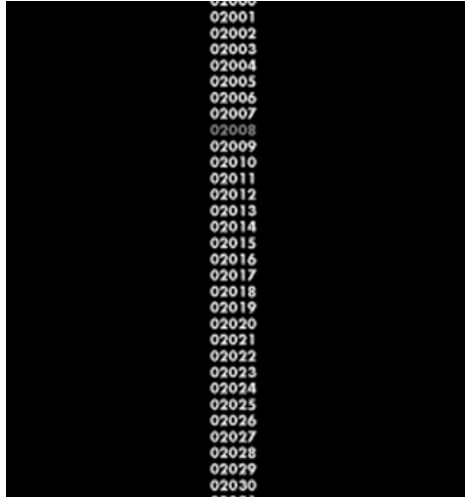


THE LONG NOW

MICHAEL CRONIN

Our society lives on a short fuse. The current economic turmoil and the cuts in arts funding demonstrate the lack of a long-term perspective. Michael Cronin asks how our society can escape the tyranny of the moment.

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It will stand sixty feet tall. It is to be hidden in a cave in the Great Basin National Park in Nevada, a day's walk from anywhere. It is a gigantic mechanical computer that will mark the passage of the hours, the days, the years, the centuries and the millennia. It is set to run for ten thousand years and it will tick once a year, bong once a century and a cuckoo will come out once a millennium.

The idea behind the Clock of the Long Now is to get humanity to think about the long term. By trying to figure out how to build and maintain a clock that will be around for a period that is equivalent in the future to the period covering the emergence of all the major civilisations in the past, the challenge is to move away from cripplingly short attention spans and plan for a viable future. It is the work of the Long Now Foundation, one of whose founding members is the musician and producer Brian Eno.

In the short term, of course, there is nothing more difficult than planning for the long term. The acceleration of technological change, the short-horizon perspective of the market-driven economy, the next-election perspective of our representative democracy and the frantic multi-tasking that has become the daily lot of so many living and working mean that a potentially fatal short-sightedness becomes the norm. What is even more alarming is that when economic fortunes decline, it is the arts and arts funding which become the all too easy targets for spending cuts. This further compounds the tendency to live on a short fuse, as music, painting, sculpture, poetry, which both reside in and transcend the present, thus providing society with a crucial long-term perspective on what it is to be human in a particular time and a particular place, are downgraded and marginalised.

It is often said that what a people strive for is the greatest happiness of the greatest number, but it is worth bearing in mind that the greatest number have not yet been born. Therefore, when we speak about the greatest good, what we really mean is the longest good. There is not much we can do to improve the quality of life of those who are already dead on this island, but we can do immeasurable good to improve the quality of lives of those who will be born or come to live on this island. In order to give force to this notion of the longest good, we need to make the taking of long-term responsibility the most important political and cultural issue of our time.

The Stern Report and the reports from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have clearly spelt out the consequences of global warming and unchecked carbon emissions. The repeated conclusion is that humanity must begin to act now if it is to avoid catastrophic consequences in the long term. So the way we farm, the types of crops we produce, the way we plan our cities and organise our transport systems, the kinds of goods and services we produce and how we produce them must change in the short term if there is to be a viable long-term future for humans and many other species on the planet.

But part of the difficulty with much of the debate around these topics is that it has excluded cultural practice. That is to say, that what music or art or literature provide is a form of secular transcendence, shaped by but never wholly a prisoner to their

moment of production. If this was not the case then we could never listen to a Mozart opera or read Proust or look at Dürer, forever excluded by the chronological misfortune of been born in the wrong century, the death of the author a kind of end stop to the possibility of reception. Cultural practice is inherently bound up with the long term. Societies need to value artistic practice not because it provides decorative detail for narratives of ephemeral economic success, but because it is vital to situating experience and self-understanding in the long now of aesthetic achievement. In the era of the instant opinion poll, however, the relentless style barometers of 'What's Hot' and 'What's Cold', and the instantaneous e-mail message, how are we as citizens and producers and receivers of culture to escape the tyranny of the moment?

Look to the Mountain

In the language of the Tewa Indians of the American Southwest there is an expression, 'pin peyeh obe', which translates as 'look to the mountain'. When the Tewa elders use the phrase they mean that if we look at things as if from the top of a mountain we get a broader view, we see what lies ahead. We also, however, if we turn in another direction, see what lies behind. In other words, the long view is not only forwards but backwards. Just as our present was once someone's distant future, if we want to make sense of what might or ought to happen in the future we need to understand how we got here from our distant past. As our sense of time extends in both directions, being responsible for what might happen to future generations involves being equally responsible for learning appropriately from past generations. In this context, the notion that in times of economic recession the arts should be dispensable luxuries is a form of short-termism which further compounds an inability to think, function and create in the long term.

As the economic historian David Landes pointed out in *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (1998), 'if we learn anything from the history of economic development, it is that culture makes all the difference' (p. 516). In the name of economic pragmatism, however, the very thing, culture, which makes the most significant contribution to the long-term social sustainability and economic well-being of a society is systematically eroded, stockbroker soundbite trumping historical reason.

Higher-level research is similarly important. For example, in comparative European terms, Ireland has been enormously fortunate at a very early period to have an extremely wide and varied body of writing in its vernacular language on a multitude of subjects from religion to jurisprudence. The study, analysis and transmission of that language and the associated culture and society makes a powerful contribution to how the development of Irish writing, culture and society over an extended period of time can be understood.

To think that far back is to develop the reflex of the long view. It is not the subsidised indulgence of the scholar, but a core survival value of any culture which wants to exist into the future. Similarly, an engagement with any area of music involves a dialogue with the past of the musical form and, as debate in the pages of this magazine has already demonstrated, the national contexts for music production are crucial to understanding the choices made by practitioners and their audiences, choices we live with to the present day in terms of, for example, the relationship between musical genres and social class.

The long-term engagement implicit not only in the development and understanding of an arts practice has consequences that go beyond the needs and sensibilities of practitioners and audiences. What those consequences might be are suggested in a work by two financial services specialists, Finbarr Bradley and James J. Kennelly, *Capitalising on Culture, Competing on Difference* (2008). They argue:

A society is more than an economy. The contemporary obsession with achieving maximum GNP growth as the overriding policy target is likely to be counterproductive. A learning society is one where shared meaning, a sustainable culture, a common sense of purpose, a service ethic, and social relationships all intertwine. The health of a society depends on how (or if) people feel about each other, care about the world, and believe in some kind of common purpose. (p. 302)

None of this is likely to be achieved with, for example, an arts education that occupies a paltry position in the educational system at primary and post-primary level, a state broadcasting service which is almost wholly hostage to ratings wars, and arts practitioners who must make do in expensive societies with depressingly inadequate levels of income. Without seeking therapeutic alibis for the arts (the arts as a sticking plaster for social ills), it is nonetheless evident that 'meaning', 'learning', 'culture' can only be sustained over time if there are practices which partake of and are intrinsically committed to the long-term. As arts practices are unavoidably implicated in longer timescales, it is to their enhancement not their denigration that a society should be looking if we are to move beyond the unsustainable attention deficit disorder of financial traders and political fixers.

Across a different space and time

Part of the current difficulty, and a serious obstacle to the development of long-term thinking, is a fundamental failure to distinguish between *communication* and *transmission* in societies. Communication we can conceive of as sending a message from one place to another in the same space and time. The television image

broadcast from Baghdad or Beirut arrives almost instantaneously on my television set. Transmission, on the other hand, is the sending of a message across a different space and time. When you sit down to read Thomas Kinsella's translation of the *Táin*, the text is coming to you from a different time and a different country. In the arena of traditional music, arts councils acknowledges that 'transmission' is an important dimension to the development and promotion of the practice.

In Ireland, for many decades, it did seem as if the country was poor on communication but strong on transmission as it laboured to commemorate the Patriot Dead and the Faith of Our Fathers. In the *Wirtschaftswunder* of the 1990s there was the understandable communicative delirium as the country topped the tables for global connectedness and favoured the short-term gains of global instantaneity over the long-term responsibility of local transmission. The enthusiasm for communicative immediacy must explain in part the puzzling failure of those generations who had lived through the boom and bust cycle of the 1960s to 1980s to pass this experience and knowledge on to today's young people. The reticence about transmission means that in the current recessionary spiral, the society seems utterly bereft of the emotional and intellectual resilience that comes from the long view. Telling it as it was is infinitely preferable to making up it up as we go along.

For transmission to operate across space and time, for an idea or an image or a text or a piece of music to travel through time, you need a medium of transmission (parchment, paper, magnetic disk) and a vector of transmission (a religious grouping, a political party, an educational institution, a symphony orchestra). So if a society is to look not only at the short-term communicative dimension to its activities, but also at the long-term transmissive dimension, then it must invest in and prioritise the resources and institutions that ensure that our knowledge base from the past and the present is carried into the future. This is why institutions invested with the mission of transmission cannot be wholly subjected to market-driven norms of accountability with their severely reduced time-frames. Long-term thinking needs long-term planning and long-term support.

At the turn of the last century, many social commentators predicted that motor cars would mean an end to all forms of physical activity. As motor car usage became more widespread, evolutionary logic dictated that our lower limbs for the purposes of mobility would become useless and these unnecessary appendages would wither in time. What has happened instead is that our towns, cities and countryside are filled with panting, red-faced humans determined to push their legs to their physical limits. The lesson to take from this is less that moral punditry makes for bad science than that it is a fundamental mistake to project irreversible technical time onto human and social time. We do not go in a straight line into the future, never looking back. On the contrary, almost all the truly radical moments in human history and culture which dramatically altered the course of the future have involved a looping back to the past, whether it is the French revolutionaries raiding the arsenal of Greek and Roman thought or Picasso the Cubist working through the influences of prehistoric Iberian sculpture and early African masks or Seán Ó Riada fusing Mahler and Irish traditional music. The longer and wider the view of the artistic, literary and musical past, the more we have at our disposal going into the future.

When we speak of the long term it is necessary to distinguish between long-term planning and long-term responsibility. Knowing what the future will be like is an uncertain business, as any viewing of a vintage science-fiction film about what life would be like in the year 2000 comically shows. People fly around in individual pods, but there are no computers. The tendency is generally as futurist Paul Saffo says to 'over-expect dramatic developments in the short term and to under-expect them in the longer term.' Taking the long view, considering our policy choices and political decisions in terms of their long-term consequences, does not mean trying to control the future, but giving the future a set of viable possibilities from which to choose. The lesson of transmission is not to determine the destiny of our descendants, but to give them a chance to determine a destiny of their own. And to do this takes time. Global income inequality, hunger, dwindling freshwater resources, loss of cultural and biological diversity, these are problems that are impossible to solve in two years, but give them fifty and they immediately appear more solvable.

Our problem is that current models of governance and economic activity are overwhelmingly skewed towards short-term benefits and gains so we find ourselves constantly unable to adequately address the major economic and political issues of our time. We also, as a consequence, devalue arts practices in our schools, on our media and in our public sphere. Instead of the culture of *Me, right now!* we ought to be moving to a culture of *All of us, all of the time*. This means that planning practices would be about preserving options for the future, our culture would honour and reward long-term, responsible behaviour and our arts policies would favour ambitious, sustainable projects over the ephemeral glitz of vox pop.

The one thing we do know about the future is that we are in it together. Thinking long-term means engaging the collective good of the species over the self-interest of individual members. Thinking long-term also involves the kind of joined-up thinking that sees a structural link between what might seem like the peripheral issue of arts funding and the headline topic of the survival of the planet. The greatest challenge for society in the years ahead is how we answer the question put by one of the architects of the Clock of the Long Now, Stewart Brand, 'How do we make long-term thinking automatic and common instead of difficult and rare?' One answer is to look to, not

away from, the arts.

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