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What Will Culture Look Like After the Pandemic?



*A return to the social life before the virus now seems impossible. Social and existential fears are rampant and dominate public communication. In view of widespread fake news, many media outlets no longer succeed in living up to their social responsibility. Social media is a colourful hodgepodge of opinions. Public space, as the agora of society, is being virtualised even further and at a faster pace. After the crisis, all physical third places will only be able to be revived or recreated under great restrictions. The global cultural exchange will be further decelerated in favour of the local, regional and national. **Michael SCHINDHELM**, Writer, Filmmaker and Member of the stars International Board, thinks that borders will again play a greater role – also, for better or worse, in culture.*

Despite all the alarm, there are also positive trends: people almost everywhere in the world have greater confidence in rational arguments and coping concepts than in the whisperers of conspiracy theories, religious fanaticism or New Age escapism. They have generally shown solidarity and responsibility for themselves and towards others. Governments have tended to act decisively after understandable uncertainty.

Women in particular have demonstrated great leadership qualities in such a time (see also the assessment of global institutions such as the WHO on this issue). The discourse on how to remedy the crisis has so far been largely transparent and conducted by experts.

Today's communication technologies have made it possible for people to follow current trends in the spread and control of the virus around the world. In the field of culture, too, crisis alliances and action groups have quickly been formed. Many cultural workers have contributed as enablers of communication among people in times of social isolation. Cultural workers can also be found among the "coronavirusheroes" of Politico Europe, among others.

Surely a market of ideas will now emerge to find out how to deal with them. To observe and influence this market can be interesting. Trends will certainly become apparent in the coming weeks as the paralysis gives way to a new objectivity.

The cultural consequences of the crisis must be considered in conjunction with the political, economic and social consequences such as:

- A high degree of social fear and insecurity, also provoked by the gloomy prognoses of experts (from virologists to economists).
- Dramatic economic slumps and resulting national debts are to be expected.
- A temporary increase in executive power at the expense of legislature is observed, with no foreseeable plans for what might follow after the introduction of a vaccine.
- A temporary reduction of social rights of the individual and of institutions.
- A growing resurgence of national institutions and resources.
- Renewed tensions between North and South in Europe, fear of a virtual “troika” dominance like in the Euro crisis, underlying sympathies for a “Latin alliance” within the EU (France, Italy, Spain) vis-à-vis the Protestant northern states (Scandinavia, Germany, Benelux).
- A new Eurocentrism due to the growing isolationism of the USA and expanding Chinese power.
- A new wave of xenophobia and populism (conspiracy theories).
- A growing localism in the face of the (negatively perceived) influences of economic and cultural globalisation.
- A decrease in desire for travel, especially intercontinental, reduction of travel in professional capacities.
- An acceleration of the progress in virtual communication versus physical space.
- Restrictions of life in public space impacting civil society and social events.

What effects do these trends in society as a whole have on culture in Europe?

A deep and long-term crisis in the financing of culture is to be expected. Some European governments have launched or announced support programmes for cultural workers and institutions. These include social benefits and support. Nevertheless, given the current number of public aid programmes in effect, it is likely that public debt (and that of smaller local authorities) will be immense. This will trigger a massive downward correction in cultural funding. The duration and effects of this correction are difficult to predict. However, the following can be expected: unemployment, thinning of the cultural landscape, alienation of culture and society, decline in production, lowered reception and reduced social effects of culture and cultural education.

While partially withdrawing its previous support for culture, the state may become more paternalistic in its attitude. Public culture, threatened by closures, unemployment and loss of significance, is thus also exposed to the danger of accepting state-authoritarian thinking and action. The question: How do we protect the freedoms and self-governance of culture?

Cultural work will undergo redefinitions of value in its digital or virtual forms: the virtual space not only as a means of communication, but also as the public space alternative to its physical counterpart, where cultural work takes place just as tangibly as in the physical

world and where producers and recipients/consumers exchange in diverse and innovative ways.

An increase in demand for traditional art, less for content-related and experimental art, with a stronger focus on the local cultural context. This will be to the detriment of international cultural work.

Commercial (often global) providers of culture will provide fierce competition to the respective actors of local cultural landscape(s). In this context, it remains to be seen whether local, non-global cultural producers can hold a firm position in local and physical public space while standing up to the presence of digital multinationals with alternative offers.

A hard fight for survival is expected between institutionalized and independent art. Innovative cultural policy will have to ensure above all that tradition and institutions in culture do not marginalize the new, alternative and non-institutionalized forms of culture.

Conclusion: The current pandemic will result in permanent changes to all areas of human life. Critical voices currently point out that our previous way of life had already been unsustainable. European politicians suspect that our society has “exaggerated many things in the recent past”. As with all historical pandemics, there is a sense of punishment for human sins. As long as this feeling cannot be manipulated for the purposes of populism and fundamentalism, perhaps it poses no need for worry.

Nevertheless, the rationalist worldview of our post-modern era is currently facing a great challenge. At present, it is not possible to predict in which direction cultural and social values will be shifted. But there will be a shift. Basically, we are currently seeing how certain early trends (new borders, anonymous globalisation, digitalisation/virtualisation) are being solidified and reinforced. One could therefore also counter the politicians that while some things may have been exaggerated, others have been understated. The result is that we now also have to live with, or compensate for, the lack of those things we have understated.

If material resources (and their scarcity) were to dominate the discourse on the future of our civilization in the coming months and years, the basic rights of our free and democratic society may come under severe threat. Benjamin Franklin is often quoted as having said: “He who would trade liberty for some temporary security, deserves neither liberty nor security.”

Culture has so far been an essential instrument for defending and promoting our – genuinely European – fundamental democratic rights. In difficult times, cultural creators and institutions have had to make the judgement call on submitting to the pressure of populism and fundamentalism and to howl with the wolves, or whether to communicate and embody an expanded world view in which the values of freedom, multiculturalism, human dignity, and so on, are confidently represented and developed. In the years 2020/21, the main direction of Europe's, and the rest of the world's, cultural development will surely be revealed to us.

Despite all challenges, there are good reasons to build on the robustness of European culture. It may sound paradoxical, but it is a simple fact: we can go back many decades in world history to compare the current crisis with earlier dramatic events. History also

makes it clear that Europe, in particular, has enjoyed a long period of relative stability. This stability has resulted in the culture of Europe today. Whatever happens to our society in the coming years, it will be hard to imagine why European culture should not continue to be a major driving force of our society and the world.



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