

Speech by the High Representative at the Symposium on Art and Reconciliation, King's College London

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Art and the Power of Change

The English poet Shelley described poets as “the unelected legislators of the world”.

When in a given society, the political elite ceases to uphold basic standards of democracy and decency, or even tramples on these values, it has often fallen to the creative community to articulate universal values of human decency, of justice, of solidarity and of love.

Writers, artists, musicians, and filmmakers from the Western Balkans have produced some of the most vibrant, challenging and universally relevant work to come out of Europe in the last hundred years. This is not mere hyperbole – it is supported by Nobel Prizes, by Oscars, and by widely recognised contributions to the visual arts and to music.

It may be useful to ask if it is a paradox that societies that have witnessed social, economic, political and military turbulence have at the same time produced artists of international stature – or if the impulse towards profound and lasting artistic achievement comes directly from that very turbulence.

It may indeed be the case that interesting times make for great art.

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The newspaper columnist Dario Dzamonja wrote a piece during the 1992-1995 conflict in the former Yugoslavia that described waking up on his birthday. It was early spring and there was no heating; for breakfast there was dry grey bread; preoccupied with wartime worries, his family had forgotten his anniversary.

As he drove to the newspaper office, a sniper's bullet whistled across the windscreen, missing him by inches. He raced for the cover of some nearby buildings and as he did so he thought: Oh well, at least someone is thinking of me on my birthday!

There are people all across the former conflict zone who will identify with this idiosyncratic response to the bleak reality of war.

Sometimes all you can do is see the bright side.

But I think what is happening in this vignette may be more significant than that.

Humour doesn't simply make a difficult experience more bearable; it has the capacity to undermine the very same forces that make that experience difficult in the first place.

If the object of small-arms fire is to instill terror in the civilian population, Dzamonja's whimsical response clearly defeats the object.

Instead of terror, there is a form of ridicule.

And ridicule is a powerful function of art, especially when it is deployed in a political context.

A common characteristic of those who were in power in the Eastern bloc between the 1940s and the 1980s was their monumental humourlessness.

And a common characteristic of those who opposed them was the inventive and effective deployment of ridicule.

The privileged and powerful do not like to be opposed – they like even less to be laughed at.

Vaclav Havel's absurdist drama challenged the intellectual capacity of the Husak regime precisely because of its absurdism. A certain kind of personality is baffled and bewildered by the absurd – the sort of personality that customarily fails to understand jokes that everyone else finds hilarious.

The deployment of humour – by all sections of society from taxi-drivers and shopkeepers to playwrights and poets – eroded the authority of the old regimes, and in 1989 we saw just how effectively soft power was able to trump even the accumulated oppressive capacity of totalitarian states.

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So, what has been the political impact of artists, musicians, writers, filmmakers, and poets in the Western Balkans since the war – have they been a force for good, a negative force, or no force at all?

On the last point, I think, the answer is beyond doubt. The creative community has been a force: in fact, the influence and achievement of this community is in marked contrast to the reputation of politicians and government officials. In many parts of the Western Balkans, pop singers and TV actors are viewed as being more trustworthy than government ministers.

This owes much to the fact that performers engage with their audience at a deeper level than most politicians. They tell stories that elicit profound emotions. Politicians may aspire to this, but rarely achieve it.

Different skill sets, of course. One of the purposes of art is to explore the meaning of life; the purpose of politics is to make the buses run on time.

Politics shouldn't get in the way of art – but art should certainly get in the way of politics. Poets may be unelected, but they are often called upon to speak up for values that have been sidelined or abandoned in day-to-day politics.

When the government starts spouting nonsense, it's time for artists to start speaking common sense.

Now, that wouldn't be out of place in a play by Vaclav Havel.

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Creative types fulfill this role in odd and unexpected ways.

It is not a coincidence that one of the most perceptive of the many brilliant works of cinema that have emerged in the shadow of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia – Pjer Žalica's *Gori vatra* – is a comedy.

Nor is it a coincidence that a key element in the soundtrack that worked so well in that film is the song, *Iznad Tešnja zora sviće* written by Saša Lošić of Plavi orkestar.

Pop and comedy converge here to affirm the futility of violence and the transcendence of the human spirit – poets acting as unelected legislators.

The importance of the comic element is not limited to its satirical effect. Just by virtue of expressing humour, works such as *Gori Vatra* prevent violence from hogging the public space. When public debate is "all about the war" then the perpetrators of violence have succeeded in setting the agenda. Art offers an alternative to that – and as long as there is a space in which alternative ways of looking at the world can be expressed, then the impact and influence of violence can be blunted.

A proliferation of remarkable films have sought to address the conflict and its legacy: Danis Tanovic's *No Man's Land*, of course, Jasmila Zbanic's *Grbavica*, Srdan Golubovic's *Circles*, Ahmed Imamovic's *Go West*, and Dino Mustafic's *Remake*, to name just a few.

I personally think it is significant that, after the unflinching realism of *Grbavica*, Jasmila Zbanic went on to make *Love Island*, a whimsical meditation on the tangled fabric of human experience in which none of the Balkan cultural particularities are diluted, but the universality of human foibles are celebrated. Likewise, in *Go West* Ahmed Imamovic portrays the catastrophe of conflict from the point of view of a couple who, because of their relationship, already have a clear view of the limitations and intransigence of their surroundings. These films show reality in all its complexity, and they implicitly reject the monochrome lens of bigotry and chauvinism, dwelling instead on

human resilience and diversity.

The insights of Balkan filmmakers and the stellar body of work they have produced over the last two decades stands as incontestable testimony to the fact that countries in the region cannot and should not be defined by the conflicts of the 1990s.

Indeed the success of the Sarajevo Film Festival and other artistic festivals in the region have shown the capacity of art to transcend political divides and in so doing advance reconciliation.

And this liberating function of art is not limited to film, of course.

The singer Đorđe Balašević's first postwar concert in Sarajevo is rightly remembered as a moment when it became apparent to many that the region's torn cultural tapestry could be repaired. International performers who visited during or immediately after the war, such as Joan Baez, Iron Maiden's Bruce Dickinson and, of course, the Irish group U2, also testified, in their own distinctive way, to the healing power of art.

I do not pretend to be an aficionado of heavy metal – but like many people in the Western world, I was impressed by how apposite and timely were the lyrics and melody of Winds of Change, the song by the German band, The Scorpions, that served as a sort of soundtrack to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In these and other cases, popular musicians caught the mood and at the same time articulated sentiments that served as an antidote to hopelessness.

My wife, Bernarda, is an opera singer, and I myself am more at home with classical music than with pop or rock. And we can certainly find in the classical repertoire astute and enduring commentaries on politics and society – from Beethoven's Eroica, written when the ideas of the French Revolution promised to take root in much of Europe, to Olivier Messiaen's Quartet for the end of time, first performed in a freezing camp where the composer was a prisoner of war to the Polish pianist Paderewski, who became a powerful voice for his country's independence after the First World War.

Richard Strauss's Metamorphosen is a lament for the world that was destroyed by National Socialism and his Four Last Songs are seen by many as the composer's apologia for his failure to recognize fully the evil at the heart of the Nazis' ideology. I believe this last instance raises an important point – because, while we salute the capacity of creative artists to affirm the most valuable and fundamental of human values, we cannot ignore a contrary capacity to jump on the chauvinist bandwagon. Artists can create work that celebrates resentment rather than love, exclusion rather than solidarity; they can wax lyrical about the supposed thrill of conflict and say little about the prodigious human cost.

All across the former Yugoslavia, we have seen how easily some musicians and writers and other creative artists have slipped into a chauvinist style – discovering a seam of popularity in the articulation of belligerent nationalism.

But it's equally important to point out that art placed in the service of disreputable politics constitutes a relatively small segment of the mainstream. The Nobel Prize winning novelist Saul Bellow once noted that you cannot build art on a foundation of hate. Art is by its nature constructive, while hate is fundamentally destructive.

When, far in the future, an assessment of contemporary art in the Western Balkans is made, I believe the work of those who have examined the human costs of conflict and those who have affirmed the values of solidarity and love – often in the most unpromising and dangerous circumstances – will be valued. I also believe there is a correspondence between chauvinism on the one hand and artistic mediocrity on the other.

In case I appear to be overstating the case for the power of art to help societies recover from conflict, let me conclude with an example that is not necessarily at the top of every critic or political scientist's list of cultural achievements.

Every day across the Western Balkans, millions of viewers tune in to the talent shows that make up such a disproportionately large segment of programming in the region.

This programming sidesteps a linguistic and cultural obstacle course of identity and language. TV channels have enthusiastically embraced an inclusive format for the simple and sensible reason that strong viewing figures translate into high advertising revenues.

If you tune in to talent shows, you find that the panellists and performers cover the full gamut of family names and accents and places of origin. Celebrity, it seems, trumps ethnic identity. Panellists on these shows characteristically engage in dialogue that embraces and reflects the life experience of their huge audience with humour and often with subtlety. The repartee revels in the glorious anarchy of interrelated cultures. Viewers respond enthusiastically.

This seems to me to be a very positive example of the power that art – in this case popular art, some would even say “down-market” art – undoubtedly has to contribute to postwar recovery.

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But is it enough? This is a different question. Unfortunately, the answer may be rather less positive.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country that is blessed with abundant natural resources and a population density – four million – that is practically optimal. It is right next door to the world’s wealthiest market, to which it has been given privileged access, and it has had the benefit of comprehensive infrastructural development financed by international aid.

And, as I have just noted, it has a cultural heritage – in literature, in art, in music, in drama – that is not only world class, but which is clearly predicated on an inclusive and progressive view of society.

So, why isn’t Bosnia and Herzegovina making political and economic progress at a satisfactory rate?

The short answer is that the political system favours the interests that created the system in the first place. It is not being operated for the benefit of the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I have said often in the past that the only people who can change this are the people themselves – the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Yet such a change requires a formidable exercise of popular will. The system is self-perpetuating. It is designed to prevent upsets, and the biggest upset of all would be the removal from power of the parties that have ruled for nearly a generation.

But Dario Dzamonja, a remarkable man in many respects, was not unusual in his offbeat view of the world, his ability to see possibilities in the most unpromising of circumstances – this is the Bosnian way. It is something that is celebrated in much of the creative art that has been produced in and about Bosnia and Herzegovina in the last twenty-five years. That’s why I continue to believe that the world of BiH politics can and still might learn from the arts.

There are BiH politicians who understand the complex reality of the society they govern; they understand that if they want to avoid becoming figures of fun, subjects of popular ridicule, they will have to steer a new course. The righteous indignation of the people cannot be contained indefinitely.

We are in a race against time. If political leaders want to win that race, they will have to begin fulfilling their obligations as elected legislators of the world. I have not yet entirely lost hope that that is what they will do.

Thank you