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## And now for the good news

The West End's struggling, the art market's faltering ... but might the slump be a boon for culture? John Harris reports

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Damien Hirst's *The Blood of Christ* sold for far less than expected at auction. Photograph: Sotheby's

Last week, the director Richard Eyre sent an email to a friend. With governments busy nationalising banks, and the consumerist boom giving way to a new sense of dread, he decided that now was the moment to cast the net for material that captured the spirit of the times. Was anyone already on the case, he wondered. "It's only - what? - 20 years since the death of communism and socialism was announced," he says, "and now the age of the self-regulating free market turns out to have only lasted 20 years. Right now, I think that's *The Great Subject*."

Eyre has yet to discern the kind of clear plotlines that might make for compelling drama. "String up the bankers' would be pathetic, but kind of understandable, because of all that very visceral rage and despair," he says. "But I think what we're looking at is similar to the response to global warming: the sense that people feel terribly impotent. I suppose you're looking for someone who expresses that, and it's difficult to dramatise despair, confusion and uncertainty."

"But I'm optimistic," Eyre maintains. "Cometh the hour, cometh the genius."

Across the arts, consensus has yet to emerge about what the slump may bring. There is anxiety about ticket sales, sponsorship and subsidy - but also, in some places, optimism about a rising public need to seek solace in a music download or a trip to the cinema.

Lean times, many observers point out, tend to lead to a surge in creativity. The Roaring Twenties have their fans, but plenty of people prefer the stuff that came in the wake of

the Wall Street crash: the politicised plays of Clifford Odets, John Steinbeck's novels, the songs written by Woody Guthrie, even Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. The New York that still partly grips our imagination is not the gentrified, upmarket city of the early 21st century, but the graffiti-strewn, crime-ridden place of the 70s and early 80s, which catalysed the art of Julian Schnabel and Jean-Michel Basquiat, the first stirrings of hip-hop, and the music of Blondie and the Ramones. Similarly, thousands of people still get misty-eyed about the explosion of British creativity prompted by the messy end of the postwar consensus and the battles of the 1980s: drama written by Alan Bleasdale, Howard Brenton and David Edgar, the confrontational sculpture of Tony Cragg, or the sparse, cutting songs written and sung by the young Billy Bragg.

Like all of those names, Bragg is still very much with us, cited as an influence on a new crop of rock groups - the Enemy, Hard-Fi, Arctic Monkeys - whose social-realist songs served early notice of the insecurity that preceded the financial plunge. Bragg discovered the Enemy, he tells me, when he was handed a promotional flyer linking their music to the closure of the Peugeot factory in their native Coventry. It is voices like theirs, he believes, that will most convincingly soundtrack a recession.

"What happens in times like this is that songwriters go from staring at their belly-buttons to staring at the TV," he says. "When the economy is relatively stable, there's plenty of room for 'poor pitiful me'. But when times are hard, it becomes 'poor pitiful us'. People are going to have to start articulating these things, because what's happening is going to affect everybody. It's going to be very, very interesting."

If some of music's loudest voices were almost prophetic about the downturn (have a listen, for example, to Hard-Fi's 2006 hit *Cash Machine*, complete with its refrain, "There's a hole in my pocket"), the fortunes of the record industry have also been ahead of the curve. It has been in the midst of lay-offs and budget cuts for at least five years.

Sounding a note of optimism, Paul Williams, the editor of trade magazine *Music Week*, points to credible recent sales for the likes of Oasis and Kings of Leon, and a pre-Christmas schedule that includes records by such big sellers as Beyoncé and Snow Patrol. But he also admits to the key difference between recessions past and present. "If you look at downturns in the past, there doesn't seem to be any great evidence of declines in music sales," he says. "But what's different this time is file-sharing and what it entails. It's illegal, of course, but there's now the possibility of getting hold of free music. From that perspective, the industry is entering into the unknown."

Should the music industry nosedive, it may not be a calamity for creativity. "What you need in difficult times is a hard edge, and strong integrity," says Bragg. "If you have those things, I think you'll find an audience, particularly because of the internet. More

and more will recognise the viability of doing it themselves."

In the art market, there are no signs of panic just yet. Some insiders insist that the arrival of blue-chip collectors from eastern Europe, India and China will cushion the top end against recession, citing as evidence the recent Damien Hirst auction at Sotheby's, and steady trading at last week's Frieze art fair. Then again, another Sotheby's auction last week, including works by Hirst and Andy Warhol, saw sales falling well short of predictions: the total take was £22m, against estimates of as much as £43m. On Sunday at Christie's, Lucian Freud's portrait of his friend Francis Bacon fetched just £5.4m, near the low end of the £5m-£7m guide price.

There is also a lot of anxiety about "the death of the middle", where artworks trade for between £5,000 and £50,000. The over-arching prediction seems to be something serious, but not drastic: a pronounced slowdown rather than a crash.

What will definitely suffer, it seems, is the kind of art that sits well outside the market, and depends on sponsorship and subsidy: the series of giant installations in Tate Modern backed by Unilever, for example, or Antony Gormley's Angel of the North.

"The idea of creating very expensive, ambitious installations and grandiose public projects and sculptures - by definition, during a recession that has to decrease," says Tim Marlow, director of exhibitions at London's White Cube gallery. "Artists will have to start thinking, 'Can we actually justify doing something that exists, will then be destroyed, can't possibly be sold, and gets lots of public money?'"

Marlow adds that anyone looking to art for commentary on the economic crisis will be disappointed. Partly, he says, this is because of the democratisation of video and photography, and the profusion of images on the web. "If you want something much more explicit, that's the place to look."

Perhaps, I suggest, contemporary art has proved much more suited to documenting boom rather than bust. One thinks of the overblown excesses of that former Wall Street broker Jeff Koons, or, more recently, Damien Hirst's £50m diamond-encrusted skull.

'I'd actually argue that the skull contained within it the inevitability of bust," says Marlow. "One of the whole points about it was, 'You can't take it with you,' and Damien said so. It subverted the idea of boom, and hinted at a downturn."

It's a description that rather brings to mind the title of Hirst's most famous installation, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*.

"Exactly," Marlow agrees. "The physical impossibility of bust in the mind of someone booming."

What about the theatre? The West End is already suffering, with a string of shows ending their runs early, ranging from *Girl with a Pearl Earring* to the musicals *Never Forget*, *Avenue Q* and *Eurobeat*. One recent report in the *Times* claimed that every theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue had tickets to spare - even productions with big-name leads such as *Rain Man*, with Josh Hartnett.

At Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre, artistic director Sarah Frankcom does not need much persuasion to sketch out the anxious times ahead. Her theatre's current three-year agreement with the arts council is up for renegotiation in 2010, and there are worries about a possible cut in funds, not least because of the diversion of £675m of lottery money from the arts to pay for the Olympics. She sounds even more fearful about the prospects for corporate donations to the Royal Exchange - which last year totalled £500,000, and included gifts from Royal Bank of Scotland and Barclays.

"That money is vulnerable, and it's going to be dramatically cut, one would think," she says. "I don't think you'll see signs of it right away, but for the next generation of actors, directors and writers, the sources of money that support them in the early part of their careers will either dry up or be drastically reduced."

On the plus side, the Royal Exchange is attracting more people than it has done for four years. "I think our audience is facing a sense of uncertainty, and they seem to be responding to big plays and big themes. That's very interesting: from what I'm told, in the recession of the early 1980s, a lot of theatres were encouraged to move their repertoires towards entertainment, but the people who are coming through our doors at the moment are very hungry for plays that make them think." She mentions the 2,000-plus new scripts that have just been entered for the Royal Exchange's biennial playwriting competition, sponsored by property company Bruntwood - brimming, she says, with work that "wants to make sense of what's happening with the world: globalisation, social exclusion, personal responsibility, political accountability".

Though all that suggests rude creative health, it rather bumps up against a fear that runs across all areas of the arts: that what recession will really cause is a desire to escape into an all-singing, all-dancing fantasy world. "The other day," says Eyre, "I was looking at an advertisement for *Hunger*, the Steve McQueen film [about the Republican hunger striker Bobby Sands], which I hear is magnificent. And I was thinking, 'Aren't they on a hiding to nothing?' I would love to think that people are queueing round the block for it, but I have a feeling that the Fred Astaire syndrome is coming shortly."

Which brings us to cinema, and an old statistic that is being endlessly quoted in an attempt to raise the industry's spirits. In the year that followed the Wall Street crash, US cinema audiences rose by 58%. That is not quite enough to allay worries that the more challenging end of film-making will be hit by a fall in subsidies, not to mention the

drying-up of credit from the banks.

Looking into the more recent past, there may be a few causes for optimism. During the long period of crisis and uncertainty that stretched from the mid-70s into the 80s, there was an upsurge in the idea of film-making as social commentary, seen in such classic New York movies as *Taxi Driver* and *The Warriors*, and brilliant British films such as *The Long Good Friday* and Mike Leigh's *Meantime*. Critic Mark Kermode, however, points out that that this wave of "meaty films dealing with topical subjects" was accompanied by the rise of escapist blockbusters such as *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. "Think about *Indiana Jones* - it looks like an old B-movie. As opposed to being low-down and gritty, those films were spectacular."

Today, Harvey Weinstein is preparing a movie version of *Nine*, the Broadway hit set in 1960s Venice, featuring Daniel Day-Lewis, Nicole Kidman and Judi Dench. There are also reports of imminent remakes of *Fame* and *Footloose*. As *Variety* magazine recently put it: "It's beginning to look a lot like the 1930s: the economy is in the toilet and Hollywood studios are filling their pipelines with upbeat dance films, particularly teen hoofers."

If such news doesn't fill you with excitement, one thing has to be said: compared with some of the stuff that will boom despite the bust, films like those may well look like great art. "In terms of cinema that makes money, look at *Transformers*," says Kermode. "That's where we are right now: great big, infinitely stupid films about robots from outer space hitting each other. The other thing is, it's not coincidental that the *Superman* series has been revived, and so has *Batman*. Even if it's postmodern and ironic, that's going to continue, because it's what people want in times of crisis: superheroes."

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