

Editor's Introduction

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In June 2020, Prof Daniel Carey of NUI Galway called for significant investment in the humanities and the social sciences in order to address the effects of the pandemic, arguing that the humanities had the potential to make a significant intervention into how a society would deal with the impact of lockdown. Historical and literary accounts of previous crises could assist us in mapping out the future course of our social responses, he explained, while understanding the behaviours and motivations that drive people to act in particular ways is cited by all public health experts as crucial to defeating the disease (quoted in Conrad et al 2020). As Kathryn Conrad et al note, the methodologies and expertise associated with Humanities have played a vital role in harnessing public support for lockdown measures: “Pathogens and people together make a pandemic, and we cannot eradicate the pathogen without understanding, respecting and working with people. Doing so takes the co-ordinated efforts of historians, anthropologists, artists, sociolinguists and writers, all of whom are experts in narrative and representation – in short, scholars and practitioners of the humanities” (Conrad et al 2020). The successful completion of the academic year is testament to the extent to which staff and students in the Department of Humanities rose to the challenge of engaging with teaching and learning in an entirely online setting. The student dissertations included in this volume reflect the depth and variety of research conducted by final year students in the most difficult of circumstances.

The volume also includes a selection of papers delivered at the Departmental Symposium on “Society and the Arts in the Pandemic”. A key theme in this year’s symposium was the intersections between the arts and society during periods of pandemic, both historically and in the current context. What role, in other words, have the arts played? We all turned to the arts over the past year as a means of escapism, and writers and artists across time have documented and critiqued political responses, and consoled audiences during these periods of crisis. On the other hand, economic and political expedients can leave artists adrift during periods of pandemic, with cultural venues closed and access to their audiences limited. This is in spite of the fact that arts and art therapies can play a significant role in addressing some of the negative consequences of social isolation and anxiety. The papers reflect on a range of interventions undertaken to circumvent the isolation and disconnection caused by social distancing measures, which closed educational institutions, arts venues and support networks.

Works Cited:

Conrad, Kathryn, Cólín Parsons and Julie McCormick Weng. 2020. “Science and the Humanities in the Time of Pandemic: better together”. In *The Irish Times* (1st June).