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**An analysis of cultural organisms based on museum
collections.**

Case study: The Ornithological Collection of the Natural
History Museum from Sibiu

PhD THESIS SUMMARY

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Keywords

1. morphology of culture, 2. cultural organism, 3. museum collection, 4. ornithological collection, 5. Natural History Museum from Sibiu, 6. Brukenthal National Museum, 7. natural history museum, 8. art gallery, 9. art museum, 10. Bioart, 11. contemporary art, 12. timeline of the natural history museum, 13. timeline of the natural history collection, 14. cabinet of curiosities, 15. action capacity of objects, 16. *actor network* theory, 17. *paideuma*, 18. culture as a collective cultural organism, 19. organic theory of culture, 20. hyperobject, 21. specimen, 22. natural object, 23. type specimen, 24. cultural field, 25. cultural space, 26. cultural plane, 27. cultural movement, 28. the value of natural history pieces, 29. aesthetic value.

Thesis structure

The thesis entitled *An analysis of cultural organisms based on museum collections. Case study: The Ornithological Collection of the Natural History Museum from Sibiu* is structured in four chapters to which the introduction, conclusions and bibliography are added. This paper contains 45 illustrations and 3 tables, counting 242 pages and it integrates 137 bibliographic sources. The structure of each chapter can be seen in the table of contents presented at the beginning of this summary.

Hypothesis

The central question addressed in this paper can be summarized as follows: *How do museum objects function and how are they organized, through their materiality and their values, from a cultural perspective?* The answer that can be given to this question is the following: At least in the case of museum collections such as ornithological collections and in particular, in the case of the Ornithological Collection of the Natural History Museum from Sibiu, museum objects are organized by their materiality and their values in structures homologous to biological organisms, structures that we will call *cultural organisms*. The answer becomes our working hypothesis which stipulates that museum pieces are not inert objects, but they are able to generate active systems with the capacity of self-organization and self-functioning, contexts such as networks in which the "action capacity" (*agency*) is redistributed between human and non-human actors. This hypothesis is the one we justify and prove during the presentations in the thesis.

Objectives

The general objectives of this research can be summarized in three main directions. The first is represented by the analysis of the museum collections' elements and the elements of the cultural organism. The second is represented by the analysis of the cultural field and space in which the cultural organism manifests itself. The third direction is represented by the analysis of the parallelism between the museum collection and the biological organism, in order to point out the vital characteristics of the ensembles of museum pieces.

Considering the analysis of the museum collections' elements and the study of the cultural organism, we established the following specific objectives: 1. classification of the pieces according to their typology, integrating a philosophical discourse in each case; 2. the systematization of museum pieces' values, emphasizing those aspects that prefigure the analysis of the cultural field; 3. analysis of the aesthetic value by researching several aesthetic criteria corresponding to the appearance of some bird species, integrating the methods of experimental philosophy; 4. analysis of the status of natural history museum pieces in the context of works of art and art exhibitions.

Taking into consideration the analysis of the cultural field and the cultural space, we established the following specific objectives: 1. investigation of concepts similar to the cultural field, in this paper's terms and the detection of their origin; 2. analysis of the cultural space from the perspective of language and ornithological taxonomy; 3. research of cultural identity in the case of birds based on the methods of experimental philosophy; 4. the most detailed presentation and analysis of the concept of cultural field in close connection with the issues addressed in the presentation on the cultural organism corresponding to the Ornithological Collection.

Keeping in view the analysis of the Ornithological Collection and that of the cultural organism, we established the following specific objectives: 1. presentation of the history of the Ornithological Collection; 2. analysis and presentation of the morphology of the cultural organism based on the parallelism with the structure of the Ornithological Collection; 3. analysis and presentation of the anatomy of the cultural organism based on the same parallelism with the structure of the Ornithological Collection; 4. analysis and presentation of the functionality of the cultural organism; 5. research on the genesis, replication and evolution of cultural organisms; 6. a final argument for the real existence of the cultural organism.

Through the established objectives, the paper has an interdisciplinary character, falling both in the type of philosophical research and in that of museology research and represents a theoretical research articulated with an applicative dimension.

Methodology

The theoretical research in this thesis was performed based on a diverse methodology. This is characterized by the integration of new methods applied in philosophy, such as experimental philosophy, as well as the integration of specific methodologies, due to the strong interdisciplinary character of the thesis.

The first method refers to bibliographic research, conceptual analysis and identification of philosophical theories that correspond to the objectives proposed in the thesis. At the same time, these theories were used to interpret the empirical results obtained by other specific methods, used in the analysis of the case study (Ornithological Collection of the Natural History Museum from Sibiu) and that of the *cultural organism*. The second method consisted in generating and testing conceptual / scientific models based on the abstraction of cultural phenomena. This includes the very concept of cultural organism, but also those of *cultural field* and *cultural space*. The third method consisted in using the questionnaire, a specific means of experimental philosophy, through which we aimed to obtain empirical data on the behavior of objects from an aesthetic perspective and researching their cultural identity. The next method - direct observation - was an alternative for investigating the same issues mentioned above, but through a different means, in order to identify all perspectives and at the same time to test the results obtained through the previous method. It includes direct visits and analysis of contemporary art exhibitions in the country and abroad and their exhibition texts, as well as visits to various natural history museums. Simultaneously with the method set out above, we also considered a bibliographic research on art exhibitions that integrate objects such as natural history museum pieces. A sixth method used in this research was the detailed case study of a natural history collection. This collection was evaluated from a historical perspective, out of which a chronological dynamic was extracted in terms of specimen formation¹. Another method was constituted the interdisciplinary research of the wallpaper with oriental influences

¹ PRIPON, Liviu Răzvan: The Ornithological Collection of the Natural History Museum of Sibiu – A historical review. În *Brukenthal Acta Musei X. 3*, Sibiu, 2015.

from Brukenthal Palace, which integrates many representations of birds². This method allowed us to explore how the forms hybridize, what degree of identity they have and finally what relationship is concretely established between nature and representation.

Synthesis of chapters

Chapter I entitled "Elements" considers 5 main aspects. This chapter begins with an inventory of the specific typologies of museum pieces of natural history, highlighting a number of 21 categories analyzed including from a perspective of their philosophy and phylogeny. The nature of these pieces that represent the elements of the collection and, consequently, the nature of the corresponding cultural organism are discussed by analyzing and pointing out the specific environment in which they exist and manifest themselves, environment that is represented by the cultural space. In order to reach the cultural space, we analyzed its sub-structures, namely the cultural planes in which the material objects are culturally reflected. The first chapter ends with the analysis of the identity degree of natural objects insisting on birds, which are the central object of investigation in this research, among the museum pieces. Through this last subchapter we have concretely exposed the way and the degree of cultural reflection of natural objects, absolutely necessary to underline the situation encountered in the context of the cultural field.

Chapter II, "Analysis of natural history museum pieces in terms of value", deals with four general aspects regarding the values of museum pieces and then the cultural field in which they manifest themselves. Initially, we made a categorization of the values of museum pieces in the field of natural history, materialized by pointing out 19 types of values. From them, we selected for a more detailed analysis the aesthetic value, using the aesthetic principles proposed by William Hogarth in *The Analysis of Beauty*³. As a result of this analysis, we found the status of the aesthetic value, which is relative and therefore dynamic, thus introducing the principle of cultural movement that we later analyzed in the subchapter dedicated to the position of natural objects in the context of contemporary art. In this way, we proposed and explained the nature of an analytical apparatus, represented by the aesthetic matrices, through which the cultural field can be inspected and researched. The last part of chapter two is represented by the analysis of the structure of the cultural field that represents the basis for understanding the

² PRIPON, Liviu, Răzvan – Cuzepan-Bebeșelea, Gabriela: The Brukenthal Palace oriental tapestry approached from a Natural History point of view. În *Brukenthal Acta Musei XII. 3*, Sibiu, 2017.

³ HOGARTH, William: *Analiza frumosului* (traducere de Theodor Redlow). Editura Meridiane, București, 1981.

cultural movement, which is specific to the elements of the cultural organism. Based on this, we exposed the construction, functioning and behavior of the cultural organism.

Chapter III "Cultural Organism" is dedicated to the parallelism between the museum collection and the cultural organism. With the help of the museum collection we demonstrate the existence of the "cultural organism" entity and describe its anatomy and functioning, while being able to bring it in the perceptible spectrum ("visible"), as a massive structure corresponding to a *hyperobject* in the sense of Timothy Morton⁴'s ideas. The chapter begins with the timeline of the Ornithological Collection of the Natural History Museum in Sibiu, and it continues with the anatomical illustration of the collection taken into account as a case study in this paper. After representing the component parts of the cultural organism in the form of counterparts homologous to biological organisms, we discussed how the collection works, focusing on its metabolism that is a fundamental characteristic based on which the status of organism can be attributed to it. The last part of the chapter is dedicated to the genesis, evolution and replication of collections from the perspective of their functioning as cultural organisms.

Chapter IV "Additional arguments for the existence of the cultural organism" has as goal a series of objectives that seek to complete the argument for the existence of cultural organism and the manifestation of museum collections in the form of these entities. The chapter begins with the description of the main directions of argumentation and continues with the completion of the concept of cultural field. A representative part of this chapter is dedicated to the theoretical arguments corresponding to the bibliographic sources, in which the theories of four reference authors are discussed: Leo Frobenius⁵, Pierre Bourdieu⁶, Bruno Latour⁷ and Timothy Morton⁸. The first case is about the correspondence between culture and the biological organism, the second is about the cultural field, the third is about the capacity of action (*agency*) of objects, and the fourth is about the characteristics of hyperobjects. The chapter ends with a report on the nature of objects in the cultural space, in order to demonstrate their hybrid behavior from the perspective of the material and immaterial dichotomy and to finally confirm the cultural fraction as a component of their unitary structure.

⁴ MORTON, Timothy: *Hyperobjects – Philosophy and Ecology after the end of the world*. University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota, 2013.

⁵ FROBENIUS, Leo: *Paideuma: schiță a unei filosofii a culturii (aspecte ale culturii și civilizației africane)* – traducere de Ion Roman. Editura Meridiane, București, 1985.

⁶ BOURDIEU, Pierre: *Regulile Artei, Geneza și structura câmpului literar*. ART, București, 2017.

⁷ LATOUR, Bruno: *Reassembling the Social: An introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford UP, Oxford, 2005.

⁸ MORTON, Timothy: *Hyperobjects – Philosophy and Ecology after the end of the world*. 2013.

Conclusions

The general conclusion of this paper is that the initial hypothesis proposed in response to the question *How do museum objects function and how are they organized, through their materiality and their values, from the cultural perspective?* is confirmed. Thus, our thesis is that museum pieces are not inert objects, but they are able to generate active systems with the capacity of self-organization and self-functioning, respectively contexts such as networks in which the action capacity is redistributed between human and non-human actors, superstructures that we can name *cultural organisms*.

The general conclusion is detailed by the conclusions corresponding to each chapter of the thesis, which can be summarized as follows:

1. The nature of the elements of the cultural organism supposes both a material and an immaterial side of them, which gives them the possibility to exist and to manifest themselves in cultural spaces, different from the physical ones, but equally real; these elements carry out a particular form of movement, namely the cultural movement specific to the "third kingdom", as Leo Frobenius⁹ calls it.

2. The cultural movement is based on the manifestation of objects in the cultural field, a concept that is similar to the one proposed by Pierre Bourdieu¹⁰. In our view, it also integrates the capacity for action recognized by Bruno Latour¹¹, thus having a hybrid nature inclusive for objects. That field and its effects can be studied by analyzing the aesthetic value in the context of its dynamics.

3. Ensembles of museum objects, as well as the objects themselves, can acquire "organic" value through their organization and arrangement analogous to the structures of biological organisms, which is reflected in the correspondence between the two types of systems when compared. From the analysis of the collection's metabolism we obtained the main empirical argument that demonstrates a specific pattern of the complex and autonomous functioning process of the museum collection.

4. The theoretical arguments in the papers of some reference authors confirm our own results regarding the functional autonomy of sets of objects and their own capacity for action, which is an addition in demonstrating the existence of cultural organisms and the behavior of museum collections as such entities.

⁹ FRUNZETTI, Ion: „Prefață” la *Paideuma*. Editura Meridiane, București, 1985, p 6.

¹⁰ BOURDIEU, Pierre: *Regulile Artei, Geneza și structura câmpului literar*, 2017.

¹¹ LATOUR, Bruno: *Reassembling the Social: An introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, 2005.

The essential personal contributions are that we have introduced the term *cultural organism*, which offers a conceptual advantage in different directions of research of cultural structures, and we have brought in a perceptible plan an entity that, although obvious and present in the immediate vicinity of most of us, is still imperceptible, thus exposing a method that can be useful in emphasizing other seemingly "invisible" structures. In short, the personal contribution consists in demonstrating the existence and in the demonstration of the cultural organism's anatomy, previously unknown in the study of museum collections.

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