

Democracy, Culture and Ownership – who tells the story?

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Let me begin with a provocation.

In our modern lives we surround ourselves with art and cultural products, images, music and media, which just like most other things, we tend to consume with little regard for where it came from or without much thought about why it may have been sold to us in the first place. Our phones bombard us with images, music and one-click stimulation. And our dopamine levels respond accordingly. We upload snippets of our lives, often ones of our most intimate moments, faces of our children and their friends, to social media platforms with little or no thought as to where it will remain, who will be able to access it, who owns it, and which AI facilitator will combine it with something else to make it... apparently... something new. We do not really know who controls these networks and strangely we no longer seem to care. Our imaginations, our dreams and desires have been digitalised, commodified, and sold on over and over again. Scared yet? Good as that was precisely my intention.

The myth that our digital culture and our media are social is simply that – a myth. It is neither social nor cultural – and I think I can demonstrate quickly and simply that this is the case. If you place a kilo of apples on the table of your neighbour, do the apples become the property of your neighbour? No, obviously they do not. The table remains theirs, but the apples remain yours to give or keep or share however you wish. The problem with our ubiquitous contemporary digital media platforms is that we use them as if (at best) they belong to us or (at worse) who they belong to does not matter. And this is new. We think these cultural platforms in which we embed ourselves, our lives and families and communities belong to us. They don't.

Before the 19th century, the greatest commissioner and consumer of culture and the arts was not social media, but the Church. The Christian Church was commissioning art and paintings and architecture from the moment the disciples spread across the world to preach the word of God. Christianity, Islam, Judaism or Hinduism, and earlier spiritual traditions, it doesn't really matter which religion, have all actively engaged architects, designers, musicians, composers, painters, poets, translators, printers, and artefact designers. The greatest contractor of culture and the arts for at least 6000 years has been the religious authorities. Without them, there would be no temples of architectural majesty, no Bach and El Greco. Very much more recently, as the concept of nationhood and nation-state grew throughout 19th century Europe and the power of the Catholic and Protestant churches started to decline in comparison, it was the state which started to demonstrate and celebrate its power and ambition through the commissioning of...poets, architects, musicians, painters, composers and choreographers.

The painting, *The Burial of the Count Orgaz* (1586), by El Greco, today housed in Toledo, is clearly a religious painting. But it is extremely important in the history of painting not simply for its beauty and technical achievements. Look closely and you will see that the painting is as much about pathos and religiosity as it is with power and money. It marks a turning point in social history as merchants become commissioners of art. If one coldly assesses the distribution of symbolic elements in this fine painting one is drawn to the fact that fifty percent of the painting focuses on the commissioners of the work in the lower half of the painting. They are, undoubtedly, the ones who paid for the painting and even the contemporary viewer can see and feel the philosophical and political tension which exist within it. Having looked at

this painting for more than thirty years I cannot help but feel unconvinced by the idea that its principal concern is religious. It is about the marking of the death of a very rich and powerful man who many others, those who paid for the work standing behind him, wish to be associated with forevermore. It is also about the death of religious power to some extent as the mercantile class assumes a power before only afforded to the church itself – the power to commission art.



Unknown photographer, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1170096>

Through the 19th century and into the second half of the 20th Century Europeans can observe their nation-states becoming the main benefactors of culture and the production of art. The works of Shostakovich would have been impossible without the Soviet Union sponsoring his efforts. And in the post-World War Two West, we also witnessed a huge increase in the purchasing and subsidising of artefacts and architecture paid for with nation-state, with public tax money. Theatres, museums and galleries, and cultural institutions of many forms all flourished as public institutions both in the capitalist and socialist blocs. Art and culture were encouraged to play a role in nation-building, memory-keeping, boundary delineation and loyalty gestures.

The business world comes to this story quite late. The US is the perfect example, e.g. Guggenheim, Rockefeller Foundations. What do they commission and for what purposes? They own huge collectors of art, and rarely or never commission painters, but they

have built museums to hold their collections. While the US has not been great at commissioning symphonies, the development of high-rise skyscrapers is the product of corporations commissioning architects just as the Church did in earlier centuries.

The early church wanted to define its political power and attempt to communicate its influence as a source for good. Its power base and founding concepts were intellectual - the presence of God in your life makes your life more bearable. Something remarkably similar happened in the 19th century with the development of the nation-state as it too wanted to define its role and place in the imagination of citizens as something benevolent and reassuring.

But now let's return to the 21st century, where global corporations play such a fundamental role in all our lives – owning powerful mechanisms which 'suck-up' our stories, the photos of our existences and turn them into commodities often sold on to anonymous buyers. Yes, artists too are involved in these processes. Where would Meta, Apple, Google, and Netflix be without artists? Indeed, they are creative organisations but are they creating art for art's sake? Has any organisation ever commissioned art for art's sake?

At the beginning of this article, I began with a provocation. You and I, almost every one of us, give away the creative artefacts we generate during our lives; photos and posts (called stories) to anonymous digital corporations in return for a dopamine hit lasting a microsecond. This gets monetarised and sold on – making these corporations more powerful than any state or any church every dreamed was possible. Where culture was once commissioned and then presented to us, we now produce the artefacts ourselves and give them to others to use however they wish. We used to be the consumer. But we are actually the product. Dystopic? Quite possibly. Yet alternatives exist, different models of thinking about culture and the tools habitually associated with it – the stories, the music and images, the dance and literature, the poems and rituals we create to mark the passage of our lives and rebirth of our desires and aspirations.

Elefsina is often described as a suburb of Athens. But this is not strictly true. The 22 kilometres which separate the site of the Pantheon in central Athens to the coastal industrial port of Elefsina could be a world apart. Fields and hills, and a route of an ancient pilgrimage, separate the two places. Even though Athens has a limitless, sprawling periphery with endless industrial areas, heavy traffic, countless car sales rooms, warehouses, and coffee wholesalers along the road, by the time you reach Elefsina you have also seen the sea and encountered the regions rocky landscapes.

Taking the coast road north out of Elefsina one immediately passes through the middle of a giant oil refinery, with high-security fences and multiple cameras presumably monitoring every car and every movement. A few kilometres further along this startling coastline, with its arid fauna and cyan blue water, a gigantic sea-cruise liner, the Mediterranean Sky, lies on its side, half submerged in a few metres of water having been towed there, abandoned and then grounded. In 2003 the ship took on water and now lies, as if a beached whale, only a couple of dozen metres away from the rocky shore silently waiting for the future to decide its destiny.

Eleusis, to use its ancient name, was the site for the Eleusinian Mysteries initiations held every year for the cult of Demeter and Persephone - the most famous of the secret religious rites of ancient Greece. The Mysteries are represented by the myth of the abduction of Persephone from her mother Demeter by the king of the underworld Hades. Not coincidentally, the myth is described as a cycle with three phases: the descent (loss), the search, and the ascent, with the

main theme being the ascent of Persephone and the reunion with her mother. Re-birth and transition are the underlying themes of this myth.

Elefsina is now a living, breathing metaphor of the twentieth century's apocalyptic relationship with the environment. The massive oil refinery is not the only symbol of our global inertia to move away from what is killing us all. Cement factories, oil factories, paint and chemical plants were all built here. As a result, many humanistic and creative things also happened of course.

The city generated jobs, economic growth, and a rich community life for many immigrant newcomers. But that period of development is over now, and the city is beginning the long journey of redefining its torrid relationship with the sea, air, and soil.

A plan to remove the multiple sea wrecks around the bay is being progressed, industrial sites are being transformed into cultural and community centres. The sea is increasingly considered to have its own dignity, its own oxygen, be its own complex ecological system of which we humans are simply part rather than masters. For if the sea breathes, we breathe. A transition has begun.

In 2023 Elefsina, Greece, became the European Capital of Culture under the title *Mysteries of Transition*. As a result, a conversation about past, present and future became an opportunity to be local, national, and European. And it is the story which counts here. The story of Elefsina become story of the role of culture in transformation for us all.

Let us imagine, for a moment, that we draw a graph of artists' and cultural practitioners' engagement in the politics of the environment throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Such a graph would, at first, resemble a chart of greenhouse emissions with a few dramatic upsurges. For example, the industrial and chemical impact of the First World War also led to a significant increase in the number of artistic projects, poetry, film, and literature, which addressed this catastrophe. But then something strange occurs. The chart of greenhouse emissions radically diverges from the chart of associated artistic and cultural output. Despite artistic engagement in so many political and progressive causes in the 20th century, cultural and artistic work seems to remain dislocated, disinterested even, in the catastrophe on our very doorstep.

In the last decade, this divergence has begun to decline. Let me give one example from my own life. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I worked closely with Istria's Slovenian coastline on a bid to become European Capital of Culture in 2025. When examining and responding to the climate emergency was identified as the principal line in our work many of the most exciting artists in Slovenia and across the whole of Europe willingly and energetically contributed astonishing projects about the environment to our portfolio of ideas. And this is not an isolated case. Dozens of European Capital of Culture candidates and winners have all identified human relationships to the environment as being central to their initiative.

In his book, *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh makes the case that there is no more vital task for artists and writers than to create a space for apocalyptic thinking as a way of delaying, if not averting, the climate horrors we must now confront. European Capitals of Culture, and other cultural initiatives of course, have the responsibility of looking for ways in which trust can be built with audiences, spectators, participants, artists, and indeed all citizens, for these conversations and imaginative endeavours to take place.

Culture does not shape the climate, but it undoubtedly shapes the climate debate. While scientists explore the mechanics and the data of climate change it is social scientists who show why people support or reject their conclusions. Artists have a role here as we build transformative stories which can help humanise the implications of the data. As humans, we all tend to develop world views consistent with the values held by others within the groups with which we self-identify.

Artists and educators are no exception as since the beginning of time we have created or written the stories and myths which reinforce or question our notions of identity and by implication our worldviews. Are we helping understand what is at stake? Are we placing our weight behind the need for democratic transformation at every level of our relationship with the environment? Or are we part of some disguising mechanism, working for those with little or no interest in ensuring our cultural expressions remain at the service of making our lives and our planet more liveable? Our stories are not neutral innocents and nor are those who commission or consume them.

I have suggested that the early Church wanted to define itself as a political power and communicate its influence as a source for good. It needed artists and cultural practitioners to help this happen. The nation-state wanted to define its role and place in the imagination of its citizens as something powerful, benevolent and reassuring – and it too looked to artists for help. In recent decades our culture and artefacts have been sucked up by a giant digital corporate mechanism which fails, on most occasions, to inform us that it is we who are designed to be its product. Yet cultural practices which are democratic in intent, transformative in aim and available to us all, are in reach of many of us when we care to look. Whether it's a European Capital of Culture in Greece or the spectacularly successful Los Glayus, based in Oviedo, cultural practices which celebrate our common humanity and aspirations to cherish our shared past, present and future continue to grow, gain significance and increasingly needed by us all.