

# INTRODUCTION

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## Abstract

The introduction begins with an overview of the relationship of the arts and conflict over the last hundred years, pointing out the enduring influence of the First World War, and the influence of the arts on popular memory of that conflict, as well as the emergence of new technological art forms such as television and video installations. It discusses briefly the question of the relationship between arts and politics and provides some examples of problematic aspects of this relationship, for example in the British tradition of government-sponsored war art. It gives a historical and contemporary overview of the world-wide context of live performance strategies which engage with situations and themes of conflict, oppression and social justice including those in the metropolitan centers of former imperialist nations, African storytelling theatres, the anti-colonial theatre movement in India, with its indigenous narrative traditions, and the Filipino People's Theatre Network under the Marcos regime. It gives attention to the work of Augusto Boal in Brazil and his introduction of Forum Theatre, an important method of engaging with conflict transformation and reconciliation, which has become popular in many parts of the world and which is discussed in one of the essays which follow. It goes on to introduce the essays which include consideration of arts as a tool of the establishment, to arts as resistance, and arts as counter narrative.

## Keywords

instrumentalism, propaganda, protest poetry, subversion, transitional justice

**About the Authors**

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Terry Phillips is an Honorary Research Fellow at Liverpool Hope University. Her research areas include Irish literature and the literature of conflict, particularly the First World War. She is the Chair of the International Advisory Board of the Archbishop Desmond Tutu Centre for War and Peace Studies at Liverpool Hope University and before her retirement she was Dean of Arts and Humanities.

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The relationship of the arts to conflict, if not as old as conflict itself, nevertheless has a long history, as is testified, to take one well-known example, by Homer's *Iliad*, the epic verse narrative of the Trojan War, usually dated to the eighth century BC. While there are many instances of literature, both oral and written, and of the visual arts which celebrate military victory, the narrative presented is rarely monolithic, and artistic representation has often had a subversive element, presenting to a greater or lesser degree a counter narrative. The history of the arts in relation to conflict over the last hundred years has demonstrated two interesting developments: the continuing influence of the First World War in artistic representations of conflict; and secondly, the influence of technology in both providing new art forms and circulating knowledge and understanding of very traditional forms.

The enormous output of poetry which was a feature of the First World War has long been recognized,<sup>1</sup> as has the emergence and popularization of 'protest poetry.' Thus while the patriotic lines of Laurence Binyon's "For the Fallen" may be proclaimed at Remembrance Day services in the United Kingdom, the population at large is more influenced by the writing of poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. As the historian Niall Ferguson argues, "the persistence of the idea that the war was 'a bad thing' owes much to the genre known as 'war poetry' (usually meaning 'anti-war')" (Ferguson xxvi). In the world of the visual arts, the most commonly recognized paintings in a European context are those of Paul Nash, with their stark representations of the battlefields as places of almost Gothic horror. In the hundred years since this conflict, the tradition of the arts as a means of counter-narrative has lived on strongly. However, as the essays in this Forum *Kritika of Kritika Kultura* demonstrate, artistic response to conflict and, by extension, political repression is many-faceted and not always one of simple protest.

The relationship of the arts to politics is enduringly controversial. If the broadest definition of politics is adopted, most artistic expressions can be seen as political, since they inevitably reflect, to a greater or lesser extent, elements of ideology. However if the term is defined in terms of the exercise of power, for example by governments, institutions or political parties then the relationship becomes more controversial. At one extreme, art can be regarded as no more than propaganda. However, artists can on occasion find themselves endorsing the actions of powerful political entities, most notably in the area of conflict. However, in the view of most critical commentators, this raises questions since the artist may be seen as adopting the discourse and following the agenda of those in power, with no control over how their artistic ventures might be used in a future context.

The often problematic relationship between art and the state, and the implied issue of instrumentalism, is evident in the participation of Nash and others in the British tradition of government-sponsored war art. On this topic, art historian Brian Foss has documented the tensions resulting from the decision that the British Ministry of Information, dedicated to news, publicity and propaganda, would house the War Artists Advisory Committee, established to commission artistic responses to the Second World War. The unprecedented popular success of the touring program of exhibitions that the Committee organized throughout Britain and allied countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, in line with the Ministry's aim to boost morale and promote unity both at home and abroad, highlights the critical importance of considering, not only artistic intention, but the various contexts in which art is displayed and interpreted.

Artists often resist the idea of service to a particular political narrative which they would see as propagandist. The Nobel Prize winner, Seamus Heaney, writing from Northern Ireland, a region recently embroiled in civil conflict, commented perceptively, in his acceptance of the Nobel Prize, on the burden of:

having to conduct oneself as a poet in a situation of ongoing political violence and public expectation. A public expectation, it has to be said, not of poetry as such but of political positions variously approvable by mutually disapproving groups. (Heaney)

These comments are a response to criticism from both his own nationalist community, for a lack of resistance to their perceived oppression, and from those with loyalist sympathies for what they saw as a too ready acceptance of nationalist violence. Such criticisms indicate the complexity of the artist's position, a refusal to become a conscript for any political cause.

While the artistic legacy of the First World War was predominantly literary, recent and contemporary conflicts have produced an enormous range of artistic responses. In the years following the Second World War, film and photography emerged as the most powerful artistic expressions of the experience of the war. More recent technological developments have expanded these forms to include, for example, television and video installations. The Imperial War Museum North's recent *Catalyst* exhibition (October 2013 – February 2014) highlighted several such contemporary responses, with Rasheed Araeen's video installation *White Stallion* (1991), for example, exploring the role of media and propaganda in the First Gulf War. In addition, these technological developments have enabled an increasing spread of knowledge about very traditional forms of engagement with conflict and reconciliation, in areas such as theatre and performance.<sup>2</sup>

Live performance strategies which engage with situations and themes of conflict, oppression and social justice, are largely rooted in examples of oppositional theater during the twentieth century. From the colonial, metropolitan centers of Europe, director-playwrights such as Bertolt Brecht, Dario Fo and Joan Littlewood produced radical, dialectical narratives inspired by popular traditions such as cabaret, music-hall, clowning and storytelling. In doing so, they invited a Marxist re-consideration of 'the popular,' restoring to the term its roots in subversive performance traditions such as the medieval minstrel (Fo), folk storytelling (Fo and Brecht) and popular music forms (Brecht and Littlewood). Folk narrative was also integral to developments in examples of African storytelling theaters, reflecting Ngugi wa Thiong'o's assertion that "[s]atire is certainly one of the most effective weapons in oral traditions" (Thiong'o 81). Ngugi's theater practice in the 1970s responded to the injustices of neo-colonial Kenya under the Moi regime, and was characterized by the appropriation and deployment of folk narrative forms, community involvement and audience participation. Similarly, the 'workshop plays' which were produced in South Africa as part of the anti-apartheid movement, had both hybrid form (indigenous storytelling with some influence from European dramaturgy) and a radical approach to collective collaboration in the theater. Plays such as *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1972), *The Island* (1973), and *Woza Albert* (1981) are at once acts of defiance, solidarity, cultural intervention and powerful narratives of post-colonial desire.

In India, rich, indigenous narrative traditions informed a diverse, anti-colonial theatre movement from the mid-nineteenth century up until independence from the British Empire in 1947. Perpetually under the surveillance of a censorious colonial authority, Indian dramatists during this period appropriated from European traditions such as social realism, while also staging allegorical tales drawn from Hindu mythology, including Probhakhar Khadilkar's patriotic drama, *Keechakavadha* (1906). The Filipino People's Theatre Network is another example of a vibrant movement which engaged both with community and the politics of the day, and may be described as the theater-wing of the effort to end the Marcos regime in the build-up to the 1986 elections. Once more, there is a reclaiming of the popular as political, provocative and inclusive, with performance events ranging from agit-prop to musical theatre to street performance.

In terms of participatory theater practices, Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* emerged from his personal experiences of exile and military dictatorship, and has been used internationally as a method to engage with conflict transformation and reconciliation. In particular, his well-known technique, Forum Theatre, has been used as a participatory toolbox to open up the dialogue about peacebuilding in communities affected by war and conflict. For instance, *Search for Common Ground* is amongst the many NGOs that have adopted Forum Theatre as a platform

to address social issues in post-war contexts such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and elsewhere (Slachmuisjlder and Tshibanda). Additionally, the in Place of War (IPOW) project, which is based within the University of Manchester, researches and documents creativity in sites of armed conflict and war, and has developed an international network of artists who live and create art in sites of war. Theater projects with refugees and asylum seekers have been delivered internationally as a response to issues of social mobility, cultural identity and dislocation.<sup>3</sup> An example of such interventions is the *Theatre of Sanctuary*,<sup>4</sup> which is committed to deliver a range of creative projects to refugees and asylum seekers in Leeds. More recently, the Welsh theater company *Theatr Clwyd* has announced that it is going to be the first professional theater company to perform in the refugee camps in Calais. In this volume, Hannah Reich and Raphael Vergin reflect on their experiences of using Forum Theatre to build resilience in postwar Lebanon.

The essays in this Forum Kritika are versions of papers originally presented at the annual conference of the Archbishop Desmond Tutu Centre for War and Peace Studies at Liverpool Hope University in 2014. They move from a consideration of arts as a tool of the establishment, to arts as resistance, and arts as counter narrative, assisting the processes of reconciliation by countering too dominant a peace narrative. They focus on a range of visual arts and performance, on both the reception of artistic productions and of active engagement from a situation of conflict as creators or performers.

Inevitably the relationship of an artistic output to its political context is of particular importance as is demonstrated, for example, by Silvia Colombo's essay, "From Leonardo to Picasso (1939–1953)" describing the very different contexts of two exhibitions in Milan: the Leonardo exhibition of 1939, constructed with the support of Mussolini, and consequently exploited for specifically political ends; and the postwar Picasso exhibition of 1953 foregrounding some of Picasso's most overtly political paintings, and demonstrating a clear political intent without suggesting the approval of the political establishment. Paintings provide some of the subject matter of Martin Bayer's article which also includes a consideration of video installations. Bayer's essay, with its extensive historical range provides an illustration of the sustained influence of the First World War on artistic responses to conflict, as well as the ongoing effects of that conflict on other parts of the world. The article considers the relationship between the visual arts and the media, illustrating the capacity of the visual arts to question the easy assumptions of media portrayal, and of their influence on collective memory, reminding people of facts they might sooner forget.

T. Randahl Morris's article on the Chilean arpilleras, takes the consideration of the subversive capacity of the arts further by its consideration of a distinctive art

form created in a situation of repression to enable the expression of experiences which would otherwise remain unreported. Designed initially as a response to repression in one country they have now circulated well beyond the boundaries of Chile and been imitated as ways of dealing with conflict in places as different as Zimbabwe and Northern Ireland. The arpilleras have a role to play in the difficult process of transitional justice which emerges in post-conflict situations, remaining as a testimony to what actually happened, thereby diminishing the inevitable sense of injustice felt by victims who participate in a reconciliation process. The key role of the arts in the difficult situations encountered in the process of transitional justice is also a theme of Klaas Tindeman's account of Chokri Ben Chikha's theatrical 'truth commission,' an unusual experiment in performance as a means of reconciliation. The Commission being performed is also distinctive in that it is not part of a process of transitional justice related to a recent conflict, but a reminder of past colonial exoticization, and the performance is disturbing in its revelation of the continuance of such neo-colonial attitudes. The power of performance as a way revealing deeply held attitudes is also explored by Hannah Reich and Raphael Vergin. Their consideration of Forum Theatre, and its application in post-conflict Lebanon, shows the way in which such revelation in a safe space, the stage area which members of the audience can enter as 'spect-actors,' can provide both self-knowledge and knowledge of the other, so powerfully important in the context of bottom-up peace-building and building resilience.

## Notes

1. Catherine Reilly's research into poetry 'published in book, pamphlet or broadsheet form' in Britain identified 2,225 individuals who wrote poems on the subject, 417 of whom served in uniformed organizations. See Reilly, *Scars Upon My Heart* xxxiii.
2. The term 'performance' is used to cover the wide range of cultural practices that have been used internationally to respond to issues of conflict, exile and reconciliation. In addition, we include the broader social political meaning of the term.
3. Alison Jeffers and Michael Balfour provide an in-depth analysis of how theatre has been used as a medium to address questions of hospitality, trauma and belonging (Jeffers; Balfour, et al.).
4. See "Theater of Sanctuary." *West Yorkshire Playhouse.com.uk*.

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