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A policy review of *Strategy 2022 – 2025, Culture Ireland*

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Summary:

A review of Culture Ireland's new strategy (*Strategy 2022-2025*) as a culturally and politically strategic document.

Abstract:

Culture Ireland is the government agency which supports the promotion of Irish arts worldwide. The aim of this policy review is primarily to identify key concepts in the recently launched revision of Culture Ireland's strategy (*Strategy 2022-2025*) and to place them in the wider context of the role of arts and culture in Ireland. In particular, it highlights the implicit and explicit framing of arts policy as a way of operationalising Ireland's culture on the global stage as a form of soft power.

Key words: Culture Ireland strategy, soft power, Irish cultural policy.

Culture Ireland's mission statement is to promote Irish arts worldwide. Culture Ireland was set up in 2005 as an arm's length agency to promote Irish arts worldwide. In alignment with an increasing shift towards an 'architect' model of arts funding in Ireland (Mulcahy, 2016), in 2012 the agency was brought under the aegis of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (the "Department of Culture"). This review interrogates the latest strategy document from Culture Ireland, the Culture Ireland *Strategy: 2022 – 2025* (the "strategy") (Culture Ireland, 2022a). This analysis places the document in the wider context of Irish cultural policy. It raises questions on

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the cultural policy model extant in Ireland, and problematises the shift towards what can be considered an architect model of cultural funding in Ireland (Hillman-Chartrand & McCaughey, 1989), with implicit instrumentalist soft power (Nisbett, 2016; Nye, 2008) policy goals in the wider policy discourse.

This policy review places the strategy document into the wider cultural policy context in Ireland. It does not interrogate the implementation of the strategy nor the actual funding decisions made, as this is beyond the scope of a policy review. However, such analysis would be an excellent future research project, particularly given the commitment to openness in the new strategy and the availability of the outcome of funding decisions on the Culture Ireland website. Instead, it looks at the rhetoric and discourse and wider policy context within which the new strategy operates.

The prior Culture Ireland strategy document (2017-20) differed from this new strategy in one crucial way. The 2017-20 strategy was more overt in its acknowledgement of explicit links with government, stating that it aimed to 'work in tandem with Creative Ireland and other stakeholders across Government to maximise the impact of Government investment and promote wider interests of the country' (Culture Ireland, 2017, p. 3). It also outlined alignment with emerging geographic priorities of Ireland Connected, i.e. the whole of government policy strategy which, per the earlier strategy 'provides an overarching framework, aimed at building on our trade and investment success to date to deliver greater visibility for Ireland overseas and economic impact and job creation at home' (Culture Ireland, 2017, p. 2). The new strategy identifies key partnerships including with the Department of Foreign Affairs to further the aims of the *Global Ireland* strategy (Government of Ireland, 2021). This relationship is analysed further below.

In order to contextualise the analysis, it is useful to provide some scene-setting context for the new strategy. The strategy was launched in March

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2022, after an open public consultation process ending in July 2021. The newly launched strategy can be seen as a vision-based advocacy document which identifies certain values central to the vision and mission of the agency, namely diversity, inclusivity, gender balance, environmental sustainability and the promotion of the Irish language.

The new strategy takes the agency's core purpose of promotion of Irish arts worldwide and focuses on addressing and negotiating the changes wrought by international exhibition under the COVID-19 pandemic. The inclusion of operational goals of increased global partnerships, and commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion, and environmental sustainability are particularly welcome. Effectively unspoken in the strategy, however, are the more political aspects of the operations of Culture Ireland. In an indication of the increasingly explicit instrumentalist discourse towards culture in Ireland, the press release detailing the strategy contains a quote from Minister Catherine Martin explicitly flagging the strategy aims under the *Global Ireland 2025* strategy to increase Ireland's impact worldwide (Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media, 2022). There are a number of ways of reading this discourse. On the one hand, it can be read as a proud endorsement of the quality and value of Irish culture. Alternatively, it can be seen as a problematic justification of needing external validation for arts funding in Ireland, a justification that is continually looking for external proof that the arts are worthy of funding for instrumentalist reasons (Hadley, Collins and O'Brien, 2020).

The choice of documents to be analysed for policy research is in itself a deliberate action. Much of what occurs in policy development is undocumented, with the published strategy operating as a specific manifestation of aspirational thinking. In this case, the strategy is treated not only as a factual or contextual source of information, but also as an object of study in itself; a meaningful social product that frames the issues relating to

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funding of culture abroad in a particular light (Karppinen and Moe, 2019). The strategy presents 'one possible construction of reality and one perspective into the issue and possible solutions' (Karppinen and Moe, p. 252). Essentially, the published strategy is an expression of government's aspirations towards promoting Ireland on the global stage. While it may be a laudable aim to fund Irish culture, it needs to be acknowledged that this is an expression of power, in this case a form of soft power (Nye, 2008). The significance of soft power to an understanding of Culture Ireland is addressed below and is considered central to any analysis of the agency's strategy.

Overall, the strategy places the artist at its centre and, concomitant with the necessities of living on a small island nation, holds that international work is vital to many Irish artists. With the stated vision of 'contemporary Irish arts are unique and treasured and deserving of a worldwide audience' (Culture Ireland, 2022a, p. 3), the insistence on Ireland's cultural exceptionalism is understandable, albeit questionable. The mission statement centres the artist, stating that it is to create and support opportunities for Irish artists (Culture Ireland, 2022a, p. 3). The values of excellence, artistic freedom, co-operation, equality and adaptability and strategic goals again all centre the artist. The centrality of the artist to the strategy is also evident in the emphasis on supporting the artist in various ways including exchanges with international partners, adaptation of funding supports to respond to changing ecosystems and artists career paths, and active engagement for promotion of events. The development of partnerships and the commitment to issues of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) are both long-term strategic goals that will strengthen both the opportunities for artists and the diversity of such opportunities. The identified priority actions include reviewing the showcase platforms, strengthening of global connections, enhancing online opportunities, implementation of systems to inform and engage underrepresented artists, environmental and touring policy, and increased digital engagement.

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In light of the re-absorption of Culture Ireland into the Department of Culture, it is particularly interesting that the strategy expresses an intention to enhance cooperation both with other Irish state bodies including the Arts Council of Ireland/*An Chomhairle Ealaíon*, Screen Ireland and cross border cooperation with Arts Council of Northern Ireland. This expressed priority is firstly an explicit manifestation of outward looking goals, and secondly, broadens the understanding of the remit of Culture Ireland from the more narrowly defined arts and artists under the *Arts Acts 2003* to a more expansive definition to include film. However, there is no explicit inclusion of NI Screen in the strategy, which somewhat undermines the broadening of the remit. A brief analysis of the funding decisions shows that a very small percentage of the funding goes towards promotion of film, perhaps on the understanding that such funding is more a matter for Screen Ireland.

While the explicit goals in the strategy document are nuanced, aspirational and celebratory, it must be acknowledged that Culture Ireland's implicit policy aim is to implement the *Global Ireland* strategy (Government of Ireland, 2018). *Global Ireland* is a resolutely outward facing multi-year strategy to promote Ireland on the 'global stage' with the stated aim of doubling the scope and impact of Ireland's footprint by 2025. *Global Ireland* sets out Ireland's aspirations for global engagement, under the shadow of economic crisis and Brexit. As then Taoiseach (now Tánaiste) Leo Varadkar's Foreword to *Global Ireland* states 'We are at a moment in world history where we can turn inwards and become irrelevant, or we can open ourselves to opportunities and possibilities on a global scale that we have never had before' (Government of Ireland, 2018). Thus, Culture Ireland as an agency has instrumentalist/political aims to spread the word about a particular vision of Ireland.

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The implicit alignment with *Global Ireland* is, of course, part of a wider policy strategy for Culture Ireland. The subsumption of Culture Ireland under the umbrella of the state in 2012, from its prior status as autonomous, allows for intervention by the state in the decision-making process for allocation of funding. As the Culture Ireland website states 'The Irish Embassy/Consulate network is also invited to comment on applications in terms of impact ...and whether there might be wider strategic benefits for Ireland arising from a proposed event' (Culture Ireland, 2022b). In the context of models of cultural policy theory, this policy intervention can be considered as a shift from an arm's-length approach to an architect model of cultural policy funding. A number of theorists have developed organisational categorisations of cultural policy models, primarily driven by considerations of the relational aspects between state and society. Mulcahy identifies broad 'ideal types' of cultural patronage, namely 'culture states, cultural protectionism, social-democratic cultures, and laissez-faire cultures' (Mulcahy, 2016, p. viii) which allow us to develop an understanding of why a nation supports (or not) cultural activities via the public purse. The Irish government's approach tends to fit within a number of different ideal types, depending on the arts form, with a certain amount of direct funding, some identifiable social-democratic forms and alignment with laissez-faire policies. What is clear is that funding of arts and culture is ideologically driven. In Ireland's case, it is possible to identify both postcolonial and economic ideologies which underpin certain cultural policies (in particular, for example, in the policies set out in the Audiovisual Action Plan (Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2018) which emphasises the role of film both in promoting Ireland on the global stage and as a way to attract inward investment production). These are not, in fact, oppositional but can be seen as mutually constitutive. The ideologies around identity formation on the world stage directly feed into Ireland's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) approach.

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Hillman-Chartrand and McCaughey's approach identifies certain modes used in identifying types of public support for the arts. Based upon the principle of arms-length funding, they identify four alternative roles, namely facilitator, patron, architect and engineer (1989). The arm's length principle means that the government determines the amount of aggregate support but not which artists should receive such support. The architect ideal type means granting decisions are made by bureaucrats, however in theory artistic enterprises retain autonomy in decision making. The very shift from arm's length to architect is in itself ideologically problematic in that it undermines the potentially oppositional role of culture in society. As Hillman-Chartrand and McCaughey hold, 'Although some may have been convinced that a well-disposed political gift horse should not be examined too closely, others remained strongly aware of the risks to the arts which can result from arts councils encouraging, ignoring or acquiescing in moves by the political arm of government which prevent a broad bi-partisan commitment to the arts' (1989, p.67). The framing of the Culture Ireland strategy as a political document, and in particular, the deployment of Irish art and artists as an instrument of the government raises questions about the autonomy of the arts in Ireland.

The use of culture to promote a particular version of Ireland on the global stage can be understood as operation of a form of soft power. 'Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others' (Nye 2008, p.95). For Nisbett, Nye's concept can be usefully considered through theoretical approaches to power in a way that is underexplored in Nye's own work (Nisbett, 2016). In particular, she frames soft power through Steven Lukes' third dimension of power as an insidious way 'to shape desires and beliefs' (Nisbett, 2016 drawing on Lukes, 1974). The existence of soft power is never guaranteed as resistance or oppositional readings are possible. In addition, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of any soft power measures.

Therefore, questions arise as to how might Culture Ireland's efficiency of influence be measured and what metrics are used to measure engagement

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and results. If Ireland is relying on soft power to sell a particular manifestation of Ireland, what does this mean for those who do not meet with the specific requirements of the political stakeholders?

The Culture Ireland strategy is pragmatic, with a politically expedient use of place branding and soft power. Problematically, a pragmatic approach doesn't always acknowledge the negative aspects of the cultural economy such as the precarious nature of the industry. Instead, a reflexive approach to cultural policy as advocated by De Beukelaer and Spence (2018) acknowledges the contradictions in the role of the cultural economy in society in the wider context of contemporary conditions of cultural production and the policies that shape them. While there may be relative improvements in recent funding awards (e.g., to Screen Ireland and Arts Council Ireland), piecemeal increases from a low base means that funding of the arts in Ireland remains starkly low. The grassroots lobby group for the arts in Ireland, National Campaign for the Arts (nfca.ie) pointed out in their response to Budget 2020 that direct funding to artists and arts workers in fact saw little real change (District Magazine, 2019). A reflexive approach to the role of cultural policy acknowledges the pragmatic elements of funding structures, that there is no bottomless pit of funding and that strategic, complex and political decisions must be made regarding who gets funded and for what purposes. However, it is contended that the political nature of the operation of Culture Ireland and the decision making process should be less opaque. In particular, the relative lack of autonomy in Culture Ireland's decision-making processes, as a branch of the relevant department of the state, and the inclusion of overseas embassies and consulates in the decision process points to increasing state intervention in the dissemination of culture.

What is key for the understanding of policies that shape arts and culture is that instrumentalist rationales are not singular, but rather multifaceted. While the instrumentalist discourse around the strategy may be aspirationally

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neutral in its desire to represent Ireland on the global stage and to provide international opportunities for Irish arts and culture, in fact the strategy sits firmly within the political aims of the government. Cultural production operates from multiple facets, from engaging with public, representing public, constituting public and in opposition to reigning hegemony. Art as a form of opposition to hegemony has a long history. We need to question what happens the role of art and the artist in society when it is operationalised as a form of soft power. We need to also question the measures of effectiveness underpinning the strategy. The strategy calls for effective measurement of effectiveness through various means including through use of an online reporting system. However, measurement of impact and effectiveness of this nature is obviously complex and non-linear. There are assumptions around the generation of and effectiveness of Ireland's soft power that are often impervious to specific quantifiable targets. As flagged by Nisbett (2016), evaluations of soft power are imprecise and thus it is problematic to measure success on such targets.

The shift to a more artist-centred approach has much to celebrate, however, the power of the state to intervene in decisions on who gets funded is problematic from multiple perspectives. It is noted that while the final awards are published, what is not available for public scrutiny are the rationales underpinning such decisions and particularly the inputs of various consultates and other bodies. This review queries long term cultural strategies where the funding for international dissemination of art is opaque.

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