

“SPEAKING FREELY – THE CASE FOR WORDS”

John Tusa for Jo Mangan

We should watch our mouths. We should watch what we say. We should mind our language. From childhood, I guess, we have all been at the receiving end of these or similar admonitions. It's what teachers and parents say. That doesn't make them unimportant. Perhaps their advice has never been more important than it is today.

“What book are you reading,” asks Polonius of Hamlet? He replies: “Words, words, words!” In refusing to go beyond words as such, in declining to talk of the meaning of what he is reading, I believe Hamlet – Shakespeare – is reminding us of the absolute, original, fundamental value of words. They are the carriers of meaning. That meaning can be literal, poetical, fantastical, comical, rhetorical, lyrical, economical, instructional, devotional, inspirational, directional or just beautiful – as the Player King might have said. Whatever the hoped for meaning, words, rightly used, will bear it. They are infinitely precious. They should not be mis-used.

In a sense words as such and in themselves are neutral. When they are used to carry meaning, which is after all the essence of communication, they become precious or pernicious or precarious. For words plus meaning equals opportunity or problem. For us, working in the arts, the particular words which we assume belong to us, to what we do and what we believe in, can be so seized, manipulated and misused that they come to carry meanings that threaten, even undermine what we do. For words can be owned by others. The war over words has never been so intense, so real, so grim. Often it is simply ridiculous.

So, it's time for an easy laugh or two. The BBC advertised for a new editor of the in-house journal “Ariel”, historically known to staff as “Pravda”. The actual job advertisement called for: “Senior Internal Communications Publishing Manager, reporting to the Head of Internal Brand and Engagement, Corporate”. Words have been bullied into creating a nonsense.

Apple's creative guru, Sir Jonathan Ive, rhapsodised at the launch of the iWatch. He praised its “digital crown – a remarkable input device which fluidly zooms into apps and enables nimble, precise adjustment.” Gosh, what's that? What was he talking about? The knob. Every watch has one. It remains a knob.

When the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value reported, it observed that “the industry” - what you or I might call the “arts world”, why call it an industry? - “the industry is positioned on a creative-cultural continuum”. I have been trying to fathom exactly what a “creative-cultural continuum” might be. If so where should we position ourselves along it? I doubt if I care.

In a newsletter circulated by a European cultural organisation, I came across the following claim. “This platform” it said - presumably referring to itself, though it hardly matters – “This platform will link

many audience-created narratives about the human act of crossing borders.” Somewhere in that sentence I think there may be a nugget that says “immigrants or refugees will tell their stories”. Why not say it? Why should anyone bother with such complication? Why do writers think that nonsense words make proposals sound more serious or more posh?

Over the past few years I have spent time, probably far too much, nagging away at words that evade, conceal, obscure or actually mislead. Playing this game with Clore Leadership Fellows on the Clore Leadership Programme, I found that we shared many hates in common. My own alphabet of special abomination – far from exhaustive – included these. A for Accountability; B for Benchmark; C for Customer and Capacity Building; D for Direction of Travel; E for Edutainment; F for Going Forward; G for Goals; H for Holistic; I for Impact; L for Legacy and Leverage; N for Narrative; P for Pushback; R for Respect; S for Synergy; T for Transformational.

You, I am sure, will have your pet hates. Why do I have mine? Some are crude neologisms, such as “edutainment” and don’t forget “webinar”. Most of these abominable words are fancy and pretentious; they are frightened that honest simplicity will expose their shallowness. So “Direction of Travel?” Why not “where do we want to go?” Or: “Going Forward?” Why not “in the future?” Or: “Narrative?” Why not good old fashioned “story”? Or: “Pushback”? Why not “resistance?” or “disagreement”, or “argument”?

More generally, in my experience any organisation that talks of and treats its paying public as “customers” is assuredly heading for the dogs. Our audiences for the arts are not customers – to call them that reduces our mutually complex relationship to a single crude economic transaction. Such a simplified category diminishes and destroys.

I do not believe that a patient in a hospital is usefully or properly labelled as a “customer”. Are they more likely to be healed if they are seen as a “customer”? Nor is a “passenger” on, say, the railways better served by being treated as a “customer”. Usually worse. But those industries can argue their case for themselves.

Now my – or your – pet dislikes of such vocabulary do not address the question of why they are used at all. I think Humpty Dumpty might have the answer. “When I use a word” he tells Alice, “it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less”. Alice looks puzzled. Humpty Dumpty goes on: “The question is which is to be master – that’s all”.

Lewis Carroll was right. Words reflect power; meaning exerts control and control delivers power. Vocabulary and the terms used in debate are entirely about who has power. If the arts allow the discussion of what they do, why they do it and how they should be assessed to be conducted with words and in terms that come from other disciplines, then they have surrendered the greater part of the intellectual battlefield. It would be like fighting a battle with the wrong weapons, weapons, what’s more, designed by the other side and which therefore suit the other side.

The language of the arts must not be the language of management, business or the civil service. We need our own words to define our needs and activities, not an externally imposed lexicon of objectives, outcomes and deliverables where a sense of purpose becomes a “direction of travel” – yes, I really don’t like it - where a problem always becomes a “challenge”, a dilemma mutates into an “issue”, where serving your audience becomes “maximising stakeholder value”, where clarity and meaning dissolve into fogs of evasion or obfuscation. Actually a miasma of sheer intellectual dishonesty.

For what is “policy” but “what do you want to do?” What is “vision” but “what is your big idea?” What is “process” but “how will you do what you want to do?” What are “outcomes” but “results?” What is “risk analysis” but spotting dangers?

Raising objections to managerial cant is not in itself mere pedantry. Other people’s jargon is fine if used when needed. When it becomes the defining vocabulary for describing, judging and assessing the myriad human activities and interchanges involved in the arts, then the borrowed or imposed vocabulary can do terrible damage. The superficial clarity of “faux-managerial” words and concepts not only undermines the complexities of meaning. It is intended to do so. Were the arts to adopt this vocabulary it would amount to no less than capitulation – an intellectual surrender first, closely followed by surrender of independent action. To adopt this vocabulary is to surrender the intellectual battle ground of debate about the arts.

Worse still, what I call the “managerialist” words are fine in and for the particular disciplines for which they were created. They are – perhaps have to be – stripped of complexity, of qualification, of uncertainty to meet the needs of business and manufacturing. The world of the arts exists surrounded by complexity, double meanings, paradoxes, illogicality. There is no “cause and effect” in the arts, in the realms of the creative. There is no right or wrong. How can you judge let alone measure such imponderables?

Here I offer to you a bold definition of the essential difference between the sciences and the humanities – including of course the arts - given by Professor Philip Allott of Trinity College, Cambridge.

The natural sciences, he wrote recently, study the natural world and the human being as part of that natural world. The STEM subjects – as he doesn’t quite call them – are cumulative, progressive and evolve by natural selection, by evolution.

The humanities, Allott then argues, are totally different. They proceed by implication and “involution” – rather than evolution. What might this mean? Philip Allott argues this crucial distinction like this:

“We humanists produce ever-increasing densities of ideas, ever-new coherences of existing ideas. A new coherence of ideas changes the world. Humanists are alchemists of the mind. We listen to what science says but we have other horizons.”

Then this, which I believe is a defining claim of huge value. Allott asserts: “No idea in the humanities is ever wrong. It may be based on a mistake of fact. It may be stupid, irrational, evil, impractical. But you can never know when an idea might turn out to be useful, if only in causing other ideas dialectically, through disagreement. Thought cannot be unthought. Every thought already thought can be rethought”.

For “humanities” just read “arts” throughout. Using his argument, it would run like this:

“No work of art is ever wrong. It may be badly done. It may be stupid, evil or irrational. You never know when even bad art may turn out to be useful. It may provoke something new as a reaction. Art cannot be undone. Art already made can be re-made.”

That seems to me as profound a definition of the very particular nature of the arts as I have ever read. It rings absolutely true to me. Allott does not claim for a second that the way the arts and humanities think, create, make it better than other disciplines. But it is, on his definition, intensely different, intensely distinctive, intensely itself. If so, such activity requires and deserves description and understanding of a kind suitable to its nature.

If Allott is right and I believe he is, then attempts to measure, quantify, define, restrict, explain or compare the arts as if doing so might explain or justify the arts are not merely irrelevant. They would threaten or even destroy the qualities that make the arts what they are.

Make no mistake. The pressure on the arts from some funders and policy makers to use these alien terms and concepts is often considerable. It is far easier to wrestle an opponent to the ground when the terms of the debate are yours. That is why politicians and instrumentalists want to impose their terms, their vocabulary, their language on the arts.

The first task of the arts world is to refuse to be bullied into using words and concepts that belong to a different world - the world of bureaucratic, political and management speak. The arts must be – and are – clever and cunning enough to know how to use and adapt management tools to their own purposes. But to do so is only part of the process of being excellent. It cannot be a guarantee of excellence in itself.

The first duty of the politicians, managers and consultants is to recognise then to admit that imposing an alien language on the arts will destroy what even they might regard useful to society. So what is the point of winning that language war?

There is a particular language for use about the arts, unique perhaps, certainly special and distinctive. That does not make it better – intellectually or morally - than other languages. It does not originate from a position – implied or assumed - of superiority over others. It matters because it describes and expresses what the arts do better than other languages.

What might this language, what must it, include? What must it be allowed to express? What essential meanings about the arts must it attempt to carry? Try it this way.

That the arts are unpredictable in the effect that they have. The time span over which they are judged may be decades away. Failure in the arts is frequent and cannot be prevented by listing objectives. Excellence cannot be guaranteed. An activity which deals in the original or even the revolutionary must not be judged by snap decisions. What the arts are earth – or value for money, or cultural value as we have to say – only emerges years after any expenditure takes place.

Above all, giving the arts the opportunity to be excellent involves chance, risk, harnessing the variable, the impulsive, the uncalculated, the incalculable and the shocking. It depends on allowing the arts their own voice. They must be able to talk of what they do, argue for what they do, explain what they do in their own terms. How can the arts be judged, appreciated, measured except in a language which is rooted in their fundamental unpredictability or complexity?

Above all language should not be imposed from outside as a straitjacket. It should not be about power, the imposition of policy, of social or economic prescriptions. So, if the arts are to free themselves to do what they are best at, they must reclaim the way in which they talk of what they do. The war of words, the war about words, must be fought. To use managerial cant: there must be “pushback”; there must be “contestation.” Or plainly, argument and resistance.

Words must be recognised as slippery, ambiguous, rich and risky. They should be used with care precisely because they are powerful and dangerous. At their best they can change minds. Often they are the only weapon the arts world has. That is why they are worth using carefully and considerably; meaning is at stake. Preventing misuse, obfuscation, distortion requires eternal vigilance. Being picky about the way words are used is not pedantry. It is the first line of the defence of truth. Capturing the vocabulary amounts to a first line of attack.

And in the meantime, the arts world must think cleverly, must use words in a technical way when the tactics demand. To the congenital sceptic, to the ruthless bureaucrat, to the calculating politician, to the class warrior, to the anti-elitist, to the inverted snob the case for the arts can easily be put in their own terms. It is not hard. Let's use their own words. The case might go something like this:

“The arts should be funded because they are efficiently run, transparently led, meet their objectives and deliver all the outcomes set. People are healthier, children better educated, communities more harmonious, towns and villages more prosperous when open to and involved in arts activity. National economic activity is boosted, research and innovation advanced, entrepreneurship galvanised, philanthropy stimulated, employment increased, tax take grown, social benefits increased, international reputation and prestige enhanced as a direct result of public support for the arts. The investment is minimal; the returns very large. Investing in the arts is very good value for public money.”

Now a real managerialist hardliner would still regard such a statement as too sloppy and imprecise. Let's go one stage further and harden the language up still further. Here is the same case fully aligned with the critics' own language, the language of bureaucracy and managerialism:

“Arts investment is a high-yielding multi-factoral multiplier delivering diverse and complex social, economic and psychological outcomes of an unpredictable, at times unquantifiable but occasionally ultimately verifiable nature. While certain outcomes are more subject to precise metrical validation, most can yield results that are beyond the merely subjective. But ‘going forward’, the ‘direction of travel’ is clear. The ‘narrative’ should be persuasive. Investing in the arts is money well focussed. It offers value for money investment to government or local authorities. Investing in the arts amounts to taking the ‘easy wins’, to ‘picking the low-lying fruit’. Such claims should always be subjected to cost-benefit review and high level, impact analysis drilling down into claimed consequences.”

Well, there may be meaning there but it's hardly our meaning. So, how should the case for the arts be made in terms that are true to the nature of the arts? What are the words to use, what are our own words? I fully accept that we all shy away from words and ideas that sound too high-flown, too pretentious, too remote, too, yes, elitist? I owe it to you, owe it to myself to have a go.

I have tried such definitions of the purpose of the arts at least twice before. In 1999, in my book “Art Matters, part of it went like this:

“The arts matter...because they are universal; because they are-non-material; because they question the way we look at the world; ...because they link us to our past and open the door to the future; ...because they offer a shared experience rather than an isolated one; because they encourage the imagination and attempt the pointless; because they make order out of disorder; because they offer beauty and confront us with the fact of ugliness...A nation without the arts would be a nation that had stopped talking to itself and stopped dreaming”.

Looking back on those words from 1999, I stand by them. But when, soon after, I met a local politician at a book event, he said very politely that none of them connected to anything he knew or did.

Suitably challenged, I decided to try again. Writing in 2007 in “Engaged with the Arts”, with that local politician firmly in my mind, I had another try. Part of this new definition went like this:

“The arts regenerate the rundown and rehabilitate the neglected. Arts buildings lift the spirits, create symbols that people identify with, and give identity to places that may not have one. The arts teach the young how to create, inspire the imagination and believe in their own potential. Where the arts start, jobs follow, jobs which are individualistic, independent and forward looking. Anywhere that neglects the arts, short changes its people”.

Would such a definition have been more useful to my local politician? I don't know. I do hope so.

So, here I am in 2015. A few moments ago, I deliberately made the case for the arts in managerial and economic terms using a vocabulary that is alien to me and, I suggest, damaging to the activity I – you – believe in. Can I do it using our words? It's time for me to try again. Here goes:

“The arts are valuable because they are different from other parts of life. Not better, not superior, but different. On a bad day, they may be boring, irrelevant, pretentious or just bad. On a good day, they can alter the way we think, look, hear and even behave. It is worth waiting for those good days. Artists make up their own particular rules and then risk living by them. We can follow or not as we choose. What the scientist is in their research lab, the artist is in their studio searching for something original and new. The artist doesn't know in advance what that might be. The arts are sometimes beautiful. The arts are sometimes good. They are not defined by their need to be either. Paying for the arts is low cost and low risk. You never know what will come out next. That's the point”.

So, there you have it; my latest attempt to use our language to describe the activity of the arts. Anyone can take their pick of the language to use. Both may reach similar conclusions. They will sound and be very different. In the plainest language: the arts yield more than they cost; they are a benefit not a drain. It needs saying again and again and again. Truth often does not prevail. Reality always does. Reality always will. It must be put into words. Use them. They may be all we have. .

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