

What we owe the cultural industry

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When coronavirus reached Germany in early 2020, cultural venues were the first to close. Later, when it became possible to ease restrictions on businesses, politicians left theatres shut. The consequences were severe; the creative industry plans events months and years ahead, and they can't simply be postponed to some arbitrary future date. Months of rehearsals came to nothing, venues went bankrupt.

CULTURE ISN'T A MASS ENTERTAINMENT SERVICE, BUT A SOCIAL CORRECTIVE

While other industries are still talking about making it mandatory to work from home, the people who've been unable to work for a whole year have been forgotten. Whenever the federal government met, hopes were raised of an end to empty stages. Only for cultural businesses to once again find themselves at the top of the list of institutions that would remain closed.

Society has lost out on more than just entertainment as a result. From photography to opera, culture isn't a mass entertainment service, but a social corrective. It's part of democratic debate, and that was true long before Amanda Gorman read her poem 'The Hill We Climb' at Joe Biden's presidential inauguration.

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Art allows us to process conflicts, and brings flaws and deficiencies to light. It's no accident that drama is a core part of the curriculum at prestigious schools; culture shapes personality, reflects current affairs and brings people through crises – and pandemics.

Going to big theatres, opera houses or classical concerts doesn't necessarily pose a health risk if the

organisers follow hygiene rules such as getting audience members to wear masks, face in one direction and refrain from speaking and moving about too much. A study by the Fraunhofer Heinrich Hertz Institute and the German Environment Agency found that there is almost no risk of infection in a half-full concert hall. Nonetheless, theatres have stayed shut.

IT'S DIFFICULT TO PUT ON STAGE SHOWS REMOTELY

During the pandemic, workers in the cultural industry have lost their source of income, since it's difficult to put on stage shows remotely. But that's not all they've lost. Artistic work depends crucially on interaction with an audience. Even in normal times, only those who are truly passionate about their work as a comedian, singer or director can cope with the financial uncertainty and tough working conditions in the industry.

Keeping cultural venues shut deprives artists not only of their livelihoods, but a fundamental aspect of their lives. Moreover, the creative industry is mostly made up of very small organisations, with 20% of workers being freelancers. Government support packages aren't tailored to this reality and rarely get to the people who are suffering the most.

A BUREAUCRATIC SYSTEM WILL STRUGGLE TO DEAL WITH THIS PROFESSIONAL FIELD

Of course, while infection rates are rising, opening theatres isn't a solution. But artists have been creative despite the crisis. Operas were performed in car parks during the summer, and concerts were held in ice hockey stadiums with the audience sitting in socially distanced beach chairs. There have not been any reports of major infection clusters at cultural venues.

The essence of art is to tread new paths. To create something that wasn't there before and open up new perspectives – perspectives which are urgently needed in a pandemic expected to last years. But

a bureaucratic system will struggle to deal with an industry that's constantly changing. In a pandemic, procedures and workflows should ideally be predictable and standardised so that any problems can be quickly solved. But if you're creating entirely new things, it's harder to devise suitable measures to help curb the pandemic.

A CONCERT DOESN'T SOLVE PROBLEMS, BUT IT CAN HELP TO DEAL WITH THEM

As people get increasingly tired and no one knows how much longer the pandemic will last, the need for culture grows. The need for the new perspectives that only music, poetry, dance and literature can offer. A concert doesn't solve problems, but it can articulate the things that are troubling the audience members and help them to deal with them. No livestream or recording can replace the feeling of experiencing something alongside other people and having the sense of community that the isolation of recent months has made impossible. Audiences need artists just as much as artists need audiences.

CULTURE NEEDS TO GET GOING AGAIN IN ORDER TO SURVIVE THE PANDEMIC

A study by the international accounting and consultancy firm Ernst & Young found that culture was a key economic factor in the European Union before the pandemic. At 4.4 percent, the cultural sector contributed more to GDP than the telecoms or pharma industry. In Germany alone, some 1.8 million people work in the cultural and creative industries. The pandemic isn't just a problem for a handful of workers, but one that threatens the existence of millions of people.

If culture is to survive the pandemic, then it urgently needs to get going again.



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