

Interview

Rodica MOCAN

Digital Media and the Information Age.

Interview with Dr. Peter BRUCK, Research Studios Austria

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Urgency, when you are – let’s say – an activist, is the hurt of society.
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Between 10-12 September of 2015, Babeş-Bolyai University – in partnership with the Cluj City Hall and Share Foundation – hosted the Grand Jury meeting of the European Youth Award 2015, a project included in the European Youth Capital program. The members of the grand jury are young European experts and leaders in ITC, youth, multimedia and academic sector and gathered together to jury the projects submitted in the different categories of the digital media competition. The judging session was hosted by the Department of Cinematography and Media of the Faculty of Theater and Television.

The European Youth Award (EYA) is a pan-European competition. Its main objective is to motivate youth, entrepreneurs and startups to produce digital products with a social added value according to the European Council agenda and Europe 2020 strategy. The European Youth Award demonstrates the potential of the young generation to create innovative solutions with the help of the Internet and mobile technologies.

Dr. Peter Bruck, the Director of the Research Studios Austria and of the International Center for New Media from Salzburg, kindly offered us an interview in which he explained the importance of the European and global digital media competitions that he has been organizing over the past 20 years, elaborating on some themes that are important for the information age we live in.

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Rodica Mocan: Professor Bruck, Welcome to Cluj!

Peter Bruck: Thank you! I am very pleased to be here. I know that Cluj is a hub in Romania for creative activity, for IT and also for young people taking charge of their own life. I think that is wonderful that I can be here on the occasion of this very focused effort of this municipality on young people [Cluj European Youth Capital] and their involvement in public life and social development.

R.M.: For twenty years now, you have been organizing competitions regarding digital media. Why do you do that? Why do you spend your time doing these things?

P.B.: Digital media are different than any other media which we had in human history before. The most important and the most obvious difference is that you cannot touch the content. So they are intangible in terms of content. With the book, you pick it up, you know the paper and the binding, with film you can pick up the film roll and things like this, with painting you pick up the canvas... When you [want to] pick up digital content, it's not there. You have a dark screen. You have the device. And therefore the content itself is not transparent. What does this mean? When I open the newspaper I can flip through the newspaper and immediately see what interest and what does not interest me. If I go to a website I have to scroll down and look, and look, and look but I don't see what I have already looked at, while in the newspaper I still see which pages I have flipped over. So there is a very clear reason why the problem of judging the quality of digital content is a problem which comes with digitalization itself and also with the opportunities this opens. Because, when you have a painting you do see very clearly – you have a whole cultural history of 400, 500, 600 years in terms of cultural forms, how to paint characters, how to include nature and things like this, but when it comes to the digital you can alter, you can morph the structure, you can morph the form, you can alter, you can switch and you never know what is the original and what is the copy because everything is changing. So this is the second aspect where digital content becomes more difficult to judge. The third thing is that with digital media we are not just opening up this morphing of forms and emerging of different kind of media, I mean representations, but there comes the whole new aspect of interactivity. It's the first time in human history that the text speaks back to the user, adapts to the user. That the picture is different or adjusts to the context in which it is, not just in terms of light, but also in shape, form and also depth. And that creates a whole new dimension for cultural products. And what we have done in the last twenty years, is the using of jury process of exploring, searching and solving this issue of quality. How do we solve it? We do not solve it on an abstract manner, in an abstract fashion, but by selecting best practices. So what is the result of our efforts? The results of our efforts is the best practice view of eminent, excellent experts regarding what is best within a given category. And this makes this process so interesting that I'm looking to do it for the next twenty years as well.

R.M.: If I look back at the other competitions, the Europrix [being one of them], for the past fifteen years or eighteen years, I don't know exactly for how long they

went on... the categories that you had then were focused mainly on the type of media or the type of platform: broad band, or mobile, cross-media, or the others. Now, the European Youth Award is focusing on something else, it's looking at another dimension of content. You have categories that reflect social issues, [...] concerns that society has. How did that change happen, why did you feel the need to change focus and was that also a result of social media?

P.B.: When we started Europrix in 1998, we looked at, basically, content in terms of the cycle of life of the society. So, while we payed attention to the different kinds of media forms – online, offline – we always had categories which looked at education, health, at government and from the very beginning we always had also categories looking at social inclusion. So, in 2003 when we went global within the United Nations, from Europe, and created World Summit Award. We took the issue of the digital device very, very seriously and looked also at the content divide and also the content gap, because at that time, especially online, 89% of the content was in English. And still to this day when I go to Arab countries, or to African countries or to some Asian countries, you can see the disparity in terms of: 4.3% of the world's population is speaking Arab but only 1.3% of the online content is Arabic. So there are some issues in this regard. But what you address is very, very clearly a turning point in the work which we have done. It's not just enough to basically say that we are looking at all issues in society, but we need to look at what issues are on the top of the agenda of society. And there we have done a lot of work regarding alignment with the United Nations and the United Nations millennium development goals. So, when we look at the European Youth Award we have, for instance, the categories "Fight Poverty, Hunger and Disease", "Power to Women", "Go Green" or "Education for All". These are categories which address issues of great importance. If you look at outside of Central Europe and of developed countries and you know maternity rates, and child birth are such that 6, 8, 10 children out of 100 die before they reach the age of 6 months. Then you know that the focus on helping women during pregnancy and right after pregnancy, that applications which support this in terms of healthy nutrition, in terms of cleansings and safety during the birth, process and breastfeeding for instance, these are very, very important. The same thing is true for the critical issue of climate change. If we are not able to address those issues which come with a change in our natural environment we will not only have hot summers in Romania, we will not only have drought in Northern Africa, but we will lose 15-20% of the Earth mass where about 25% of the world's population live. We will have real issues in terms of migration, we will have real issues in terms of large numbers of population which need to get away from where they are living for hundreds of years. And, if we are not able to address this [by] using technology to assist the political and the economic and other transformations which are necessary, then we will have failed. It's very important to use the mechanism of an award

like European Youth Award to bring these issues in the forefront. So, yes! We have changed the issues and we are looking especially to young people to use technology for societal impact.

R.M.: The western society has developed at a steady pace in terms of how technology was developed and has been adopted. But then, you have other societies who either were closed, like the former Communist countries, or were at the extreme end of the “digital gap”, like probably African countries or some other remote areas. We talk now about this process of leapfrogging, of jumping over whole stages and you have areas in the world where from medieval or feudal type of economy [they] are already in the information society. Do you see that these kind of competition – and especially I talk about World Summit Award – are able to influence this process, to stimulate a production of digital applications in such areas, enabling them to tackle societal problems?

P.B.: Technology develops at an incredibly fast pace. People, their attitudes, their brains, their minds develop much, much slower. So, all of the sudden, you have something like a new kind of gap opening up. I call it “the performance gap”. The performance of the technology might be measurable – according to Moore’s Law – grows on exponentially and it is true. But the attitudes of people and their capacity to use the technology is changing much slower. So what we then call the absorption capacity, so the ability of a population – of people, of a group of people, men, women, young people, older people – to use the technology in a good way for their own benefit and for their own interest. This is what we call the absorption of technology and that rate is very, very different. And one of the things which we try to address is how to address the ability of people to absorb technology by making good content. That is not something which we do ourselves, but where we basically serve as a platform, as a global stage. How much people use it depends very much on different kind of countries. There is the Emirate of Abu Dhabi which uses it very much to position itself on the global issues, there is Azerbaijan who has a really great ambition – beside having hardware, mathematical or computer science – to have also a creative component. There is Sri Lanka, which tries to create a Smart Island initiative to use technology and good content also to address the social issue of rural and urban development, of teaching also. Or, there are countries like Rwanda or South Africa, where people are working very hard to create their own content. But it’s obvious the case that the market structure is very, very different in terms of domination. You have a strong domination – especially in content – through American companies which serve as platforms and which give real, clear template for people. Now, the open and free internet is a great leveler. So! If you live in Africa, you can Google yourself out of poverty, by using the search engine functionality and using it in the open internet. There, you will find good content, but if you have a very limited platform, it is much more difficult. “Leapfrogging” means a number of different kind of things. Means the technological leapfrogging, it means the economical leapfrogging and it means the cul-

tural leapfrogging. What we try to address is that people do not lose their mind with each jump. And that, I think, is a good enough benefit.

R.M.: Cluj is positioned, the way it is, and we are looking at ourselves as trying to become a center well developed in innovation and creativity regarding digital media. Also, because of the education opportunities here, we have two universities that are offering IT, engineering and programming programs at all academic levels. So, there is a large number of young people who are coming on the market every year. There were more and more opportunities for us, with Cluj being a place known for outsourcing. I know that today, many Romanian companies and many young Romanian startups want to move from this image of being just outsourcers. What step should we take? And what should us – as educators – do, in order to help out young people to move to the next level, where they are creative, innovative, where they bring added value on the market – which they already do, but very often under the umbrella of other companies or other structures? From your experience of working so many years with young people, what would be your advice for young people and for their educators, like ourselves?

P.B.: One of the most important things about what we do with the European Youth Award and also the World Summit Award is saying to people: if you live in Cluj, if you live in Bucuresti or other places in Romania you have the same chance

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to get on to a globally and internationally recognizable level as if you would live in Nottingham, or in Lyon, or possibly in Madrid, or in Milano, or in Tampere or in Stockholm. In that sense, the entire effort of having a competition of this kind is a leveler. It tells the people and gives them the message that if you are creative in

your own community you do not need to migrate to the centers where you presume that you can make the biggest money and things like this, but you will get the same kind of recognition as somebody who lives in Amsterdam, when you live in Cluj. And that is something which is a promise given and a promise kept, because that is the way we work. And that is the way we give recognition to people. We do not give recognition to somebody who migrated to Munich because they used to think that the grass is greener there. The second aspect is we know that creativity has to do with community. You are never creative outside of a community where you feel like 'I am a fish in that water'. The idea that the people are creative outside, that is an idea of renaissance, but it's not a post-modern idea. We know that we work in teams and we have to work in a community. And when we work within a community, then we are able to create something unique. Therefore, is very important for young people to understand that if they migrate, they have to be able to enter into a community somewhere else and start being native to that community, and it takes 2, 3, 5 years. Why

not spend that time investing in your own community, travel back and forth and take this actually not just as a jumping point, but as your creative excellence point. And that is something which is very important. Cluj has – I think – four universities, two technical faculties and has a number of more institutes from teaching German as a second language all the way to cinematography and other things like this. Given that, you have actually all it takes pos in terms of international connections here; and being rooted somewhere is a real benefit. That is something we try to really focus on and value. This means that you can go and you can learn, because you need your years of apprenticeship somewhere else, but then you come back here and you help this community in which you are integrated. One other thing which is also very important is that the opportunities in terms of economic success start to even out. With the online and Internet things switch very, very fast. The most important thing is that if you are creative yourself look at what is the intellectual property you have and instead of being outsourcing for others try to collaborate with others. And that is something which is a different kind of paradigm which is very genuine to the European Youth Award and out presence here in Cluj.

R.M.: I want to mention how grateful I am that, as a spinoff of European Youth Award competition, there is this student programme in which the [Interactive Multimedia master students from the Faculty of Theater and Television] were involved last year and the success this program had. The fact that we've learned how to collaborate. We've learned and they had the chance to see all the hurdles of communicating internationally with other people, students from another cultures and the reward of being able to participate in Graz and really meet the colleagues that they works with. I think it was a wonderful opportunity that was added to other things that we were able to bring at our faculty, the Faculty of Theater and Television through the Interactive Multimedia program that we started as a result of our collaboration from many years ago with yourself and the European Academy of Digital Media and some of the other fellow academics there. How do you put together your very different hats of being university professor, researcher and also an entrepreneur that has a number of companies that you juggle, where you produce content and many other things?

P.B.: When I left Austria, I was 23-24 years old, and I went to the United States and I started a whole new life there. I started like a refugee in Europe today. I had one suitcase, one backpack and that was it. When I became a professor at the university in Canada, I had redone the Master although I had already done the Doctorate, and then I did another Ph.D. in communication at the University in Montreal. So you start having a different kind of attitude towards what you expect from yourself and what you expect from others. And the thing which you are trying to do is trying to be less overconfident about your abil-

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ities because you realize that you have to learn a lot from others all the time. For me entrepreneurship is the translation into action of how you feel about scholarship. I thoroughly dislike academic scholarship which only looks to itself and is only self-referential. I highly value scholarship which looks at the interaction between academia and society and tries to add value to society, and addresses issues and problems and longing and hope and love of that society. But if you are closed in academia, being it informatics and computer science, or communication studies, sociology, language studies, or even history, you will be withering away. The creativity which might attribute to my work comes from this kind of notion that there are urgencies both in society and in our work as academics, as researchers, but also as people who are activists and possibly also entrepreneurs. We need to look at those urgencies. Urgency, when you look at it as entrepreneur, is market demand. Urgency, when you are – let's say – an activist, is the hurt of society. Urgency, when you are an academic, is to better understand - with new theories and new methods – what this society has as problems and needs. So, in this sense, having a sense of urgency is something which is very important. And to acknowledge that is a privilege.

R.M.: Professor Bruck, we wish you all the best of luck in your work! We thank you for choosing Cluj and for being our partners in presenting the European Youth Award program to our community.