

Culture Shock: The price of everything and the value of nothing

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Arch: Grayson Perry's *This Pot Will Reduce Crime by 29%* was a *reductio ad absurdum* of the embrace of culture with conditions attached. Photograph: Lisa Maree Williams/Getty

So there you are, well placed in the government of your nation and a champion of the arts to boot. You are known to be cultured, a vocal critic of literature and theatre; you also dabble in direction and are a capable performer. In fact the arts seem to be the only thing to have lifted your spirits since the untimely death of your father and your mother's hasty marriage to your uncle, now the king of Denmark. And what do you do during all this upheaval? You develop an arts policy.

Say what you will about Hamlet, but he values the arts to an almost absurd degree. He has heard that guilty audience members have been so moved by the power of a performance that they turn themselves in, to which end he commissions a play about regicide. This is what we now call the "instrumentalising of the arts". If they're going to operate under state subvention, shouldn't there be clear targets?

Thankfully, *The Murder of Gonzago* is a great success. Although poorly reviewed and abandoned halfway through the performance when the king takes flight, the desired outcomes are achieved. An economic impact study will surely find that for every ducat invested in the visiting players, several ducats more are returned to the exchequer through job creation and VAT, and although no cost-benefit analysis is undertaken with great rigour, who can say that civic engagement with Danish society has not been revolutionised? If only valuing the arts were always this easy.

In the real world, sadly, we are terrible at valuing arts and culture. This is in not just in our public subsidy, which is lousy, but also in the arguments and thinking about it. Earlier theorists began with the hoary assumption that culture is good for everyone

(but too good for some), as civilising and inviting as a cold shower. With the advent of state subsidy, it isn't unreasonable that arts and culture might account for themselves – but how? All art is quite useless, wrote Oscar Wilde, but never within the boxes of a grant application. In those joyless grids all art is quite useful for encouraging creative thinking, cultural participation, urban renewal and economic recovery.

In the draft Framework Policy for Éire Ildánach/Culture 2025, an aspirational document released last month, even abstract notions of the benefit of the arts will become measurable, such as “the value of culture as a means of fostering a more sustainable future for Ireland, including through economic and social policy”. I have no idea what that means. (Are we running out of future?) But the hard swerve towards economic markers suggests that our first national cultural policy is in danger – to use another Wildeism – of knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing.

"If we could prove conclusively that the economic value of culture was zero, would we therefore prevent children from learning to draw?" asked Robert Peston, then the BBC's economics editor. His words were used to introduce a much more persuasive publication, called *Understanding the Value of Arts and Culture*, an expansive piece of research from Britain's Arts and [Humanities Research Council](#), presented by one of its authors, Prof [Geoffrey Crossick](#), at [Trinity College](#) Dublin in May. This report, by Crossick and Patrycja Kaszynska, was not the first to discover that government cultural policies can lead not just to economic-impact studies that are often unsound but also to targets that are either unachievable or unquantifiable. An arch 2007 artwork by the potter [Grayson Perry](#), *This Pot Will Reduce Crime by 29%*, was a reductio ad absurdum of New Labour's embrace of culture with conditions attached.

As every Irish Government department, State agency, local-government office and cultural institution now addresses itself to the early draft of *Culture 2025* – much of it laudable in sentiment, some of it so vague as to be completely open to interpretation – it is important that old mistakes are avoided. Robert Hewison's *Cultural Capital: The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain*, a narrative of cautionary examples, traces how New [Labour](#) repositioned culture as a silver-bullet stimulus for economic and social woes, with attendant targets and managerialism that actually stifled creativity and limited public access.

Crossick and Kaszynska's study was sceptical of the figures and methods that arts organisations must regularly stump up to justify their existence, arguing instead for reasserting personal experience as a guide to cultural value: the effect of the arts on empathy, health, reform, civic engagement or simply understanding the world. None of these things is easily graphed, and aesthetic appreciation has never been a priority in policy documents. Targets, metrics, economic impacts and sustainable futures may sound like more concrete ways to establish the value of culture than a gush about enriching our quality of life and imagination. But they are hardly more sincere. "If arts and culture offered us reassuring certainties, we wouldn't need them, would we?" Crossick said.

If we agree that arts and culture matter, the way we talk about them needs to change. Besides, Hamlet may get measurable results with *The Murder of Gonzago*. But I've seen that show. It's not pretty.