

# Salvation through Art?

## Third-level art education in an Irish prison



Written on death row, Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy* (524) was one of the most widely read books in medieval times. In the above image we see Boethius writing in his cell, accompanied by the liberal arts and the figure of Philosophia, who enabled him to overcome, or at least cope with, all the trials of life. However, when Philosophia saw that the muses of poetry were also present in the cell, she flashed in anger:

Who has suffered these seducing mummers to approach this sick man? Never do they support those in sorrow by any healing remedies, but rather do ever foster the sorrow by poisonous sweets. These are they who stifle the fruit-bearing harvest of reason with the barren briars of the passions: they free not the minds of men from disease, but accustom them thereto (Boethius, 1902 (524), p.3).

This Platonic hostility to the arts is betrayed by the form of the book itself, in which the reader encounters Philosophia 'in an already doubly allegorized library: a library of the mind within the library of the text, both of them inscribed within the pages of a book' (Selcer, 2010, p. 50). Philosophia consoles Boethius by reminding him that God knows all time as the present, thus giving future events the certainty which makes them proper objects of knowledge, while retaining their indeterminacy for us (Marenbon, 2010, Section 6). As the only real human freedom in this schema lies in the contemplation of God – or the dictatorship of the proletariat – education has a moral purpose, directing us to the ultimate good, away from the passions and bourgeois comforts. The Platonic and early Christian refusal to accept contingency as the human lot meant that this world was endurable only through the hope of a better world hereafter (Russell, 1945, p. 304). As Kołakowski (2005) argues, this soteriological outlook is shared by

the religious and the revolutionary – especially those like Boethius, Gramsci and Negri, but also Hitler, who have been imprisoned for their politics. Does an art education return us to our passions, as Philosophia alleges, distracting us from the struggle for Utopia?

The intention here is to focus on art education within the prison system in Ireland, specifically the role of the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) in Portlaoise Prison, and the idea of the prison as a site of learning. The work is grounded in a series of conversations with those involved in education within the prison system at all levels over many years. Several images will be used to explore this territory, providing historical echoes and widening the range. Some of the themes raised by Boethius, such as the revolutions of the wheel of history, the optimistic hopes for education of Schiller, Dewey and Giroux, and the tension between empowerment and emancipation for those living in Agamben's 'state of exception' are central here (Agamben, 2005). The difficulty of providing a third-level art education amid the 'consensus that education has a rehabilitative role and contributes significantly to prisoners' successful re-entry into society' (GHK, 2011, p. 54) is also explored.

Portlaoise Prison is a closed, high security prison for adult males, accommodating mostly long-term prisoners, including 'subversives', in a largely nineteenth-century building. It could hold up to 359 prisoners in 2010, although the daily average was 263 (Irish Prison Service, 2011, p. 9), up from 119 in 2009. 53% of prisoners in Portlaoise participated in an education programme in 2010, significantly higher than the national average of 35% (Ibid., p. 23). The prison's history reflects the turbulence of Irish politics since the late 1960s. In 1967 the Fianna Fáil government attempted to introduce a Criminal Justice Bill to crush dissent and introduce military custody, despite the ongoing official commitment to the aim of rehabilitation (Rogan, 2011, pp. 119-121). This conflict between punishment and rehabilitation led to a period of crisis management within the prison system in the 1970s, exacerbated by the arrival of Republican prisoners who were both organised and 'awkward to handle' (Ibid., p. 137). The riots in Mountjoy, the reopening of the Curragh military prison and the Prisons Act of 1972, led to the gradual development of a *de facto* recognition of political status for Republican prisoners, who were soon concentrated in Portlaoise. After the H-Block hunger strikes in 1981, the roughly 200 IRA prisoners in Portlaoise operated their own command structure, controlling the top three floors, while 'mavericks' were housed in the basement. The atmosphere was more that of a camp, with free association rather than prison work the norm, and the prisoners ran their own, intensely politicised, system of education, reminiscent of the *ollscoil na réabhlóide* (university of the revolution) at Frongoch internment camp in 1916. By 1984, formal education had been introduced into most Irish prisons, and, in 1985, the Whitaker Committee advocated educational improvements in prisons, based on the principles of adult education such as self-improvement, self-esteem and self-reliance (Deignan, 2004, pp. 3-4, 59-61).

The NCAD's contact with Portlaoise began through Brian Maguire's participation in an Arts Council Artists-in-Prisons Scheme in 1987 (Maguire 2000, p. 107), and ended in 2011. The NCAD was the only Irish academic institution to offer courses in prison when it began working in Portlaoise, using the methodology of the Fine Art department based on a principle of 'normalisation' (Maguire, 2009, p. 1). The focus was educational, and aimed at providing skills for 'self-expression' (Deignan, 2004, p. 9), and the project was largely driven by Maguire. This personal engagement has been both a strength and a weakness of the project.

The NCAD's introduction of artists into the prison needs to be seen against the background of prison education more generally. The stated aim of the Education Service in Irish prisons is

to deliver a high quality, broad, flexible programme of education that helps prisoners cope with their sentence, achieve personal development, prepare for life after release and establish an appetite and capacity for life-long learning.[...] It promotes the principles of adult and community education and supports a multidisciplinary approach within the prison system. (Irish Prison Service, 2011, p. 22)

Adult education has been defined as 'activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults.' (Merriam and Brockett, 1997, p.8, cited in Smith, 1999). As such, it is work *with* adults, to *promote* learning *for* adulthood (Smith 1999). 'Community education' is less easy to define, being divided between education *in* the community and education *for* community – in an art context, this can be seen in the distinction between community-based arts-development, where the primary focus is on cultural production; and arts-based community development, where art is instrumentalised in the service of community.

These complications are exacerbated when we add an art education process into the mix which aims to be neither therapeutic nor explicitly rehabilitative, although there may be 'intrinsic qualities of both in the art process' (Deignan, 2004, p. 9). Art education practiced in a personalised, facilitative manner directly engages the tension between prisoner education, a largely self-initiated process, and the more formal prison education system (Germanotta, 1995, p. 106) – although this can be achieved by means other than art. Some of the problems here include attempting to justify what is specifically educative about self-expression, and what is specifically artistic in this process. Attempts at justifying art education instrumentally are vulnerable to challenges to quantify the significance of the claims made, and whether art is the most efficient way of achieving the desired outcome (Forrest, 2011, pp. 60-61). Across most of Eastern Europe, art education in prison is part of a larger programme of 'Rehabilitation through Culture and Art', often featuring a 'patriotic' agenda (Zybert 2011, pp. 419-422). Attempts at providing a purely artistic justification stumble over defining just what art is – a classic example being Read's *Education Through Art* (1958), which devotes a whole chapter to defining art. As Forrest (2011, pp. 62-64) points out, since the mid-twentieth century aesthetic theory has resisted essentialist definitions, preferring to see it as an 'open concept' (Weitz, 1956). Thus, trying to

justify the arts according to their distinctive properties requires defining what these are, which is the very sticking point upon which the philosophy of art still wriggles. And yet, to take the pragmatist strategy of justifying the arts on the basis of what they do, leads one to the instrumental argument that leaves the arts vulnerable (Forrest, 2011, p. 64).

To add further difficulties to our problem, the humanistic notion of facilitating 'self-expression' as central to art education has come under serious challenge in recent years. If we reject the idea of an essential inner self that can be transposed into art practices 'in favour of one where agency, as well as perceptions and feelings, are the effects of social power, then the humanist model becomes problematic because the distinction between self and social become blurred' (Atkinson, 2005, p. 28).

The ideal of art education facilitating self-expression is derived from Schiller, who linked aesthetic education to the practice of politics, arguing that the State is always a stranger to its citizens, because it cannot make contact with their 'feelings':

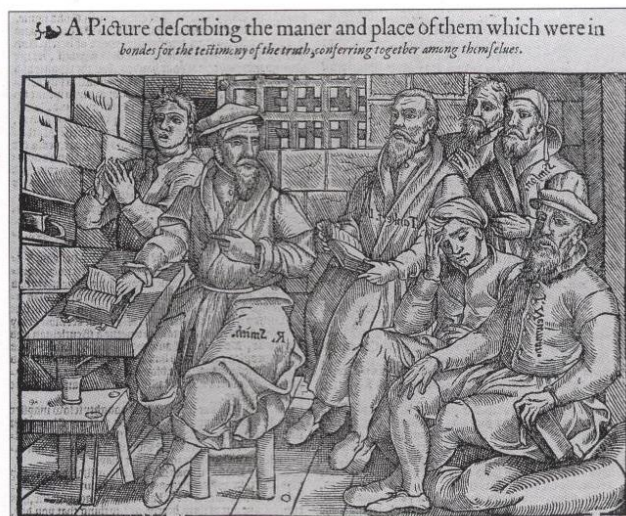
Forced to resort to classification in order to cope with the variety of its citizens, and never to get an impression of humanity except through representation at second hand, the governing section ends up by losing sight of them altogether, confusing their concrete reality with a mere construct of the intellect; while the governed cannot but receive with indifference laws which are scarcely, if at all, directed to them as persons (Schiller, 1795, p. 800).

The solution lay in aesthetic education, through which 'man' would, 'out of every dependent condition be able to wing his way towards autonomy and freedom: then we must see to it that he is in no single moment of his life a mere individual, and merely subservient to the laws of nature' (Schiller, 1795, p. 803). True political autonomy could not be achieved through revolution, but '[f]reedom and the capacity for appropriate political choice would percolate up from below, from those educated in the delights and liberating force of beauty' (Richards, 2002, p. 55). Art then provides a way of reuniting the disaffected citizen with the State, rendering them competent to play a full part in society.

During a colloquium held in 2009 to initiate this project, a former prisoner laid down a basic challenge – do we choose to collaborate with or oppose the violence of the capitalist state? He suggested that despite its rhetoric of transformation, if art education were of any real use, it would be banned. Critical analyses of penal education traditionally focus on the role of the prison in the coercive maintenance of unequal relations at the level of production. In the 1980s, Freire and Giroux sought to extend this class-based analysis to the production of subjectivities. Germanotta (1995, p. 104) argues that this 'drives a wedge between the polemical positions that view education as mere ideology and education as political training for immediate revolution.' However, as Bingham (2009, p. 411) points out, both the programme of critical pedagogy and Dewey's progressive education fall foul of 'teaching's magic circle' as they fight 'teaching with teaching': 'One must see the truth that truth is hidden, and one must be taught not to trust teaching.' Further, this model of the production of subjectivity requires the learner to create a self-identity which objectifies itself

by creating the world, which then appears to it as something external and enables it to know itself. This dialectic of self-cancelling exteriorization [. . .] [is] rooted in the whole history of neo-Platonic theogeny and in all doctrines that present God as coming into existence through his own creative activity (Kolakowski, 2005, pp. 44-45).

We are back with Boethius, searching for consolation in his cell.



Our second image depicts ‘the manner and place of them which were in bonds for the testimony of the truth, conferring together among themselves.’ It is taken from Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* (1583), ‘one of the most influential English books ever written’ (Tribble, 2001, p.39). Here Robert Smith expounds the Protestant scripture to a group of his fellow prisoners. This idea, of the prison as a site of prisoner education, is a recurrent theme among ex-prisoners from Portlaoise, especially the ‘politicals’.

Irish Prison policy in the late 1970s and early 80s was dominated by crisis management and pragmatism (Rogan, 2011, p. 154, pp. 164-5), and it was considered 'too risky' to bring teachers into Portlaoise Prison, although self-education was facilitated by the National Coordinator of Education for the IPS and by Library Officers. This was a time of extreme tension within the prison, and an expansion of security and staffing in the Irish prison system more generally, in what has been described as a ‘totalitarian’ regime. Despite this, the ‘politicals’ maintained a tight discipline, within a paramilitary style command structure, creating an ideologically driven revolutionary culture in which collective unity in the struggle dominated at the expense of notions of the self. The prisoner education system was geared towards enhancing people’s abilities when they rejoined the struggle, to the extent of formalised lectures on trajectories and the physics of explosives. The landings and yard were characterised by intense and wide-ranging discussions and debates, in a monastic atmosphere reminiscent of puritanical Catholicism, despite the Marxist rhetoric. To consider the self was a luxury, and the search for beauty was a bourgeois vanity.

This is reminiscent of Schiller’s citizen of the world, who must engage in the political, as it is ‘not merely his own cause which is being decided in this great action; judgement is to be passed according to laws which he, as a reasonable being, is himself competent and entitled to dictate’ (Schiller, 1795, p. 797). However, Schiller rejects this ideal of the competent citizen engaged in political dialogue in favour of aesthetics, because ‘if man is ever to solve that problem of politics in practice he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom’ (Ibid., p. 798). In his historical analysis of the rupture between humanity’s natural or sensuous state and the state of

morality or reason, 'all-dividing Intellect' is opposed to 'unifying Nature', producing civilization's wound:

State and Church, laws and customs, were now torn asunder; enjoyment was divorced from labour, the means from the end, the effort from the reward. Everlastingly chained to a single little fragment of the Whole, man himself develops into nothing but a fragment; [. . .] nothing more than the imprint of his occupation or of his specialized knowledge (Ibid., p. 799).

As Beardsley (1966, p. 227) suggests, these words 'could easily be put in the mouth of John Dewey, nearly a century and a half later'. Like Schiller, Dewey argues that the task of those who write on the philosophy of the fine arts is to 'restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art' and the everyday events of ordinary life (Dewey, 1934, p. 2). As Rancière (2010, p. 115) puts it, the basic idea is that 'there exists a specific sensory experience that holds the promise of both a new world of Art and a new life for individuals and the community, namely the *aesthetic*.' This promise has been realised both in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that is a totalitarian society, and the 'Spectacle' of a commodified culture. Schiller's work is therefore at the heart of Rancière's theory of the politics of the 'aesthetic regime' of art:

This may be summed up in three points. First, the autonomy staged by the aesthetic regime of art is not that of the work of art but of a mode of experience. Second, the 'aesthetic experience' is one of heterogeneity, such that, for the subject of that experience, it is also the dismissal of a certain autonomy. Third, the object of that experience is aesthetic, insofar as it is not, or at least not only, art (Rancière, 2010, pp. 116-117).

One element of this is art's promise of its own abolition through self-realisation in a new form of collective life, the tragic dream of the various twentieth-century avant-gardes. Tragic, because art must either suppress itself in the cause of the revolution or refuse absolutely to engage in any form of aesthetic militancy (Ibid., pp. 178-179). Groys (2008, 2010) has attempted to negotiate this paradox with his idea of the 'weak universalism' of artistic images. While recognising that there 'is a long history of profound inner complicity between modern art and the modern revolutionary', whereby 'radical negation is equated with authentic creativity' (Groys, 2008, p. 11), he argues that 'the terrorist or warrior with an embedded image production machine is an enemy of the modern artist: he tries to create images that have a claim on being true and real beyond any criticism of representation' (Ibid., p. 14). By contrast, the art world has created a sustained critique of representation, undermining the permanent truth claims of the 'strong images' of the 'political sublime' by demonstrating art's transience, 'its lack of time; and to transcend this lack of time through a weak, minimal gesture that requires very little time – or even no time at all' (Groys, 2010, p. 120).

Art educators usually make claims about art as being a specific form of 'knowledge' – often, following Schiller's division, a more intuitive, emotional knowledge than 'hard' rationalism. For example, Grierson (2011, p. 338) lists six 'ways for educators to consider art as a site of knowledge that reveals something more than [...] might be possible under the leading guise of

reason'. Why art reveals 'more' rather than just 'differently' is never made clear (other than references to a Heideggerian 'bringing-forth'), but Grierson includes the notion of art as a 'language' of 'identity formation'. This claim was echoed in many of the conversations, where much of the discussion centred on ideas of art as form of expression and painting being a language in its own right.

Dewey (1934, p. 282) extols art as the 'most universal form of language' and claims that '[e]xpression strikes below the barriers that separate human beings from one another'. Further, [t]he sense of communion generated by a work of art may take on a definitely religiously quality.' Dewey's status as a theorist of education has led generations of educators to accept such claims. However, even Goodman (1976, pp. xii) acknowledges that describing art as 'language' is misleading and 'should, strictly, be replaced by "symbol systems".' Art is different from language because of the impossibility of replying in kind, and particularly art's self-referentiality, leading Mukařovský to posit a basic distinction between an 'artistic sign' and a 'communicative sign' (Mukařovský, 1977, p. 237). Expression in art is a very old idea, but one that routinely gets stuck in the gaps between the emotion of the artist, the art object and the viewer (Beardsley, 1966, pp. 318-340; Graham, 2005, pp. 133-147; Matravers, 2005, pp. 445-455), rendering expressivism untenable – despite the undoubted fact that emotion is central to our experience of art. From an educational point of view, the magic trick of expression (Arendt (1958, p. 323n) went as far as calling it 'charlatanism') leads to a concentration of power in the teacher, who becomes at once a priest and healer – teaching as a 'practical shamanism' (Murphy, 2000, p. 16). This essentially romantic vision can be derived through Schiller and Goethe directly to Beuys, but is at odds with the more critical discourses developed in contemporary third-level art education. This disjunction led to one student who made the transition from prison to art college coming to believe that the tutors had no 'belief in art'. Expecting that he would develop a fluency in a new language which would give him the ability to express himself, he found art college to be a disillusioning experience.

Inglis (1997, n.p.) is sharply critical of the psychological individualism inherent in transformative theories of adult education leading to 'empowerment', arguing that 'there is a need to take an understanding of human emancipation away from notions of liberating a pre-existing, essential self towards a more realist or structuralist analysis of power.' He cites Ellsworth (1989, p. 298), who argues that concepts such as 'dialogue' and 'student voice' that are central to many critical pedagogical practices are effectively 'repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination'. The idea of adult education based on individual transformation as the agent of social change (Mezirow, 1991) is therefore at odds with structuralist analyses, in which individuals are constituted within structures of power – although even here, just as we saw with both Marxism and Boethius, there are tensions between determinism and contingency. The promotion of the 'true self' in transformative adult education is a good fit with nationalist essentialism, perhaps making it attractive to many of the 'politicals' in Portlaoise, facilitating 'authentic individualism' within an 'authentic community'. However, following the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, with the prospect of imminent release the PIRA prisoners collapsed as a community, lapsing back to individualism in an outbreak of 'gate fever'.



Here we see Rorie Oge, a defeated sixteenth-century ‘rebell stoute’, reduced to living in the forest with only the wolves for company – for ‘such is every rebeles state’ (Derrick (1581), Plate 11). This outcast figure remains at the heart of debates about prison education. Kevin Warner, who was Co-ordinator of Education for Ireland for many years and Chairperson of the Council of Europe ‘Expert Group’ on Prison Education and Training, has proposed two different penal ‘models’, the first of which is based on policy documents of the Council of Europe,

constructed around the recognition of the prisoner as an individual rather than as an ‘offender’, in line with the adult education approach. The second model is the ‘Anglo American model’ which Warner identified in an earlier publication (Warner 2002) as consisting of three key features: negative stereotypes of prisoners, vengeful attitudes and a considerable rise in the use of incarceration in the justice system. It is this model which is currently more prevalent in Europe (GHK, 2011, p. 8).

That this isolated hero of Irish nationalism is a universal trope is exemplified, albeit at ‘the euphoric end of prophecies of global cataclysm’ (Bhattacharyya, 2005, p.193), in Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* (2000, pp. 412-413), where ‘[i]nsurrection was the proud emblem of the militant’, and in the contemporary world, ‘[m]ilitants resist imperial command in a creative way.’ For Badiou, this political subject

used to be referred to as a ‘citizen’, certainly not in the sense of the elector or town councillor, but in the sense of the Jacobin of 1793. He used to be called ‘professional revolutionary’. He used to be called ‘grassroots militant’. We seem to be living in a time when his name is suspended, a time when we must find a new name for him (2005, p.102).

Agamben (1998) has suggested a very old name for this figure, that of the *homo sacer*, the Roman term for the outcast living a ‘bare life’, who could be killed without it being murder, but could not be ritually sacrificed. Such is the life of the condemned man like Boethius, living in the ‘state of exception’. Agamben suggests that in the contemporary world the emergency has



become the rule, enabling ‘the elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system’ (Agamben, 2005, p. 2). These incompetent citizens – or worse, non-citizens – are herded away into ‘camps’ of various types, the spaces that are ‘opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule’ (Agamben 1998, p. 169). In Irish terms, paradigmatic examples include the 20,000 people in psychiatric hospitals in the Republic in the 1940s and 50s, internees held in Northern Ireland between 1971 and 1975, and asylum seekers in ‘Direct Provision’. The re-entry of such people living what Agamben, following Arendt, describes as *zoe*, the bare physiological life, into the *bios politicos*, the life of the society, ‘constitutes the decisive event of modernity’ (Agamben, 1998, p. 4).

One possibility therefore is that imprisonment is both a rite of passage and a form of dialogue for some of these ‘incompetent’ citizens, those who become a minority at war with the State, thereby assisting in the creation of a state of exception, yet also unable to rise beyond this and implement their own idea of politics. This is reminiscent of Bloch’s description of Job, who has discovered his ‘Utopian potency’ through his challenge to Yahweh. ‘Job has not just stepped aside from his cult and his community – his attitude is one of definite, unambiguous attack’ (Bloch, 1972, p. 94.) Yahweh’s response is to momentarily reveal the impossibility of salvation, the absolute lack of any anthropocentric teleology in the universe (Ibid., pp. 97-102). This radical disillusionment echoes the original frustration of the criminal driven to violence, and even the experience of prison itself with its own ongoing narratives of victimisation and hopes for a better life which may come to nothing. Even an encounter with the education system can be profoundly disillusioning, as we have seen.

Kertzer (2001, p. 111) argues that the construction of symbols and rituals ‘helps us construct political reality out of what must otherwise appear as chaos.’ A very traditional element in Irish nationalism has been the construction of the martyr, exploiting narratives of resistance and oppression creating a stock of images essential for the creation of nationalist ritual (Owens, 1999). The transition from jailed patriot to government minister is a familiar rite of passage in Irish history, echoing the familiar phases of separation, marginalisation and readmission into society with a newly acquired status. For art educators working with Republican prisoners, this reservoir of political symbols and metaphorical forms could enable narrative pieces to easily slip into representations of incorporation into the pantheon of Irish history. In this sense, the idea of the artist ‘giving voice’ and ‘restoring humanity’ could misunderstand the importance of going to prison as a rite of passage within the struggle – despite the fact that the war has clearly been lost. However, it is very clear from all the conversations that this danger was apparent to all, and that propaganda on even a subtle level was rigorously avoided. This risk of propagandising is not confined to the ‘politicals’, as many ‘social’ prisoners adopt the pose of being ‘primitive revolutionaries’ – ‘taking back the night’ in revenge for the ills of society, keenly aware that it is the *function* of many people in Ireland to become prisoners, and that without them, whole structures of power would collapse.

Part of Goffman’s original description of the ‘total institution’ included the ‘handling of many human needs by the bureaucratic organization of whole blocks of people – whether or not this is a necessary or effective means of social organization’ (Goffman, 1961, p. 6, quoted in Davidson, 1995, p. 10). This brings us back to the role of adult education within a contested space such as a

prison, without attempting ‘to portray prisoners as “primitive rebels” or “eternal protestors”, or to see teachers as an “intellectual vanguard”’ (Davidson, 1995, p. 10). Through dialogue, a process of critical self-reflection can emerge for those students willing to engage in such a process.

Once critical reflection begins, in the context of formal education being pursued in a prison setting, prisoner-students find their own life history placed in a new perspective, and they begin to see the possibilities of genuine personal transformation and eventually of transformation of the world. They look to higher education to deliver on these possibilities. Instead, a tragedy unfolds, and the second phase of the prisoner’s educational journey comes to an abrupt end (Germanotta, 1995, pp. 111-112).

This is the crux of the criticism of ‘empowering’ education – that it will run against the walls of the ‘total institution’ in some expression of power or another. While the idea of emancipation through dialogue is common to thinkers such as Dewey (1916), Freire (1970), Bakhtin (1981), Habermas (1984), Schön (1991), and Bohm (1996), ‘the possibilities of dialogue in the critical pedagogy classroom often seem bleak’ (Kaufmann, 2011, p. 472). One of the problems is that dialogue can provide solidarity, which feels empowering while leaving power structures unchallenged – in fact it can reify ‘power through constituting an us/them binary – us minority/them privileged – without interrogating how these positions are possible’ (Ibid., p. 470). In the conventional discourse of civility, differences are bracketed out to enable decision-making in a contingent world. One version of this civil solidarity could produce the *Gleichschaltung* of both the Nazis and Stalinism, where all difference/dissent was wiped out – although as Agamben (2005, p. 5) points out, ‘it is important to remember that the modern state of exception is a creation of the democratic-revolutionary tradition and not the absolutist one.’ Benhabib (1992, p. 43) posits a universalist pragmatism premised on an equality of differences, based on a reflexive culture:

That is to say, only a moral point of view which can radically question all procedures of justification, including its own, can create the conditions for a moral conversation which is open and rational enough to include other points of view, including those which will withdraw from the conversation at some point.

The idea of an egalitarian dialogue that underpins constructivist models of educational process is based on a certain view of the person, one that is not necessarily taken for granted within a prison system. Warner (2008, p. 5) tracks the shift in official Irish discourse from prisoners being ‘referred to explicitly and without qualification as “members of the community” and as “valued members of society” (Department of Justice, 1994)’ to seven years later being described as ‘endeavouring to become “valued members of society” (Irish Prison Service, 2001)’. Warner and Costelloe (2008, p. 3) take issue with the current language of ‘offending behaviour’ as supporting a return to ‘the now discredited medical model of imprisonment’, and Warner (2010, p. 1) argues that prisoners ‘are often demonised, not regarded as fully human and not perceived as part of the society to which the rest of us belong.’ While the GHK review (2011, p. 5) describes as ‘esoteric’ Warner’s position that ‘prison education lessens the damage caused by imprisonment’, it is a vision that is clearly supported by a large body of both human rights documents (particularly the European Convention on Human Rights and the UN International

Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) and educational theory over many years. It has been bolstered by the European Courts of Human Rights Ruling 681, *Hirst v the United Kingdom (No 2)* [2005] through which prisoners won the right to vote, reasserting their position as citizens, which has been given legal effect in Ireland. This marks a highly significant step in the struggle to return the prisoner to civil society.



This statue of Sir Alexander McDonnell (1794-1895) sits abandoned at the back of the former St. Conleth's Reformatory in Daingean, Co. Offaly. McDonnell was resident commissioner in charge of the National School system established in 1839 on the basis of a non-denominational form of education, with separate religious instruction for each group (Hyland & Milne, 1987, pp. 98-103). The rules drawn up under McDonnell's leadership included three forms of punishment only – confinement, exclusion and expulsion (Commissioners of National Education, 1840, p. 35). With the rising power of cultural nationalism amid the devotional revolution of the mid-nineteenth century, the reality of the Irish education system was to be very different. Many of the former prisoners taking part in this project referred to their own educational experiences prior to prison, with many leaving school in their early teens or having being through the Industrial School/Reformatory system. Braz and Williams (2011, pp. 126-145) document the 'schools-to-

prisons pipeline' in the USA, demonstrating how education cuts are matched by rises in prison numbers and expenditure, with California's 2012-13 budget projections allocating \$15.4 billion for prisons and \$15.3 billion for higher education. In an Irish context, 84.2% of all prisoners have left school at the age of 16 or younger, with 41% having left school at the age of 14 or younger (Morgan and Kett, 2003, p.46).

We are therefore witnesses to a disastrous cycle wherein prison spending rises, educational spending declines, the number of students pushed out of school in at-risk communities rises, and then those students disproportionately end up imprisoned, hence helping to fuel the call for more prison spending, which in turn curtails education spending, which leads to more students pushed out of school, and on and on it goes (Braz and Williams, 2011, p. 127).

This in turn can feed into social unrest as witnessed in the UK in the summer of 2011, where just 8.6% of around 1,000 people before the magistrates courts had jobs or were students (Davies, 2011).

While there is the possibility that working in prison education is a form of co-optation rather than a model of change (Hartnett, 2011, p .8), the fact remains that prisoners continue to have rights, including those to education. As Rancière (2010. p. 69) puts it, the 'very difference between man and citizen' is 'the opening of an interval for political subjectivation', whereby those affected not only 'bring the inscription of rights to bear against situations in which those rights are denied but they construct the world in which those rights are valid, together with the world in which they are not.' While he goes on to suggest that consensual politics is merely a reduction to a simple redistribution of rights, the production of 'an identity between law and fact', the rights-based argument remains a potent tool in prison education debates. It underpins the position taken by the European Prison Education Association and the Council of Europe's 1990 policy document *Education in Prison*. Article 18 of the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights asserts that 'everyone has the right to education and to have access to vocational and continuing training', and Article 2 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms states that 'No person shall be denied the right to education'. In order to ensure that prisoners gain access to education there are a number of relevant international provisions supporting their rights, such as the UN *Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners* (Resolution 663 c (XXIV) of the Economic and Social Council, 1957) (Muñoz, 2009, p. 9) and the Council of Europe's *European Prison Rules* (2006) (GHK, 2011, p. 54).

While prisoners' rights to art education in Ireland are met within the existing VEC provision, Article 15 of the Council of Europe's recommendations on education in prison (Council of Europe, 1989) suggests that '[w]here education has to take place within the prison, the outside community should be involved as fully as possible.' This is a key element in the policy of 'normalisation' adopted by the NCAD project, and the idea of artists arriving in to the prison as independent observers was cited by former prison staff as being of major importance (although this claim was hotly disputed by some former prisoners). The pedagogic encounter is different with an artist-teacher rather than an art-teacher, insofar as the former is usually seen as less part of 'the system' – indeed the NCAD programme was described as having a 'whiff of sabotage' about it. While this may have been part of a carefully cultivated image, it did serve to bridge the

gap that often exists between students and staff in prison. A further element is that from the very beginning Brian Maguire made it clear that there was a *quid pro quo* in the relationship, that as an artist, he would be seeking something from the encounter. Thornton (2011, p. 33) suggests that such reciprocity 'reflects a central conceptualization of dialogue as intimate, amicable conversation between two interlocutors striving for trust and mutual respect and an exchange of knowledge and understanding of benefit to both.' Working in a context such as Portlaoise can be of benefit to NCAD staff as artist-teachers in so far as 'they are offered opportunities to make art and engage with concepts of art and consider the value in this for them as artists, teachers or learners' (Ibid., p. 35), and this 'added value' may mark a distinction between the work of the NCAD and that of the VEC staff within the prison.

Other distinctive elements of the pedagogy used by the NCAD artist-teachers include a high level of informality and a collaborative approach to art-making, especially in the narrative video work. While ongoing evaluation has been carried out within the NCAD, the project has eschewed formal accreditation, opting for a role whereby artists facilitate personal development rather than training in competencies. This fits with what many of both the former prison officers and prisoners felt was appropriate, especially in terms of the prison as a site of continuous, flexible learning, a view supported by international studies (Braggins and Talbot, 2005, pp. 55-57). However, on an institutional level, this very flexibility can be a weakness in terms of defending budgets and standards, so it may be preferable, were the project to resume, to include some sort of optional accreditation. The process of making the video portraits, being a group effort, led to prisoners assuming responsibility both for equipment and the space for each other to develop their work. This process led to the emergence of spaces of freedom and dissent which are unusual within a prison context, adding to the depth of the experience from the prisoners' point of view, building enormous trust and respect between them and the artists. In this way elements of the programme began to resemble the notion of the therapeutic community, which centres on this idea of prisoner responsibility (Boyle, 1977, pp. 229-264; Meadows, 2010, pp. 81-87).

The focus on narrative and dialogue in this work, while not explicitly therapeutic, undoubtedly has a therapeutic effect. The borders of education and therapy are however notoriously unclear, especially if 'the general purpose of education is to foster the growth of what is individual in each human being, at the same time harmonizing the individuality thus educed with the organic unity of the social group to which the individual belongs' (Read, 1958, p. 8). The focus on narrative enables the situated nature of such partial stories to emerge (Kaufmann 2011, pp. 461-2), allowing for critical reflection on them. These narratives, while of obvious importance to their originators, can have educative significance far beyond the personal, and are powerful tools for observational learning, especially in the field of health education and behaviour change (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007; Houston *et al*, 2011). Narratives have also been seen as productive of a form of knowledge which 'attempts to illuminate the universals of the human condition by revealing the particular' (Charen, 2006, p. 9, cited in Hustvedt, 2010, p.27). For Badiou (2005, p.105), 'it is always in subjectivity, rather than the community, that the egalitarian edict [*l'arret*] interrupting and overturning the usual course of conservative politics is uttered.' Such claims are reminiscent of the anagogical elevation of subjective narrative which both Jameson (1981, pp.13-20) and Kołakowski (2005) – albeit from very different points of view – argue is at the heart of both Christianity and Marxism, shaping the 'political unconscious'.

This brings us straight back to the psychological individualism criticised by Inglis (1997), and the critique of writers like Laclau and Mouffe (2001), Bishop (2004) and Rancière (2010), who promote antagonism rather than consensus as the basis of democracy. ‘According to the agonistic approach, critical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate’ Mouffe (2007, p. 4). Despite attacking ‘the privileged position of the artist’, however, her suggestion that critical art is ‘constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at *giving a voice* to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony’ (Ibid, emphasis added) is surely a restatement of that privilege, insofar as the artist is accorded the power of enabling others to speak. Within an explicitly educational context, however, where the artist is also a teacher, this power is clearly present and easily justified – as long as it is not used to produce a predetermined ‘learning outcome’ while claiming to be ‘emancipatory’ (Ruitenbergh, 2011, pp. 221-222). As Carey (2005) has shown, it is important not to overstate the value of the arts – and to remember that access to the arts for many is better inside a prison than outside (p. 165).

From the time of Schiller on, we have known that ‘[t]eaching, like the arts, is a social engagement, and has political, moral and ethical consequences, through its mode of delivery as well as its content’ (Adams, 2011, p. 158). At a time when art is regarded ‘as a potent form of creative knowledge that reveals cultural and social conditions’ (Grierson, 2011, p. 349), and the key question for art educators is the art institutions’ relations with the outside world, it would seem to be incumbent on a college that claims to be ‘national’ in its reach to engage with a site of learning that may be the ‘nomos of the modern’ (Agamben, 1998, pp. 166-180). The NCAD’s prison project, while it may have had elements of the therapeutic and the rehabilitative, enabling people to cope with their time in prison, has gone beyond this to exemplify a model of art education as action research in the public domain. While new models of engagement, such as flexible learning and the Inside-Out model (Pompa, 2011) (whereby students from the college and prisoners could interact) may need to be developed, this project has clearly had significant value and importance for all concerned, and should be revived as soon as possible.

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