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**Beauty and the Beasts: Looking at the Cultural Economy
in Times of Climate Change, Pandemic and War**

Octavian-Dragomir JORA¹, Vlad I. ROȘCA^{2*}, Mihaela IACOB³,
Matei-Ștefan NEDEF⁴, Mihai-Răzvan NEDELCU⁵,
Alexandru Florin PREDA⁶

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Abstract

Arts, as distillates of cultures, capture assorted feelings spurring from disruptive/distorting events – environmental, sanitary, or warmongering, which, in some cases, are twisting and turning the sense(s) of “beauty” as well. The present article starts from the reality of calamities depicted in arts, pursuing the economic processes germane to the artistic/creative sector in times of societal debacle, preparing for the detection of qualitative and quantitative transformations in cultural production and consumption. The current societal state of affairs, that of a multilayered crisis, is scanned against a brief historical record. The stake of this study is to get a glimpse of “the state of the arts”, noticing the limitations of economic verdicts in art fiefdoms, and opening an original research avenue on the robustness, resilience, and antifragility of the cultural and creative industries/sectors.

Keywords: art, cultural/creative sectors, climate change, pandemic, war.

JEL Classification: L80, Z11, Z13, Q54.

1. Introduction

The three crises chosen for this essay on the “economy and economics of culture” are representative for the contemporary age; thus, culture/arts could not escape from

¹ Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, octavian.jora@rei.ase.ro.

² Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, vlad.rosca@fabiz.ase.ro.

* Corresponding author.

³ Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, mihaela.iacob@fin.ase.ro.

⁴ Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, nedefmatei10@stud.ase.ro.

⁵ Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, nedelcumihai17@stud.ase.ro.

⁶ Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, predaalexandru17@stud.ase.ro.

being affected by and absorbing their both material / physical and spiritual / intellectual offspring:

- the *climate crisis*, acknowledged as such globally, yet subject for contesting views, is critical for human species' relation with the "planet";
- the *pandemic crisis*, somehow fading away, stays relevant for our grasp on how to wield any trade-offs between freedom and (health) security;
- the *Russian-Ukrainian crisis/war* is quintessential for our understanding on the need to depart from barbarity and from the risks of extinction.

The concern for the human-nature relationship is part of the human nature itself, because the environment is the provider of critical resources for survival and thrive. Art captured this concern, as depictions of nature experiencing mutations over time – from Renaissance's revelation of the inspirational character of natural surroundings, as well as its revolution of perspective and spatial representation, to the immersive Impressionist seemingly sloppy strokes, emancipatedly sprawled *en plein air*, not in the confines of clogged workshops, to Land Art, with man giving up his hegemonic-industrial attitude towards environment in favour of a humbled-toned and harmony-chasing hook-up. But no matter how ecstatic or revering the attitude of painters (see Titian or Cezanne) or composers (hear Vivaldi or Enesco) looked with regard to our natural givens, Picasso (Stonard, 2018) seems to best describe the, otherwise, tensed encounter: "Through art we express our conception of what nature is not". A sense of apartness from the other living creatures and the neighbouring cosmos exhales from almost all representations of natural landscapes, especially in relation to human personages, and it is said that, within and through Art(s), one of the most important unifying movements humans critically need to assume is the one with the rest of the created (or chance-born) nature, for our entropic exchanges with it, erratically economic, uncoordinatedly competitive, will only secure a "Pyrrhic victory". Even if economists do not consensually agree whether free markets or political hierarchies are the best equipped to tackle environmental crisis, the latter is a fact.

Intermeshed with our environmental conundrums, the pandemic crisis left its mark on the cultural and creative economy. Gradually going through the stages of suspension, cancellation, and postponement of the characteristic interaction with the public, the cultural sector had to lose during the pandemic years, in addition to an inherently creative component, the real sources of validation and financing. The restriction of the dynamics of the consumption of arts in all its forms, the closing of performance halls, theatres, cinemas and museums, their sluggish and hesitant reopening and transition to the so-called form of normality, were doubled, in some cases, by the public's reluctance to (re)acquire consecrated freedoms, something that faded timidly and gradually, until the collective consciousness was regained (UNESCO, 2021). Although strongly affected by the pandemic, the cultural sectors have joined the creative ones, playing a leading role in maintaining the stability and mental health of the people, against the background of the extensive measures of isolation and social distancing, managing to strengthen recurrent communication channels and reach to the public through the digital medium (European Commission,

2021). Quantifying the impact of the pandemic on societies as a whole, the European Commission's *Single Market Report 2021* showed that the cinema industry in the EU reported a 70 % drop in box office receipts in 2020, while music halls saw a decline of revenues by 64 %, and museums faced revenue decreases of up to 75-80 %, while UNESCO noted losses within the cultural and creative industries, in 2020, of 20-40 %.

On top of all this climate of (un)natural uneasiness, there is the threat of a widespread/worldwide war, having as inception point Russia's aggression on Ukraine. "*Inter arma silent musae*": this may be the first impulse in associating war with arts. The social definition of art, as the product of the indivisible work of the creator who is defined by its uniqueness, is a legacy of the tormented 19th century (Létourneau, 2022). This tensed period in the history of humanity, as well as the following 20th century, was strongly blistered by the interstate military conflicts which took place, in their most intense developments, in Europe, deeply marking our civilisation. From Napoleon to Hitler, the European continent experienced many periods of abusive appropriation of foreign heritage when artistic looting was being part of the "law of war" of the time. Unfortunately, the Napoleonic wars arrived at a period in the history of humanity when there was not necessarily an awareness of the cultural importance of goods and works of art and this practice was exported outside the continent with colonial expeditions and imperialist policies (Jora et al., 2018). It took the Nazis' obsession with the hoarding of cultural objects and goods and works of art to wake up the West. First with the creation of *Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Program* (Kirrily, 2021) during the Second World War to recover property stolen by the German army and then with the *1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*, the international community finally acknowledged the role of heritage and the risks for art(s) in times of wars.

The proposed discussion starts by acknowledging the (economically) complicated framework for artistic expression (Throsby, 2001; Jora, 2016) and tries to address a fundamental question, without having the pretense of providing the answer in the following pages, but rather of igniting a research route that the current literature did not cover, this to the detriment of cultural/creative sectors' stakeholders: is art necessarily at loss in times of crisis (when people seem to restrict themselves to satisfying more material needs) or, on the contrary, artists and their ecosystems can capitalise on crises, since the very essence of the artistic world/communities is to critically and creative deal with realities (as opposed to inertias and inflexibilities common to other social fields)?

After a brief statement of the problem and a short point on the methodological choice, the essay is streamlined to three theme-based case studies, devoted to a certain "art"/industry and scrutinising the way in which individuals or organisations from it responded to one of the three above-noted societal crises.

2. Problem Statement

The intersections between societal crises (environmental, pandemic, military) and artistic expressions, reviewed from an economic perspective, though not necessarily abundant in the (economics and business) literature, reveal to us at least some insights with the potential to become the starting point of our own inquiry.

2.1 Environment-Friendly Messages and Materials

Climate change is the ultimate form of environmental derangement (Nordblad, 2021), and humans are supposedly its main source or at least the escalator factor. Artists, much more convincingly than industries and governments, pay their fair share to the restoration of the natural equilibria or, at least, not to add to the imbalance. Their messages are intended to be strong. For instance, drawing attention to the phenomenon of “ghost forests”, as dead remnants of once-green woodlands due to rising sea levels and extreme weather events (hurricanes, drought), artist Maya Lin “planted” 49 dead, leafless, branchless cedar trees, each being around 13 meters tall, in the middle of the Madison Square Park (Choi et al., 2023).

The “forest grave” has a reply in the form of a “sunk forest”, created by the eco-artist Jason de Caires Taylor, at the Ayia Napa Underwater Sculpture Museum, where snorkelers and divers can admire 93 works of submerged art, including hybrid trees and life-size human figures designed to facilitate the repopulation with coral formations in a portion of Mediterranean that currently is devoid of marine life. Such pro-climate change awareness manifestos are legion, even if the artistic sensibility is not always in phase with scientific sense in identifying unambiguously the true culprits and the right remedies. One of the main risks with regard to the appeals against climate change inaction is related to calculating and modelling the cost of “climate action”, mainly when “action” is based on coercive measures rather than on securing the consent of the actors (Jora et al., 2022), with the anti-market camp claiming intellectual victory – see Fremstad and Paul (2022) vs. counterarguments from Zitelmann (2023).

2.2 Physical Quarantine, but Digitalised Contagion

As Bonin-Rodriguez and Vakharia (2020) pointed out, the arts and the rest of the cultural realm were one of the leading sectors negatively impacted by recent crises, more notably the COVID-19 pandemic, as lockdowns all around the world confirmed its status as “non-essential”. “Non-essential” is a crucial term describing the impact of recent instability on the cultural economy. Cox et al. (2020) stress, in a quantifiable manner, the decline in spending on non-essential goods and services in the United States, following the proliferation of pandemic sentiments. The authors cover the behavioral economics of consumers who, on the backdrop of the pandemic, shifted their focus toward essential goods and services (such as basic groceries, fuel, utilities, and health), while so-called “non-essential” goods such as restaurant meals, accommodation, clothing, or art/culture-related goods or services have taken a backseat in terms of priority in the average consumption baskets.

For instance, cinematography, the “seventh art”, is no stranger to the socio-economic changes that described the pandemic state of the world. However, with the help of technology, more and more artistic and/or cultural activities made their way into the quarantined homes of consumers. One of the most important recent trends in technology is considered to be video streaming. The market for video streaming services also increased considerably in terms of value: USD 59.14 billion in 2021 (Grand View Research, 2021), with competition among players such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney Plus, and HBO Max. And the best term for this is “Technoculture”, the mix between technology and culture, coined by Penley and Ross (1991) in their homonym book. Such technological innovations transformed the landscape of the cinema, since more and more consumers have access to a larger and freer market, which can be accessed from anywhere and at a competitive price.

2.3 Art Galleries, Ethical Canons, and Cannonades

There is a constant trend that appears on the art market during wartime periods. With the risk of physical damage increasing in the occupied countries, as more and more objects were targeted, their economic value ended up rising, inciting more transactions. Nevertheless, during times of crisis, this kind of assets become safer to invest in than financial assets or real estate, as their value is not affected directly by the events of the outside world.

For instance, in the case of the Netherlands, during the World War II, “in real terms, the price of paintings increased more than fivefold between 1940 and 1945” (Euwe, Oosterlinck, 2017). The Dutch art market had a boom as the demand for old masters and Dutch art increased (Jeroen, 2018). This paradox occurs as “the cultural economy is more complicated including both the monetary and non-monetary aspects of the way culture is produced, disseminated, and exchanged” (De Buekelaer, Kim-Marie, 2018).

On the short term, the price and the demand are falling because of the non-liquid character of this asset class, but on the medium and long term, the situation is reversed. It remains to be seen if this phenomenon is recurring also in today’s case of Russian-Ukrainian war. Another intriguing aspect, all the more that there is basically no centralized data that observes the evolution of the market in this regard, is related to what happens with the artistic/cultural markets on the aggressor state’s side. In the light of Russia’s “special operation” (that is, aggression) against Ukraine, how will the Russian art markets be affected?

3. Research Questions / Aims of the Research

As stated from the outset, the present essay/study aims to open up the pathway for a more thorough research that, ultimately, will be indicative and instructive for those involved not only heuristically, but economically in the cultural sector. Such questions/inquiries are on the “radar” of cultural entrepreneurs and policymakers, too. They will not necessarily be answered as such in the present investigation; still, this essay is insightful for systematic, follow-up approaches intended to meet them:

- Q1 – Are crises (whether they are ignited by natural disasters alone, or of a mainly anthropic origin, such as wars, political disputes, economic/financial crisis, or of mixed origin, such as pandemics and inadequate countermeasures to them, etc.) detrimental/propitious for (certain and rather which?) cultural-artistic industries?
- Q2 – Being noted the ambivalent impact (positive and negative) of crisis episodes on artistic creatorship and its commerciality/marketability, which (re)actions, coming from the main categories of stakeholders, could be found responsible for the maximisation of opportunities, as well as for the minimisation of challenges?
- Q3 – Could the lessons derived from the successful responses to crisis situations provided by the cultural/creative industries, as, allegedly, the most dense fields in terms of innovative approaches/actors, be translated in other sectors or are they rather idiosyncratic, non-replicable and non-scalable in the rest of the economy?

4. Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative research methodology and is structured around a case study framework. A comparative approach is taken to analyse and compare three different cases (one for each problem statement assumed in the research) in order to gain insights into the research topic. In the end, the studies are compared to answer the general problematic of the investigation. Therefore, we employ an analytical framework to create understanding to the given situations and explore key topics. The data for the study was gathered from secondary desk research, which relied on empirical evidence obtained from research on cultural economics. This method involved reviewing previously published sources of information on the subject matter, including scientific journals, newspaper articles, and industry reports. ConnectedPapers and Litmaps were used as tools to reference relevant academic research in the field.

5. Findings

Case Study no. 1: Antiques Markets – “The” Vanguard Cultural and Creative Industry?

Despite the quarrels between the (vast majority of) pro-government intervention economists backing “Green Deal” approaches (see the EU and the US law packages) and (the fringe minority of) market supporters, there are at least some uncontroversial avenues for those who want to embrace and emulate an eco-responsible stance: the (voluntary version of) *circular economy*. Artists and artisans are much closer than any other economic category in practicing the market-based version of circular economy, for they enroot their option for “reduce, reuse, and recycle” on the consented participation of the “green” customers. From an art(istic) point of view, circular economy is the restorative-and-regenerative-by-design economic model.

One of the most lucrative segments of the artistic circular economy are the antiquities markets (Cuomo et al., 2021). At the bottom of the supply chain there are the “flea markets”, present today in most capitals and big cities of the world and

credited to be reminiscences of the marketplaces of Antiquity (Korsunova et al., 2021; Machado et al., 2019). They are part and parcel of the profound community fabric, interweaving cultural diversities, of social values and norms, and being an arena in which different people or groups interact and negotiate not only products, but also identities (Preda, 2010). Through trading arts items, flea markets create a sense of community, bringing people together regardless of their backgrounds, while also providing a unique shopping experience, where one can discover rare and one-of-a-kind items while supporting small artists, crafts, businesses, or local entrepreneurs. The labyrinthine space of the fairs invites explorations of interconnected worlds, topologies of intimacy, and affectivity. On the upper end of the value chain there are the famed antiques restorers/dealers, like Drew Pritchard, the British star of the TV series *Salvage Hunters*.

Around Europe, some of the most appreciated antiques/flea markets (Moldoveanu, 2023) are those in Berlin, Germany (rare books and war tokens), Bilbao, Spain (collectible coins and vintage vinyl), Copenhagen, Denmark (cheap designer clothes and kitchenware), Edinburgh, Scotland (chic charity shops and special events), Helsinki, Finland (Finnish fabrics and iconic tableware) or Paris, France (French designer fashion and fine food). In a sense, commonalities of the past are the art of the present/future, and many “oldies” end-up integrated in upscale new products, when preservation and restoration is not enough to catch the eye and the pocket. Romania also proposes its medieval relic flea market in Negreni, Cluj county (old paintings, furniture, or communist memorabilia) (Răcășan, Egresi, 2020; Stănică, Stănică, 2020).

And, definitely, circular economy is a much more decent and elegant response to environmental/climate concerns than “symbolically” vandalizing (even if not physically irretrievably) classical works of art. In 2022, environmental activists from “Just Stop Oil” threw tomato soup at Vincent van Gogh’s *Sunflower* painting, exhibited at the National Gallery in London, while activists from the German-Austrian environmental group New Generation threw mashed potatoes in Claude Monet’s *Les Meules* painting, worth more than \$110 million, on display at the Barberini Museum in Potsdam (Luke, 2023). The message: “What is more valuable, art or life? Is it worth more than food? More than justice? Are you more concerned about protecting a painting than the planet and people?”. The cause-effect logic requires “no comment” to such radicalistic manifestos and manifestations.

Case Study no. 2: Tehnocultural Revolution: Did Telework Reshape “Home Cinemas”?

The economy of arts is more dynamic thanks to the technological innovations of the last years, cinema in the form of movies and TV shows making no exception. The era of actively being present in the cinema is slowly fading away, the same being true for the other means of consuming cinematography such as DVDs or Blu-Rays. In fact, video streaming is the dominant means of consuming content (Gaustad, 2019). The recent socio-economic conditions (especially the pandemic) may have

helped the video streaming sector, as lockdowns forced consumers to participate in the cultural economy from the comfort of their homes (Jia, 2022).

With Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, HBO Max and Disney Plus, the global streaming services sector becomes increasingly competitive. These platforms manage not only to disseminate content to their customers, but to create it as well, even acquiring or merging with other companies or studios, such as HBO, Discovery and Warner Bros. being fused formerly under the umbrella of telecom goliath AT&T (CNBC, 2022). Producers all over the world can create art under the aegis of a streaming platform, location not being a prerequisite. It can be argued that the „brave new free market” of streaming is eroding Hollywood’s “old order”.

A PwC (2022) Global Entertainment & Media Outlook 2021-2025 (GEMO) report shows that, globally, the video streaming services market has grown at rates between 12.4% and 34.5% over the past five years, to 58.3 billion euros in 2021, with the trend expected to continue, to a global market worth of 81.3 billion euros. 2022 came with new shows worth tens of millions of dollars, new players and massive merger potential. However, while reassuring investors that they will report profits in the next 2-3 years, most streaming services have announced investment cuts this year, adding a new feeling of prudence within this market.

Case Study no. 3: Is The Free Production and Distribution of Russian Art South Down?

Protesters gathered in San Francisco on March 6th 2022 to demand peace in Ukraine. They painted a replica of a 1982 work titled *A dove has spread her wings and asks for peace*, by Ukrainian artist Maria Primachenko, a self-taught painter which Picasso once called an artistic miracle. The week prior, a small museum that housed her paintings burned to the ground, destroying up to 25 of her major works, according to some accounts. Satellite images show that none of the surrounding structures was damaged, indicating that the attack was premeditated. Also, other locations were completely razed by military attacks, including the Babyn Yar Holocaust memorial complex and the Kuindzhi Art Museum. The Garage museum in Moscow, founded by socialite art collector Dasha Zhukova (Azizzade, Jular, 2021; Tarasova, Putz, 2021), is facing exhibit cancellations by artists due to Zhukova’s ties to sanctioned oligarch Roman Abramovich, her ex-husband (Jackson, Hannah, 2022; Art Monthly, 2022). Despite Zhukova’s efforts to distance herself from Abramovich and Garage’s board of directors, and to create an identity of her own, some artists feel it is not enough and are choosing to pull their artistic exhibits from the museum.

While during the Napoleonic wars and the World War II artistic looting took place in a “logic of trophy or de-nationalization of European patrimony” (Gacon, 2015), the looting of cultural objects and property as a systemic action of appropriation and destruction of heritage can have a completely different purpose: to erase the identity of the adversary. To Buckland (2013), cultural heritage is significant as it shapes our identity, loyalties, and behaviour. Cultural heritage can be understood as a legacy which is passed across generations and which reflects the

traditions, beliefs, values, or customs of a given society, defining who its members are and which are their roots, both in terms of identitarian recognition. Therefore, preserving the cultural heritage is a form of fostering social cohesion. Demolishing a culture's psychological and intellectual components comes also with destroying the physical manifestations or artefacts of what defines a community, country, nation. Protecting the cultural heritage and passing it on to future generations is a condition for preserving the traditions upon which future generations will be able to anchor themselves in the shared identity of the community and, thus, maintain this bequeathed identity.

On the other side of the battlefield, the Russian government has been urging the country's cultural communities to visibly demonstrate their support for both the military and Putin regime (Coalson, 2022). Large banners featuring the symbolic Z logo have been adorning theatres, museums, and other cultural spaces nationwide. This push is reflective of the government's desire to showcase unwavering patriotism and to publicly align the country's creatives with its military efforts. The international art community issued a range of measures intended to restrain as much as possible the means of Russian oligarchs to evade the sanctions through art trade, as part of the Western economic crusade against the Russian plutocracy. However, the manifest difficulty of enforcing decisions of this kind shows once again the lack of transparency in the art trade. Jackson and Hannah (2022) noted that, in 2020, a Senate investigation found that art intermediaries bought over USD 18 million in high-value art in the US via shell companies tied to Russian oligarchs, thus trying to dribble the sanctions following the 2014 takeover of Crimea. For artists, as citizens of a country that is at war, the stigmata on their art is, no matter how (un)just/(un)fair, a pervasive fact.

What is certain is that the longer the sanctions of the international art world, as, for example, the decision of the biggest auction houses in the art market to ban sales of Russian art from the beginning of June 2022 are going to last, the bigger are the chances of them leading the artistic communities into cultural precariousness. For instance, sales of Russian art have been cancelled by top fine art auctioneers such as Sotheby's, Christie's or Bonhams (The Guardian, 2022). This view of the matter is ignorant to some extent to the role that art could represent in such conditions for politically uninvolved Russian artists and collectors, who still need visibility, a chance of "mental salvation" and/or an act of resistance. Bringing the sanctions imposed, in principle, on critical sectors and industries for the warfare effort of the villain-state towards the personal level of certain individuals having Russian citizenship, but with no other proven link to Russian government aggressive actions (such as public endorsements or cautioning), is inconclusive in terms of helping the international cultural community in metabolizing the "right" sentiments and attitudes and blocking the dangerous financial flows that fuel the unprovoked and unlawful military intervention.

6. Conclusions

In this essay, we tried to explore how arts and the creators of arts fare at the intersection of three currently ongoing crises: the climate crisis, the pandemic crisis, and the military crisis between Russia and Ukraine. The qualitative results indicate that there is no generally viable rule to be applied, as crises can either be detrimental or beneficial for arts and their main characters. Crises can be a challenge for many art creators or cultural brands, but some find opportunities in them. The ability of the cultural sector to adapt to unforeseen circumstances and find creative solutions (which should actually be self-evident and without too many problems for such a sector) is not only critical to the survival of the cultural sector, but, more than that and, probably, more than it is the case for any other business sector, culture and arts can even strive from and get the so-needed inspiration in crises.

Therefore, we shall argue, cultural entrepreneurship ought to manifest itself in the same way as the wider, general, common-sense business entrepreneurship. By adopting an entrepreneurial stance in response to crises, art producers can create opportunities from crises, reduce challenges, and extract benefits therefrom, since the increase of value (artistic or monetary) is still a desiderate, irrespective of the harshness of times. We argue for the adoption of an entrepreneurial mindset in the cultural sector when it comes to dealing with crises of any sort, whether it is about running cultural businesses more efficiently, or about finding inspiration for artistic depiction. A mix of contextual factors and entrepreneurial skillsets can make crises becoming inspirational for new (managerial, technological) ideas and make art more robust, resilient, anti-fragile (transforming shocks into energies).

As we have shown, many times in history, crises have been the subject of artistic creation, and to name just a few well-known paintings: Diego Velázquez with *The Surrender of Breda*, Peter Paul Rubens with *Consequences of War*, Pablo Picasso with *Guernica*, or Nicolae Grigorescu with *Atacul de la Smârdan*, testimony of Romanian state-building and independent destiny, or painters who have made war scenes one of their preferred topics, such as Stoica Dumitrescu, Paul Molda, or Ion Bărbulescu. To name the plethora of movies created on war subjects or other crises would be futile. Not to mention that ecclesiastical paintings, as well as the secular paintings, abound in scenes of religious crises, from the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden to the Crucifixion of Jesus and many others. All in all, cultural entrepreneurship can, as argued, capitalise “on” and “in” crises.

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