NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

FINE ART (PAINTING)

PROMOTING VISUAL AWARENESS THROUGH THE LIBERATION OF EDUCATION

BY

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INTRODUCTION

The significance of the arts on a society's cultural plane will usually be reflective of the status accorded to those subjects within the education system of that society. Levels of visual awareness and engagement in the activities of the visual arts are undoubtedly related to the impact of the dominant philosophy of education on the quality of education available in our schools. As Ireland's economic health continues to weaken, the powerful grip held by the economy on matters of education strengthens.

Education is an institution which plays a vital role in the formation of social attitudes and characteristics. The school occupies a prominent position in our lives for at least one quarter of our life expectancy. It is of prime concern when investigating the root couses of any sociological issue. It must therefore be called into question when tackling current social trends in relation to the arts.

Through an insight into the history of policy making and development patterns in Irish secondary education, one can begin to discover how we have arrived at the close of the twentieth century with an education system inextricably bound up with public examinations as the tools of a utilitarian approach to schooling. The liberating aims of education for life have been reduced solely to the restricting objectives of education for work. The arts, with their intrinsic worth in human development, have consistently been under-developed or ignored completely in second level educational circles.

A serious disparity exists in Ireland, as in many countries of the western world, between the artistic pursuits of visual artists and the accessibility of those works produced to large portions of the population. This deprivation of a nation of the potentially stimulatory experiences of the visual arts arises partly through defects in our education system. Its present passive reflection of current social trends offers little scope for the promotion of the visual arts in their capacity as questioners and evaluators of a society. The economically defined ends presently determining the education of our youths are however in unison with the dominant voices of mass culture. We are educating a nation of passive consumers on which the mass media thrive. People's alienation from the private arenas of the fine arts is often attributed solely to elements of elitism and snobbery within that sphere. A willingness to pose much more fundamental questions about the ideologies and stratification of our society is lacking. These ironically are questions which arise from human faculties directly neglected by the current approach to schooling.

An argument for the arts in education needs to ask exactly such sociological questions. Rather than simply calling for a place for the arts for art's sake alone, the opportunity is rife for confronting much wider social issues as a mandatory accompaniment to a programme for the arts. The long term success of any such programme in awakening a heightened visual awareness in society is dependent upon a comprehensively radical re-evaluation of educational practice.

Characteristics of the Irish Secondary School which may hamper the progress of a promotion of a critical consciousness and visual awareness must be identified and reformed. A re-appropriation of the school as a social service, loosening it withour detaching it entirely from the grip of stark economic realities, must form the basis of educational policy in the twenty-first century. The arts constitute a cultural arena of immense importance, one of which people must be made

aware, including, if not especially, those for whom the worsening economic climate signifies a bleak future.

CHAPTER ONE

The oldest institution of Post-Primary education in Ireland, the Secondary School, dates as far back as the year 1570. In the Post-Reformation era these schools were established in Ireland to spread the English language over the native Irish tongue, Gaeilge. The schools were vehicles through which English values and behaviour could be transmitted and the Protestant belief instilled. It is interesting to note how in these formative years the Secondary School, like many educational institutions world-wide, was already being recognised as a powerful social instrument, the control of which was essential in the course of stamping one's own ideologies on a society. Catholic education was more or less prohibited until the relaxation of the penal laws in the 1780's after which time Catholic diocesan clergy, orders and congregations, both male and female, were permitted to found educational establishments. Again this represents schools being run under clearly defined value systems based on the philosophy of the founders. (Hyland, 1986, p. 254.)

The curricular emphasis during these years was on the humanist grammar school tradition, with language and literary studies predominating. (Coolahan, 1981, p. 53.) The schooling at the time has been referred to as austere and drab with a joyless piety lingering in the classroom. (Hogan, 1986, p. 268.) Such characteristics have been difficult to shed ever since. Education beyond the elementary, or primary stages was generally considered as a luxury or a commodity which could be purchased by the more priveleged members of society if they so chose. (Randles, 1975, p. 15.) This phenomenon was not

unlike the one created by the so-called 'grind' institutions of the present day which offer more and supposedly better education to those members of society who can afford to pay for it, over and above their non fee-paying education. A sharp distinction was drawn between primary education, seen as being of central importance to the development and growth of all members of society and secondary education which was considered necessary only for the formation of an elite. This feature of our education history has remained a striking reality to the present day manifesting itself in many areas of the system. Despite the slogan 'equality of educational opportunity' constantly recurring as a political promise, social conditions still ensure that this is an ideal beyond our grasp.

The year 1878 is a landmark on the historical plane of the post-primary institution. Through the Intermediate Act the British Government, in relation to subsidies for educators, introduced the payment by results system. (Randles, 1975, p. 18.) This scheme involved government funding for post-primary schools on the basis of the extent of their pupil's success rate in a public examination. The importance and relevance of this act rests not so much in the nature of the scheme for it was abolished soon after. The note-worthy feature however, is that the syllabi for these public examinations immediately began to determine what was studied in Irish classrooms and, more importantly, how it was studied. The powerful grip thus held by examination systems on the schooling of the nation's youths remains ever strong today. As a result of this determining factor in how subjects are studied in the classroom, certain subject areas such as the Arts, whether drama, poetry, or fine art, are inevitably taught in an inadequate, restrictive fashion or even neglected entirely as in the case of the latter. Some subjects by their very nature are simply unsuited to the demands of an examination driven education system.

After Independence for the Republic new programmes of education were designed. During the 1920's a nationalist shift in curricular policy was the most significant change. The government were, in terms of educational policy, preoccupied with the re-establishment of what was understood to be the true Irish cultural heritage as reflected in the Irish language. (Coolahan, 1981, p. 73.) The potential of the schoolroom in initiating a revival of the native tongue was immediately targeted.

The Intermediate and Leaving Certificate public examinations were introduced in 1924, substantiating rather than altering the direction taken in 1878. The ideal objective of the Intermedicate Certificate was to provide a well balanced general education suitable for pupils who might leave education as well as those who wish to proceed to a higher level. The Leaving Certificate was to prepare students for immediate entry into open society or advancement to third level education. (Coolahan, 1981, p. 206.) These rather broad and similar definitions of the functions of each examination are relatively consistent with today's. It should be noted however, that the Intermediate Certificate has recently been reformed and renamed the Junior Certificate, in an attempt to loosen the grip of the exam and to broaden the curriculum. The long-term effects of this remain to be seen.

1924 saw a change to a capitation grant system, funds being distributed according to the number of recognised students satisfactorily attending any given school. The students themselves of course were still funding much of the running costs of the schools , through payment of fees, at this stage.

In these early years of the Irish Free State education began to be recognised as the solution to at least some of the nation's economic problems. An awareness grew of the importance of "preparing the rising generation to meet the urgent

problems of our difficult times". (Randles, 1975, p. 17.) Out of this social concept the idea of Vocational Education developed during the 1930's, concentrating on practical training as opposed to the more academic traditions of the Seconday School. The inevitable social distinctions arose between the two contrasting and increasingly opposing veins of the post-primary institution. Elements of snobbery within the Secondary system manifested themselves in social prejudice against the less established Vocational strand. (Randles, 1975, p. 21.) The government meanwhile were realising and excited by the healthier economic return likely to unfold from investment in Vocational Education, important in the nations continuing struggle for economic prosperity. Gradually, with a rival now in place, the Secondary school was considered more beneficial to the individual rather than the nation as a whole. This type of opinion has influenced the course of policy making to this day. It is an important development to note in an investigation into the chanelling of the aims and objectives of Irish education and the subsequent neglect of certain subject areas amid the increasingly utilitarian approach to education in the twentieth century.

The visit to America in the 1960's by the then Minister for Education, P.J. Hillery, further instilled this theory of education in the political mind of the country. There he witnessed how emphasis was placed on more and better education as "the cutting edge of national survival". (Randles, 1975, p. 54) A wholly healthy concept at heart, but seriously undermined if more and better are solely understood as means to economically defined ends.

By 1961 it was noted that the system of education in place in Seconday schools was still largely that which had been established by the British. (Randles, 1975, p. 66.) In the same year the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) again highlighted the role of education as an investment

of equal value as that in fixed capital, from the point of view of productivity and economic growth. (Randles, 1975, p. 79.)

The seed of what has grown into the notorious 'points' system or 'points race' in relation to university entrance can be traced to the year 1963. Universities expressed concern over the numbers of undergraduates they found to be ill equipped to engage in concentrated or methodical study or to undergo sustained mental exertion. (Randles, 1975, p. 127) They called for radical reform of the pedagogical practices of secondary institutions in what was clearly an early recognition of the damage being inflicted on the quality of post-primary education, as a result of the over-reliance on the examination as the driving force behind motivation, learning and teaching in the classroom. There is a place for the exam in such an establishment as the Secondary school, but this place has become over-powering in the course of the century at the expense of education. The school authorities, faced with this questioning of their practice, preferred the superficial solution to the problem of simply raising the minimum standards of entry, thereby excluding those students who had not developed the necessary abilities to engage in active critical study through inadequacies in the system, rather than personal intellectual problems. The call for radical reform then was not answered and that call needs still to be made today. The 'points' system was eventually introduced in 1968, also acting as a controlling force on the rapidly increasing demand for third level places.

In 1964 when the question of free education for all was a live issue on the political spectrum, P.J. Hillery expressed his fears of a problem which might arise with the realisation of such a social service. They are again symbolic of the growing utilitarianism of approach to educational thought. He suggested that in the event of providing free secondary education to all citizens the government would be wasting it's money, as such academic courses of study would be of no

use to most of the pupils and that there would be no jobs, no need for so many more 'white-collar' workers. A serious sociological problem would thus arise in the conflict between the democratic rights of the students and their parents and the manpower needs of the nation. Secondary education which had always been beyond the reach of low income, working class families would suddenly be made accessible and probably preferable to many. (Randles, 1975, p. 147.) The fine line between education as a democratic right and education as a service to the economy is touched upon here. Since 1967 though, when free secondary education for all was finally implemented by Donogh O'Malley, the latter cause, that of the manpower needs of the nation, has adapted to the continued public desire and preference for Secondary schooling by steering that institution from within, in the direction of current economic concerns.

From the 1960's through to the 1980's, there were dramatic increases in public and governmental interest in education. The government were continuously investigating the concept of education as an investment in the economy, while the public became increasingly aware of the possibilities of education as a social escalator. This escalator however continues to break down falling short, as I have mentioned, in its capacity to transcend social inequality. Curricular changes, though few in number during this period, were always pre-occupied or pre-determined by the needs of a more industrialised economy.

1979 marks the year of the publication of the Benson Report on the place of the arts in Irish education. This enlightening and comprehensive account of the need for urgent attention to the absence of the arts at an acceptable level on the curriculum unfortunately does not mark any significant point in the history of development and change in the Secondary education system.

In his book, *Irish Education, History and Structure*, John Coolahan describes the basic mode of pedagogy of the Secondary School as being "subject centred with a heavy reliance on the expository lecture method and note giving". (Coolahan, 1981, p. 198.) It has been didactic and directive in approach, inhibiting more innovative, creative, problem solving attitudes among school leavers. Parental, pupil and social expectations of rewards of successful examination performance have meant that schools are increasingly being judged on results in these examinations and restricted to the established teaching practices which accompany the pressure of an exam. In Britain recently, so called 'league-tables' have begun to be published listing schools in order of merit, as determined by the extent of the success of their students in public examinations. This scheme has been defended on the grounds of parental right to information. It does quite honestly and accurately expose the seriousness and the extent of inequality in British education system, quite similar in that regard to the Irish system. This inequality is reflected in under-achievement in dis-advantaged areas of the country. Such 'league-tables' however, serve to further cloud the aims and objectives of an education system in a liberal democracy through the inculcation of a consumerist market philosophy on the social understanding of what constitutes a good education. Undoubtedly the under-achievers in disadvantaged, unemployment-stricken areas are receiving a poorer, inferior education than the children of the socially privileged within the context of competitive examinations. One must question however, whether even the privileged child is in receipt of the full range of benefits of a truely liberal education. Is the child who sails through the public examination system having benefited from quality expensive schooling not equally deprived of his/her right to a developed cultural awareness, a mind appreciative and critical of his/her cultural milieu, if the school paid inadequate attention to such concerns through neglect of important areas such as the arts? The danger of such 'league-tables'

is in their capacity to reduce the concept of a good, quality education to the achievement of a top grade in examination.

Briefly on curriculum, five subject groupings have tended to be focused upon. These include Irish, English, History and Geogrpahy, Mathematics, and Science. In Comprehensive or Vocational schools, the category of the syllabus comprising History and Geography can accommodate Mechanical Drawing, Home Economics (usually for girls), Commerce or Art as alternatives. The Science category also can be replaced by an extra language or Business Studies. Physical Education and Singing have also figured importantly. At the senior level the five groups alter slightly to become Language, Science, Business Studies, Applied Science and Social Studies. (Coolahan, 1981, p. 203.) This is a very simplistic outline of the basis of the curriculum of the Secondary school throughout the century. Obviously on a closer examination one would discover variations on this rather constricting bedrock. A point to note at this stage though, is that there has been a serious lack of a co-ordinating synthesised statement on overall curricular policy for second level schools regarding programmes offered, the pedagogy employed and the life-styles of the schools. This has resulted in various interested groups continuously canvassing for their own desires concerning education in complete oposition to each other, with victory for one's own lobby signalling defeat of the cause of another.

CHAPTER TWO

Under the recent political climate in Ireland, education has once again arrived at the forefront of government policy and public interest at large. As we edge ever closer to the end of the twentieth century and, more importantly, as European economic union lingers ahead under the guise of the Maastricht Treaty economic recovery, primarily concerned with the creation of jobs, dominates the political agenda. The education system has naturally surfaced within that agenda. In June 1992, the Fianna Fail government published a Green Paper, *Education for a Changing World.* This has ignited an explosion of political and social responses. Our daily newspapers and national airwaves are littered with the reactions and proposals of the multitude of interested parties from parents and educationalists to politicans themselves. The debate which is very much a live issue is intended to contribute to the publication of a White Paper and eventually to the passing of an education Act. As many might have expected, drawing on past experience, but never resigned themselves to, the arts have once again been almost entirely neglected in a policy paper shrouded in economic discourse, a modish programme for the future of Irish education. The thrust of the paper concerns itself with reforming education to meet the requirements of 'European citizenship', a European workforce, an 'enterprise culture' and increased social and technological change. Such phrases are forming the political lingo for the 1990's. Disappointment and astonishment emanate from the enormous quantity of responses to this "outrageous neglect". (Woodworth, "Interview with M.D. Higgins", 1993)

One can draw hope from the frequent discussion of the subject in the various channels of the media, bearing in mind that there is still opportunity to reverse the potentially damaging course for Irish education of the future as outlined in this prototype for change. The neglect of the arts in Secondary schools and its effect on levels of visual awareness in society was set to continue and worsen as long as this Green Paper influenced government policy. A flicker of light however was reflected in the premature dissolution of the designing government. Fianna Fail have, seven months after publication of the Green Paper, been through the shake-up of a general election. In the aftermath a coalition government was formed with the Labour Party under Dick Spring. Seamus Brennan has been replaced by Niamh Breathnach, of the Labour Party, as Minister for Education. More importantly a new department has been created, that of the Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht. This portfolio rests on the lap of Michael D. Higgins. It now appears increasingly unlikely that the original Green Paper, with its emphasis on education as a secondary concern to that of the economy, will ever be enabled to mature into a White Paper. The new Minister for the Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht has clearly expressed his recognition of the central role of art education in any philosophy of Culture, a philosophy he feels Ireland urgently needs to re-evaluate. (Woodworth, "Interview with M.D. Higgins", 1993.)

This represents a new political force which will be lobbying for the arts, if it remains loyal to its election manifesto, instead of the various reports and bodies such as the Arts Council, which have been so doing for decades without any real political weight:-

> If the creative element in people is central to their lives then it is a democratic right to exercise that creativity; this generates policy issues from the role of the Arts in education to creation of jobs in the Arts.

(Woodworth, "Interview with M.D. Higgins, 1993.)

A striking feature of the Green Paper is the highlighting of a widespread recognition of the lack of "communication and other interpersonal skills, critical thinking, problem solving and individual initative that an enterprise culture requires". (Irish Government, 1992, p. 11.) As the development of such basic human faculties have lately become a matter of urgency for the economy and it's workforce, they have received due attention in education policy. They form the bedrock of thought in the Green Paper. These fundamental human skills and qualities are not however, singularly associated with the concerns of a market place or a workforce. These are some of the fundamental aspects of the human condition which continuously arise in discussions and philosophies on education for life. They are constantly presented as some of the far reaching and beneficial results of a comprehensive education in the arts for example. In the Green Paper, however, they have arisen solely in an economic context and subsequently attended to solely in terms of educating a workforce. As a result the implied inter-relatedness of educatiing for work and educating for all other equally important life experiences has not been allowed to develop. Where the arts had a role to play in enhancing the quality of education beyond solely for the sake of the arts themselves, they have been practically ignored.

Subjects such as the fine arts, particularly the visual arts and music, have vast potential in the development of these crucial human faculties of critical thinking, individual initiative, communication and creativity which the government presently so desire as tools in the attainment of economic objectives. It is ironic that the qualities which have been lacking in Irish school leavers, that lack largely attributable to the disregard for education for life, are now being called forth in the cause of the economy itself which has continuously widened the rift between schooling people for work and educating people for life.

Art and Music are glossed over in the Paper reflecting a complete inability and reluctance on the part of the policy makers to consider any possible role for art education in attempting to meet the current needs of the economy. The utilitarian mentality which has governed education policy throughout the century does not stretch its vision to realising the relevance or usefulness in educating our youths to be artistically aware even in achieving it's own limited ends i.e.; the creation of a competitive workforce. Art and Music we are told are merely desirable as subjects that would develop expressive abilities. (Irish Government, 1992, p. 96.)

Meanwhile the birth of the new Department of the Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht could be seen as a ludicrous contradiction of the vision of education in the twenty first century. If this is a genuine move towards promoting the cultural fabric of the country, an attempt at increasing public involvement and interest in artistic activities, then surely a complete re-evaluation of the course set for education must take place. These two government departments which should be so closely related, inseparable in their quest for the betterment of the quality of Irish life are presently embarking on contradictory political journeys especially regarding the arts. The Green Paper is presently in limbo providing both Ministers for Education and the Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht the opportunity to unite their efforts in order to initiate that re-evaluation of our cultural philosophy.

In a 1985 Curriculum and Exams Board discussion paper the importance and relevance of the arts to all aspects of education was clearly recognised; "the nature of artistic problems requires a flexibility and inventiveness of approach essential in a society with rapid and unpredictable changes in employment patterns and technology". (Curriculum and Examinations Board, 1985, p. 5.) Here one finds an open-minded interrelating of the various purposes of

education, preparation for work being only one amongst many humanitarian needs. Similarly in the White Paper of 1980 the rapid and accelerating pace of technological change which seemed "destined at the very least to result in longer periods of leisure" was proposed as one reason for giving attention to the arts in our classrooms. (Irish government, 1980, p. 63.) In terms of language such statements could have come straight from the cream pages of the Green Paper. In terms of liberty and intelligence of approach however, the former particularly is strides ahead of the blinkered Green Paper.

One must not fall prey to a confining narrow-minded response to the Green Paper by merely attempting to highlight the usefulness of the arts in an economic programme for education. As I have pointed out this is of course relevant in its own right. The potential of an Irish film 'industry' in generating employment and economic growth is enormous and a prime example of contribution to the economy as a spin-off of increased creative activity and creative awareness. However, Irish Film should not be dependent upon such economic factors. Economic returns from such activity should literally be regarded as spin-offs from much more fundamental reasons for developing Irish film such as its potential contribution to the artistic framework of the country, its capacity as a vehicle for the discovery of latent creative talent. A utilitarian approach to education must not overshadow or control our response to the latest manifestation of this approach in the Green Paper. Real reform must transcend the boundaries of this school of thought. The sudden or even phased inclusion of the arts on an acceptable level in the present system of education or in the proposed system of the future would not result in a utopian system. It would seem that this could only come about on convincing the policy makers of the economic potential of such a strategy. This in the long term would be to the detriment of the cause of heightening social artistic awareness as the arts would simply be squeezed into the structure of the present system which has its roots in schooling people for

entry into a workforce as opposed to developing their social and cultural awareness. As the present system becomes more and more firmly noted in the competitive ethos of an examination driven institution, irrespective of how well it adopts superficially to changing economic circumstances, it accordingly becomes more and more impossible to conceive of a strategy whereby the arts could fulfil a role in that system.

The arts and an exam controlled institution of education are simply incompatible. While attempting to raise an awareness of the necessity of education in the arts for every individual, the intrinsic values of which are a basic democratic right, without solely attending to the extrinsic values, it is essential that we examine the fundamental structural and organisational flaws in our Secondary schools. The radical reform of these would have to precede any programme for the arts which aimed at generating increased visual awareness in society.

CHAPTER THREE

The importance of an education in the arts as an integral part of a child's development is reason enough for its inclusion in any school curriculum, from primary through to second level. The lack of such a facility in Irish schools, especially at second level is undoubtedly reflected in social attitudes to the fine arts, in the position they occupy in the cultural environment of the majority, a distant, insignificant point in the realms of high culture. Ciaran Benson, recently speaking to a conference of the National Parents Council, spoke of the:-

> Misconceptions and prejudices which we Irish share about the arts and about ourselves which seriously hamper our educational policies and practices..... we tend to place the arts as a field of human activity, outside the range of ordinary life.
> (McTiernan, 1993).

In this quote Mr. Benson (author of the previously mentioned report on the place of the arts in Irish education) touches on some of the contributing factors to the elitism and inaccessibility of the activities of the art world from the creation of art objects to the appreciation, criticism and purchasing of those objects. There is a serious lack of visual awareness and visual interest, an ignorance concerning the visual arts, amongst large portions of the population. The contribution the

arts can make to a society beyond the consumerist commercial principles of an art market is presently an unappreciated area of the creative process.

Our schools play a significant role in both the creation and sustenance of such a nationwide lack of engagement in the arts. The neglect of the arts is the promotion of ignorance (Arts Council, 1989, p.11.) This ignorance has far reaching consequences beyond simply preserving an elitist art world. It is the deprivation of a nation of the stimulation of creative thought and diverse thinking processes which the arts can offer as sources of social strength (Brinson, 1985, p. 52.) Many of the nation's youth do experience lessons in art, dance and music beyond the school timetable but this is usually a matter of privilege created by parental income, geographical location or fortunate social standing. Basically it is very much a middle class phenomenon. The Arts Council stress that an educational system should not depend on such "variable factors". (Arts Council, 1989, p.10.) A child attending piano lessons or art classes as extra-curricular activities on a Saturday morning is much the same as a Leaving Certificate student attending expensive 'grind' institutions beyond school hours as a reflection of social inequality in matters of education.

In the "Benson Report", as it has come to be known, it is pointed out how those subjects which are regarded and treated in schools as unimportant will become regarded and treated as such in society at large. (Benson, 1979, p.21.) This results in a widespread inability to "see a painting as a painting" or to "grasp a poem as a poem" before comparing it with what is already known. (Curriculum and Examinations Board, 1985, p.7.) Amid the quickening pace of technological change and rapid advance in communications we are constantly being bombarded with new forms of information and entertainment through various channels of communication. "Television and mass media in general expose people to some forms of entertainment of questionable value and taste". (Irish

Government, 1980, p.63.) What is already known by the individual confronted with the less familiar media of fine art is a complex lattice of visual and verbal information communicated through the mass media. This forms the basis of comparision and essentially does not allow the less familiar to be seen or grasped for what it is. Particularly when the media adopted by visual artists is more or less unlimited, making art objects less easily identifiable as art objects, the danger of comparison with more familiar mass forms of communication or entertainment poses a serious threat to the successful existence of art works amongst the vast imagery of the mass media.

The ignorance complex instilled in one's school going years manifests itself in the familiar codes and strategies of the mass media becoming the criteria on which a work of art is judged. A genuine critical analysis does not occur. This inevitably results in alienation from the work and the subsequent discarding of any potential artistic experience, aesthetic or otherwise, into the dustbin of forgotten catchphrases and slogans. The distinct cultural languages of the arts with their ability to broaden and deepen the possibilities of human feeling, thinking and behaving are jettisoned in the storm of mass communication. People are not deprived of all visual experience through exclusion from the world of the visual fine arts. On the contrary, we live in an environment largely fabricated by the intense visual imagery of the mass media, from the privacy of the television screen to the publicity of the billboard. There is certainly no shortage of potentially stimulating visual experiences, it is a heightened awareness of the workings of such experiences and the ability to dissect the tripe from the worthwhile which is in abeyance.

Benson urges the need for the individual to be able to cope critically with the vast range of art now accessible through technological development. (Benson, 1979, p.21.) We also need various skills in order to be able to interpret the

complex situations presented by mass communication. The individual needs to be able to decode the facts from the fictional, the real from the imaginary in the haphazard juxtaposition of news item with advertisement, soap opera with documentary and special offer with extra special offer. The reality of a consumer culture however, in which the acquisition of wealth and material goods are social priorities, is that we are regularly passive consumers of information slung at us by the competing forces of the economy. Advertising wishes us to be passive consumers of information. A subject who undertakers to critically evaluate the actual message of an advertisement undermines the very cause of that advertisement. Through constantly advancing techniques and innovative designs, highly praiseworthy in their own artistic capacity, advertising seeks to infiltrate the consciousness of the nation, the potential consumers, creating false desires and generating massive demand for the multitude of products and services available.

Down through the century from artists such as Delaunay and Leger in the 1920's to Warhol and Rauschenberg of the 1960's and continually today, artists have delved into the vast pool of images created by advertising designers, whether to subvert the order of that business or to celebrate it or attempt to make an interpretative commentary on it. Artists have been influenced by and borrowed from their visual surroundings which contribute to their making of images. Similarly advertising has mirrored the development of modern art of the twentieth century. Approaches to representation and strategies of communication in the world of fine art have resurfaced on the opposite side of the often forbidden border between the depths of low culture and the realms of high art.

In particular artists who have set out to make 'public art', attempting to address the problem of social ignorance of their activities within the private labyrinth of galleries and museums, have often turned to the format of advertising as a tool in

the destruction of art as an elitist institution. This is a logical course of action particularly when the work in question concerns the public at large and requires that public as the audience of the work. Again and again the problem arises of peoples "misconceptions and prejudices about art and about themselves". (McTiernan, 1993.) Is it enough for an artist to resort to the visual arena in which the public are constantly engaged as a means of overcoming the inadequacies of an education system which fails to raise students awareness of creative activity? When an artist crosses the line between the gallery and the vast open planes of the mass media, any preconceptions he/she might have had about the audience for his/her work in the gallery must be removed and replaced by an awareness of the lack of critical faculties or responses required of the public in their day to day experience of mass visual imagery. What has often been a very harmonious relationship in formal terms, whether involving artists working on billboards or billboards themselves appearing in galleries, too often fails in it's initial intention, in its ability to communicate the distinct cultural languages of the arts to an unexpecting, disinterested audience.

An example of this is the public reaction to Les Levine's "Blame God" billboard project in London, Dublin and Derry in 1985. These posters were highly successful in their marriage of popular imagery and the textual format of the billboard with the artist's response to a social issue, the political situation in Northern Ireland, the 'Troubles'. Once under the public eye the posters came under immediate attack from individuals and public representatives who found the art works offensive and blasphemous in their use of the word God alongside various verbs such as hate, kill and blame. This is a prime example of the audiences inability to see a work of art as just that and to respond critically and analytically within the context of fine art. These posters required the ability on the part of the viewer to indentify the works as those of an artist and the ability to

respond intellectually and emotionally to the works as distinct forms of communication from the regular inhabitant of the billboard.

As an exploration of values, an evaluation and re-evaluation of the world in which we live and as an observation and analysis of personal and social experience (Brinson, 1985, p.53.) Levine's posters had much to offer a community, much to communicate to the public regarding the continued labeling of the violence in Northern Ireland as a religious war. These works and many like them had vast potential in generating increased understanding of society through the arts, a basic function of the arts and an essentially educational experience. The revolutionary potential of the works was not realised, the cause of which was rooted in the lack of critical and visual awareness in a society. These faculties are presently underdeveloped in education and the subsequent ignorance is sustained in the relationship between the viewer and the various channels of communication comprising the mass media. The promotion of critical thought concerning social issues, as a possible result of such projects as Levine's, requires a radically different education system, one which instils a hunger to think critically about every social issue.

These billboards became the subject of public censorship. Like when an advertisement is found to be offensive or unacceptable in any way the public voiced their concern expressing their prejudices about the arts requesting that they be kept amongst their own people and that the workers right to stay away from art galleries be respected. (Levine, 1985, p.31.) In a democratic society supposedly respecting freedom of expression this form of censorship is worrying and unacceptable but entirely understandable and indicative of the position of the arts on the scale of social priorities, a position secured by the consistent neglect of these subject areas in the classroom.

CHAPTER FOUR

As I have outlined in chapter one, certain fundamental characteristics which developed throughout the century continue to have a strong determining influence on the nature of Irish schooling. Many are characteristics which are frequently questioned but which remain solid at the core of the system. A radical reform of these features must, as I have said, precede any programme for the arts in education. A social-wide shift of emphasis concerning the aims and objectives of secondary education is essential to allow for the adoption of a worthwhile comprehensive arts education policy.

The dominant mode of pedagogy has been determined mainly by the public examination system and the 'points' system for university entrance. The most striking feature of this pedagogical approach is what Paulo Freire, in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, refers to as the 'banking concept' of teaching. Under this concept teaching is reduced to a mechanical process which caters for consistent adherence to the examination as the primary concern of both student and teacher. It results, in the classroom and in social expectations of education, in passive reflection of the current social and political trends. Should not the role

of the school be to educate society and thus attempt to change it, improve it? If so, in the light of the aforementioned artworks of Les Levine, then the arts clearly would be a core subject.

Irish primary school education is undoubtedly far closer to the ideal of an enduring, constantly developing education for life, concerned with the formation of all the child's faculties as a human, engaging the student in a continuous process of inquiry and discovery and the acquisition of knowledge and understanding. While many of the shortcomings addressed in the 1971 *Revised Primary Curriculum,* have never been attended to, due to shortage of funds and overcrowding, the educational experience of one's formative years as a primary student does pay more heed to one's moral, intellectual, spiritual, aesthetic and physical needs. The significant church involvement in primary schools has a large part to play in this. The school represents to the church a powerful medium through which its clearly defined value system can be inculcated during a child's tender impressionable years. Most Irish primary schools have close relations with the local parish church, predominantly Roman Catholic. In the Secondary school however, the church's power is enormously reduced due to the contrasting nature of the schools. Even though many Secondary schools have members of religious orders as members of staff, the ability of the church to transmit religious and social values is seriously hampered by the utilitarian approach to second level education. Because religion is not an examination subject, the usefulness of it to the students is practically non-existent in the context of getting satisfactory examination grades. Irrespective of whether students desire to engage in religious studies or not, the discipline stands little chance of being respected and taken seriously in competition with the mainstream exam subjects.

The transition then from primary to secondary education is a rather disjointed one as students travel into an entirely different educational environment. In the initial period spent in this new environment students are made aware of the fact that most of what they will learn is in the context of being reproductive in an internal or public examination. Every piece of knowledge acquired thus becomes a potential mark gained on an examination paper.

What the exams in question are capable of measuring and rewarding are the types of factual information acquired by a student under the 'banking' concept of teaching. Paulo Freire describes the teacher who employs this concept as a "narrating subject" at the top of a class of "patient listening objects". The students must be filled with contents to be "recorded, memorized and repeated". (Freire, 1972, p.45.) While Freire discusses the concept as that form of teaching which is most likely to be adopted by an oppressive regime the theory is equally relevant to the state of Irish Secondary school education. While obviously not wishing to suggest that Irish students are being oppressed by a tyrannical government it could be said that the liberating potential of education for life is seriously under-developed in our schools.

The development of a critical consciousness amongst students in the approach they adopt to studying a subject is virtually non-existent. Regarding say the study of literature, drama or even fine art, the emphasis is usually placed on learning other's interpretations of the subject matter. These are then miscomprehended as fact rather than understood as the opinions of one particular individual which should ideally arouse a personal response in the student and develop his/her own understanding of the subject. The student is perceived as an ignorant empty shell which under the name of education is filled with the knowledge of another. A pupil is not encouraged to engage in active critical thinking in a co-investigation with the teacher. The convenience of

accepting what is presented by the teacher, or read in a book, is the safest option for many students with the examination looming. There are of course students who will be exceptions to this process and usually they will be the students who perform exceptionally well in the examination. Such students who manage to transcend the limitations of the classroom through personal initative will usually have benefitted from a home environment in which education is a recognised integral part of the childs growth not confined to the classroom. Again though this is generally a middle-class phenomenon with far less working-class children succeeding within the system.

To say that critical consciousness is under-developed in Secondary schools does not mean we are a critically unsconcious nation. Third level education provides for many the environment in which such a crucial faculty is encouraged and awoken. Also many who manage to transcend their social boundaries after leaving school acquiring self esteem and self worth are naturally educating themselves continously and developing an understanding of their social and political environment. Visual critical awareness however, is much less likely to naturally unfold because of the consistent neglect of the visual arts in the school and the subsequent prejudices and disinterest with which I have dealt previously. University graduates and unskilled workers alike share in their lack of visual awareness, an awareness which lies dormant throughout the lives of many. People often attribute their artistic ignorance, their inability to evaluate and understand a work of art, to their non art-orientated school years. The school thus being considered the only opportunity to educate or familiarise oneself in a particular subject.

All subjects studied, if they are exam subjects, are presented with the expected layout and content of the examination paper foremost in mind. The existing

programme for the Leaving Certificate in Art and Design is no exception. During the students two or three years in preparation for the certificate he/she embarks on a rotating programme of life drawing, still life, imaginative composition and design. A small amount of attention is devoted to history of art which is generally treated in a purely historical, documental manner with little or no regard for the disciplines of criticism and aesthetics. Each element of the course is practiced and polished with reproduction in an examination hall as the primary concern. "Students can master with little real effort the superficial skills necessary to achieve a D grade in the examination". (Curriculum and Exams Board, 1985, p.18.) As was pointed out in the *Benson Report* the NCEA first considered foundation courses, as a mediator between Leaving Certificate and first year of University, essential because of the mediocrity of standard at second level, an exam result being no real indication of a students potential. (Benson, 1979, p. 42.) So even when the arts make an appearance, studied by relatively small numbers, the quality is found to be unsatisfactory.

One must of course be sympathetic towards the teachers who consistently place such emphasis on the exam as the primary concern of the pupil. Teachers essentially find themselves in a position where their raison d'etre in the minds of the pupils and their parents alike is the training of pupils to achieve top grades. The education of the students in the teachers particular area of knowledge as a social service and a transferral of that knowledge becomes instead a commodity measurable by a grade. Teachers are vital components in the system as a mechanical process as opposed to a life of understanding. Teachers can hardly radically depart from the syllabus or the expected mode of pedagogy in the pursuit of a liberating education. Such a revolutionary move would undoubtedly place their jobs in jeopardy.

Even when teachers rigidly adhere to the formula of putting a student through the examination process, large numbers of students continually fall behind, failing the quality control test at the end of the production line. The method of Secondary school teaching is unsuited to far too many pupils who attend these schools. The nature of sociological problem that P.J. Hillery spoke of in the 1960's (see chap. 1.) is very much a relevant issue today. An individuals democratic right to attend a Secondary school is in conflict with the unsuitability of the environment of such schools to many attending pupils. The very particular course of action (pursuit of third level education) promoted in Secondary schools and the subsequent limiting approach to teaching fails to account for the needs of all students equally. The children of 'working' or more appropriately 'under-class' background are the main victims of this discrimination in Secondary schools. 'Culture-shock' and self discipline are just two of the problems which might hamper the progress of a student from a less priveleged, less educationally orientated background.

Right and wrong answers in second level education are synonymous with success and failure. A student who constantly gets the answers wrong, a student who is struggling within the system of learning to which he/she is unsuited, is labeled a failure from an early stage. A personal complex can develop in students which can be very difficult to shake off without the opportunity to discover one's own abilities, aptitudes and limitations. Such opportunities are not easily come by on the 'dole' or in mundane manual labour. It is essential that second level education is not simply viewed as a kind of sorting device to determine what direction a student should take in third level education. Third level cannot be viewed as the solution to the failings of second level education especially as third level studies are still inaccessible to many, despite the continued use of the slogan 'equality of opportunity' as a political cry, a vote winner.

Far too many students become long term victims of the right/wrong, success/failure scenario, being relegated to the lower classes in a streaming process. Once a student slumps into the 'D' classes he/she can easily lose any motivation, self esteem or self respect that may have been acquired in primary school. Teachers are faced with the prospect of attempting to get these students through the system with as much success as can be scraped from the bottom of the barrel. In these 'D' classes the competitive ethos of the school, the motivation of the examination, is more or less entirely lost. The students struggle against the downward spiral which is the negative result of an exam-driven, 'banking' approach to education. Valuable years are thus wasted, years in which these pupils could have been educating themselves towards an understanding of the society which seems not to be working in their favour. The arts represent a significant source of strength in combating this sociological problem. They are powerful social voices being silenced to the majority by the loud-speakers of the economy dotted around the educational landscape. The government, at least those who devised the Green Paper, were distanced from the concerns and ideas of educationalists allowing themselves instead to be over influenced by the industrialists and economists. Each group have their own important contribution to make to educational thought but in the Green paper we have ended up with a "modish but adamant discourse, an ascendancy of the partisan over the deliberative". (Hogan, 1992) This could result in the continued deprivation of deeper educational entitlements and the more enduring benefits of education.

The essentiality of preparation for work cannot be denied. However, if industrial demands, the manpower needs of the nation, are allowed to take over the functions of schooling then:-

> the faults of traditional schooling would simply be instituted in a more inexorable naked way: social stratification, the inculcation of the values of competition and consumerism, a distorted emphasis on knowledge with a rapid short-term application and the discouragement of independent critical thinking.
>
> (Chanan and Gilchrist, 1974, p.74.)

A comprehensive programme for education in the arts would not cater for 'class' division in either sense of the word in our schools. In fact the socio-political awareness which would develop through the introduction of a student to the artistic activities of his/her society might have rebellious consequences. This is why all problems, such as inequality, need to be addressed if the arts are to play a genuinely educational role in the classroom with all art works, no matter how socially or politically subversive, open for discussion. It is difficult to envisage for example the work of Brian Maguire with its regular tackling of social and political issues, not to mention sexual issues, on the curriculum of secondary education, unless that system first underwent radical reform to concern itself primarily with social equality and the liberal education of that society.

CHAPTER FIVE

As the antithesis to the 'banking' concept of education, Paulo Freire discusses the 'problem-posing' concept. (Freire, 1972, p.52.) In the context of his particular subject matter he stresses the importance of such an approach to education as a tool for the revolutionary concerned with the liberation of an oppressed people. The theory, though, is not limited to such extreme social and political circumstances. It is one which should be at the core of educational thought in any liberal democracy. Just as the 'banking' concept is relevant and widely employed in Irish Secondary schools, so too is this contrasting approach relevant in its capacity to transform the quality of education available to the nation's youths.

Basically the 'problem-posing' concept adopts all the pedagogical methods which are unsuited and counterproductive to the aims of a regime wishing to control education as an instrument of oppression. The theory does not lend itself to the indelible printing of a dominant ideology upon the minds of the students. In an oppressive social order the oppressed cannot be permited to begin to question

their social situation or the political framework which causes them to be oppressed. This would only serve to subvert the oppressor's authority. "The discouragement and impediment of active critical thinking and questioning and ignorance of that which may be socially or politically unpleasant" would be the more likely objectives of oppressive people in relation to education. (Quinn, 1991) In the words of Patrick Quinn, education shapes that kind of people that constitute a given society by forming their understanding of the world in which they live. A truely liberal education therefore should signify a means of living a more human life of social concern and responsibility, critical evaluation, transcendance of confinement or oppression of socio-political life. (Quinn, 1991.)

Freire's 'problem-posing' education, as an essential factor in any socially revolutionary programme, is a signpost of the direction we must take in our Secondary schools, if the awakening of a visual consciousness through education in the arts is to be realised. Problems requiring questioning, analysis, criticism and understanding must form the bedrock of teaching practices in our classrooms. This, it must be remembered, is not an attempt at hampering the cause of educating a workforce for a changing economic environment. It is an argument for the creation of a system in which presently conflicting interests can flourish equally or according to their importance. We must halt and reverse the movement which is reducing education for life to the purpose of education for work. All students must be provided with an education for life and not just those who fortunately manage to transcend the boundaries of second level education experiencing more liberal forms of education.

One of the fundamental characteristics of a 'problem-posing' education is that in which as opposed to the teacher and his/her students situation, the teacher becomes a student also and similarly the students become teachers. This is called the teacher-student with student-teachers phenomenon. (Freire, 1972,

p.53.) Again I would stress that this is not an alien concept to the Irish educational sphere in its entirety. As one example, in the country's Art and Design colleges, this relationship abounds in its extreme form. Instead of relying on a teacher of the students and students of the teacher scenario, art colleges are organised on an entirely different basis. Students expect to learn from both their fellow students and their teachers. They may also conceive of themselves as potential teachers of their peers and their teachers. This is of course far more easily attainable in the context of an art school due to the active nature of the learning process where the visual arts are concerned. The general theory is however reflected throughout the third level environment in varying degrees. The learning of the creative process of painting for example, is obviously more suited by nature to this teacher-student relationship than say the study of the history of painting. This does not however mean that one discovers a hasty retreat to the 'banking' concept. On the contrary the superior qualities of the ' problem-posing' approach prevail. In third level education students are made aware, with exception, that their opinions and ideas are open for discussion and indispensable alongside the information, knowledge and understanding of teachers or external bodies brought into the classroom in book or note form. 'Problem-posing' education has communication at its core. Acts of cognition take place between the teacher student and students-teachers as opposed to transferrals of information. (Freire, 1972, p. 53,54.)

The result is a greater awareness and understanding of the cognizable object. This object mediates in an improved relationship between the teacher and his/her students. Critical reflection takes place on the part of both resulting in the emergence of a critical consciousness, one which will manifest itself thenceforth in all walks of life. The potential here in contributing also to increased visual awareness is vast. Whether the pupil is studying Physics or Chemistry, Irish Literature or English Prose, Modern Art or Renaissance

Painting, the educational experience will contribute to the overall development of the individual and the betterment of the human condition. Dialogue, reflection and creativity are indispensable to 'problem-posing' education.

As I have pointed out previously the method of communication of the advertising world is closely related to the 'banking' concept of teaching. 'Problem-posing' on the other hand is central to the communicative dialogue between the creator and the receiver in the arena of the visual arts. The patient listening objects which are so essential to the success of the advertising business become active critically thinking subjects in the 'problem-posing' relationship. The communication between an art object and a viewer, particularly when that art object is subversive of the viewer's accepted standards and values, requires deciphering and critical skills in order for the voice of the art object to make it's presence heard. The visual arts differ radically from so many subjects taught in schools in that they should not "seek to provide ready-made answers" rather to "equip students with ways of working to identify problems and arrive at their own answers at their own pace". (Curriculum and Exams Board, 1985)
Simarly the visual arts in society do not seek to provide answers as advertising does. The visual problem as opposed to the visual solution or visual directive is symbolic of the liberating education as opposed to the utilitarian one. The potency of a project such as the aforementioned *Blame God* billboard project by Les Levine would pose a threat to the nature of education in a utilitarian framework. Such a project could not be 'taught' within the teaching framework of our secondary schools, that which attempts to transfer definite pieces of information and knowledge. The type of live subjects which constantly arise in the arts require discussion and response, analysis and understanding, activities central to the 'problem-posing' concept of teaching. Like most visual artists Levine explored fundamental questions of identity "engaging our thoughts and feelings in such a primal way". (Drury, 1991, p.13.)

CONCLUSION

As we began to proceed through the final decade of the twentieth century the economic mentality which has overshadowed educational policy throughout that century continued to manifest itself in political circles. The economic phrases comprising current political discourse symbolise the recent preoccupation with European economic union. Phrases such as 'European Citizenship' taint all matters of social policy. The Green Paper, 1992, on education, set the tone for a reinforced economic emphasis on matters of education. This agenda of the Department of Education was contradicted by the new Department of the Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht which, early in its political life in 1993, expressed its recognition of the role of the arts in education. Presently this conflict provides no scope for the development of the symbiotic relationship of education and culture. It is difficult to conceive of the education system in its present state playing a contributory role in the Department of the Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht's expressed desire to urgently re-evaluate our cultural philosophy. The arts in education is not simply a quantitative issue but also one of quality.

The neglect of the arts in education contributes greatly to the elitism of the fine art world. It is a gross distortion of this problem to attribute the blame entirely to

privileged, representing to them what mass or 'low' culture represents to the majority. Our education system, particularly at second level, mirrors these cultural distinctions preserving the inaccessibility of the fine arts.

Public artists are faced with this problem in the course of presenting their work directly to a mass audience. The conflicting interests of popular imagery and those of a visual artist inevitably result in misunderstanding and miscomprehension of the values of the visual arts. The destruction of art as an elitist institution does not come about simply by hurdling the barriers created by the private gallery system. The potential of the arts in arousing intellectual and emotional response can easily be lost to the prejudices and ignorances regarding the arts instilled in Irish schools.

Possibly the most important characteristic of Secondary school education in the context of critical visual awareness in society is that of the 'banking' concept of teaching. As a symptom of the over-reliance on the examination system as the driving force behind teaching and learning in the secondary school, an assessment of the negative results of this pedagogical approach automatically calls into question that examination system itself. Without suggesting a total abolition of the examination system we must re-evaluate it's importance in an attempt to redirect learning in favour of active critical thinking.

Discrimination on the basis of social background and intellectual abilities, resulting in inferiority and 'failure' complexes, also need urgent attention. The inclusion of the arts on a comprehensive level in the curriculum has liberating potential in tackling the social implications of these problems. Such issues however must be addressed concurrently with a programme for the arts in education. The ability of the arts to transcend the stratification of pupils will only excel in a reformed system of renewed aims and objectives.

The 'problem-posing' approach to teaching possesses real potential as an instrument for radical reform. The concept involves developing the intellectual and emotional faculties crucial to a critical awareness and appreciation of the arts. The liberating consequences for education as a whole would thus imply a significant role for the arts in education. A genuine strategy for the arts in education should insist upon such pedagogical reform. An education system which held dialogue, reflection and creativity at the core of the learning process would naturally recognise the intrinsic importance and extrinsic usefulness of a place for the arts in education.

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