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The Machine Society: The Current Situation for Arts in Education and the Wider Society

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Abstract

The Arts are marginalised in education because of a lack of fit with a dominant market-capitalist ideology, based around economic utility and measurement. To become acceptable, the Arts are using its values and language, so becoming part of the culture has seen the Arts as having little worth. Rather than being an opportunity for individual and progressive change, the Arts become an agent of conformity.

Paper

Hausman et al. write that the Arts can be seen as ‘a dialogue that brings into existence new understanding’ (Hausman et al., 2010, p371), however they also note that the current status of Art education is driven more by politics and policies than the potential benefits of the Arts (ibid. p370). With Arts being sidelined in favour of seemingly more readily measured forms of school attainment, namely Mathematics, Science and English, the Arts are being given a greatly reduced emphasis at multiple levels.

This dominant ideology, based around economics, uniformity and assessability, has an impact starting from primary school level and continues right through to careers in the Arts. This has been further driven by the widespread cuts in government funding since the last global recession and now the Arts, as both a discipline and sector, are increasingly at risk of being marginalised into irrelevance. The pre-eminent socio-political discourse, where the purpose of education is understood as a means to achieve employability, reduces the recognition of the benefits of the Arts, either personally or socially.

The relegation of the importance of the Arts fits with Moran’s 2015 work, which notes how the identities we adopt as individuals fit into the global priorities of capitalism (Moran, 2015, p. 174). We are at the stage of development in a capitalist society that Adorno and Horkheimer predicted in their 1947 work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where culture itself becomes a product of the industrial process (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p72). The term ‘The Machine Society’, used in the title of this paper, refers to the ideas of Adorno and Horkheimer when they wrote about ‘the culture industry’ (ibid.); and relates to the self-perpetuating nature of the current society we live in, whereby we use the generally accepted standards of society to inform our actions (Ward, 2014, p114).

Though writing over 50 years ago Adorno and Horkheimer managed to identify the potential risk of an economic system dominating the rest of society and determining what counts as value in the human experience (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002). Applying this idea to education it is evident that when a society treats education as a means to supplying the job market, the ‘Machine Society’ is acting in its purest form prioritising certain disciplines and marginalising others because they don’t fit within a very specific definition of (economic) value. This paper examines how this way of thinking and acting impacts on the Arts, as a case

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study of an area that is not directly supported by the priorities of the 'Machine Society', and looks to see how the Arts are responding to the threats presented by this historically specific form of economic society.

The 'Machine Society', as would be expected by its name, produces products including education that fit the desired demand of the market. The demand in this case is constructed by neoliberal society, meaning that the output is understood in terms of individuals who can fit specific roles in organisations that deliver economic value. Boas and Gans-Morse note how the structure of the political economy has shifted over time with Neoliberalism as the latest incarnation of this, even if the specific content of this term is still contested from different political stances (Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009, p158).

Writers such as Adorno and Horkheimer do however show how economic and cultural systems begin to create a self-confirming system, whereby the way the market directs people to express their identities then forms individuals that only fit into certain roles and jobs. The important thing to note is how this market direction then becomes presented as truth, so 'the paradox of routine travestied as nature is detectable in every utterance of the culture industry' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p101). The culture industry, as they coined it, creates people's perceptions of not only what is good practice but also what is of value – and this ties us back to the Arts and how they in turn are valued.

There are many academics, such as Eisner and Ward, who defend the value of the Arts in education without collapsing it into the economic definition of the value of value. Eisner is one who fears the loss of the non-measured aspects of education – his vision for education is one where 'the quality of the journey [is] more educationally significant than the speed at which the destination is reached' (Eisner, 2004, p10). Though this vision can be seen as romantic, as arguably some element of education is about developing skills that one can use in later life, the sentiment remains clear – excessive monitoring of grades can take away from the experience of education as a whole. The intrinsic value of the experience in itself gets lost in the extrinsic value of what the experience makes possible elsewhere. The issue remains however that although writers like Eisner try to articulate the benefits of the Arts in non-'Machine Society' ways, on a political level their arguments are cherry picked to support the status quo.

The deep rooted persistence of the economic frame can be seen in the goals of international organisations, such as the UN, where education's focus is seen as needing to be on numeracy and literacy because this is seen as the best way to improve job prospects and (economic) development objectives (UN Chronicle, 2007). World leaders over time, such as Tony Blair and others in positions of power, constantly see education as an economic tool, which can 'condition pupils for labour in the free market' (Ward, 2014, p184). The micro effects of education will continue to be eclipsed by the macro economic and political priorities of a nation, as expressed by those in positions of economic and political power.

There are plenty of Artists who mock and parody the functional account of the Arts, and defend their place in modern society on their own terms. Banksy, the anonymous street Artist, has done many pieces that critique modern capitalism and the state. In a review of the Banksy film *Exit Through the Gift Shop* Preece notes that there are many examples in the film that show 'Street Art is important... providing political and social commentary on the world in which we live (Preece, 2012, p436). Art should not in itself be part of the capitalist process in Banksy's view, and Banksy in his general work critiques how this takes place, such as his 2015 work *Dismaland* that parodied the unthinking consumerism of Disney Land (Brown, 2015).

On an Arts education level Artists see it as important to defend the place of the Arts in education – Anthony Gormley was scathing of the proposed Ebacc reforms that the then UK Education Secretary Michael Gove promoted in 2012, as he saw that this form of education would not develop “creative intelligence” and the focus on literature and numeracy missed a large point about education as a whole (Singh, 2012). Banksy’s anonymity can be seen as a method that allows them to make statements without fear of negative repercussions. Ai Weiwei caused much outrage among the political elites in China with his piece “She Lived Happily in the World for Seven Years”, that critiqued the poor construction of the schools that killed 5,335 pupils in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake (Prodger, 2015; Associated Press, 2009). On the instruction of the Chinese authorities he was beaten till he was hospitalised, his studio was destroyed and his blog shut down (Ibid).

Though this situation can be seen as extreme, it represents another problem governments can have with the Arts. The Arts being used to create large-scale, eye-catching pieces that critique actions that the government has taken. By being Artists people can make themselves outsiders to the political and economic establishments. Artists can then be seen as agents who critique the economic status quo of the ‘Machine Society’ and are critical of the institutions of power that sustain the dominant, economically framed, view of education. While effective as outsiders, these critical Artists pay for this license to criticise by reducing their power to influence as insiders. To become an established insider an Artist would need to lose their distinctive voice that they use to express values outside of the dominant discourse of the ‘Machine Society’.

The specific effects of being seen as outsiders in the Arts industry as a whole should not be overlooked. There have been in recent years restrictions in funding to bodies such as Art Centre England (ACE), which saw ‘its government grant cut by 36% since 2010’ (Youngs, 2015). With reduced funding on offer Arts Charities are having to justify their funding needs in new ways. One case study charity is Cardboard Citizens – a homeless theatre company. The ACE funding can comprise a large part of their funding so their applications for it are important for their viability. In terms of applying to ACE for funding, charities such as Cardboard Citizens have to justify themselves using various methods, a key one being to measure themselves against the ACE determined format. This includes framing benefits as ‘STEAM’ (an adaption of the term ‘STEM’ which is the more common government priority with the ‘A’ referring to the Arts). STEAM in the view of Welch allows ‘for the realization of the multifaceted potential of all our children and young people’ (Welch, 2011, p31). STEAM as a concept seeks to bring the benefits of STEM, with their rational base, and connect them to the skills developed by the Arts such as ‘critical thinking’ and ‘creativity’ (Ibid.) There is an irony in the fact that the Arts has to justify itself in these terms, so as to finance itself. This shows the way the Arts has to accept the need to prove its value through the lens of perceived economic potential. This again shows how Arts organisations are forced to value themselves in the terms of the priorities of the ‘Machine Society’, rather than on their own merits. We may be past the point that Lanier believed in – that of enjoying Art for the sake of it (Lanier, 1963), but the framing should still be able to talk about the Arts for the benefit of Arts.

One further point to note is the philosophy that Cardboard Citizens subscribes to – the concept of the ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’. This method of theatre is based on that developed by Augusto Boal, who believed theatre could be used as a weapon for revolution and liberation (Boal, 2000, ix), which in turn connects to the work of Paolo Freire and his ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’.

Freire sought to free both oppressed and oppressors from a worldview which belittled the humanity of all and instead assumes knowledge rests with the lived experience of the audience, not within the truth of the author (Freire, 1996). This style of theatre relies on the audience of a play intervening with their potential solution for how a scenario could be improved for one of the actors; this encourages the audience to connect whole-heartedly with the characters on stage and improve their situation (Boal, 2000, p132). Snyder-Young (2011) notes how Theatre of the Oppressed can be used, in theory, to achieve positive outcomes but that it is limited by the fact individuals don't always gravitate towards 'progressive' ideas, but simply gravitate to 'popular positions'. Though this could be seen to be an issue within the 'Theatre of the Oppressed', there still remains a strong contention as to its potential benefits. This form of theatre, as conceived of by Boal was seen as a way to encourage the audience to change the situation in which the actors find themselves (Boal, 2000, p132). Recent works by Cardboard Citizens include challenging pieces around the housing crisis, as shown in their production *Benefit* (Smurthwaite, 2015); these works are performed by actors who are themselves often homeless or who come from challenging backgrounds. The way these pieces can get people, from many different walks of life, to engage with these issues is powerful in itself and if nothing else encourages us to question what is taken for granted. It is the Arts then that offer us different ways to approach societal issues, and with a lesser focus on them we risk a limited analysis and critique of institutions – as well as the assumptions that we allow to unconsciously govern our society.

The lack of value placed on the Arts by adults is likely to result in children mimicking this view and reducing the value they in turn place on the Arts – this is even more likely to happen when children do not get to experience the Arts first hand. If fewer individuals have access to it, the reduced experience of it is likely to result in its further devaluation. Framing the Arts as aids to STEM subjects reduces the emphasis on their own merit and reinforces a belief in the existence of a single world epistemology. More importantly, as identified by Boal (2000), without practices in education and in wider society that encourage people to resist what they see or experience as wrong, then there risks being a move towards unchallenged homogeneity and a loss of critical rigour when a discourse can only know the world on its own terms. As Adorno and Horkheimer noted, what is natural and what is cultural can become blurred (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p101). Furthermore, if we do not continue to engage with concepts not directly supported by the 'Machine Society' then we will inevitably be left in an environment where the opportunities to experience and engage with the Arts, in schools or in wider society, will be denied to us by the 'Machine Society'. In other words 'Under cover of this illusory enmity feeling...finally all human expression, indeed culture itself, is stripped of any responsibility to thought and transformed into the neutralized element of the all-embracing rationality of an economic system long since grown irrational' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p72). By restricting how we know the world we limit ways of being and acting in the world and lose our capacity to critique our economic system, and how it shapes our individual and collective being.

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