

Summary

Construction and Innovation. Heritage and the Arts in Cultural Studies
Habilitation thesis in Cultural Studies

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Cultural studies is a field that is above all interdisciplinary in the way in which it was described when it was founded in the British academic environment, exactly sixty years ago. In Romania, the doctoral specialisation of *Visual Cultural Studies* arose¹ when the Doctoral School "Space, Image, Text, Territory" (SD SITT) and the Centre for Excellence in the Study of the Image (CESI) have been inaugurated in 2016 at the University of Bucharest. Since then, the interdisciplinary character of our researches has been maintained through theoretical investigation as well as analyses on different arts and architecture.

The habilitation thesis that I am putting forward in this field deals especially with the aforementioned specialisation. I present and justify in this the relationship between, on the one hand, publications, institutional and research projects, and teaching activities that I have been carrying out for three decades at the University of Bucharest, and, on the other hand, the upbuilding of *Cultural Studies* in the humanities, especially in the research centre and department whose co-founder I am. Thanks to institutional collaborations, my academic trajectory at the Faculty of Letters, starting with the 1990s, was permanently undertaken with a view toward *construction and innovation* via an assimilation of theories and international disciplines. In my case, this expansion has taken me from literary studies (structuralism/narratology) toward symbolic anthropology, history of mentalities, the study of the imaginary, and later, from critical theory (poststructuralism) to contemporary cultural studies.

The thesis contains two main parts: I dedicated the first part to a systematic outlining of the most important works that I have published in the aforementioned fields; the second is dedicated to the presentation of a professional portfolio and to the various directions that I propose for teaching and research (including doctoral supervision).

The introduction also has two levels. First, in my "Preamble: Going through the Filter of *Habilitation Thesis*", I sketched a set of conceptual vectors that organise the whole thesis: *construction–innovation, context–historical consciousness, meaning–hermeneutics, interdisciplinarity, multiperspectivism, cultural object– "presence effect", devices pertaining to site-specific representation, image–imagination–the imaginary*. Later, in "Contextualisations and Research

¹ The academic field *Cultural Studies* started in Romania in the decade 1990-2000 with the establishment of research centres and programmes in area studies, first at the Bachelor and later at the Masters level. The inauguration of the field in 2016 as a doctoral field in SD SITT/CESI took place after fifteen years of research in this centre and ten years of doctoral research (back then only in Philology). During this period, the specific methodology of the field was strengthened through research Masters programmes in interdisciplinary Cultural Studies, research projects and publications in the field. *Visual Cultural Studies* is a unique specialisation in the Romanian academic environment

Directions”, I succinctly outline the formative contexts in which I published the first interdisciplinary studies (during my pre-doctoral years), conceived already at the intersection between literary studies and anthropology, history of mentalities, theories of the imaginary, philosophy of art and history of ideas.

I have thus given relevance to the notion of “context” with the presentation of my own intellectual trajectory, projected on the historical, institutional and scholarly background of two politically opposed periods: 1984-1988–1990-1995. In my case, it was in these contexts that I have made the passage from the structural analysis of texts (decontextualizing the research object and closing it in on itself) toward a poststructuralist analysis (open and yet critical) of discourse and of the cultural object. Inasmuch as context, problematizations, and theoretical solutions have changed rapidly in the decades since that time, this last interpretative option is only partially to be met in my present research programme, which is focused on the historical, epistemological and ontological valorisation of the cultural object in the arts and heritage structures.

The first part of the thesis, entitled “Construction and Innovation. Interdisciplinary Models”, is dedicated to outlining the four research directions in my postdoctoral publications (after 2004).²

In the first sub-chapter, “The Theory and Archaeology of Antique and Medieval Imaginary”, I have presented the theoretical models that I put forward in the two volumes I included in this research direction: the first one, *Medieval Imaginary. Forms and Theories*³ and the second one, *Forgetting Rome. Studies in the Archaeology of the Imaginary*.⁴

In order to systematise these models, I analyse the following topics:

- *constructing* systems of power;
- the consciousness of political communities and of the various registers of public visualities (through iconographies, rituals, ceremonial objects);
- the construction of a political *imaginary*, which is historically and culturally representative;
- historical thresholds, urban and symbolic mutations, dislocations of systems of representation, and of power structures, even as pertains to major *innovations* (such as the movement of the Roman power centre from West to East, the officialization of Christianity, the breakdown of Roman beliefs, etc.);
- the aedils’ *historical consciousness*;
- *the presence effects* of political actors’ being on the stages of power, in public spaces, in *representation devices* (formed out of texts, images, objects, urbanism, and architecture).

In the first volume, I suggest a reading of the imaginary as a system, and for which I sketched two interdependent matrices. The first matrix is general and has a linguistic inspiration (“the grammar of the imaginary”) while the second one is tied to the specificity of a historical period, to wit the Orthodox Middle Ages (with a body of references to Romanian culture, particularly the written one). The argument in the second volume, pertaining to the political character of collective imaginary, was

² I only refer here to the two main volumes in which I discuss theoretical models of the imaginary. Individual articles and chapters in various collected volumes, as well the volumes that I edited can be found in the habilitation thesis and in the appended documents.

³ Laura Mesina, *Imaginarul medieval. Forme și teorii*, Institutul European, Iași, 2013; ed. a II-a, 2015.

⁴ Laura Mesina, *Uitarea Romei. Studii de arheologie a imaginarului*, Institutul European, Iași, 2013; ed. a II-a, 2015 [*L’oblio di Roma. Studi di archeologia dell’immaginario*, tr. in it. di Igor Tavilla, Mimesis Edizioni, Milano, 2024].

based on an “archaeology of ideas” – inspired by Michel Foucault’s *L’archéologie du savoir*, 1969 – extended to the ceremonies and philosophical vocabulary pertaining to images and the city-fortress.

At the centre of my research, I placed the *funus imaginarium*, a spectacle of the legitimating masks of the ancestors, which formed part of the imperial funerary ceremony (centuries 1-4 A.D.), through which I identified the major argument of the political character of collective imaginary. From this historical threshold, I drew a descending line toward Greek funerary ceremony and philosophy. I followed the echoes of these all the way to the point where was formed the Christian vocabulary for power and images. I returned, thus, to the 4th century, in order to observe the process whereby the foundation of Constantinople has been considered as being to the detriment of Rome, as well to analyse the consequences of this major mutation. I then followed several other important turning points (among them the reign of Justinian, 6th century; then iconoclasm, 7th - 9th centuries), which ultimately led to the final rupture, spiritual and institutional, between the “two Romes” (9th century).

Using this historical backdrop, I followed the Byzantine Christian power imaginary, the image of the *basileus*, the Christian *oikonomia*, and the antique values present in hesychast thinking. The research of the echoes of this movement in post-Byzantine cultures, as well as other subjects subsequent to these volumes took the form of other projects and studies published later.

In the second sub-chapter of this thesis, entitled “Space, Visuality and Medieval Intra-Textual Architectures”, I presented the interdisciplinary (micro)-method that I developed over time, and which I applied especially to the reading of Byzantine and post-Byzantine texts. These latter I analysed and interpreted not for their literary-rhetorical features, but rather as historical and political witnesses, as actors in the construction of power visualisation regimes. Even though texts did not play the same role for the collective imaginary as statues, ceremonies, or figurative frescoes, they did serve the same function in the institutional and political imaginary: that of memorialising the princely portrait, the guarantor of the community. My work traced historical treatises, court chronicles, Byzantine political pamphlets (for example, by John Malalas and Procopius of Caesarea), but also especially “the mirrors of princes”, including in the paraenetic post-Byzantine literature. Subsequently, I elaborated a proposal to interpret this corpus of medieval texts through the theory of the kind of texts generally called *speculum*. This interpretation completes and consolidates the micro-method of analysing the text as a historical witness and as at same time a cultural object that has an internal regime of power representation. In the vocabulary of this micro-method, I introduced terms and perspectives from literary theory, history of art, history of architecture, political theory, and philosophy of history. The approach is generally specific to cultural studies.

Closely linked to previous sub-chapters, the third one, “Historical consciousness. From/toward the Middle Ages”, summarises the studies in the field of historical hermeneutics dedicated:

- on the one hand, to author-princes of medieval political treatises and history (such as Neagoe Basarab, Dimitrie Cantemir),
- on the other, to researchers in Romanian medieval studies (in the fields of literary history and the history of art and architecture, from Virgil Vătăşianu, to Vasile Drăguţ or Radu Popa, and from Sextil Puşcariu to Dan-Horia Mazilu), studies that have sought to build and innovate in the field.

The following topics interested me in a particular way:

- formative contexts and their methods,
- echoes of cultural nationalism on theorisation,

- strategies for “exiting the cultural niche” and for internationalising Romanian medieval heritage (written culture, material culture, parietal art and architecture),
- the contextualisation of monuments and the spatialisation of texts, as well as their transformation into cultural objects that are represented by way of identity.

The fourth sub-chapter, “Spaces, Visuality and Heritage Artistic Architectures (Medieval and Renaissance)”, maps out the decisive turn my research has taken toward the visual arts and urban architecture. Texts continue to remain an object of discussion, once again as historical witnesses, having the role to illustrate a context or an epoch—for example, the quotations taken from the local constitution in the iconographical program that Ambrogio Lorenzetti placed in a fresco in Siena in the 14th century. These quotations are thus a part of the first European medieval “multimedia” device, which has a lay political significance (and is based on the relationship between images, interior spaces, architectures, exterior spaces both intra and extra *muros*).

In the study that I dedicate to the fresco *Il Cenacolo*, by Leonardo da Vinci, the text is an implicit vector of the work itself and of its history, from the gospel sources the artist used, to the documents and witnesses of the era, mathematics and philosophy treatises, the artist’s workbooks (which the study takes into account). The text also deals with later histories of art, fieldwork reports, correspondences and academic works. Contemporary digital photography, which can today enlarge a fresco fragment thousands of times in order to save it in a posthuman archive, becomes in its turn an internal reading of its present materiality. In the case of Leonardo’s lost parietal painting from Florence, *Battaglia di Anghiari*, which I also discussed, the text is once again obviously present: a source of documentation for the artist, as chancery text, as practical documents, the artist’s workbooks, correspondence, etc. As such, the text does not lose its importance, but merely cedes the foreground to cultural objects that were available on a large scale in pre-modern periods.

This last sub-chapter represents the bridge between my previous researches, systematised according to the four vertices already mentioned and the present and future research programme (as much as I can now foresee it). Representation devices, in which I explore the relationship between text, mental images and visual images, the art object and other types of cultural objects, architecture and urban heritage areas, are one of the main elements of my current and possibly future research.

Whether I have studied the collective imaginary, forms of the cultural imaginary, individual cultural objects, networks of objects, or the historical consciousness of the author (prince-scholar, artist or modern researcher), I have permanently placed the object of research in its context(s), from an interdisciplinary standpoint, and from multiple perspectives.

Historical hermeneutics has never competed with, but rather always completed in my studies the archaeology of ideas, as well as a certain apprehension toward systematising phenomena and *cultural meta-objects*, to be able to trace their contextual roles and their epistemological or ontological functions.

In the second chapter of the first part, “Construction and Innovation, discourse and Institution”, I have first presented my “professional portfolio”. This includes the disciplines that are part of *Cultural Visual Studies*, disciplines that I have introduced in Romania, such as *Urban Cultural Studies*. It further does include institutional activities, the establishment of educational and research structures, such as SD SITT/CESI and its study programmes; scholarships and international fellowships; institutional collaborations; membership in various doctoral thesis committees (for supervision and evaluation); scholarly recognition; the organisation of research and representation activities; editorial activities, etc.).

I have then put forward a sub-chapter entitled “Cultural Studies in Metamodernity. For a Doctoral Programme”, in which I synthesised my present research directions (for example, international editorial projects in Medieval and Renaissance Studies), which I intend to develop into a programme for doctoral supervision; regarding this latter project, I have outlined several new theoretical proposals that fill out previous models and methodologies of research through reference to contemporary theories.

In the second part of the thesis, I refer to

- a) *Research projects* that I have initiated, supervised or in which I took part as a member, placing the emphasis on my role and especially on the results obtained;
- b) My job description regarding activities like organisation and administration of *teaching*, activities which I have been carrying out for thirty years at the University of Bucharest;
- c) The *research environment* that I have created for students, teaching staff and collaborators with regard to the study and research pertaining to the field of *Cultural Studies* as part of my department SD SITT / CESI at the Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest.

I thus sought to answer in a detailed way to all of the questions that are put forth in the habilitation methodology. The most important one remains, however, the experience of the retrospective mapping out and organising (or *re-discovery?*) of a meaning, of a *plan de vie* (Paul Ricœur), by way of this provocative exercise of hermeneutics applied to one’s own bio-bibliography.