

# “Our country’s calling card”<sup>1</sup>

## Culture as the Brand in Recessionary Ireland

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### Introduction: A moral crisis begets an economic crisis?

While there have been some efforts to explain Ireland’s<sup>2</sup> economic crisis with reference to the dialectical tendencies of capitalism<sup>3</sup>, globalisation and neo-liberalism, mainstream media and political commentary has preferred to avoid this kind of sustained analysis. Instead, with varying degrees of emphasis, commentators have attributed causality to specific errors – some collective, others individual – in behaviour or judgment. They include our foolhardy reliance on the property sector, the misbehaviour and miscalculations of rotten apples in the banking sphere, and cronyism and ineptitude within ruling political elites. In the general rush to censure, the Irish public has not escaped criticism. The profoundly ideological contention that *we are all somehow to blame*<sup>4</sup> is repeatedly passed off as an incontestable fact; a ‘common sense’ legitimising reductions in the minimum wage<sup>5</sup>, assaults on public sector spending and conditions, the broadening of the tax base to include the low-paid and the avoidance of more decisive redistribution from the summit of the earnings hierarchy. For example, former Finance Minister, Brian Lenihan, ritually invoked our collective responsibility – constituted by one part guilt and one part patriotism – to rationalise his government’s deference to global markets and the new climate of austerity<sup>6</sup>.

“This Budget serves no vested interest. Rather, it provides an opportunity for us all to pull together and play our part according to our means ....” (October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2008)

“Everybody pays and those who can pay most will pay most. The Plan calls on us all to take more responsibility for ourselves.” (Budget 2011 Speech, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2010)

“I accept that I have to take responsibility as a member of the governing party during that period for what happened, but let’s be fair about it, *we all partied.*” (Prime Time, November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010) [My italics.]

In the mainstream media, discussions about the economic crisis have displayed a comparable moralising sensibility, with recurring references to how we’ve been let down by elites<sup>7</sup> – politicians,

Despite all the moralising about *Celtic Tiger* evils of consumption, hegemonic discourses inevitably retreat into a consumerist model of culture

state officials, bankers – and how we as a people let ourselves down. The economic crisis is thus framed as a kind of un-cool karma, drawn down by citizens’ relentless pursuit of hedonism during the period of the Celtic Tiger<sup>8</sup>. In April 2011, the Finnish Banking expert Peter Nyberg, who was charged with reporting on the causes of the banking crisis, finally published his analysis:

“[T]he way Irish households, investors, banks and public authorities voluntarily reacted to foreign and domestic developments was probably not very different to that in other countries now experiencing financial problems. However, the extent to which large parts of Irish society were willing to let the good times roll on until the very last minute (a feature of the financial mania) may have been exceptional.”<sup>9</sup> [My italics.]

‘Our’ obsession with the property ladder, speculative investments and conspicuous consumption are now memorialised in the ugly reality of ghost estates, abandoned race-horses and home repossessions. Former President Mary Macaleese became something of an early touchstone for anxieties about prosperity’s impact on our national value system. Having warned against the dangers of “the *cul de sac* of complacent consumerism”<sup>10</sup> in November 2005, she would later suggest that recession presented an opportunity for moral rehabilitation, “Somewhere along the line, we began to think that we weren’t happy with deferred gratification. We had to have it now and in this moment and I think that we have paid a very, very big price for that very radical shift. And now the balance presumably is going to swing back the other way and it will be no harm.”<sup>11</sup>

These would become the narratives of blame: either so universalising that they fail to interrogate issues of power, social reproduction, inequality and exclusion in the Irish context; or so narrowly targeted on charismatic miscreants that they avoid analysis of the structural roots of this latest crisis in capitalism. Demonstrating, a wilful denial of their own partiality they ultimately fall back onto that most pervasive of ideological devices, the fetishisation of individual choice. As with doctrinaire neo-liberalism they assume that individual citizens – be they ordinary consumers, politicians or employees of financial institutions – can be disassociated from their economic and social habitus and thus hold sovereign responsibility for their risky choices in the market place. Sometimes these choices are represented as ‘rational calculations’ and sometimes as ‘moral lapses’, but the overall effect is similar; to gloss over the contradictions of late capitalism as a global system that governs our every day practices.

### A functionalised culture

There is another problem with all this showy lancing of collective guilt; it typically prefaces a more urgent kind of ‘X Factor’ quest, where the search is on for those innovators who can lead the economic revival. It became manifest in the recurring calls for particular business ‘dynamos’, celebrities, economists or civil society leaders to run for elected office in the General Election of 2011. It also became manifest in various representations of the cultural sector, the arts and artists – or as Fintan O’Toole describes them “Ireland’s greatest remaining asset”<sup>12</sup> – as storm troopers in the battle to rescue the nation’s beleaguered reputation. When the economic crisis punctured the credibility of old elites, it also cleared a space for new icons of hope and as the National Campaign for the Arts recognised, “There is now a broad consensus that the arts will play a dynamic part in Ireland’s economic and social recovery. To maintain the role of the arts as a significant driver of employment, cultural tourism, the creative industries, our collective wellbeing and international reputation...”<sup>13</sup>

What manifests as a consensus, I am inclined to describe as hegemony; the broad acceptance that culture be ‘functionalised’ in the interests of the economy. In September 2009, the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs hosted the “inaugural Global Irish Economic Forum”, which was attended by “members of the Government; Secretaries General of Government Departments, CEOs of State Agencies, and leading members of the Irish business and cultural sectors”<sup>14</sup>. Among the principal themes under discussion were the uncertain status of Ireland’s reputation and the urgency of ‘brand’ consolidation<sup>15</sup>. The report on the event explained that,

“[S]peakers focused on the concept of branding, noting the strength of ‘Brand Ireland’, but that in today’s hugely competitive environment, resources must be targeted and the message focussed so that Ireland, could distinguish itself on the global stage. The arts and culture had a key role to play in this process. Participants strongly argued that the arts are no longer a luxury or a charity, but are a hugely important part of the economy.”<sup>16</sup>

It’s a limited and limiting appraisal of the role of the arts – charity, luxury or brand extension – and it could easily be dismissed as corporate babble, typical of an event such as this. However, the ever present threat of further cuts in public spending has done much to focus Ireland’s

Expectations of the arts to reboot the economy seem inconsistent with the actual earning power of artists themselves

collective consciousness. ‘Brand Ireland’ discourses have been adopted by arts organisations that are cognisant of the rising expectation that all must prove our commitment to the economic revival. Even before the Global Economic Forum, Visual Artists Ireland “the all Ireland Development and resource body for professional visual artists”<sup>17</sup> made a submission to the Innovation Task Force on September 16<sup>th</sup> 2009, in which it positioned improved grants and resources for artists as “further support of the cultural identity of Brand Ireland”<sup>18</sup>. It is also worth noting that similar tendencies were common in Japan in the wake of its economic crash in 1991, with the ‘J-cool Brand’ invoked to counteract the country’s reputational and image problems<sup>19</sup>. During March 2010, RTE Radio’s flagship news show *Morning Ireland* ran a week-long discussion series centred around the somewhat rhetorical question ‘Can the Arts help revive the economy?’, incorporating interviews with guests who were described by presenter Áine Lawlor as “the great and good”<sup>20</sup> of the Irish arts world. Significantly the interviews were timetabled to coincide with the St Patrick’s holiday, the now ‘traditional’ focal point for international marketing of Brand Ireland. Participants included Abbey Theatre director Fiach Mac Conghail, musician and broadcaster Philip King, writer Colm Tóibín, theatre director Garry Hynes and the newly appointed Cultural Ambassador to the US, actor Gabriel Byrne. The interviews did not allow participants to reflect on the social, democratic or transformative possibilities of the arts, or how and why culture might be meaningful to citizens. Instead questions were framed to elicit arguments regarding the economic, and specifically touristic, dividends that could be yielded by investment in the cultural sphere.

In Ireland there has been a long-standing tendency for government and mainstream media to privilege a narrow frame of economic rationality in their evaluations of cultural, scientific, social and political developments<sup>21</sup>. As the economic crisis has unfolded, invocations of that rationality have become cruder and more frenetic. Given that the artistic sphere is often attributed transcendent properties – based on its ability to elevate our minds and desires – it is notable that it too should fall victim to that tendency. A speech by former Taoiseach Brian Cowen, “at the announcement of Ireland’s next Professor of Poetry – Harry Clifton” comically illustrates the case:

“[T]his country is fighting its way out of a severe recession and we will come through this because of the quality of our people, their self-belief and their ingenuity. The arts and our culture has a big role to play in getting Ireland back on track.

I believe that being Irish holds a distinct and intrinsic value. Ireland is a brand. People know us. Our country, her landscape and her culture are known the world over. *We must connect with that brand now and use it to give us the competitive advantage in a globalised world that is increasingly the same. We must ourselves portray the positives that others see in us.*<sup>22</sup> [My italics.]

In other words: creativity must be entrepreneurial, cultural distinctiveness means market advantage.

### Rhetorical status Vs structural location

As Howard Becker observed, the arts are never immune from social processes and are never merely the products of sequestered minds or individual imaginations. Instead they should be viewed as outcomes of collective action where “[R]elations of co-operation and constraint, ... penetrate the entire process of artistic creation and composition”<sup>23</sup>. Despite all the ‘Brand Ireland’ rhetoric, issues of economic survival constitute a pressing constraint on contemporary Irish arts organisations and individual artists. Significant in this regard are the findings of survey of 1,128 artists that was jointly commissioned by both Arts Councils on the island of Ireland. It suggested that the average income from their arts practice for artists in the Republic of Ireland was less than “€15,000 in 2008, with 50% of artists earning €8,000 or less from their work”<sup>24</sup>. Expectations of the ability of the arts to re-boot the economy seem inconsistent with the actual earning power of artists themselves. Furthermore, hegemonic discourses about culture and its role are taking shape against the backdrop of significant cuts in revenue for the Arts Council and arts organisations. Launching its strategic plan, in October 2010, the Arts Council chair Pat Moylan<sup>25</sup> noted some of the challenges it now faces:

“[T]he Arts Council said it was publishing the strategic overview ‘in a spirit of confidence, tempered by the realism required to plan and provide for the arts at a time of significant difficulty in the public finances’, and stressed that the consequences of some decisions could be ‘far from what we would wish in ideal circumstances’.”

In 2009 the *Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes*, chaired by economist Colm McCarthy and established for the explicit purpose of rationalising cutbacks in government spending, recommended €5.3 billion in savings and staff reductions of 17,300 across the public sector. It identified the arts and cultural fields as a “lower priority”<sup>26</sup> for the state and posited that the existing government department’s functions be re-allocated to other departments. It also recommended a €6.1million reduction in the Arts Council budget, along with the discontinuation of financial support for Culture Ireland and the Irish Film Board. This ‘lower priority’ status was underscored by the ‘controversy’ that surrounded the appointment of Mary Hanafin as minister for ‘Tourism, Culture and Sport’ in 2010, a move that was widely regarded as a demotion.

“I did say, that whereas I would be very happy to take the job, that it would be perceived as a demotion – because, unfortunately, media over the years has perceived arts, sports and culture to be something of less importance than some of the other departments. And, yet when you see the importance of it to the economy, when you see the people who came last year to Farmleigh<sup>27</sup> to share their ideas on how to promote Ireland, culture and tourism was at the heart of what people were suggesting.”<sup>28</sup> [My italics.]

Simultaneously championed and treated as an afterthought, the rhetorical status of arts and culture seems to be at odds with its structural location. This contradiction is less puzzling if we consider the broader economic and discursive context, and what Hardt and Negri have described as the hegemony of ‘immaterial labour’ in the contemporary period. By immaterial labour they mean labour that produces “immaterial products,

such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship or an emotional response”<sup>29</sup>. By hegemony they are not claiming that the majority of workers are engaged in this kind of labour – clearly they are not – but that this labour has a comparatively elevated status in contemporary capitalism, whereby it is perceived to embody all that is most market friendly, innovative and forward-looking. Immaterial labour imposes “a tendency on all other forms of labour”<sup>30</sup> and societies, states and industries must show that they are willing to “informationalize, become intelligent, become communicative, become affective”. Given that the arts and cultural spheres are already invested with these kinds of attributes, they are well placed to be activated in the interests of economic accumulation and commodification. In Ireland the ‘Smart Economy’ has become a new signifier of economic progress, with the arts and cultural sectors identified as key potential contributors, but ones that require ‘leveraging’: “[F]uture investment in this sector must be based on world-class ambition and achievement, and it must also be based on engaging and attracting the business sector”<sup>31</sup>. Hegemonic discourses, therefore, simultaneously seek to discipline and

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enable the arts and cultural sectors. Upbeat prescriptions of their economic role and their centrality to Brand Ireland carry a parallel – albeit often implicit – threat regarding the fate of the economically irrelevant.

### A case for resistance

Given their sector’s vulnerabilities, it’s unsurprising that many artists and arts organisations have mobilised collectively to resist the threat of cutbacks and to argue for continued public subsidy of the arts. For example, the National Campaign for the Arts has combined high energy and visually arresting forms of advocacy with repeated assertions of the sector’s economic relevance. During the 2011 election, it urged supporters to deliver a unified message to canvassers and candidates.

“The arts enrich our lives

The arts enhance Ireland’s image and reputation on the world stage

The arts are a stimulant of and contributor to the smart economy

The arts are a significant employer

The arts drive cultural tourism”<sup>32</sup>

Arguably, lobbying by artists and arts organisations has been quite successful in obviating austerity’s more draconian effects<sup>33</sup>. In many ways their structural position resembles that of community organisations that are feted for their contribution to society, yet are ultimately dependent on state favour for their financial survival. Community organisations can find themselves strategically adapting to government policy in order to protect their sector and to legitimise their particular value claims. Likewise arts organisations may draw upon hegemonic discourses and economic rationalities in order to defend what are already precarious funding streams and support networks.

However, when resistance is framed within the parameters of the prevailing hegemony it ultimately speaks to the short term material interests of (a minority within) the arts sector and its audiences. It is worth remembering that beyond that sector, cultures are generated through everyday encounters and uncelebrated forms of aesthetic practice. As Paul Willis explains, ‘aesthetics’ and ‘Art’ are presented as universal signifiers of what is best and most exceptional in cultures, but those signifiers are themselves

socially constructed: their status is derived from and sustained by social distinctions, patterns of exclusion, power inequalities and market relationships<sup>34</sup>. As the arts and cultural sectors are responsibilised to fashion brand identity and attract consumers in international markets, their responsibilities to Irish citizens are trivialised. Alternative expectations of the sectors might include: the broadening and deepening of audience participation; the creation of new opportunities for ordinary citizens to make and distribute their own cultures; and a critical interrogation of hegemonic discourses of culture, Irishness and our so-called ‘Brand’ identity.

Ultimately hegemonic discourses, such as those embedded in the fantasy of ‘Brand Ireland’, offer an impoverished conception of culture. The ‘arts sector’ becomes a proxy for creativity in its broader sense. ‘Tourism potential’ and ‘market share’ become the default measures of cultural and artistic achievement. A nationalist imperative is imposed on artists who must generate positive PR for Brand Ireland. Citizens are responsibilised to take pride in and to cheerlead those PR achievements, like supporters of the national football team, while our own contributions to the contestation and re-fashioning of culture are overlooked. Despite all the empty moralising about the evils of consumption in the period of the Celtic Tiger, hegemonic discourses inevitably retreat into a consumerist model of culture: privileging spectacle and things – they can be bought, sold, visited or reproduced – over communication, critique and “ordinary common meanings”<sup>35</sup>.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that this hegemony is not absolute, that there are some vital expressions of resistant culture in Ireland today. In any functionalised reckoning of what constitutes a society’s cultural wealth, it is difficult to monetise these localised, provisional and reactive processes: although particular, they do not seem so special; although real, they usually lack celebrity. Nonetheless, un-branded culture that speaks against the crude hegemony is vibrantly present in the creative solidarity that artists, musicians, poets, dancers – professional and otherwise – give to social movements. In its most limited form, the ‘cultural contribution’ to activism is reduced to fundraising or PR. At its best, the political reclamation also coincides with a cultural reclamation and celebration, so that culture and creativity is seen as intrinsic to social change, not merely as a decorative accessory. Cultural reclamation and resistance is also evident in the emergence of independent social centres, poetry slams, lo-fi festivals, alternative screenings and all those other spaces – be they intellectual or physical – where people get together to communicate and co-operate democratically. These efforts may well be temporary expressions of an always elusive autonomy, but even when they disappear and reappear in other forms they add up to a cumulative culture of resistance – maybe even a culture beyond the brand.

### Notes

- 1 Comment by Taoiseach Brian Cowen made during his speech ‘at the announcement of Ireland’s next Professor of Poetry – Harry Clifton – Newman House’ Wednesday, 30th of June, 2010.
- 2 Here Ireland is used to refer to the Republic of Ireland rather than the Island of Ireland.
- 3 See Allen, K (2009) *Ireland’s Economic Crash: A Radical Agenda for Change*. Dublin: The Liffey Press and Kirby, P (2010) *The Celtic Tiger in Collapse*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 4 Following the general election of June 2011 a new coalition government came to power in the Republic. In advance of its first budget in later that year, Taoiseach Enda Kenny was moved to address the nation and to assure us that the crisis was not our ‘fault’. His analysis seems to have been revised by January 2012 when he told the World Economic Forum at Davos that ‘people went mad borrowing’. Scally, D (27/01/2012) ‘Taoiseach blames crisis on ‘mad borrowing’ and greed’, *Irish Times*: Accessed 19/04/2012 <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/frontpage/2012/0127/1224310810287.html>
- 5 That policy decision, taken in the early aftermath of the Irish crisis, has since been reversed by the new government.
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- 11 *Irish Times* (16/12/2008) 'Ireland is on rebound from consumerism, says President', *Irish Times*. Accessed 04/03/2011  
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- 12 O'Toole, F (27/03/2010) 'Does Mary Hanafin realise she's the minister for all we've got?', *Irish Times*. Accessed 04/03/2011  
<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/weekend/2010/0327/1224267154518.html>
- 13 National Campaign for the Arts (No Date) 'About the Campaign', Accessed 04/03/2011  
<http://www.ncfa.ie/index.php/page/about/>
- 14 Department of Foreign Affairs (2009) *Global Irish Economic Forum 18-20 September 2009 Report*. Dublin: Department of Foreign Affairs, p 4.
- 15 *ibid*, p 15.
- 16 *ibid* p 21.
- 17 Visual Artists Ireland (2009) *Creative Ireland – Submission to the Innovation Taskforce*. Dublin: Visual Artists Ireland, p 3.
- 18 *ibid* p 5.
- 19 Allison, A (2009) 'The Cool Brand, Affective Activism and Japanese Youth'. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 26 (2-3): 89-111
- 20 <http://www.rte.ie/news/morningireland/artsandcultureindustry.html> hosts Podcasts of the interviews.
- 21 See O'Mahony, P and Schafer, MS (2005) 'The Book of Life in the Press', *Social Studies of Science*, 35(1): pp99-130 and Meade, R. (2008) 'Mayday, Mayday! Newspaper Framing Anti-globalisers!', *Journalism*, 9(4): pp330-352.
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[http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Government\\_Press\\_Office/Taoiseach%27s%20Speeches%202010/Speech\\_by\\_the\\_Taoiseach\\_at\\_the\\_announcement\\_of\\_Irelands\\_next\\_Professor\\_of\\_Poetry\\_Harry\\_Clifton\\_Newman\\_House\\_30\\_June,\\_2010.html](http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Government_Press_Office/Taoiseach%27s%20Speeches%202010/Speech_by_the_Taoiseach_at_the_announcement_of_Irelands_next_Professor_of_Poetry_Harry_Clifton_Newman_House_30_June,_2010.html)
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- 30 *ibid* p 109.
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- 34 Willis, P (2005) 'Invisible Aesthetics and the Social Work of Commodity Culture', in D Inglis and J Hughson (eds.) *The Sociology of Art*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, p 73-74
- 35 Williams, R (1989) *Resources of Hope*, London: Verso, p 4.