

Doctoral research in art: between the preservation of cultural values and the challenges of the contemporary crisis

VLADIMIR BOGDAN BOCA*

“George Enescu” National University of the Arts Iași
ROMANIA

Abstract: A fundamental point of doctoral theses is their contribution to the preservation and valorisation of cultural heritage by means of a critical approach that integrates both historical research and innovative perspectives on artistic practice. However, there is a constant concern that many of these works remain limited to narrow academic circles, without achieving the desired impact on the general public or the artistic community. Thus, their effectiveness in the face of the current cultural crisis, marked by the rapid fragmentation and uniformity of cultural products, is questioned. The contemporary cultural crisis is deeply rooted in socio-economic changes, and the status of the artist is often undermined, being seen more as a producer of aesthetic goods than as a creator of fundamental values. In this context, doctoral theses should respond to these challenges and contribute to a redefinition of the role of art and the artist, thus facilitating cultural regeneration in a constantly changing landscape.

Keywords: crisis, culture, doctoral thesis, artist.

Introduction

In popular discourse, “culture” is an all-encompassing term that can be invoked to explain the behaviours or failures of any individual or group. As researchers, we aim to build more precise models that avoid the fallacies of stereotypes and other intuitive biases about social differences. However, when we narrow our definitions of culture, we must always consider whether narrowing our definitions will also narrow down the questions we can address.

Some people think of culture in the singular, as it was conceived in Europe during the 18th and early 19th centuries – as something achieved through evolution and progress. This concept of culture reflects the inequalities within European societies and their colonies around the world; in short, it equates culture with civilisation and contrasts both with nature or non-civilisation. According to this understanding of culture, some countries are more “civilized” than others and, therefore, some people are more “cultured”

* PhD Student, email: vladimir.boca@yahoo.com; PhD Supervisor: Prof. Aurelian Bălăiță.

than others. Mircea Vasilescu writes, “We will have to decide quickly: is culture a luxury that we can give up when we don’t have enough money, or is it a necessity of modern man, worth making efforts and sacrifices for?”¹.

When people talk about culture in the sense of civilisation or sophistication, they are actually talking about “high culture,” which is different from the sociological concept of culture. High culture refers to elite goods and activities, such as theatre, fine arts, gastronomy, fashion, museum-quality art, and classical music. In common parlance, people may refer to others as “cultured” if they know about and participate in these activities. Someone using “culture” in this sense might argue that classical music is more refined than pop or rock music or indigenous musical traditions. Popular (or “pop”) culture, on the other hand, is more general and is influenced by the media and public opinion.

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This definition of culture recognizes only one standard of sophistication to which all groups are held accountable. Thus, people who differ from those who consider themselves to be “cultured” in this sense are not usually understood as having a different culture; they are understood as uncultured.

The culture of a society is reflected in values, norms, and practices. This is observed through individuals to reflect perceptions, practices, and values and in the transfer of technology. The emphasis on identity and diversity has led to a fragmentation of culture, with each social group developing its own cultural references.

In the case of the disinterest that has emerged in the new generations, there is a perception that young people are increasingly less interested in traditional forms of culture (classical literature, visual art, theatre, etc.). This could be attributed to:

- The acceleration of the pace of life: Consumption of fast and superficial content (social media, short videos) has become the norm.
- The accessibility of technology: The internet and mobile devices offer an infinite range of entertainment options, which can make other forms of culture seem less attractive.
- Changing concepts of leisure: Young people seek immediate and interactive experiences, while traditional forms of culture may be perceived as passive and boring.
- Redefining the concept of culture: The line between culture and entertainment is becoming blurred, and many cultural products are now created with the primary purpose of entertaining. Why watch a dramatic performance that will make me sad, make me think, and remind me how horrible people can be when I could watch a short cat video?

¹ <https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/tema-saptamanii/cultura-in-criza-iar-612185.html>

- Digital culture: New communication networks have generated new forms of artistic and cultural expression (gaming, vlogs, digital art), which can be considered part of contemporary culture. Technology has a crucial impact on fundamental aspects of all our cultures, including language, art, mobility, education and religion. A community's culture acts as a standard for perceiving, judging and evaluating technology, since technology affects all cultural components and determines the direction of its development.

To occupy a broader cultural dimension, modern technology needs to be in harmony with the social and cultural conditions of the community – otherwise there is friction between technological development and the preservation of values. A rational balance allows people to exercise their freedom of expression in the technical world, which transcends each person's ethnicity, age or level of education. People use it to fulfil their fantasies, but a cultural decline can occur due to the lack of restrictions, regulations and/or consequences.

What contributions are we trying to make through doctoral research and through studies like this one? What do we bring new in relation to the old "humanistic cultures"? Are researchers "men or women of culture" or have they, without realizing it, already turned into technicians who follow certain text patterns of producing small-scale research just to check a requirement from a file? Are these mere pre-established rituals that make their steps predictable actions devoid of the spectacular nature of an act of creation? "You cannot write well... if you do not have a solid cultural background. The spontaneous and illiterate writing that lurks around us is very dangerous,"² Andrei Pleșu says.

Controversies surrounding artistic research often focus on the issue of demarcation. What distinguishes artistic research from artistic practice? And what distinguishes it from scientific or academic research? Underlying these issues of demarcation is a question of legitimacy.

Experimentation and play as forms of knowledge: As classical forms of artistic expression were no longer sufficient, attempts were made to mix them with other media starting a hundred years ago. First the papier-collé of Cubism, then Picasso's sculptures, Duchamp's Fountain, Dada, later we reached increasingly unconventional installations and the story goes on. At some point, art consumers found themselves in the position of seeing ordinary objects presented as art. Aestheticism has perished, and if it still survives somewhere, it is accused and unwanted, criticised when it does not praise an artist or director. There are new rules of a game that takes place in the artistic realm. The art-reason couple is formed in the public and political space.

² https://adevarul.ro/stil-de-viata/cultura/andrei-ple-su-elemente-de-criz-a-exista-pest-e-tot-1856299.html#google_vignette

The art market with all its fields and the stress of artistic production leave artists little room to “stop and contemplate” what they are doing. Many artists must act as free entrepreneurs in the “creative industry” market, a market which is not oriented towards reflection, but which expects its suppliers to provide a constant flow of new products and projects.

Art is now immersed in the universe of reason, whether that is the economic and social world of the market, the institutional one, or the intellectual world of knowledge. Art received in a public space can only be conceived in the circulation of works that acquire the status of a commodity. Art also needs to coexist with science, research and thought, freeing itself from the very beginning from purely aesthetic judgment. The state structured by public space establishes the condition of new artistic creation, namely freedom. But is this freedom complete? “It will be useful to study new strategies that respond to the crisis on a large scale and to explore the extent to which cultural heritage can be a way to address environmental, economic and social problems around the world.”³

And thus, we arrive at freedom of expression, the freedom to choose the camp we want to be in. Most artists outside the University may not know much about what is happening or what is being researched inside a doctoral school, just as the reverse is also frequently true. But the artists’ values were and are the same. They have always sought solutions for expression, trying to find themselves. Knowing themselves, they express their inner world in relation to what is happening around them.

And yet... Does the exigency of culture remain valid, in the case of the artist, or must we accept the relaxation to the point of dissolution of a once essential criterion? “Art and science are not two separate worlds; they complement and enrich each other.” Renaissance artists proved that art and science or research, could and should collaborate to create unique innovations and solutions. Combining artistic creativity with scientific reasoning can lead to remarkable achievements.

Has the status of artists changed from curious bohemians eager to know more and more to simple pieces of today's industrial-technological mechanism? We cannot know that yet, but they remain in solidarity with the events of the era in which they live, be they actors, directors, graphic designers, musicians, architects, sculptors, photographers, puppeteers, visual artists, writers, or translators.

The world of art and culture in general is forced to adapt to a world in constant motion. Theatre, music and visual arts are losing ground to the media arts and the digital world in general. Progress in any science requires a willingness to rethink fundamental concepts, even concepts that might be

³ <https://www.firstonline.info/ro/cultura-in-crisi-una-visione-futura-del-patrimonio-globale-qual-e-sara-la-nuova-sfida/>

intuitively correct. Sciences tend to start with popular everyday ideas – products of intuition. These can be useful for a while, but they eventually hinder progress on certain issues and lead to a cultural crisis.

Erosion of cultural values: The lack of a common cultural foundation can lead to a loss of collective identity and difficulties in building a cohesive society.

Declining levels of cultural education: A less cultured population is more vulnerable to manipulation and disinformation.

The cultural crisis is a complex phenomenon, with multiple causes and long-term consequences. To overcome this crisis, concerted efforts are needed from all the actors involved: cultural institutions, educators, content creators, but also from society as a whole. This is the advice of ChatGpt for humanity. So, the virtual friend also offers me a conclusion and possible topics for discussion at a future meeting.

“A cultural crisis occurs when a breakdown in values, behaviours and societal norms negatively impacts employee well-being and performance. This results in low morale, high turnover, lack of trust, disengagement and potentially even ethical lapses. Dropping levels of management support, poor communication, and empathy worsen the situation, leading to burnout, dissatisfaction and instability within the organisation.”⁴

The institutionalization of art involves the emergence of specific fields and an adequate methodological programme. The number of institutions that have emerged (museums, galleries, auction houses, art centres, independent spaces, etc.) reveals people’s interest for this world. Somehow, the role of the sponsor is taken over by all these public institutions. But, while the sponsor only exhibited the artist's works to a small and well-selected audience, they are now seen and accessible to the entire public, to all people regardless of social status or intellectual training. Thus, the second problem enters the equation: finding visual solutions adapted to our contemporary world.

Conclusions

I said above that the increasingly rapid technological evolution puts the cultural world in a bind. When people have comfort as their primary goal, and this depends on science, they will invest in it. Social status is calculated today according to comfort and the number of objects that make life easier. Most people do not need culture and art in order to climb the social ladder.

Is Dostoevsky's idea that “beauty will save the world” still valid? The best answer and the most conclusive definition is found in Baudelaire: “Beauty is nothing but the promise of happiness”. Of the happiness of freely choosing

⁴ <https://www.isaca.org/resources/news-and-trends/isaca-now-blog/2024/the-hidden-culture-crisis-and-human-burden-undermining-cybersecurity-resilience>

with whom we want to be compatible in common principles, convictions and inclinations. Of the happiness of designing a work that is relevant from a cultural point of view, avoiding kitsch, bad taste and fashion. Although kitsch is also consumed and present now more than ever in our lives.

From theatre, painting, literature, music, film, publications, works of fiction, comics and advertisements – products whose purpose is exclusively financial. If we adapt this definition to today's society, we will realize that everything we consume is kitsch. Our favourite TV series, the music we listen to, the album we buy, all have elements of kitsch in their composition. Of course, not everything that surrounds us is kitsch, just as we cannot label every creation as art.

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