

POSTCARD

63. Representing and challenging inequality through the arts

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It was the way he lay: asleep, terminal, so profoundly sad – as if by lying in supplication before the waves that killed him, he was asking for a replay, with a different outcome this time; and his socks and little shoes told us he was ready to try life again. But his cheek on the soft sand whispered otherwise, it made us choke. Shamed and disgraced, the world wept before the body of this little boy.

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein,
the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

The photograph of one drowned Syrian refugee, Aylan al Kurdi, on the shores of Greece in 2015 provoked shock and sympathy around the world. Through one image, the world was confronted, not only with the maldistribution of wealth and income, but with the extremely unequal distribution of human misery, suffering and hardship, and indeed inequality in the means to inflict misery. The image provoked citizen responses that obliged authorities to act in more humane ways, but thus far, these actions have addressed the symptoms rather than the structural causes.

We live in a world characterized by two essential fault lines: inequality in the distribution of income, material wealth and political power, and in the military means to assert and defend them; and inequality in culture – values, belief systems, traditions and worldviews – and the means to project these as vehicles of soft power to manufacture consent. And yet we do not pay sufficient attention to culture and its relationship to development, conflict, peace-building, human rights and addressing inequality.

UNCTAD has showed that Africa's share of the global creative economy stands at less than 1 per cent. This points not only to huge inequalities in the trade of cultural goods and services, but more importantly, to inequalities in the projection and consumption of culture.

In 2005 UNESCO adopted the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions as a response to the World Trade Organization's emphasis on trade liberalization in the 1990s.

So what does all this have to do with the arts and the representation of inequality?

First, the arts are located within the realm of culture, within the battle for hegemony of ideas, worldviews and belief systems. They are not neutral players, and may be actively deployed or silently co-opted in the promotion, defence or challenging of inequality.

Second, the arts sector is itself unequal. Who has access to skills, resources, networks and cultural infrastructure often determines who creates and distributes art. And it is those with disposable income who are most able to enjoy the fundamental human right enshrined in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'everyone shall have the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community and to enjoy the arts.' They will largely determine whose stories are told, and whose narratives reach the screens, the stages and the gallery walls.

Third, it is not only that the arts are not neutral in themselves; it is also about the context in which they are produced and distributed, contexts that are determined by grave inequalities in economic, cultural and military power. A piece of orchestral music that is enjoyed for its own sake in Vienna might be associated with elitism in South Africa, with its high Gini coefficient, while the same piece played by an orchestra from Afghanistan in Washington might, on the orchestra's return to Afghanistan, place a target on their backs as agents of Western cultural imperialism.

This shows that there are important but often overlooked relationships between art, broader culture, and social and economic inequalities. These in turn impact on and shape such culture. These inequalities are manifested within the production of art (who has the skills, resources and distribution to produce and disseminate art) and the reception and consumption of art (who has resources to purchase access to art). There is no one particular role for art, not is art predetermined to reinforce – or counter – hegemonic ideas. Depending on where artists, arts administrators and institutions locate themselves, art production and distribution can perpetuate or challenge social and other inequalities.

There is an annual festival that takes place in Darling, a little town an hour north of Cape Town. Called the Voorkamerfees (the 'Front Room Festival'), it literally happens in the front rooms of people's homes. Audience members purchase a ticket for various routes, but no one knows what they will see on the route, which comprises stopovers at three different houses. They might be watching a stand-up comic one moment, an operatic tenor the next, a hip-hop dance group the next.

The interesting aspect of this festival is that it does not happen in city-based, purpose-built infrastructure, but in the homes of poorer people who reap economic benefits from hosting performances, and who are integrated into a broader social project, rather than remaining on the margins.

This cultural intervention integrates human, social and economic development, taking place at a very local level. Social inequality is addressed too, since communities traditionally marginalized from the main tourism routes and from cultural production in the town are now at the centre of cultural dissemination.

Those who produce and distribute art, and who support others in the same effort, should be made more aware of the global, regional and national contexts in which they work, of the role that their art might play in perpetuating social, economic and community inequalities, and how their art could challenge those inequalities. It is also imperative that governments recognize the fundamental human right asserted in Article 27 for all to participate in the cultural life of the community and to enjoy the arts. This would place an obligation on the state to ensure that all have access to skills, resources and other means to produce and distribute creative works, thereby giving voice to their hopes, their anxieties, their concerns and their interests.

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