divine truths, and of poetry as "the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth", to borrow the words of the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (Shelley 1954, 281). The Romantic belief in poetry as a civilising force in society - "Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man" (*Ibid.*, 293) – also proved extremely influential in England, whilst via similar notions elaborated by Weimar theorists (Goethe, Schiller, etc.) these ideas became current throughout Europe. Through the influence of those

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[7] For a discussion of the intellectual legacy of the Romantics and their influence on cultural policy see Bennett (2006)

such as Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis, the typically Romantic faith in the civilising powers of the arts eventually provided a central guiding principle for contemporary cultural policy-making in Britain and beyond.[8]

The 'autonomy' tradition: rejecting instrumental logic

The third strand of thinking we have identified is a grouping of arguments around the view that - whilst the arts might well have educational, cognitive, humanising or other powers (either positive or negative) - the value and importance of the work of art resides firmly in the aesthetic sphere. Non-aesthetic considerations, then, ought to carry little weight in aesthetic matters. Thus, in this view, aesthetic values alone should provide enough grounds for the centrality of the arts in the life of both individuals and society, without the need to look for further legitimacy through other benefits that might be seen to accrue from the aesthetic experience. In the present cultural policy debate, such views are often labelled as arguments in favour of "art for art's sake". Interestingly, the adoption of a historical perspective reveals that, ultimately, the theoretical reference of the present label, that is, the so-called theories of art for art's sake developed between the XVIII and the XIX centuries in France and England, originated, in fact, from a misunderstanding and distortion of Kantian aesthetics (Wilcox 1953; Bell-Villada 1996).

Countering what was an entrenched view of art as the handmaiden of theology or, in an increasingly secular world, ethics, Kant, in section 16 of the *Critique of Judgement* (1987, 78; originally published in 1790) attempts to identify a sphere of autonomy for art, declaring that "neither does perfection gain by beauty, nor beauty by perfection". For Kant, the aesthetic dimension has both a cognitive and a moral value, despite not

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[8] For a discussion of the relation of Arnold's ideas to the development of cultural institutions in Britain, see Bennett (2005)

being able to transmit universal knowledge or universal ethical values. Nevertheless, by defining art as "purposiveness without a purpose", Kant asserts that artworks have no purpose outside of themselves, and as such, they cannot serve any practical (or, as we would say today, instrumental) function or purpose. By the late XVIII century, this idea seemed to have taken firm root within the German intelligentsia. In the twenty-second letter of his *Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), Schiller similarly argues: "nothing is more at variance with the concept of beauty than it should have a tendentious effect upon the character" (in Bell-Villada 1996, 27). It is primarily through the influence of Kant's writings, however, that the affirmation of the emancipation of art from practical finality and moral preoccupation eventually developed into theories of *l'art pour l'art*.

This conceptual shift was the result of the influence of a number of cultural intermediaries who translated and popularised (and, in the process, distorted) Kantian ideas. In particular, Madame de Staël (1766-1817), who spent some time in Weimar in the winter of 1803-4 together with Benjamin Constant, played a key role in this dubious diffusion of Kant's aesthetic theory by giving a rather imprecise account of it in her book *De l'Allemagne*. Here, de Staël suggests that Kant's writing postulates a stark separation between the aesthetic and the moral, thus providing a crucial inspiration for the 'Aesthetic movement'.

Indeed, in the course of the XIX century, such ideas around the autonomy of the arts developed into theories that proposed a separation between art and morality, as well as a rejection of any educational or humanising function for the arts. As Gautier put it, "nothing is really beautiful unless it is useless" (in Grieve 1999, 17). Besides more extreme forms of art for art's sake theory, and their wholesale rejection of the prevalent Christian morality, authors writing in this tradition developed a strand of thought that promoted awareness of the limitation of the powers of the arts to

humanise and radically improve society. In the words of John Pope-Hennessy (1913-1994)

> My life has been devoted to studying works of art and putting them to use. To the material well-being of the world neither activity is of much consequence; it does not make the poor less poor, it does not sustain the hungry, it does not diminish suffering or redress injustice (cited in Carrier 1997, 6).

More recently, the American playwright and director David Mamet (1998, 26) has forcefully reiterated this position, highlighting the ethical implications of the view that theatre can (and is supposed to) improve audiences:

> Now I've been working with audiences thirty years or more, in different venues. And I've never met an audience that wasn't collectively smarter than I am, and didn't beat me to the punch every time. These people have been paying my rent, all my life. And I don't consider myself superior to them and have no desire to change them. Why should I, and how could I? I'm no different than they are. I don't know anything they don't know. An audience (a populace) can be coerced, by a lie, a bribe (a gun); and it can be instructed/preached at. By anyone with a soapbox and a lack of respect. But in all the above this audience is being abused. They are not being "changed", they are being forced. Dramatists who aim to change the world assume a moral superiority to the audience and allow the audience to assume a moral superiority to those people in the play who don't accept the views of the hero.

Mamet is raising here a number of points that are crucial to any discussion of the relationship between art, artists and society. Unsurprisingly, similar preoccupations for the consequences of the growing emphasis placed by arts funders upon the idea of the transformative powers of the arts (and the consequent centrality of issues of evaluation and measurement) have been voiced by cultural commentators across the Western world. A representative of this, in the British context, is John Tusa, cultural commentator and director of the Barbican in London. For years now, Tusa has been vocal in rejecting instrumental considerations in arts funding allocation, turning

himself into one of the most prominent promoters of 'art for art's sake' as an ideal guiding principle for cultural policy-making:

> … we have lost a vocabulary and an area of permitted public discourse where values are valued rather than costed; where inspiration is regarded as heaven-sent rather than an unacceptable risk. Instead, we have a materialistic debate where the immaterial is dismissed as pretentious rather than welcomed as essential; where art for art's sake is pigeon-holed as a personal obsession rather than recognised as a vital social ingredient; where the public good is dismissed as a chimera so long as it cannot be quantified on a balance sheet (Tusa 2000, 29-30)

Interestingly, Tusa's argument - and the many other recurrent complaints over the extent to which arts organisations and funding bodies have allegedly subordinated (at least at the level of rhetoric if not practice) purely artistic considerations to a preoccupation with art's social or economic impacts - are part and parcel of the dichotomy between the 'instrumental' and the 'intrinsic' value of the arts that constitute a central feature of contemporary cultural policy debates.

We have thus come full circle to the supposed lack of an appropriate language to describe how the arts affect individuals and societies, which we discussed in the first section of this paper. In the light of the critical-historical discussion presented so far, it seems legitimate to suggest that such a language not only already *does* exist, but *has existed* for centuries. The debate around arts funding, as it has developed over the last twenty years, has largely taken place without explicit references to this language, and in apparent ignorance of the complex intellectual history that lies behind the very notion of the social impact of the arts. Yet, at the same time, it is from this history that key ideas have been taken, selectively and reductively, and given the status of a general truth.

Conclusions

Although limitations of space have permitted only a brief account of our classification of claims for the arts, a number of conclusions can nevertheless be drawn, which clearly have implications for present cultural policy debates.

Firstly, the historical review briefly presented here indicates that the 'negative tradition' is as robust as the 'positive tradition', which can be seen as predominant in today's debates over cultural policy and arts funding. As a matter of fact, one could even argue that the 'negative' tradition, despite being largely obscured in today's policy discourse, historically was, in many respects, the more robust of the two. Indeed, a number of the arguments on the cathartic, ethical or humanising powers of the arts were first elaborated in response to 'negative' theories that were perceived as dominant at the time. So, for instance, Aristotle's *Poetics* and his theory of dramatic catharsis (which – as was noted – has had a pivotal role in the development of the 'positive' tradition) was an attempt to counteract the fierce attack on poetry that Plato launched in his *Republic* (Cooper 1972, 9). The attempt on the part of the Italian Humanists during the Renaissance to come up with a moral defence of poetry built on the notion of poetry as an allegory of religious truths was but an attempt to redeem poetry and the theatre from the hostility that the Christian Fathers of the Church (think of St. Augustine, for example) had turned into a firm tenet of Christian doctrine (Spingarn 1908).

Furthermore, the authors of the 'negative' view of the arts, from the very start, were acutely aware of the importance of translating their concerns about the corrupting and distracting powers of the arts into concrete measures and policies. Plato attempted to put into practice the political utopia of his *Republic* twice in Syracuse (albeit with little success, and a great deal of consequent personal trouble). The Fathers of the Church repeatedly, though also unsuccessfully, attempted to have the theatre outlawed in Rome. The Puritan pamphleteers of XVI century England proved

equally determined and altogether more successful: a number of measures progressively reducing the freedom of actors to come together and perform to a public culminated in the outright closure of all English theatres in 1642. In more recent times, the persistence of the suspicion that the theatre is capable of influencing behaviour and morality adversely, is confirmed by the continued existence, in Britain, until as late as 1969, of a system of theatre censorship. Today, the existence of bodies such as the Board for Film Classification testifies to the persistence of the idea, Platonic in its essence, that it befalls upon the State to protect vulnerable and impressionable groups (such as the very young) from the damaging effects that might arise from exposure to certain types of films.

A second important observation that can be made is that the claims for what the arts 'do' to people, and the ways in which the arts have the powers to deeply affect both individuals and communities, are in truth a lot more nuanced than contemporary cultural policy debates suggest. As noted above, the versions of the civilising, humanising, healing and educational powers of the arts, as articulated in policy documents over the last twenty years, have become detached from the complex intellectual traditions that gave rise to them. As a consequence, they display little awareness of their own philosophical origins, the social and political context in which they were elaborated and their later developments.

When placed under historical scrutiny, however, many of the issues, beliefs and theories at the centre of contemporary debates over the impacts of the arts reveal themselves to have been in circulation and in continuous development for at least two and a half millennia. One of the most interesting aspects of this is precisely the fact that there was never a time, in the period considered, when discussions of the role of the arts in society and their effects on audiences have not been at the centre of heated debates. Moreover, any author that put forward his or her own contribution

to the treatment of such complex matters displayed a clear awareness of the fact that this entailed partaking in a long-standing argument. Indeed, many authors considered in our study were quite explicit in asserting their intellectual allegiances as well as the ideas and thinkers they were attempting to discredit. It is in the second half of the XX century that this awareness appears more tenuous and explicit references to earlier, millennial debates seem to become more infrequent.

In conclusion, we hope that the study briefly presented in this paper might help cultural policy researchers, policy-makers and cultural administrators to gain a clearer sense of where commonly accepted views on the impacts of the arts actually originate from. Hopefully, by highlighting the problematic side of the 'art is good for you' rhetoric, and by tracing the trajectory of what we have called the 'negative tradition', the simplistic characterization of the social impacts of the arts that seems orthodox in contemporary policy debates can be successfully overcome. This, we suggest, would be a first, important step towards succeeding in reconnecting – *mutatis mutandis*, of course - this long-standing tradition of thought in Western civilization to why governments should fund or regulate the arts.

Indeed, we argue that understanding how current beliefs in the transformative powers of the arts have developed over time and attempting to trace the trajectories through which they have become commonplace beliefs is an interesting and useful exercise in its own right. In the long term, it can point us in the direction of an intellectual route that can allow us to overcome the false and sterile dichotomy between 'intrinsic' and 'instrumental' value of the arts in which cultural policy debates seem presently stuck. Moreover, we would argue that the humanities certainly have a significant role to play in this process, and they can also help to clarify what the role and functions of the arts in present society might be. In fact, they are best-placed to take up the challenge presented by Jowell (2004, 18) when she asks "How, in going

beyond targets, can we best capture the value of culture?". By finding nuanced ways of discussing cultural value in the XXI century, drawing on the rich intellectual traditions outlined here, the humanities can make a significant contribution to the construction of a strong and coherent theoretical framework for the elaboration of more rigorous arts impacts evaluation methods.

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