

Radical Empathy. An essay by Edson Burton

The Fool is a conceit of course for the producers, the artists, the writers that make the artistic world tick. In this bleak poem I imagine that the arts beg the question why the arts don't have a more radical impact on the world.

Death of a Fool is a challenge not to the artist but to the audience and society generally. The artist's folly is to take society at its word when it says art is valued. Its value is revealed by a pandemic in which Britain's culture sector was the last area of economic activity to be considered.

But what do we mean by value? The creative industries that broad term which includes such a breadth of practice contributes £10.8 billion a year to the UK economy.' Performing arts as subsection, contributes £5.4 billion ([thestage.co.uk/news/performing-arts-contributes-54-billion-a-year-to-uk-economy](https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/performing-arts-contributes-54-billion-a-year-to-uk-economy)). The sector is the fastest growing element of the UK economy. The sector is worth far less than the staggering £150 billion contributed by distribution industries but nonetheless is a major employer, a driver of innovation and vital part of England's soft power.

If we take our market obsessed establishment at its word then the arts have a measurable and significant value. Something else then is at stake.

The demarcation of what is essential and inessential that arose in the first month of lock-down was telling. I joined my neighbours in clapping the heroic efforts of our key workers charged with keeping our minimalist lives moving – the retail workers, the NHS staff, the drivers. But began to realise that my work and that moreover of my peers was not in the 'key' category. On my social media friends mused as to their sense of purpose. What was their role as artists in this time of crisis? All that time spent in armour, tutus, bodices and boas was surely useless now that the country needed practical skills and grey scientists. Cue the return of experts and the exile of emotion. Well I would second that but that exception for the arts.

But just as shelves were stacked, food delivered, patients nursed, the homeless housed we did play our part – giving away- mostly out pure *bon homie* – our poems, monologues, songs, dances and (live) drawing classes over the ubiquitous zoom. Some went further and, guerrilla fashion, popped up in parks to entertain the socially distanced idlers in their allotted outdoor hours. Art and culture was an essential component of the stay safe, stay alert message. By entertaining we leavened the pandemic gloom. Art is as essential to life as air. It is not a case of whether we can live with or without it – it is integral to being human. The impulse to create and or share creativity is as primal as the sex and death drive.

In my city a large department store noted for its primarily low cost fast fashion goods closed days after notice was served on all theatres in the city. Coming out of lock down the situation is repeated with very little guidance as to how culture is to return. In the uneasy stuttering new normal there is no entrance strategy for live performance. The wolf bares its fangs outside the venue door it can smell fear and imminent death.

I wonder how we came to be admired and yet ignored to the point where we question our purpose at the very point when our purpose in a global pandemic is as profound as the arias sung across deserted Italian streets. Could it be by deigning to accept the demand by successive governments that the arts make a case for its existence we have legitimized a proposition that we are less valuable to the nation? Perhaps a more robust refusal to enter into a dialogue so framed might in the long run have served us better.

I return to the fool of my poem and can't help thinking he was too content with the stage. Had he looked truly looked out upon the audience he would have seen so little diversity, so little of those curious, rude, raucous, boys and girls white, black and brown with whom he went to school, whom he occasionally sites on road. Had he looked out when the lights went up he would see so little of the UK looking back. He would hear bravo but rarely a *brrrp brrrp*. No wonder the ministers can dismiss his work as irrelevant. His demise will not win or lose an election the theatre classes will mourn but find their fix elsewhere, the modern music halls with their deep pockets will live again to feed the masses with mechanical work.

But our world would be all the poorer. Art inspired by authentic enquiry has the power to transcend all boundaries. I spent my adolescence pushed into mud and slaughter of the Somme by the pen of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Erich Marie Remarque, by the sixth form I had lost my virginity to the unfettered imaginings of Anais Nin, I wept at the hopeless love of Anna Karenina, begged Raskolnikov not to kill, wandered London with Selvon's West Indian wide boys, and saw my story in the cherry tree cut into the back of Sethe. I could go on but you get the picture. I had travelled miles before I had ever set foot upon a plane. I had learned that I would find new colours, customs, tastes, and smells but the DNA of humanity would always be the same.

Art has the power for radical empathy. In our algorithmed dystopia we need radical empathy to see life beyond our curated reality. Across the globe the collective is fragmenting. Art can be unifier. But that unifying power is contained within a cannon of culture that has divided artist from audiences, audiences from each other. We need spaces where this art is enjoyed, discussed, reflected upon. Spaces of radical encounter where we come like penitents – unmasked, just citizens. The impact of such spaces, the conversations that may ensue could transform society.

Imagine then that our politicians, policy makers and thinkers base decisions upon the words of a Fool who gave his all to bare our souls.

All Quiet on the Western Front Erich Marie Remarque.