

# Arts Journalism and Theatre in the Pandemic Era: Mutations, Redefinitions and Challenges

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This paper seeks to explore the new landscape that has emerged during the period of the so-called “corona crisis” within arts (cultural) journalism, focusing specifically on theatre reporting and theatre reviewing. Drawing examples from the Greek and international print and online media, I aim to show the extent to which the sudden pause of artistic life and the rules of social distancing have reshaped not only the contents, formats and genres of journalistic writing for the arts, but also the very essence of the notion of cultural event and cultural news. The paper will consider the importance of the role of theatre journalists and critics in identifying and highlighting urgent issues within the arts in the context of the pandemic. It will also explore the new challenges that have emerged during (and, indeed, as a consequence of) the pandemic. Finally, it will ask if the changes in media coverage of the arts are only temporary, or if arts journalism is entering a new era.

**Keywords:** arts journalism, cultural journalism, theatre, pandemic, theatre journalist, theatre critic

For anyone interested in contemporary cultural life, media coverage of the arts provides a vital source of information and knowledge. This statement gains in importance when it comes to times of crisis: indeed, since the outbreak of the coronavirus until now, where else has such an amount of reference material about the overwhelming changes in the culture sector been systematically and consistently gathered? Given that prominent voices

in popular social media cannot guarantee accuracy or a professional treatment of facts, who, then, is authorized or better equipped to report contemporaneously and discuss the current situation in the field of culture than arts journalists?

However, this article seeks not only to emphasize the role of specialized journalism in chronicling arts in the age of social distancing, but also aims to show how the global health crisis has reshaped the contents, formats and genres of arts writing, destabilizing arts journalists routines, shaking their certainties and forcing them to adjust to new working conditions, practices and priorities. In comparison to other areas of cultural reporting (books, films, art exhibitions, music), theatre journalism seems to have undergone the deepest transformations; recent examples drawn from the Greek and international print and online media tend to confirm this statement. Before proceeding further, though, we need to specify the term “arts journalism” as it is the key concept in our analysis.

According to the basic definition, arts or cultural journalism is a specific area of journalistic practice covering products of cultural or creative industries (Skulte 41). Evolving “in a heterogeneous zone of media, genres and products which encompasses the production, circulation and consumption of symbolic goods,” it “dynamizes and documents the artistic and cultural field, influences the formation of audiences and provides parameters for the interpretation of culture at a certain place and time” (Golin and Cardoso 69). Pointing out the broad approach to culture that characterizes contemporary media, Kristensen (69, 73) prefers the term “journalism on culture,” which she defines as “a continuum between art, popular culture, lifestyle and consumption.”

From a sociological perspective, the field of cultural production is understood as a network of synergies, interactions and power relations, involving a variety of actors and institutions with different positions and degrees of influence on artworlds (Bourdieu 1979, 1992; Golin and Cardoso 76). Within this complex and highly competitive ecosystem of cultural intermediaries, arts journalists operate as key agents who intervene and circulate between the production and the reception of cultural goods, assisting in the transfer of knowledge and expertise (Hutchinson 58), supporting the visibility of new trends and contributing to the legitimation of artefacts as culture (Skulte 43; Golin and Cardoso 81).

As makers of meaning and shapers of taste, who construct value by framing how others engage with art, arts journalists also seek to multiply the symbolic and material value of a work (or of an artist) and to convince the public of this value; in other words, they serve as market actors, promoting consumption and mediating between economy and culture (Maguire and Matthews 551–52). In practice, these functions are enabled through the two main categories of journalistic writing: news and opinion (Voirol 41), translated in the case of cultural journalism as arts reporting and arts reviewing.

In Greece, the first sign that arts coverage was entering a new phase appeared in the press a few days before the total lockdown was announced. It was a discreetly ominous note in the Sunday arts supplement of a broadsheet newspaper (*Kathimerini*), explaining why the

usual list of upcoming events was missing: due to the emergency measures imposed by the government to protect public health, all cultural events had been postponed indefinitely.



The empty venue Vassilikon [Royal] Theatre and the set of *The Magnificent Cuckold* by Fernand Crommelynck, just after lockdown announcement in Greece (March 2020). Directed by Ioanna Tsihli. National Theatre of Northern Greece. Photo: Tassos Thomoglou

It was suddenly clear that, under the new circumstances, mass scale events, especially those in theatre and the performing arts, could not meet the public health requirements. This abrupt, almost global loss of “liveness” (Auslander) in cultural life soon made arts journalism a collateral victim. With cinemas, museums, galleries and theatres closed, one of the most common types of text in arts journalism, the cultural events guide, all but disappeared. But not for long. Anti-guides became rapidly popular in art sections, testifying to the domino of cancellations triggered by the pandemic (“A List of Canceled, Changed, or Postponed Arts Events,” *The Boston Globe*, 11/3/2020; “A List of What’s Been Canceled Because of the Coronavirus,” *The New York Times*, 1/4/2020; “Concerts, sorties de films et foires d’art: la liste des annulations et des reports dus au coronavirus,” *Le Monde*, 4/3/2020).

Encountering this unprecedented artistic vacuum, theatre journalists have been struggling to keep cultural coverage alive. Initially they dealt with the situation by either getting story ideas from the pre-pandemic world or attempting in their articles to describe the recent developments. Arts pages of this period are accurate in capturing a puzzling and unfamiliar reality; with no access to the stage, theatre urgently needed new points of reference. Alternative, mostly technology-mediated, modes of expression were soon tried out, offering a temporary antidote to the threat of artistic stagnation, while virtual means



of reception transformed spectators into users/viewers. “Billions of people are turning to culture as a source of comfort, well-being and connection” (UNESCO), impelling not only the theatre but every art form to move online. Remote audiences seemed to expand, developing a strong interest in open web sources, including events, performances, art exhibitions tours, e-books, audio-books, concerts and other artistic forms. Cultural institutions and artists were hesitant at first, but they gradually released or provided on demand more and more online content.

As these upheavals rendered traditional cultural reporting and reviewing almost impossible worldwide, an old, elementary journalistic question was raised anew: how should a “cultural/artistic event” be currently defined? What precisely can be perceived as such in times of generalized confinement? Or worse, does it even exist? And how are journalists supposed to accomplish their mission as cultural intermediaries when there is nothing between artists and consumers to mediate? Finally, is cultural journalism facing an unexpected problem of viability?



Empty venues during the lockdown in Greece. Theatre of the Society for Macedonian Studies, National Theatre of Northern Greece. Photo: Tassos Thomoglou

At the first stage of the crisis, it was the notion of non-event (postponements and cancellations) that dominated the cultural news (“[China: Coronavirus Freezes Cultural Life](#),” 30/1/20; “Old Vic becomes first London theatre to cancel performances as *Endgame* closes early amid coronavirus outbreak,” *London Evening Standard*, 16/3/20; “Avignon, Eurockéennes, Francofolies... les annulations de festival se multiplient,” *Le Monde*, 14/4/2020).

Shortly afterwards, when there was nothing left to be cancelled, a different form of factuality, parallel to reality, began to emerge. Dissociated from the spatiotemporal references of the live presence, cultural life drew its timeliness exclusively from the digital world. Art guides were reborn listing live-streamed plays available online; the theatre journalist's vocabulary adapted to the situation ("digital premiere", "free screenings," "from stage to screen," "theatre at home," "Zoom performance") and reporting covered topics such as broadcasting of monologues on Facebook or Twitter pages, online theatre and dance workshops, original short plays written and shot in isolation, etc. ("The Homebound Project's Original Plays, Performed in Isolation," *The New Yorker*, 29/5/2020). Artistic and especially theatre events were now understood exclusively in their dematerialized, virtual versions; this surrogate regime of cultural production not only raised important theoretical issues and concerns about the performing arts, but also marked a second phase and a significant shift in the selection and treatment of cultural information:

Special art sub-sections made their appearance in newspapers and websites, introducing and codifying the new normal in the field of culture ("Lockdown Culture" and "Culture in Peril," both in *The Guardian*).

Artists and celebrities who have tested positive for the coronavirus or have died from it have become a very popular topic in culture pages, proving to fans and the public the importance of self-isolating. The pedagogical role of cultural journalism (Skulte 44) has been, at a very concrete level, confirmed ("Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson Test Positive for Coronavirus," *Los Angeles Times*, 11/3/2020; "All the Celebrities Who Have Tested Positive for the Coronavirus," *Vulture*, 19/9/20).

The balance between news and opinion arts writing has changed: if the former was limited to topics that journalists could handle working from home, the latter has gained space as it does not necessarily require the on-site presence of the writer. Columnists covering culture, artists, critics and academics have engaged in an open dialogue in order to analyze and interpret the crisis in society and artworlds.

There has been a considerable increase in interviews with actors and directors: the format can generate original journalistic material, offering first-hand information, reactions and ideas about the impact of the pandemic on artistic practice. More and more often, art sections have hosted short autobiographical accounts, where artists and playwrights unfold their own experience of self-isolation as invited columnists, recontextualizing and reactivating the old text type of diaries ("Lockdown diaries," "Theatre diaries in quarantine," "Covid-19 diaries," and so on). Non-conventional interview forms, such as multimedia testimonies or homemade videos and podcasts, have become official news stories.

Something seems to be changing in the public discourse of theatre artists: they have become more introspective, adopting confessional and contemplative tones that transcend the artists' fears of professional destabilization, suggesting a transformation in how they conceive of their position in society.

Another notable aspect of arts journalism during the pandemic is that social media users not only share already published news and opinion pieces, but also produce cultural contents that serve as an information pool for several official media. This is not completely new phenomenon, but has grown significantly in the era of Covid. We could talk, perhaps, about a particularly active form of citizens' cultural journalism, encouraged, fostered and legitimized by the lockdown conditions; the boundaries between professional producers and consumers of art news (artists, audiences and journalists) tend to be eliminated, engaging them in an intensive process of mutual exchange. A striking example of this participatory effort is the Greek actor and theatre director Argyris Xafis, who, via his Facebook posts and during the whole period of self-isolation, has systematically shared interesting theatre news and daily lists (the result of his personal research) which notify readers of the best theatre and dance shows/performances (from Greece and abroad) available online. These lists functioned as a credible source of information for lots of professional arts journalists who reproduced his material. In fact, Xafis has contributed to the public debate about the crucial situation in the field of theatre, practicing a sort of investigative, international micro-reporting in a purely digital environment and with the assiduity of a professional arts writer.

Media headlines have concisely outlined every next stage of the crisis in the cultural field. Scanning through these headlines reveals that theatre and performing arts topics tend to be structured around two major thematic axes (which often interweave): a) existential crisis in theatre, ontological and aesthetic issues; b) socio-economic implications of the pandemic for the theatre sector and for individual artists. At the present moment—a post-lockdown but not post-pandemic period in numerous countries—arts journalists report extensively on the reopening of theatres, focusing on the politics, policies and practices of this difficult return: “UK theatres, on ‘brink of ruin’, criticise government reopening plan,” 27/6/2020; “Theatre Sector Welcomes Progress on Reopening but Pushes for More,” *The Stage*, 14/8/2020; “What the Coronavirus Pandemic Means for the Future of Broadway,” *The New Yorker*, 24/8/2020; “For Greece’s Theatres, the Coronavirus is a Tragedy,” *The New York Times*, 30/7/2020; “Australian Theatres Nervously Reopen with Mandatory Masks and Temperature Checks,” *The Guardian*, 24/8/2020. During this same period, journalistic discourse seems haunted by a recurring metaphor: that of theatre as the most heavily hit “patient” of Covid-19, attempting desperately to “recover” in the midst of a complex, unusual and still very uncertain global moment.



Theatre life comes back: Taksiarchis Chanos, Christos Stergioglou and the director Giannis Rigas: Rehearsals for *The Birds* by Aristophanes, Summer production 2020, National Theatre of Northern Greece. Photo: Tassos Thomoglou

With all stage productions being suspended and theatre reviewing in pause mode, theatre critics have found themselves forced to reconsider the nature and the principles of their work. The problem is not just how to compensate for the absence of reviews and to ensure that communication channels with readers and theatre audiences remain open.

Confronted with unannounced changes in their traditional role as experts and cultural gatekeepers who evaluate and recommend new theatre products (Glynn and Lounsbury 1035), many critics initially confessed that they were experiencing the absence of cultural life as trauma, and that they were anxious about the present and the future of theatre. However, they soon sharpened their responsiveness to the violently changed landscape and reoriented their columns towards a more theoretical level of reflection.

Realizing that they have to move beyond fixed patterns of thinking, they try to understand, to ascribe meaning to the incoherent, to redefine contexts, and, then, to provide a clearer view on these complicated cultural developments. Insightful analyses and thought-provoking interpretations have enriched print and online art pages, suggesting new conceptual frames for the current realities, producing stimulating ideas (what interesting raw material for future theatre researchers!), opening perspectives, predicting, discussing broader theatre issues. That's how a crisis can turn into a very creative moment for critics, who seem to be particularly needed in times of cultural mutations. Catching the zeitgeist and deciphering the cultural chaos have become their most urgent challenges.



Critical activity moves to the next phase, when the first professional reviews for online experiences (live-streamed performances, Zoom editions of plays, interactive and immersive virtual theatre and other events) make their appearance (“‘Work From Home’ Review–Audiences Become Actors in Witty Zoom Show,” *The Guardian*, 26/6/2020; “‘A Killer Party’ Review: The Case of the Online Musical,” *New York Times*, 6/8/2020).

This shift in reviewing practices confirms the critic’s contribution to the “institutional regulation of innovation” (Hirsch 643) and mediates audience’s attitudes towards digital forms of theatre and their reception. But as liveness timidly returns through socially distanced and outdoor performances, several critics sound impatient to go back to “normal.” The question is: will theatre criticism ever be the same again under the weight of accumulated experience gained during the health crisis?



Social distancing on the stage. *The Trojan Women* by Euripides. Directed by Giannis Paraskevopoulos. Summer production 2020, National Theatre of Northern Greece. Photo: Tassos Thomoglou





Masks and distances for the audience. *The Birds* by Aristophanes. Directed by Giannis Rigas. Summer production 2020, National Theatre of Northern Greece. Photo: Tassos Thomoglou

In conclusion, with the ongoing pandemic, arts and especially theatre journalism tends to mutate fast and to reinvent itself, while developing the documentary narrative of the socio-cultural crisis as an archive in progress. Restrictive measures and the arts shutdown have affected not only reporting and reviewing procedures across the globe, but also the very essence of the notion of the cultural event and cultural news.

To chart and assess instantly a fluid and multidimensional landscape has proven to be a difficult task for journalists and critics, whose adaptability, professional reflexes and competencies are now profoundly challenged. They no longer have to report and comment on simple events; they have to identify urgent art issues, to explore atypical phenomena, to elaborate new definitions of culture, to produce culture. What journalism historians will later probably name “cultural journalism of the pandemic” (or perhaps “pandemic cultural journalism”) has already taken shape and is still evolving. What remains to be answered in the future is whether media coverage of the arts is only temporarily changing or definitely entering a new era.

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