

SHORT

ARTICLES

THINK

CULTURE

T

he Romanian Cultural Scene in Crisis Times

Romania
Dan
Matei




The famous
Cotofenești Helmet
(4th century BC).
National History
Museum
of Romania.
Presented in the
Gli ori antichi della Romania.
Prima e dopo Traiano exhibition,
Museo dei Fori Imperiali,
Rome, December 2010.



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Uncommon
Culture



...the tens of thousands of good books sold every week. And not only are they sold, but some are also read. One can see now in buses and subways people (including youngsters) reading books (and not only tabloids), which was unusual 2 or 3 years ago.

The good news is that there is some good news among the much bad news.

In my opinion, two paradoxes are prominent now in Romanian cultural life. The first: despite the big (and - for me - somewhat surprising) success of the Romanian cinema in recent years (e.g. Palme d'Or at the 2007 Festival de Cannes for Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*), the number of spectators in movie theatres is dropping dramatically¹. That does not mean the movies are not popular anymore with the Romanians - on the contrary, I would say. The number of movies broadcast all day long on the many, many TV channels is huge²; and not all of them are junk. Are we witnessing a change in the way the films are "consumed"?

The second paradox: despite the common belief that reading is less and less popular (mainly among the young), the (relatively new in Romania) newsstand editions of classical books are a huge success. Certainly, buying a Stendhal novel, for instance, for less than 4 euros is very convenient, but the price does not fully explain the tens of thousands of good books sold every week. And not only are they sold, but some are also read. One can see now in buses and subways people (including youngsters) reading books (and not only tabloids), which was unusual 2 or 3 years ago. Is that also a sign of decline of the public library and of the bookshop? And what will happen when the Romanian publishers (eventually) discover digital editions?

Mainly due to the severe economic crisis - but not only - there is much bad news from the cultural sector. As usual, when public money is short, the cultural institutions are hurt. The government imposes big cuts in the budgets, even for local authorities. That leads to big personnel cuts in the cultural institutions. For

instance, a couple of days ago, the Constanta Opera was closed³. In the Romanian mentality, the idea that a provincial capital (usually having a population of around 100,000) has a theatre used to be firmly accepted. Many of them have a philharmonic orchestra and some have operas. In the last 20 years, every local council of a large city without a symphonic orchestra expressed the ambition to have one. The large cities usually have several big museums⁴. Probably that era has come to an end. The crisis will change this mentality for a long time, I'm afraid.

Even the national cultural institutions are being merged and reduced⁵. The main problem is not the administrative turmoil, but the layoff of many professionals. Besides, the decline of incomes - starting July 1st, the wages in the public sector were mechanically reduced by 25%! - is dramatic. A few days ago, the government announced an increase of taxes on royalties! Freelance artists will be severely affected.

Now, beside the 2009 Nobel Prize for literature awarded to the Romanian-born German novelist Herta Müller, there is some good news too. Despite its reduced budget, the Ministry of Culture continues to provide grants for editorial projects (mainly for reference works) and for cultural projects⁶. The Romanian museums continue to organise a significant number of important exhibitions, both in Romania and abroad. The theatres are usually full and the theatre festivals are - in general - alive and well⁷.

Finally, the good news - of most interest for us - is the major importance given to the cultural component of the "Romanian digital agenda", called *eRomania*⁸. The stated objectives of *e-Cultura*, i.e. this cultural component, are:



The Final Judgement
(detail), 1800-1801.
The Targu Gangulesti Church
(Vâlcea County, Romania),
presented in the exhibition
*Highlights of Orthodox
spirituality. Churches with
exterior mural painting
in Oltenia*
(18th-19th centuries),
Terni, Italy,
December 2010.





- to expose the full agenda of the cultural events in Romania;
- to facilitate cooperation among the cultural institutions (museums, libraries, theaters, orchestras, etc.);
- to present - in an encyclopedic way - the Romanian cultural heritage.

Thus, the *e-Cultura* portal should facilitate everybody's access to the cultural resources, in their digital incarnations. In particular, access will be greatly improved for disabled citizens.

As the national aggregator for Europeana.eu, CIMEC has great expectations from this project. We expect not only a solid and flexible software platform for the Romanian Digital Library and for its interoperability with Europeana.eu, but also a convenient set-up of an organisational framework for the generation of digital cultural content within the Romanian cultural and educational institutions.

Even in crisis times hopes are allowed!



Image from the "Saint Nicolas" Church (Brădiceni, Gorj County, Romania), presented in the exhibition *Highlights of Orthodox spirituality. Churches with exterior mural painting in Oltenia (18th-19th centuries)*, Terni, Italy, December 2010.

- 1 A couple of weeks ago, Saturday, early afternoon, downtown Bucharest, in one of the well known movie theatres, my wife and I were the ONLY two spectators at Haneke's *Das weisse Band - Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte* (Palme d'Or at 2009 Cannes Film Festival)! Of course there are many smaller cinemas in malls. I never saw such a cinema more than half full.
- 2 ... not to mention the unknown - but large! - number of movies downloaded every day.
- 3 Constanta (fifth largest Romanian city, population 300,000+) had an opera since 1957.
- 4 For instance, my home town, Baia Mare (population 120,000+) has four big museums: art, history, ethnography and mineralogy. True: from time to time the local councils merge some of them and after some years they are split again - always in the name of better management, of course!
- 5 My own institution - the Institute for Cultural Memory - CIMEC - will be merged in the autumn with the National Institute for Heritage. CIMEC won such a grant for an expositional project in Italy.
- 6 On top of that, my favourite novelist, the famous Hungarian writer Péter Esterházy was recently made commander of the "Order of Cultural Merit" by our minister of culture.
- 7 The government's strategy *eRomania* attempts to offer about 300 on-line services for the citizens and businesses by the end of 2011 and to achieve interoperability among the information systems of the public institutions. It is estimated that its implementation will cost about 500 million euros, until 2012.