

Cultural dimensions of doctoral research in the field of Theatre and Performance Arts

ALEXANDRA-SORANA EȘANU*
“George Enescu” National University of the Arts Iași
ROMANIA

Abstract: Culture represents the main method of understanding society, closely related to the values, norms and behaviours of the individual. They are influenced by several factors, acquiring a collective dimension manifested through customs, traditions and symbols from which the feeling of belonging results. Each person thus reflects the perspectives of the culture. Globally, culture has no geographical boundaries, and the doctoral research becomes a concrete cultural act based on the deepening of several fields and forms of expression, having a cultural, literary, philosophical or scientific nature. Scientific-artistic disagreements remain in some particular aspects. However, through open dialogue and interdisciplinary collaboration, the “man of culture” could understand the language of the “technical man”. Theatre is a form of cultural expression that links art to history and then to society. In this media era, the perspective of scientific work as a form of cultural creation, where the focus is on thought, reflection and debate, is a vital factor. However, not all research of this type is necessarily cultural in depth. When the interest is limited to the scientific perspective, it remains institutional. The relationship between the doctoral student and the coordinator is also a defining one, as it values the result of the common research as a cultural act or a scientific tool. For a beneficial result for the readers, it depends on the relationship of the two creative forces to be directed towards the well-being of the research and at the same time to be loaded from a cultural point of view through different formal or informal activities and experiences.

Keywords: culture, creation, doctoral research, art, theatre.

Introduction

Culture is a concept of remarkable complexity and depth and it is essential for understanding the human experience. On a personal level, it is reflected in the values, norms and behaviours which each individual adopts and integrates in their daily life. These elements are influenced by the social, economic and historical environment of that person and a unique personal

* PhD Student, email: soranaesanu@gmail.com; PhD Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Ioana Petcu Pădurean.

identity is shaped in their interaction. Each individual thus becomes a “lens” through which culture is reflected in subtle and varied ways.

When we look at it from a general perspective, culture acquires a collective dimension, where it becomes a phenomenon of the interactions of a group’s members. Whether we are talking about small groups, communities or whole nations, culture is manifested by means of traditions, symbols and discourses which strengthen social cohesion and the feeling of belonging. “Culture involves the ideas of patrimony, heritage, transmission, and, even if it is enriched, it is renewed with each generation.”¹ These cultural practices contribute to the creation of a collective identity which is essential for maintaining unity in the face of diversity. To that effect, culture is not only a sum of elements, but a dynamic network of relationships forming the foundation of social existence.

On a global scale, culture goes beyond geographical limits, being a vehicle of diversity. Forms of artistic, literary, philosophical and scientific expression enrich each other and thus contribute to developing a common cultural patrimony. Globalisation made the ties between cultures tighter and tighter and this phenomenon offers us new opportunities to understand and appreciate human diversity.

Doctoral research in cultural field

In this context, doctoral research is not only an academic process of going deeper into our knowledge in a specific field, but becomes a cultural act in itself. Each topic, question, and conclusion contribute to the expansion and transformation of human knowledge, thus influencing the evolution of culture. By generating new ideas and by reinterpreting the already existing ones, doctoral research not only advances scientific understanding, but it also adds value to the global cultural patrimony. This way, the doctoral research process becomes an active form of cultural creation. This entails the accumulation of information and a deep reflection on the world, an active contribution to the global cultural dialogue and a manifestation of our intellectual commitment in a broader social and cultural context.

Culture is the one that often raises the alarm with regard to society’s problems. “Literature and art were essentially alienation, sustaining and protecting the contradiction – the unhappy consciousness of the divided world, the defeated possibilities, the hopes unfulfilled, and the promises betrayed. They were a rational, cognitive force, revealing a dimension of man and nature which was repressed and repelled in reality.”²

¹ Alexandru Călinescu (2008). *Societatea post-culturală (Post-cultural society)*, „Dilema Veche”, no. 245, retrieved from: <https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/societate/ieri-cu-vedere-spre-azi/societatea-post-culturala-612732.html>

² Herbert Marcuse (1964). *One-dimensional man*, Beacon Press, Boston, p. 43.

In our society, there are texts which very well depict a world far from utopia, point out what does not work and push us towards a need for solutions. As viewers, we need to identify or resonate with the characters on stage. That is due to the need for belonging, which often guides us when making our daily decisions. People are social beings, as Aristotle said in *Politics*, so they need to feel part of a group. “But he who cannot or does not need to live in society due to his suffering is not a member of the state, but either a beast or a god.”³ Also, from the perspective of the character on stage, there is a need for viewers who feel close to them, offering the character the safety of knowing that they are not the only one having such an experience. Thus, the need for belonging is fulfilled due to a theatre world that is not far from reality.

Artistic creation is deeply marked by the culture of the artist, as it is influenced by the traditions, values, experiences, and social context specific to that culture. Although innovation and originality are essential in the creative process, many works are closely connected to prior cultural influences. The theory of intertextuality suggests that all works are built based on previous texts, which proves a dependency from the previous culture.⁴ Many works are the result of interactions of various cultures and global influences, which can make it difficult for us to attribute them to one cultural tradition. Contemporary works can be seen as a dialogue between tradition and innovation. The need for culture remains relevant, but its nature changes. In the context of globalisation and of the diversification of artistic styles, some criteria may be reinterpreted or even relaxed. Still, that does not mean that cultural standards are completely abandoned, but rather that they evolve in order to reflect the new artistic realities. Accepting diversity in art may lead to a deeper understanding of cultural values and a broader appreciation of different forms of artistic expression.

A cultural “air” should be intensely present on the pages of a doctoral thesis, as this is not only a scientific work, but also a contribution to the existing cultural and academic discussions. At the same time, originality should not be ignored, so the author’s unique perspective needs to be emphasised. This way, the cultural “air” not only enriches the content of the thesis, but it also strengthens its relevance in the academic and cultural environment. A doctoral thesis should be a point of departure for new discussions and a reflection of a deep understanding of its context.

Nowadays, technology is no longer just a factor of influence – it is a determining force in shaping culture and it goes beyond traditional limitations. The foundations of European culture are faced with important changes in the context of digitalisation and emerging technologies such as artificial

³ Aristotel (1996). *Politics*, translation by El. Bezdechi, Editura Cultura Națională, București, p. 36.

⁴ Julia Kristeva (1980). *Desire in Language*, translation by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, pp. 12-72.

intelligence or augmented reality. Technology can offer access to knowledge and create new platforms for expression and creation. However, there is also the other side of the coin – excessive digitalisation runs the risk of reducing the cultural experience to simplified, quickly consumable forms, which may erode the depth of reflection and of the dialogue which is essential for authentic cultural development.

Doctoral candidates' cultural experiences are fundamental not only for their formation as researchers, but also for their formations as people of culture. These experiences contribute to refining their critical spirit, stimulating their creativity and deepening their understanding of their field of study and also of the social and cultural context of their research. Ideally, cultural experiences should be diverse and include both formal and informal aspects, allowing the candidates to become holistic researchers. That would allow them to build a diverse cultural baggage and integrate multiple perspectives in their academic endeavours, thus having a deep impact on society and culture. Moreover, doctoral coordinators have a responsibility going beyond mere academic guidance. By promoting an attitude of openness, interdisciplinarity and critical reflection, together with their involvement in concrete cultural activities, they can contribute to the training of complete researchers who are able to be both active intellectuals and agents for change.

For better communication between the academic space and the cultural environment, the quantification of tensions could be done by case studies, interviews or polling analysing the attitudes and perceptions of actors in both fields, pointing out conflicts and differing opinions. Moreover, an analysis of partnerships between universities and cultural institutions and of the success of common projects may indicate the degree of collaboration and integration.

It is essential for us to promote an open dialogue and collaboration between the academic and cultural environments. Creating discussion platforms, funding projects and mobility between the two sectors are a few solutions which may facilitate mutual understanding and the consolidation of ties. Universities may also develop educational programmes integrating academic research with cultural activities, thus preparing professionals who would understand both the demands of scientific rigour and the creative dynamics of the cultural sector.

Researchers as “people of culture” are intellectual figures deeply involved in cultural development and in the perception of humanity. Research is not just the technical activity of accumulating knowledge, but also a creative act contributing to social change and to enriching culture. On the other hand, in the context of the neo-liberalisation of education, modern researchers may become “technicians” or “craftspeople” of knowledge, focusing on producing quantifiable information and abiding by rigid standards. That may lead

researchers to becoming mere doers rather than creators, and research as a cultural act runs the risk of becoming lost.

However, a balance between the two roles is possible. Interdisciplinarity can break the barriers between humanities and technical sciences, while protecting the autonomy of research allows us to approach questions that run deeper than mere usefulness. Researchers can be “people of culture” and “technicians” at the same time, but that depends on the institutional context and the use of information. It is essential for us to keep research as a cultural act, not only as production of knowledge, and to recognise its contribution to creating meaning for society. In theatre studies, this cultural reflection takes place for a complete understanding of artistic phenomena, beyond a simple technical analysis, because theatre is deeply connected to its own historical, social and cultural context.

Theatre is an art form which reflects not only the aesthetic tastes, but also the values, beliefs and social tensions of an era. “Theatre reproduces social situations and actions in the form of drama, and society, by its famous structural ceremonies, portrays various forms of performance in their dynamics.”⁵ To understand a theatre play, it is essential for us to analyse the cultural context in which it has been created. For instance, Bertold Brecht’s theatre needs to be understood in the political and social context of inter-war Germany, where Brecht used theatre to criticise social realities. Raymond Williams underlines that theatre is both an artistic representation and a reflection on society. “The artist, in this case, is not the lonely explorer, but the voice of his community.”⁶

Superficial research of theatre focusing only on its formal aspects may omit the deep meanings of the play. Reflection helps understand the symbolism behind the text and the performance. For example, Beckett’s or Ionesco’s theatre of the absurd needs to be understood in the cultural context of post-war Europe, marked by alienation and disillusionment. Hans-Thies Lehmann shows how contemporary theatre reflects the cultural and social changes of the modern world.⁷ Theatre is not only about a performance – it also involves the social interaction where themes that are relevant for the community are debated. Social or community theatre, such as the work of Augusto Boal, uses art in order to approach societal issues and generate change.⁸

⁵ Doina Papp (2020). *Teatrul social* [Social Theatre], „Bucureștiul cultural”, no. 99, article retrieved from: https://revista22.ro/bucurestiul-cultural/bucurestiul-cultural-nr-99-teatrul-social?utm_source=chatgpt.com, accessed on 31/01/2025.

⁶ Raymond Williams (2001). *The long revolution*, Broadview Press, Toronto, p. 47.

⁷ Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006). *Postdramatic Theatre*, translation by Karen Jürs-Munby, Taylor & Francis, London.

⁸ Augusto Boal (2017). *Teatrul oprimaților și alte poetici politice* [*Theatre of the oppressed and other political poetics*], translation by Georgiana Barbulescu, Editura Nemira, București.

Moreover, the criteria for cultural relevance have changed. Apart from the aesthetic and intellectual value, aspects such as social impact, innovation and accessibility are now also taken into account. Current themes such as human rights, climate change or cultural diversity are frequently appreciated as being relevant. However, traditional institutions have not completely lost their purpose. Universities, museums and theatres continue to play an important role in recognising cultural values and preserving patrimony.

Cultural relevance is influenced by a mixture of local and global factors, by societal tastes, but also by the social and political changes shaping the cultural discourse. In the end, that which is considered relevant is the result of a complex interaction between various voices and cultural agents, each having their own selection criteria.

The relationship between the doctoral candidate and the coordinator can definitely be regarded as a cultural one, in the sense that it often goes beyond the formal institutional framework and includes a spiritual and intellectual dimension. Even if, on an official level, it is an academic contract, in which the coordinator guides and supervises the progress of the doctoral research, in reality, this relationship can turn into a collaboration where spiritual and cultural elements communicate with each other.

First of all, a central aspect of this relationship is intellectual communication. Doctoral candidates choose their coordinators not only based on academic competences, but also according to a cultural or philosophic affinity. Sharing certain common values and principles can help create an environment favourable to the development of the research and to the understanding of the studied topic. This relationship can be described as a continuous dialogue between two minds which find themselves not only in a professional collaboration, but also in a cultural interaction in which each mind brings and answers the questions of the research. In the relationship between the candidate and the coordinator, culture is not just a topic of study, but also an environment in which ideas and concepts are born, while professional principles are transmitted in a broader framework. At the same time, the coordinator is the one guiding the candidate towards resources that are valuable for the research, such as actors and directors that can be interviewed and films and theatre productions that can be analysed in order to then be studied in the context of the doctoral thesis. In this type of relationship, institutional limitations can be overcome and the coordinator can become a kind of cultural guide for the candidate, not just a technical supervisor. Such a mentor can inspire the candidate not only on the level of knowledge, but also on the level of philosophical and ethical reflection, helping the integration of the values of a larger culture in the research. However, not all relationships of this kind are necessarily cultural in a profound sense. Some of them remain strictly institutional and professional and interest is limited to scientific objectivity.

Conclusions

In conclusion, doctoral research is not only a technical and methodological process, but also a cultural act, entailing a deep immersion in the values, ideas and principles of a culture. This goes beyond the boundaries of a simple academic activity and becomes a continuous dialogue between past and present, between tradition and innovation, between the theories and the perspectives shaping up the foundations of knowledge. The candidate guided by the coordinator becomes not only a specialist in a field, but also an active participant in a wider cultural process, with the ability to influence both the academic community and culture as a whole.

In a globalised and interconnected era, doctoral research is more and more diverse and dynamic, as it is influenced not only by institutional values, but also by social, political and technological change. Thus, it can be seen as a form of cultural creation, where thought and reflection on reality become fundamental acts of creating the cultural, academic and social future. From this perspective, each piece of doctoral research becomes not only a step in the evolution of knowledge, but also a contribution to the greatness and complexity of a constantly changing patrimony.

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