

Module title: Research in Context

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Essay Question: With an emphasis on Welsh language, Culture or Identity choose a theme or focus on creative practitioners relevant to your field of study and critically analyse your choices. This essay can be presented in Welsh or English in discussion with your tutor.

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Title: Hiraeth, the language phenomenon and the spectacle.

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A lived experience is assumingly a vital part of human nature, a statement that recognisably implies defining personal identity, knowledge and or meaning towards life. A conversation this essay aims to briefly acknowledge is what defines a lived experience in the modern age as we are subjected to the spectacle. A discussion of importance to the representation of Welsh experience, a Welsh language phenomenon described as hiraeth. A debate worth recognising is the understanding of how an authentic lived experience can be determined today as technology evolves, experiences that could only be lived first hand have become a virtual possibility. "Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (Debord, 2005, p.7). Debord's thesis emphasises this discussion as he states authentic experiences are lost as experiences are subjected to be lived through media. Displacement is a reoccurring feeling found present among the population. In Wales this displacement or absence is said to be known as the term 'Hiraeth' among the Welsh. The word hiraeth itself is a word that originated from the language of Cymru that is untranslatable in the English language but thought to connect Wales together on common emotional ground. "It is an idea interwoven into the Welsh psyche, felt on national level"(Petro, 2024).

A truth can be argued to be found within this statement when artistic practitioners in the manner of Josef Herman are discovered. A man not of Welsh ethnicity but Cymraeg at heart. A man who stated that he "cannot think of living anywhere but Wales, midst the Welsh people to whom, I have lost my heart." (Josef Herman Foundation, 2025).

Herman who was born in Poland moved to live in Ystradgynlais, Swansea.



Figure 1 Joseph Herman *Miners 1951*.

Herman had a great love for Ystradgynlais and their working miners. He spent a duration of his career recording the lived experience in the area and developing the distinctive way he captured the working-class mining men in Ystradgynlais. Hermans work is treasured in the hearts of the Cymraeg, his work *Miners 1951* is exhibited in the Glynn Vivian art gallery, Swansea. A particularly famous work of his in this city that he was commissioned to do. The artwork is 3x6 meters in size, capturing the eyesight immediately as it almost takes up the space of the entire wall it sits upon. *Miners 1951* is a depiction of 6 working class men in a moment of rest, said to have come above ground after finishing their shift of the day. The resilience and endurance of these skilled community minded men is pictured perfectly in this image that synthesises through the artwork the tiredness that these working men feel. The dark muted colour palette juxtaposes with what feels like a flickering light of orange flame continuing the picture of an end to a hard-working day in the Ystradgynlais mines. Hermans work clearly projects

a long time spent with and observation of these working men in the Welsh town, which prevails Hermans understanding of this tireless career and the robust men that work it.

It would be fair to raise that Hermans work *Miners 1951* is celebrated for the honest representation he published of the Welsh mining men of Ystradgynlais through this work. His unique style of working has made his marks instantly recognisable to many, amplifying the now known appreciation of these miners that may not have been so successful if Herman had not brought such attention. Attention in specifically to this lived experience in this part of Cymru. The truth in his work does not sell a false representation of lived experience in this area, but a tribute to the noble working class supporting the Cymraeg community. Another point in which expresses the importance of representation and artistic voices.

The recordings Herman created in his career emphasise his connection to hiraeth and show a clear steer away from the spectacle. “The first stage of the economic domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of being into having human fulfilment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed.” (Debord, 2005, p.10,11). The spectacle creates the narrative that our fulfilment no longer blossoms from personal qualities but now from what a person possesses. This impact of capitalism starts to shape the way people understand themselves, relate to each other and live. Artistic practitioners like Herman become important as their art reworks the spectacle, reminding those that fulfilment and self-understanding can come to blossom from lived experience, how the miners are represented as heroic individuals.

“The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.” (Debord, 2005, p.7). Representations that are projected at mass scales are shaping the way people interact within societies and how groups become organised. This can suggest that people who submerge further into identifying with mass media can start to forget or move further away from Welsh identifying culture. A narrative that will only increase the disconnection between people and place. An artist who combats this narrative is Natalie Chapman. An artist who works in an autobiographic manner, who records her personal lived experiences through her work. Chapman suggests that there is an issue with deprivation within Wales, proposing that there are not enough stories being told on the gallery walls (Milye, 2024). Providing that Cymraeg artists start to tell their own lived experiences through their individual artwork, there is a potential chance to create a new narrative towards the spectacle. A spectacle within the galleries that starts to tell the stories of the Cymru people, symbolizing emotional depth rather than embodying surface level illustrations. The spectacle can render an accumulation of images towards what life in Wales feels like following Debord's investigations, Chapman's statement suggests that this can be combatted with the real emotional depth of lived Welsh experience through artistic representation. Chapman continues to back this up as she states the rhetorical question of “who better to have stories about their lives than the people who have gone through things”. (Milye, 2024). An increase of recorded lived experiences in Cymru by Cymraeg artists can provide comfort for those who identify themselves within the concept of hiraeth, the nuance term suggesting the longing for Cymru the Welsh feel. Hiraeth can be described as a feeling of absence, by combining Chapman's indication of Welsh people telling

their stories and the term hiraeth it could theoretically be implied that the feeling of absence could be slightly amended.

Alike to Herman, Chapman works and talks around the working-class life in Wales. She shares her worry that art is becoming inaccessible as she believes that the arts have become a hobby for the rich (Milye, 2024). Taking initiative into Chapman's suggestion of using gallery walls to tell the stories of the community, the spectacle that art is a hobby for the rich can be discouraged as art is shown to be for the passionate.



Figure 2 Natalie Chapman *Milk, Bills and Boss moves* 2023.

Chapman's work *milk, bills and boss moves 2023* channels emotional depth, found in the gesture of stillness in the image. The facial expressions put forward an implementation of emotional weight. The emotional qualities in the image imply a reaction to a lived experience, an insight to a perhaps vulnerable story or side to Chapman's life. The background is flooded by the colour red creating the work to be bold while surrounding the figures. The pose of the figures suggests that they are standing in unity, continuing the impression of boldness. However, with the use of everyday aspects found in the image such as the beverage and sunglasses creates somewhat of a casual boldness compared to the background and body language. It seems to be clear that Chapman is reflecting a story through the figures, expressions, poses, clothing, the sunglasses and the bottle of alcohol. Chapman is known to work with representing the working class and the mundane while involving her own personal lived experiences. A powerful concept to appreciate when looking at Cymraeg artists and the importance of personal narrative.

"The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the non-living." (Debord, 2005, p.7). The term concrete inversion of life explains that the spectacle is not something that goes unseen within the lives of people but a permanent part that lives within everyone's day to day life. Debord continues to propose that the spectacle is autonomous and operates independently as its own system. It could be argued that the spectacle is no longer under influence and or control but in control of its own influence. Artistic practitioners have the possible potential to chip away at the said autonomous movement. This could create a pathway for people to refuse to accept aspects of the spectacle as a concrete inversion within their own lives.



Figure 3 Kevin Sinnott Study 1 for 'Sue wore a violet dress for our first date in the new Cantonese in Bridgend' 2024

Kevin Sinnotts work captures the love for a hometown in a spectacular way, his works depict the area, himself and the memories within it. Sinnott's work provides a captivating emotional depth to his beloved home that equally resembles the love and hiraeth of Wales. The recordings of his lived experience in the Welsh valleys are often inspired by the same area of the valleys; the reoccurring images of the mountains are often seen in his paintings. The work *Sue wore a violet dress for our first date in the new Cantonese in Bridgend* 2024 depicts a personal time in his life in Cymru. A memory he is

fond to reflect on within the marrying street of Bridgend. This work is a self-portrait where he depicts his current self in the exact place of the memory he longs for, a near exact resemblance of the nostalgic term hiraeth. "At its core, hiraeth boils down to an awareness of the presence of absence, kindling a feeling which pain and joy are braided too tightly to untangle." (Petro, 2024). A concept a Cymraeg heart is all familiar with, in Sinnott's work this is proven greatly. His painting which is built upon thick brush strokes and a warm kindling sense of lighting create a sense of movement within the picture that brings the memory back to life. This provides space in allowing the viewer to feel the rush of emotional excitement Sinnott aims to depict in his memory.

All aspects of life can be broken down into subheadings, our identities, relationships, work life and our leisure time. Hiraeth can target a variety of these areas however it can specifically target our relationship to place. Our relationship to the place of home is sentimental and a foundation to our lives, hiraeth is a form of sickness we feel when the connection between us and home is faded. The society of the spectacle implies that our relationship with place is interfered with in regards to the spectacle. Large accumulations of images and mediations of how an area is experienced takes away from the authentic. "In societies dominated by modern conditions of productions, all of life presents itself as immense accumulation of spectacles." (Debord, 2005, p.7). The desensitisation of the spectacle in societies in Wales can be detrimental to artists like Herman, Chapman and Sinnott. As desensitisation continues through the determination of enhanced media, the higher the stake of losing empathy within viewers. An echoing effect in a loss of empathy could result in an impact of the success of artists. Artists who focus on speculating the lived experience outside of the spectacle of media into the viewers. Hence the importance of Sinnott's work, a person who brings

connection to place back into the spotlight. Sinnott's works bring his hiraeth and connection to the Welsh valleys alive, his passion is spread over the accumulation of paintings he has made. His work *Sue wore a violet dress for our first date in the new Cantonese in Bridgend 2024* in particular is significant as he pinpoints his connection to space and lived experience down to a spot on a street.

Conclusion

A discussion of importance regarding the representation of Welsh experience is interesting when blended with the idea of how the spectacle interrupts a person's relationship with place. An aspect of the spectacle can be argued to disconnect Wales combatting with the Welsh language phenomena described as hiraeth. As creative practitioners represent lived experience, history and culture in Wales through aspects of art a helping hand is introduced in the journey of understanding the concept of hiraeth. Place, memory and belonging blend together through (*Miners 1951*), (*milk, bills and boss moves 2023*) and (*Sue wore a violet dress to our first date in the new Cantonese in Bridgend 2024*). These selected art works highlight the importance of representation, allowing a person's voice to be heard and experiences are seen how they were lived. The visibility this artwork can bring can allow communities to recognise each other, exposing connections to place where the spectacle could disconnect through aspects such as the advertisement of tourism. As the spectacle continues to deteriorate the meaning of individuality, depth and belonging it continues to sell nostalgia. The concept of the home being negatively impacted while the community still lives within it, especially in this context of Wales. Herman, Chapman, Sinnott and the concept of

‘Hiraeth’ celebrate Wales bringing the connection of lived experience and place back to life. They continue to subject the spectacle to the backfoot, reminding people and amplifying of the original importance of authentic lived experience and representation.

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