

BOOK REVIEW

The Social Impact of the Arts: An Intellectual History, by Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 248 pages, ISBN 978-0-230-57255-3 (hardcover), \$65.00, ISBN 978-0-230-27351-1 (paperback), \$29.00

Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett's new book *The Social Impact of the Arts: An Intellectual History* (2008) crystallizes their previous (and ongoing) work and publications complicating and contributing to arguments about the value of the arts. Belfiore's research and publications have served as a significant backdrop to the release of this coauthored book. Bennett has made significant contributions to the field of cultural policy, including his book *Cultural Pessimism: Narratives of Decline in the Postmodern World* (2001). Their intensive research contributing to the book's creation was based on a three-year study funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Arts Council England. In *The Social Impact of the Arts*, the authors establish a historical framework for contemporary dialogue about the value of the arts through thematic development of past arguments on the topic. Cultural policy scholars and students as well as practitioners of the arts might find that the book's historical analysis and contemporary critique provides a useful if not uncomfortable shift from previous debates about the value of the arts.

Most unsettling to some might be the authors' challenges that current arts research too readily promotes advocacy efforts or responds to funding concerns, that contemporary arguments about the value of the arts have become simplified, and that instrumental versus intrinsic analyses of the arts have been present in historical discourse but recently rely too heavily on instrumental values. Unfortunately, their critique becomes inundated with lengthy descriptions and long quotes from the literature, which (while providing strong evidence of the authors' broad research process) simultaneously overwhelms the foundation of the book. That said, the basis of the book and focus on an intellectual history provides a significant contribution to cultural policy dialogue about the value of the arts and social impact research.

The authors approach their research by reviewing 250 years of literature and language analyzing social assessments of the arts in order to identify common themes. In their research, they attempt a broad analysis of arguments made for

the potential of the arts to contribute to positive and negative social impacts. Emphasizing, primarily, literary, poetic, and performing arts, Belfiore and Bennett have identified eight categories of claims throughout history supporting theses that the arts have social impacts. The themes are (1) Corruption and Distraction, (2) Catharsis, (3) Personal Well-Being, (4) Education and Self-Development, (5) Moral Improvement and Civilisation, (6) Political Instrument, (7) Social Stratification and Identity Construction, and (8) Autonomy of the Arts and Rejection of Instrumentality. Each of these eight areas is contained within one of nine book chapters.

The book's introduction establishes problems with contemporary research claiming social impacts of the arts. First, the authors argue, is the problem of the use of research for advocacy, as they claim many researchers seek evidence of social impact as opposed to "questioning whether or not the arts actually do have the economic and social impacts claimed for them" (7). Second, such studies "do not actually engage with the real purpose of the arts," focusing on an instrumental value as opposed to an intrinsic value. Instead, the authors rely on Purnell's message that the arts "would still matter" (7) even if they didn't support social causes. Their criticism of advocacy research and misaligned arts purposes underscores an analysis that seeks to investigate positive and negative social impacts of limited arts activities. They admit, "the arts occupy a particularly fragile position in public policy, on account of the fact that the claims made for them, especially those relating to transformative power, are extremely hard to substantiate," stemming from the "prominence of evidence-based policy making" (5). Analysis of these problems underscores their approach toward placing the argument of social impact within a historical construct as an attempt to "reconnect contemporary policy debates with a complex intellectual history, which it is argued that these debates have become detached" (vii). The problems they have identified in the introduction form the basis for their research to analyze historical arguments about the value of the arts.

Chapter 1, entitled "Towards a New Approach to Researching the Social Impacts of the Arts," troubles definitions of terms, admits limitations, discusses Eurocentrism, and provides a framework for how they approached their analysis of claims made in the past by identifying categories of *functions*. Belfiore and Bennett describe the latter as an analysis of "what the arts 'do' to individuals, how they can transform them (for better or for worse), and the role they ought to have in society and in relation to the state" (35). Admitting an impossible task of defining the terms "art" and "culture," the authors instead provide an overview of discourse and examples troubling ways in which and by whom art has been defined. Resting on a postmodern approach, the authors seem to follow Graf's call for a "plurality of descriptions" (23), admitting the many histories and multiple descriptions offer a necessary complexity to understanding arts and culture. Their

discussion on Eurocentricism similarly offers an attempt to avoid a narrowly Liberal Humanist understanding of the arts “by questioning the assumption that what Europe did was always and necessarily a positive achievement” (31). However, they fall short of providing a plurality of descriptions or covering the complexity of potential impacts and possible arts forms in their own coverage, limiting their analysis to Eurocentric/Western philosophies, theories, and literatures. The book title’s unmet claim is the greatest disappointment of the book, despite the reality that narrowing their chosen literature was necessary to reaching a finishing point.

Belfiore and Bennett end the book by offering their hopes for its outcomes, including a complication of the “art is good for you” argument in exchange for a more nuanced discussion on the social impact of the arts, as well as the potential for the book to affect arts policies by overcoming measurement and evidence of impact. In essence, the book’s contribution to current scholarship rests in identifying and beginning to address a significant gap in contemporary arguments for arts impact due to a disconnect from past arguments. Their in-depth research and classification of multiple arguments made for positive and negative social impacts certainly challenge Eurocentric views that only good has come from European culture. However, they fall short of realizing a cross-cultural analysis of this very challenge by relying on Western philosophies and scholarship. Unfortunately, the book contributes to narrow views of the arts that the authors intended to disrupt. Perhaps it is the book’s title that suggests much more than what the book actually delivers. *The Social Impact of the Arts*, by its title, implies a singular vision of impact and coverage of multiple arts forms. However, the arts analyzed were, also, limited to literary and performing arts. However, visual arts and music are mostly missing from this equation. A title change that reflects the limitations of the contents, as opposed to suggesting much more is covered than truly is, might alleviate such problems.

The notion of an impact *of* the arts, too, suggests a one-way street of impact—that of the arts *on* society. I see the arts interwoven into society in a much more complex way, as society, too, impacts the arts. Good or bad, the arts are a part of most, if not all, societies. This, perhaps, supports Belfiore and Bennett’s argument for revisiting an intrinsic view of the arts. Perhaps the challenge, then, is to consider a third realm or view of arts interactions with society as both intrinsic and instrumental, if not necessary to human health, emotional exploration, and survival through community and identity building, intellectual considerations, creativity and exploration, and social commentary. Perhaps the arts are what make us uniquely human. The discourse in art education, for example, is on the potential role of education in preparing citizens to critically engage in visual culture and arts, whether those arts and images are positive, negative, or somewhere in between. Dichotomies such as instrumental vs. intrinsic and negative vs. positive

limit the potential of such discourse to examine the complexity of arts interactions with society. Thanks to Belfiore and Bennett's research, such arguments have already been troubled by bringing to light such a long history of these debates. *The Social Impact of the Arts* has redirected the dialogue, challenged current debates, and opened the door for a more fruitful discourse about the value of arts in society.

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REFERENCE

- Bennett, O. 2001. *Cultural pessimism: Narratives of decline in the postmodern world*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press.

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