Labouring under an illusion

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Remember Cool Britannia? Creative Britain? Under New Labour, Britain was rebranded as a creative nation, a multi-cultural wonderland where the arts and business could flourish in a partnership that was beneficial for all. After the dark days of Thatcher, where fine art was the preserve of individual collectors such as Saatchi, and John Major, who had no readily discernible arts policy, this seems wonderful. After all, it cannot be a bad thing for an administration to pay attention to cultural matters. Or can it?

Well, Labour have begun their second term in power and surely now it's time that their cultural policy really began to show itself. A first term government can be forgiven for not being all we would like it to be, especially in Labour's case. After eighteen years in opposition Labour saw its election as a delicate balancing act between keeping its core constituency happy and not upsetting Daily Mail readers. In all of the debates regarding this, few seem to have mentioned that Labour's constituency includes not only stodgy NUM members, but also creative, left-wing types. Dilettantes, if you like.

However, that said, Labour's first term was for many a downright disappointment. The relationship between art and the institutions which support it is a delicate balancing act which has always been deeply related to the policy of the administration which is in power. But the ideological management of art has deeper roots than the fickle tastes of an elected government. Most cultural critics on the left have long rejected the Ruskinian cultural analysis of 'art for art's sake', most especially in its 1980s Thatcherite incarnation under Peter 'Modern Painters' Fuller. Since the development of Modernism the left-wing view of art has been traditionally divided into two separate analyses, one favoured by the social democrats and Stalinists and one by the others including Trotskyists. For social democrats realism was the preferred art form as it most closely represented the means of production—this was of course perverted into the grotesque fantasy world of Socialist Realism under Zhandov in Stalinist Russia. The Trotskyite position argued for the complete freedom of the artist as an individual creator. As with so much in contemporary politics, these traditional positions now seem to have declined almost beyond relevance.

For the Labour government art is not so much a cultural product but a tool with which to combat 'social exclusion'. This is seen most obviously in Labour's attempts to replace moribund heavy industry with so called creative enterprises, but it is also obvious in how the arts are expected to be major contributors to causes such as urban regeneration. The concept of social exclusion is often mocked by the remnants of the Labour left as a new term to define poverty, but in reality it is an entirely new agenda. Rather than seeing deprivation as an exclusively economic issue with social ramifications, it redefines it as a purely social one and in doing so vastly widens the definition of the problem and dilutes the possible solutions. Poverty is, in theory, an easily solved problem—a strong economy, job creation and wealth redistribution should be able to put an end to it. Social exclusion, on the other hand, is a moving target and not a problem that will be solved by throwing around wads of cash (very convenient for an administration unwilling either to do so, or take the flak for not doing so), instead it is combated by a whole raft of measures including the creation and promotion of community groups, lessons in citizenship, promotion of culture as a vehicle for inclusion, the further recreation of education as training, counselling and a seemingly endless re-education process, sorry 'life-long learning'. Social exclusion seems to me to be quite sinister as it shifts much of the focus from the situation faced by an individual or community, directly on to them—it is they who need to be re-skilled, re-educated and reconstructed. A worthy cause nonetheless? This article is not the vehicle for that discussion, but what it is interesting to contemplate is whether this situation is really healthy for art and culture. There are several issues involved and they deserve to be dealt with separately.

Firstly, inclusiveness is not what great art is good at. The critic Robert Hughes pointed out that art institutions in the United States have reacted to coming under fire from radical critics by distancing themselves from the perception that they are elitist institutions which are part and parcel of a white, patriarchal culture. In order to do this they have reinvented themselves as places which can equally promote art which is inclusive, open to ethnic minorities and women and willing to blur the distinction between artist and viewer.

Few today would doubt that the institutions of the past have been white and patriarchal, but their response to changing times has had them lurching all over the place looking for examples of more liberal friendly art, and in many cases instead of looking hard enough to find it, they have simply elevated that which is not great art. It simply doesn't matter if a great work of art was created by a person from background a, b or c, either sex or any race. A great work of art is great, a priori, it is supposed to have universal qualities.

Returning to Hughes: he pointed out that radical critics have so far eroded qualitative judgement that "the idea of 'quality'" is now considered the "enemy of justice...Quality, the argument goes, is a plot. It is the result of a conspiracy of white males to marginalise the work of other races and cultures." In these post-modern times it is easy for qualitative judgement to be railroaded and condemned as a tool of cultural domination, but the answer to problems of social injustice does not lie in depreciating the value of the artworks of the past simply because the societies which created them featured inequity. For all of the wrongs of the Soviet Union and its horrendous cultural policy, at least Lenin recognised, much to the distaste of the Procult (Proletarian Culture) faction, that

the culture of the past must be built upon, not destroyed. The politically correct values of today's post-modern critics suddenly do not seem very far removed from book burning. As for the distinction between artist and viewer, well it may not be popular to say it, especially in today's world of interactivity, the internet, digital television and instant gratification, but it is pertinent to do so—if we view a work of art, concentrate on it, contemplate it, think about it, decide if we like it or not, then this is all of the interaction which is needed. The idea of replacing a Caravaggio with a flashy kiosk which tells us about the painting, the artist, his life and allows us to 'move around it' in three dimensions (a la the Van Gogh in a recent television advertisement for chip manufacturer Intel) is horrifying—and you don't have to be a screaming reactionary like Brian Sewell to think so.

Secondly, art can have a useful place in regeneration, urban or rural, and I certainly do not want to deny artists some municipal commissions. But is it really the answer to socio-economic problems? More often than not, it seems that art is used to give an area ear-marked for gentrification a quick boost, or as a sop to those whose futures have become bleak in a nation with growing industrial unemployment which is now becoming increasingly 'post-welfare socialism'. To use art merely as a vehicle for problem solving degrades it, if it becomes nothing more than a talking point or an education session or even a pretty mural it begs the question, why should we pay it any more attention than any of the other meaningless images which we are barraged with? Why even ask ourselves if a work in question is great art or not?

Labour's policy can seem to merely be an extension of the social democratic position of yesteryear, certainly it has some clear continuities such as the patronage of those least likely to come into contact with art. But the differences are more striking than the similarities, the policy of the past patronised the masses by trying to engender in them an interest in that which was often viewed as too complex for them, today no one gives a hoot about exposing people to big ideas. The focus has shifted from the work of art to the context in which it is seen and if the art can be stripped of all meaning, all the better. It is now seen as more important to fill peoples lives with art, any art, than to offer them the opportunity to see works of creative genius, and I use that word knowing how it has become the ultimate heresy.