

**BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY, CLUJ-NAPOCA**  
**FACULTY OF THEATRE AND FILM**  
**DOCTORAL SCHOOL IN THEATRE AND FILM**

**Besieged by Creativity.**  
**A Perspective from within the Cluj-Napoca Independent**  
**Cultural Scene**

- Doctoral Thesis Abstract -

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2021.

## Doctoral Thesis Table of Content

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>ARGUMENT.....</b>  | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>   | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>METHODOLOGY .....</b>  | <b>13</b> |
| <b>CHAPTER 1. CULTURAL POLICIES BETWEEN SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND ECONOMIC PRESSURE .....</b>   | <b>16</b> |
| 1.1. INTRODUCTION .....   | 16        |
| 1.2. POLITICS OF THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION: CULTURAL DEMOCRATIZAION (FRANCE) .....  | 20        |
| 1.3. THE EXPERIENCE OF ARTS AND CULTURE TURNED INTO CONSUMPTION (UNITED STATES OF AMERICA) .....                                      | 27        |
| 1.4. SELF-MANAGEMENT – THE YUGOSLAVIAN MODEL OF CULTURAL POLICIES .....   | 30        |
| 1.5. THE NEW WORLD ECONOMY .....  | 45        |
| 1.5.1. <i>The Global Paradigm of Creativity; The Creative Class</i> .....   | 49        |
| 1.5.2. <i>The Creative city. What Are Cultural and Creative Industries?</i> .....   | 57        |
| 1.6. THE CREATIVITY SHIFT – THE EVOLUTION OF EUROPEAN CULTURAL PROGRAMMES .....   | 68        |
| 1.6.1. <i>From Symbolic to Political</i> .....  | 68        |
| 1.6.2. <i>Changes in Discourse, Changes in the Sector</i> .....   | 72        |
| 1.6.3. <i>The Creative Europe Spirit</i> .....  | 78        |
| 1.7. CONCLUSIONS .....  | 92        |
| <b>CAP. 2. THE BIRTH OF A CONTEXT – CONDITIONS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF THE ROMANIAN INDEPENDENT PERFORMING ARTS CULTURAL SCENE .....</b> | <b>94</b> |
| 2.1. INTRODUCTION .....   | 94        |
| 2.1.1. <i>The Establishment of the Romanian Independent Sector</i> .....  | 97        |
| 2.1.2. <i>The Emergence of the Romanian Independent Movement. Case Study on Bucharest.....</i>  | 100       |
| 2.1.3. <i>The Cultural Independent Sector in Big Cities, Focus on Cluj-Napoca</i> .....   | 105       |
| 2.2. THE CHANGING NATIONAL CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE 2000S.....   | 110       |
| 2.2.1. <i>Crystallization due to the Extension of the Independent Phenomenon.....</i>   | 113       |
| 2.2.2. <i>Cultural Dynamics in Cluj-Napoca</i> .....  | 115       |
| 2.2.3. <i>The Creation of the Social Artistic Discourse – Catalyst for the Independent Movement in Cluj-Napoca</i> .....              | 119       |
| 2.3. NEW BEGINNINGS. THE THRIVING PERIOD .....  | 122       |
| 2.3.1. <i>The Global Economic Crisis, a Pretext for the Emergence of New Independent Spaces and Ideological Nuancing</i> .....        | 129       |
| 2.3.2. <i>Aesthetic Differentiation</i> .....   | 131       |

## SUMMARY

*Besieged by Creativity. A Perspective from within the Cluj-Napoca Independent Cultural Scene* studies the way in which European cultural policies pertaining to the creativity paradigm are formulated in Cluj-Napoca. Due to the connection between European cultural policies and the creative economy, the economic value of culture and creativity takes precedence over their symbolic and social value. Culture and creativity are appreciated for their capacity to bring a competitive advantage and as necessary ingredients to support innovation. The new perspective entails a language and competences borrowed from business, thus impacting on the ethos of culture, which is predominantly non-profit and subsidised, thus serving as a public service which facilitates audiences' access to culture. The new policies result in an imbalance between the non-profit and the profit-making cultural environments, as the contribution to creating more employment and to the GDP becomes a priority over culture's contribution to knowledge or to the social transformation process. The case study on the *Fabrica de Pensule* project in Cluj-Napoca is an example that serves to better understand the effects of a paradigm shift which happened at the same time as the city's switch from a post-industrial to a creative city identity. This research reveals how the independent cultural scene in Cluj-Napoca relates to these changes whose effects are already visible in the gentrification phenomenon based on urban regeneration policies, as well as the phenomena of festivalization, commercialization of culture, and neutralization of critical artistic discourse.

### **Research Motivation**

The importance of this research endeavour stems from its shining a light on the profound changes that have occurred within the cultural sector amid the adoption of the creativity paradigm as a development model for European cultural policies. Such policies influence countries and cities that lack a solid cultural policy tradition, Cluj-Napoca being an example that takes on and implements European policies in various fields. Although this

study focuses on the cultural life of Cluj-Napoca, which bears specific characteristics, many aspects can be considered by the cultural world in other cities that already face the challenges of the creativity shift or will do so in the future. Throughout my research, I have understood its usefulness, not only directly for the professional community connected to the practical or academic-theoretical dimension of the cultural world, but also for Romanian municipality representatives who wish to develop a set of local cultural policies.

The seeds of this research were a series of empirical findings made while working in the field of culture in Cluj-Napoca, i.e. as myself and other colleagues worked to build the organizational structure of the *Fabrica de Pensule* contemporary art space. The emergence of this space in the eponymous building of the former paintbrush factory on Henri Barbusse Street marks a period of *transition* in the city's life: from the post-industrial time, when the city had no clear identity, to a time when it adopted a strategy to support culture and creativity as an agent for urban development, which has recently been replaced with the image of a city of innovation.

My being directly involved in the independent scene allowed me to structure a necessary reflection after sixteen years of work in the field and imprints a touch of subjectivity to this research conducted from the perspective of somebody who has been directly engaged in the sector under analysis. Therefore, by experiencing the above-mentioned changes, I felt an ever acute need to reflect on and understand the connections between the local, the European, and the international contexts, which together make up the foundation of the structural frameworks within which the independent cultural sector operates.

## **Research Methodology**

In devising and drafting this paper, I used four research methods, such as academic research, the self-ethnography approach based on self-observation and reflexive analysis of the professional context, the semi-structured interview-based sociology method, and the analysis of the quantitative data of ten years' worth of cultural project selections by the Cluj-Napoca municipality.

The research started in the first part of 2018 with a bibliographic review of English, French, and Romanian-language scientific literature in the field of critical theory, sociology, creative economy, cultural policies, and studies on independent theatre. In order to place the object under analysis, which started from a concrete case in Cluj-Napoca, in a wider, European and international context, I mainly used bibliography from abroad. To contextualize the Romanian independent (mainly theatre) scene, I used Romanian bibliography, conducted a study of my personal archive, as well as of the archives of some of the cultural actors discussed, reviewed studies and investigations on local and national topics. The information gathered via this research method is to be found in Chapter 2, while in Chapter 4, I used the critical apparatus previously developed to examine the situation of the cultural scene in Cluj-Napoca.

The second stage of this endeavour consists of a review of EU documents, which together make up the European cultural policies, i.e. decisions establishing funding programmes, commissioned studies, and European agendas for culture. Among the administration's official documents consulted, especially for the final chapter, were the Cluj-Napoca 2014-2020 Strategy for Development, the city's Cultural Strategy and its Application for the final European Capital of Culture national selection. Besides the above-mentioned documents, I also reviewed studies conducted by the Cluj Cultural Centre on working in the cultural sector and on the development of creative industries in Cluj-Napoca and the metropolitan area. This stage laid the foundation for the following analyses, as I had no scientific bibliography to turn to, especially with regard to the local situation.

The auto-ethnographic study conducted in 2019 is built around my reflection over on-site observations based on my experience in the cultural field. This method stands out in the case study on the *Fabrica de Pensule* project, as well as in the second part of Chapter 2, dedicated to the Romanian independent theatre scene.

The third research method consists of a semi-structured interview conducted with eighteen professionals in the field of culture. Following the interviews, I interpreted the qualitative data collected from the interviewees. Moreover, I used quotes from the interviews to support the arguments put forward throughout the research. The quotes are mainly found in Chapter 4, but also in the auto-ethnographic study. Due to the high-quality and richness of the information obtained from the interviews, I decided to write a final subchapter offering cultural players in Cluj a space for expression.

To test the hypothesis issued in this research, I also turned to analysing quantitative data regarding the results of the project competitions conducted in 2009-2019 in the framework of Law 350/2005. This way, I was able to see the encouraging evolution of the local budget, as well as the preference for certain categories of cultural operators from the musical field to other categories. For readability purposes, the most relevant data is presented as graphs under Chapter 4 and Annex 3.

### **Summary of the Chapters in the Doctoral Thesis**

The thesis consists of four chapters, one of which is the auto-ethnographic study on the *Fabrica de Pensule* project, and as a whole makes up a political-economic overview of Romanian independent theatre, with a focus on Cluj-Napoca, at the time of a paradigm shift. The analysis is applicable to the country's independent cultural scene of various fields, of course considering the common denominator of certain practices regarding financing, work organization, access to venues, and so on. Starting from rather intuitive observations related to the transformation that happened on the local cultural scene and which impacted the independent theatre scene directly, I aimed to understand their nature, roots, conceptual justification, and connections to the economic and political world. I looked for the necessary theoretical instruments to process, both intellectually and affectively, the changes perceived, of which one was that the artistic and cultural discourse was transmuting. I am referring to a discourse that promoted a social vision on the role of art and culture and valued the closeness with the city's less visible communities; that was replaced by a discourse marked by a turn towards neutral content, especially promoted in a language made up of words that were foreign to the field of culture, such as competitive advantage, deliverables, market, success measured through spectator numbers, etc. The example of Cluj-Napoca is in itself relevant for the purpose of this study, not only because the object of our research is situated in this city, but especially as it stands as a precursor of Romanian creative policies.

The first chapter, entitled „Cultural Policies between Social Responsibility and Economic Pressure”, is an effort to decode the context which made possible that which, at the beginning of my research, I called the replacement of the social discourse of arts and culture with a discourse on culture and creativity as an agent of economic value. However, before finding the said moment of change, I had to review materials that offered me broader perspectives on cultural policies, representing models used in various countries. To understand those models, I journeyed through the socio-political context that made them

possible, which is why they are presented as the mirror image of notable points in recent history.

Chapter 1 consists of three subchapters, each of them expanding on various topics. The text reflects my immersion in the post-WWII universe of cultural policies, in an attempt to reveal declining visions on arts and culture. Besides, I looked at the relation between culture and creativity, since present-day cultural policies aim to serve both fields, as the creative industries have become ever important. Among the cultural policies studied and presented from a somehow historical standpoint are the French, the American, and the Yugoslavian models.

The French model is representative at an international level and I was able to approach it due to my knowledge of the language and to my professional training in cultural management in France. French cultural policies rely on the involvement of the state, which subsidizes culture based on the belief that it is a public good. These policies have supported the democratization of culture, i.e. the process of opening from an elitist field to one that is accessible to all citizens.

The American model has evolved in the context of an absent state, thus developing a totally different approach in which, in order to stay afloat, the world of culture needs a market, and cultural products are only accessible to a consumer audience. The two models of Hollywood and Broadway convinced many states to follow this trend, due to the success based on achieving a higher income through a cultural business.

The model of Yugoslavian cultural policies is less known, so I treated it more extensively. This model offers a third possible road, as it is based on the concept of self-management, which became a state policy after the 1949 break with USSR. The concept of self-management allowed for the development of a thriving independent scene in the '70s, connected to the international cultural trends of the time, thus granting it a special place in the history of contemporary art.

In the context of moving from Fordist to post-industrial economy, major shifts emerged in terms of the state's presence and intervention in regulating economic life, resulting in notable changes in social life. The United States of America and Great Britain promoted minimal state policies, allowing the market to self-regulate. This change happened in parallel to technological advancement, which resulted in a different labour profile. Manual labour was replaced with intellectual labour, as production-based industry was overrun by the service industry. In a globalizing world, raw materials were replaced by information, which

was later overtaken by creativity. Thus, the knowledge economy was also called creative economy.

The paradigm of creativity, favoured by the globalization phenomenon, relies on the existence of a social class, on a type of urban development that gives rise to a creative city, and on a creative industry that makes up the current economic profile. All these concepts are the object of a consistent part of the first subchapter. As creative industries are linked to economic markets, the latter influence the stakes and the ethos of the cultural sector, which has in the meantime been renamed as the cultural and creative sector. The questions underlying this chapter were: Is the proximity to the engine of global economy a threat or a plus for culture and creativity? Who wins from this connection between industry and culture, economy and creativity? What kind of hybrid will result from the association between the two fields? What are the chances for survival of an independent cultural system preoccupied with the social value of arts and culture in a landscape marked by lack of support from *weakened* states and where there seems to be *no alternative* other than adapting to the new models of creative businesses? Will it be able to redefine itself through its own, badly cut, resources, while keeping its specific, non-commercial character?

The economic model of the state affects cultural policies, and creativity becomes promoted by various forums as a panacea for economic problems, leaving a false impression that culture finally receives its long-awaited recognition. The sudden inclusion of creative industries into the scope of cultural policies causes a rifts between their beneficiaries, in the form of a tension between the creative industries' for-profit character and the non-profit nature of a large part of the cultural sector. This tension will result in structural changes in the sector.

The creativity turn even affected European policies, which by then had promoted a symbolic social dimension of culture, deeply connected to European citizenship. This subchapter includes an analysis on the evolution of the European view on culture, as set out in the cultural programmes of 1996-2020. In the new European narrative, designed in response to the effects of the Great Recession that started in 2008, creativity sits at the core of EU policies. Strategic documents present culture and creativity as the main ingredients for innovation, which is the base of a better quality of life. The merger between the two results in renaming the European programme dedicated to culture as Creative Europe, which highly emphasizes the development of creative industries. The sub-programme Culture, dedicated to the non-profit cultural sector, has a much smaller budget than the sub-programme Media (dedicated to creative industries) and is stimulated to borrow new business models from the



world of business, so as to become self-sustainable in the future. In other words, it is stimulated to become a profit-making sector. Under Creative Europe, the figure specific to the cultural field – in the past, that of the manager, the producer, the cultural worker – is now that of the cultural entrepreneur.

This direction shift caused turbulence in the cultural and artistic world that were also visible in the Romanian space. Some of the central arguments presented by the programme Creative Europe refer to the emphasis placed by European cultural policies on the economic value of culture, through the cultural and creative industries' contribution to the GDP and to creating employment. The change of value, from symbolic, social-civic to economic, sows confusion among cultural professionals and makes space for this new type of professional trained to be competitive on the new markets of creative economy. A central point of the research refers to analysing the way in which the value tension mentioned in the case of European policies is taken over and processed locally in Cluj-Napoca. Nevertheless, to understand how these policies were adapted locally, I had to go through the short 24-year history of the Romanian independent performing arts scene, with a focus on theatre.

Chapter 2, “The Birth of a Context – Conditions for the Existence of the Romanian Independent Performing Arts Cultural Scene”, consists of three parts. It shows how the independent sector emerged and developed before and after the influence of Creative Europe started to set in in Romania. To better contextualize the Romanian independent environment, I looked back at the moment when it came into being, at the end of the ‘90s, when we saw the first companies led by independent artists in Bucharest and festival-type events in Târgu-Mureş. Moreover, for a better understanding of the basis of the present-day local independent scene, I looked at the conditions in which the Cluj-Napoca independent scene emerged back then and in the first part of the 2000s.

The analysis regarding the development of the national and local scenes is presented in relation to the major political-economic events in Romania, such as the transition to a market economy, the country's accession to the European Union, the 2008 economic crisis, the 2012 anti-austerity protests, the 2013 protests aimed at saving Roşia Montană. In my view, these last two events triggered an awareness of the social purpose of culture among the cultural workers in my generation. Thus, an aesthetic and ideologic wave subsumed to the intellectual left was consolidated and joined by a notable part of the independent theatre world. The echo of this wave has extended to part of the following generation of independent artists.

Throughout my research, I identified four generations of independent theatre artists and looked at several types of relationships which I perceived as vectors of independent life: stakes and attitudes, public and financiers, the relation with the state, with the employee vs. independent/freelancer status, with for-profit vs. non-profit. These types of relationships determine the way in which the independent scene relates to the structural changes brought about by the borrowing of European cultural policies in Romania. At the same time, in the context of certain confusions, beneficial to the profit-making cultural scene, between the concepts of private and independent, the above-mentioned relationships can outline an argument for a new definition of the independent theatre sector. This can be mediated by acknowledging the multiple ways in which the *independent* workers *depend* on the environment in which they activate, as the sector is rather characterized as *in(ter)dependent*.

The research continues in Chapter 3, “The Coagulation, Development, and Dissipation of the Social Discourse on Arts and Culture in Cluj-Napoca”, which presents my study on the *Fabrica de Pensule* project. In the background of this chapter, I aimed to capture the Cluj-Napoca independent scene’s shift to the paradigm of creativity and its transition from the symbolic, social value of arts and culture to the economic value. Having emerged in the context of the 2008 economic crisis, which caused a drop in real estate prices in Cluj-Napoca, the project and the community of *Fabrica de Pensule*, in the form known to the audience, was only possible until the city’s next real estate *boom*. Among others, the study intended to explain the conditions that made it possible for a notable part of the artistic community in Cluj-Napoca to coagulate, as well as those that led to its atomization. To this end, I focused on three dimensions, i.e. space, programme, and community, relative to an inside and an outside perspective, more precisely, the way in which the project was perceived by the media, the partners, the audience.

The auto-ethnographic perspective is one point of view from a possible collection of viewpoints of all the colleagues who contributed to the creation and the development of this unique project in the Romanian cultural space. In light of the subjective character of the study, I X-rayed the schism undergone by this community, which left a trauma not only on its members, but also on the close audience that was part of the wider community of *Fabrica de Pensule*. At the end of the research, I understood that the shift from one paradigm to the other was even felt by the community around *Fabrica de Pensule*, as the tension between profit-making galleries had a negative effect on the entire project, which was, in fact, non-profit.

The rebound of the real estate market was stimulated by the high demand for spaces and by urban regeneration policies, which turned the city's former factories into future office or living buildings. The reconversion of *Fabrica de Pensule Perom S.A.* into the *Fabrica de Pensule* contemporary art space was often used as an example to motivate the city's policies for urban regeneration through culture. Ironically, this space was among the first of a long list of cultural actors in Cluj-Napoca to face the issue of gentrification. The gradual loss of the space coincided with the loss of the community around it, with the dissipation of the echo created by the social discourse of the cultural events created at *Fabrica de Pensule*, and with the isolation in smaller art groups.

Starting from the example of the Cluj-Napoca *Fabrica de Pensule*, I noticed that the results of culture and creativity-based urban regeneration were replicable in other cities. The last Chapter (4), "The Offensive of the Creative City – Case Study on Cluj-Napoca", examines the situation of the independent theatre environment faced with the transformations stemming from the new identity of the city, which has been declared creative by the municipality's development strategy. The choice of an urban development direction based on the logic of the creativity paradigm is preceded by a series of decisions and actions undertaken by the administration, which wanted to stand out in the national and international landscape. Some of these actions include the city's application to the titles of European Youth Capital (2015) and European Capital of Culture (2021). The main questions I tried to answer in this final chapter were: How does the independent scene in Cluj process the tension of the triad of values, i.e. the symbolic, the social, and the economic dimensions of arts and culture, which arose when local policies embraced the European policies based on the creativity paradigm? What are their effects and how do they manifest at the local level? What are the entities and the mechanisms that promote the paradigm shift in Cluj-Napoca?

The moment when the applications for the above-mentioned titles were prepared, Cluj-Napoca – in line with the progressive aspirations of the local administration which was under pressure to maintain the image of a magnet-city – was in competition with other cities. In Cluj-Napoca, culture and creativity are supported because they are seen as distinctive indicators that attract multinational companies and their employees, i.e. the *desirable qualified, entrepreneurial human resource* mentioned in the municipality's strategy.

However, analysing the spectacular increase of the municipal budget for culture that can be accessed by non-profit organizations as per Law 350/2005, I noticed that this growth is not reflected at the level of independent theatre, nor of other categories of the independent scene in general. The higher budget was mostly directed at developing a musical cultural

market, propelled by major festival-type events. This led to a change in the local cultural dynamic, which before the pandemic was in a full festivalization process. The festivalization phenomenon has caused an imbalance in the local cultural cycle, with direct negative effects on the activity of the cultural actors that currently operate over several stages of this cycle, from creation, production, distribution, reception, and education. Instead, the above-mentioned imbalance promotes the development of distribution activities, in this case, entrepreneurs involved in event organizing or the music industry. At the same time, I analysed the hybridization of the local cultural scene, as it meets the practices and the discourse of cultural entrepreneurship. The chapter comprises the key moments related to the adoption of the creativity paradigm in Cluj-Napoca, the effects it causes in the independent cultural world, in conjunction with the spreading of the gentrification phenomenon, which was favoured by urban regeneration policies that further deepen social inequalities. The section ends with the voices of the cultural actors in Cluj-Napoca whose discourse took a stand on the redefining of their work and their field of activity.

The last two parts of the thesis present my original contributions. As we lack scientific literature on this topic, I applied the critical apparatus developed while drafting the first chapter to my own experience, to the data in the interviews conducted, and to the information between local reports and strategies.

At the beginning of this abstract, I mentioned that the empirical information on which this research was based was related to a very acute feeling that, in Cluj-Napoca, the artistic, cultural, and social discourse was replaced with a discourse based by economic value. The more I delved into the depths of the topic, the more I became aware of the global dimension of a major transformation that had been going on in the sector for much longer, and on several levels. Perhaps the most unexpected discovery of this intellectual journey is that, in the *Creativity Age*, cultural policies place the cultural sector on a lower position, while the creative sector has become their flagship. Thus, the creation, the artists, and the audience, which in the past stood at the core of cultural policies, are being replaced with *SMEs* and *start-ups* that deliver creative products to consumers. These policies, which I believe have mostly become creativity policies, do not focus on the creative, nor on creativity, but are a manifestation of global capitalism, forever in search of capital accumulation.

The epilogue of the thesis summarizes the conclusions of each chapter and puts them in perspective with potential future research topics considering the effects of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic on the cultural world. One such theme is an in-depth reflection aimed at conceiving a different work paradigm, capable to reposition arts and culture as

public services accessible to audiences and to protect them from the pressure of the profit logic. This paradigm would be based on the interdependence between the public and the independent sectors, thus generating a hybridization phenomenon between the two. Until we have a framework to enable the collaboration between the two environments that antagonized each other for too long, I believe it is necessary to reposition the local independent sector by accepting the mutual dependency between different cultural actors, and to create an environment more open to sharing resources of space, technical equipment, staff, so that together we are able to overcome the current crisis that has been gravely accentuated by the pandemic. In lack of a solidary moment between these actors, we will reach a point where, in the context of the gig economy, the triad *creativity – innovation – entrepreneurship* will set forth a new triad in the cultural life of Cluj-Napoca: *precariousness – social inequality – competition*.

#### **KEYWORDS**

Public culture, living culture, independent cultural sector, cultural policies, culture economy, festivalization, gentrification, creative industries, cultural entrepreneurship, precariousness, commercialization of culture, hybridization