

Towards a reticular University: The Creative Europe Programme and the research partnerships

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This essay investigates the university partnerships supported by the Creative Europe Programme in the two-year period 2021-2022 within the wider programmatic framework of university reformism and discourse. The aim is to connect the sociological analysis of the financed projects to a European comparative reflection starting from critical interpretations provided by some eminent scholars in the field of Higher Education influencing a “reticular” vision of Universities. Autonomy of research, scientific synergy and communicative reliability are three fundamental tenets, when Universities must turn accountability into an ethic and economic mission. For this reason, the research partnerships boosted by Creative Europe emphasize the necessity to focus on the transformation of the University from Ivory tower into a democratic environment, as Habermas pointed out on the construction of an open and participative community. With reference to the social and cultural dimension of some university projects financed by the Creative Europe Programme, this essay critically examines the metaphorical interpretations of universities perceived as “social”, “civic” and “networked” from John Goddard metaphor of university as an engaged environment to the “multiversity” probed by Clark Kerr and Nicolas Dirks, to the more recent Roberta Bassett’s “Omniversity”.

1. *Towards a reticular University: a methodological perspective*

In an insightful work published in 2023, Julian Dobson and Ed Ferrari highlighted the social relevance of the “civic university” at a time of relevant transformations boosted not only by digitalization, globalization and hyperconnectivity, but also by the functional drawbacks stemming from cultural and communicative shifts. What role can universities play within a society hampered by global conflicts and under the influence of artificial intelligence, along with the communicative shifts of the post-pandemic era? (Casavecchia, Pitzalis, Poliandri 2025; Boccia Artieri, Farci 2021). This is a crucial issue relating to the mission of universities and their social impact as they struggle to deal with their localistic features and the development of effective research networks: «A civic university, by implication, holds itself to account according to its contribution to the collective good (which can include the earning power of graduates, but also much more that cannot be measured simply in market terms)» (Dobson, Ferrari 2023, 8).

The challenges highlighted by the Civic University Network in the UK deal with the opportunity to harness the collective power of higher education actors to drive societal, economic, and environmental growth especially in those places requiring more cultural and economic attention. In the meantime, the rise of new forms of censorship within the academic environment (Chemersinsky, Gillman 2017), the diffusion of “infantilization” and “emotional weaponization” (Furedi 2017), the homologation of research activities and the pressure of evaluation (Connell 2019) impose a harsh reflection on academic learning and teaching as they impact on the civic dimension of daily life. This is why the “university of risk” can be considered more than a

metaphorical insight or a taxonomic intuition, as it may be an interpretative key consistent with the new challenges that universities have to cope with.

The tenet of the “civic university” concerns the third mission activities of academic institutions as they need to empower their social, economic and cultural role. Civic universities face the contradictory effects of hegemonic financial models that seem to be behind the current management of universities in line with the neo-liberal ideology ruling public institutions at large. Therefore, the construction of civic universities ought to consider the meaningful demands for communicative and educational practices, assuming that they should support the introduction of public spheres founded on inclusion, knowledge, information, creative and intellectual skills. This is why Habermas (2008) denounced the role played by lobbies and economic stakeholders within the infrastructure of the public sphere, where knowledge and competences should gain a different informative weight. Thus, civic universities come within this conflictual value framework, in which controversial administrative patterns cohabit and “digital capital in education” is increasing (De Feo, Pitzalis 2017; Colombo, Salmieri 2022).

According to this view, the Europe Creative program appears to comply with such a civic perspective, with particular regard to the three strands financed in the field of media, culture and cross-sectorial products (Scioldo 2025). In the National Civic Impact Accelerator’s report *Civic Capitals as Risk: The Fragile Foundations of The Civic University*, Julian Dobson and Femi Owolade examine the impact and vulnerability of academic engagement, suggesting four “key risks” for contemporary universities, as they emerged during in-depth group discussions with staff from 21 universities involved in civic roles:

«First is a loss of focus and coordination, generating uncertainty among local stakeholders about the reliability of universities as partners. Second is a loss of institutional memory, leading to the need to repeatedly reconstruct local relationships. Third, stemming from the first two risks, is the loss of trust and reduced credibility of universities as civic partners. In a wider context in which the role of higher education is under scrutiny, there is thus a fourth risk of losing relevance to local communities and strategic partners» (Dobson, Owolade 2025, 3).

The dialectic between the local and the global is one of the main features of academic engagement, despite the loss of public authority, and misconduct and behavioral deviations related to ethical and communicative habits. All drawbacks afflicting universities in current times legitimate both Frank Furedi’s attempt to understand “What’s happened to University?” (2017) and Harold Silver’s question “Does a University Have a Culture?” (2010) as they explicitly denounce the loss of public acknowledgment of academic action in such social and civic turbulence. In this sense, the transition from Habermas’s “University in democracy”, to Connell’s “University of hope” through Paul Virilio’s drawing of “the university of disaster”, exalts the metaphorical fluctuations expressing the way universities have to recover their cultural and civic endeavour by overcoming localistic and individualistic obstacles (Lombardinilo 2019).

Of course, cultural production plays a central role in such a renewal, especially in Europe, as the *Council Resolution on the EU work plan for culture 2023-2026* (2022/C 466/01) underlines:

«Cultural institutions play a vital role in strengthening democracy and social well-being by reaching out to the whole community, providing affordable or free access to knowledge and information, in full respect of intellectual property rights, enhancing media literacy, creating common ground for dialogue and debate, and thereby strengthening social integration and community engagement, and ultimately contributing to combating disinformation, hate speech and fake news. This role of cultural institutions must be further nurtured».

Accessibility, inclusion, sustainability are the pivotal tenets of the European policies on culture and creativity supported by the Creative Europe Programme, for instance, with the aim to improve and harness collaboration among associations, foundations, companies, public institutions, universities and higher education actors.

More specifically, the reticular patterns of the projects financed involving European universities emphasize the way cultural creativity can be supported and enhanced by pursuing a solid epistemological vision inspired by cultural innovation, social impact and audience engagement. The attention paid by European Universities to certain strategic contexts in cultural production emphasizes the successful financing outcomes concerning theatre, arts, literature, anthropology, radio, cinema and TV series, thus confirming that audiovisual sectors are strategic not only in the development of European cultural strategies, but also in the support to university research activities coherent with the tasks of “The networked society” depicted by Jeffrey J. Selingo (2017, 35):

«Many institutions are still approaching these trends by simply hoping they will pass in a short time and they can survive. But the next era in higher education should be about more than survival. Given the growing needs for a post-secondary education around the world, the era in front of us must be defined as one of growth through change and cooperation rather than retrenchment».

The transition from the mass University to the multiversity academy inspired by a specific corporate mindset and managerial strategies concern the dialectic between public and private support, since it can determine the growth of academic competitiveness (Moscati 2012). Cooperation is essential to the construction of a reticular community focused on the exploitation of culture as a social engine and community booster, both at school and at university, as James Coleman and Thomas Hoffer (1987, 214) argued: «is it possible that there are other institutions around which functional communities with intergenerational closure can develop»? The Creative Europe Program has the merit of implementing academic engagement in research strategies inspired by cultural production. The aim is to tether “European citizens and European peoples”, as Jürgen Habermas (2013 [2014], 39) points out about the sovereign policies projected towards democratization and solidarity: «What is required is a European-wide political communication. For this we need a European public sphere, which does not mean a new one, however. The existing national public spheres suffice for this purpose; they only have to open themselves up sufficiently *to each other*».

The construction of a real European public sphere implies the development of a shared cultural strategy interiorizing diversity and identities and sharing cosmopolitan communicative inclusion: the three strands into which the Creative Europe Program is divided, Culture, Media and Cross-sectorial, are the main financing channels provided to all those actors who want to build networks in a variety of cultural productions: the

research on audiovisual products and brand journalism confirm the communicative dimension of this polyfunctional symbolic era that universities should investigate further (Ruggiero, Picone 2025). Clark Kerr's (1963) focus on "the uses of universities" can still provide epistemological insights into how to mingle the teaching mission of the mass university to the civic task of the "corporate universities", while considering not only the uses but also the abuses of the University as Nicholas Dirks' *City of Intellect* (2024) recently emphasized. At a time when democracies are undergoing a critical phase, universities can still play a social role for civic awareness and the external environment, both political and ethical. When the "city of intellect" merely turns into an array of private institutions lacking their original target, Universities lose the power to endow lives with a sense of value and the search for truth is hampered. According to Dirks (2024), human lives become poorer and social actors stop imagining a more responsible society.

The construction of strong European academic partnerships founded on reticular collaborations in the field of cultural innovation and content experimentation legitimates the attempt to investigate the functional impact of the financed academic projects in the two-year period 2021-2022, analyzed in research financed by the Ministry of Culture, General Management for Contemporary Creativity focused on the social impact and cultural declination of the projects supported (Lombardinilo 2025). Therefore, this paper is the result of this research, focusing on the role played by Italian Universities within the wider European effort to make culture an inclusive and sustainable social vehicle. To the fore is the sharing of a common cultural convergence, since Europe can be "an unfinished adventure" as Bauman pointed out:

«It was not culture that happened to be Europe's discovery/invention. Europe also invented the need and the task of *culturing culture*. Culture, let me repeat, is an incessant activity of drawing the world, fragment by fragment, out of the serene yet somnolent inertia of *zuhanden* and transporting it into a uniquely human realm of *vorhanden* – making of the world an object of critical inquiry and creative action» (Bauman 2004, 11).

This is an adventure that universities help encourage through the construction of a new academic mindset generating a different cultural approach to university transformations.

1. *Universities facing global crisis: a theoretical pathway*

Contemporary society is increasingly shaped by a series of multiple and interrelated crises-that threaten the stability of the social order. These crises give rise to new and pressing *social questions*, often directed at institutions which, under the conditions of the *radicalized modernity* introduced by Anthony Giddens (1991), appear to have lost sight of their original missions. To some extent, the forces of overextended globalisation, aiming to create a seamless transnational society, have underestimated the risks of eroding the distinctive functions and identities of institutions.

This loss of specificity that has blurred the traditional roles of institutions within the postmodern context is generating a dual effect of confusion and vulnerability. On the one hand, individuals expect more from institutions than they were originally designed to provide. Conversely, institutions themselves are increasingly compelled to engage

with issues and domains that go beyond their original social functions. Despite these tensions, institutions are still expected to acknowledge emerging social demands and to deliver credible and consistent responses to citizens' increasing insecurities and fears (Furedi 2018), regarding the social exclusions produced by knowledge gaps (Bourdieu, Passeron 1970); and they need dialogical strategies calling for the construction of democratic educational practices (Freire 2000). Such a mandate is made even more challenging in an environment marked by opacity, fragmentation, and complexity (Morin 1999). In this complex landscape, societal risks such as misinformation and disinformation, exacerbated by the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as identified in the latest Global Risk Report of the World Economic Forum (2024), are eroding social cohesion, escalating distrust towards institutions, and deepening polarisation and violence.

This landscape of uncertainty sheds light on the need for institutions to rethink the scope of their actions and to adapt their epistemological horizons. Indeed, the enduring relevance of major institutions depends not on their immutability, but on their capacity for renewal. Resilience of institutions, therefore, is not a function of permanence, but of preparedness for change. Those unwilling or unable to transform are more exposed to the risk of obsolescence.

Crucially, these transformations no longer unfold according to the slow and predictable rhythms of the past. As Giddens (1990, 26) observes, modern systems evolve at an increasingly accelerated and nonlinear pace, requiring forms of adaptation that are both rapid and profound. In this fast-changing context, the university stands among the institutions most profoundly affected by these shifts. Indeed, universities are the principal storehouses, sources and disseminators of their societies' knowledge and they should be intimately engaged by these challenges (IUA 2025).

The university has a centuries-old tradition of being a closed collegium also known as a *Hortus Conclusus*. The rhetoric of the Ivory tower appears to emphasize the traditional perception of universities as self-referential institutions, whose autonomy seems to be hampered by a permanent reformism inspired by the need for more accountability and transparency in research activities (Moscati 2010). This is one of the main tasks pursued by our "reticular universities" in which research targets comply with tradition and strategic missions, without neglecting the risks of hetero direction weakening basic research and shifting the tasks of applied research, as Bourdieu (1984) denounced in *Homo academicus*. This is truer in the humanities and creative productions, at a time of increasing investments in culture as a social boost and memorial device (Tota 2025).

Historically, it has resisted adapting its internal logic to align with the changing dynamics of the external social world. Yet, in the current hypermodern context defined by turbulence, inconsistency, and discontinuity, authors agree that the university must confront the imperative of transformation (Connell 2019). It can no longer afford to isolate itself within self-referential academic practices but must instead reimagine its role as a responsive and engaged institution capable of navigating complexity and producing value in an evolving societal landscape (Bauman 2001).

While it is true that, «according to the two meanings of the term *conservation*, the conservative nature of the university can be either vital or sterile» (Morin 1999, 84),

the role and societal purpose of universities are now being questioned more than in the past.

Thus, in this landscape of accelerated neoliberalism, the university is perceived as redundant, or even obsolete. As Bauman remarked, «the world of speed and neoliberal acceleration has no use for the university» (2001, 168).

This has led to a growing awareness of the need to rethink and restructure the university's role within the complex, fragmented landscape of contemporary society. Bauman continues: «Burdened as they are by a sense of history and linear time, universities find themselves profoundly and badly uncomfortable in a world characterised by the sporadic and fragmented nature of social and individual time» (Bauman 2001, 168).

Today's temporality, neither premodern nor properly modern, offers little space or enthusiasm for the traditional model of universities. Our age of fragmentation looms «over the double ruins of eternity and progress» (Bauman 2001, 168), threatening to engulf the institution.

This is probably why a *new model* has effectively been imposed on the university (Matthews 2023). Indeed, the transition is becoming more evident from the traditional image of the elite university, an *ivory tower* detached from society and disconnected from the everyday world, overspecialized and built on academic elitism (Etzkowitz 2000), toward entrepreneurial institutions tasked with contributing to the *common good*. The Humboldtian ideal of the university as a state institution devoted to rigorous scientific formation yet fundamentally insulated from social problems and protected by the state itself, is considered no longer sustainable outside and inside universities. The foundational principles of that model, freedom of thought and study, radical distinction from compulsory schooling, and the treatment of students as autonomous, responsible adults, have been eroded. In their place, the neoliberal environment has redefined the very meaning of knowledge. Universities and students alike are now positioned as actors within the knowledge market, simultaneously producing and consuming knowledge, and it is no longer clear what role the university plays in society (Readings 1996).

At the same time, this phenomenon has produced the expansion of higher education, to the point of a proliferation of the number of universities, degree programs, and student populations (D'Ambrosi *et al.* 2024; Lombardinilo 2014; Morcellini, Martino 2005), marking the transition from the elite university to the so-called *mass university*. However, this numerical growth raises critical concerns: while student enrolment has dramatically increased, many institutions lack the infrastructural and service support necessary for students' academic and material lives. Moreover, universities have encountered big reductions in the unit of public resources per student (Deem 2004), to the point that the meaning of this expansion remains ambiguous. The numerical explosion alone necessitates profound structural and qualitative transformations, and relying on spontaneous adaptation is not enough.

Universities are complex organisations: they are characterised by ambiguity of goals and objectives, fluid participation of members and high resistance to change (Peretomode 2021). This “multifunctional” model of the university, suspended between an anchoring to tradition and a reformist drive (D'Alessandro 2016), has generated a multitude of pressing functional demands, so that the model of the mass

university has therefore come under increasing scrutiny, as it fails to meet the needs of the current moment. Echoing Bill Readings' famous metaphor, the mass university is *in ruins* (Readings 1996).

Further critical perspectives on the mass university include the view advanced by Clark Kerr, who first introduced the concept of the *multiversity*. According to Kerr, a *multiversity* is not a single, unified institution, but rather a complex and reticular system of communities (Kerr 1963). This model has been more recently elaborated by Nicholas Dirks in his book *City of Intellect* (2024) to describe a network of interdependent university institutions rather than a monolithic entity.

However, it is a fragile but necessary construction, because the university is perhaps most necessary at the very moment it is most threatened (Barnett 2017). As Dirks (2024, 252) affirms: «Without the city of intellect, our individual lives will not just be poorer. We risk losing the capacity to imagine better ways to frame our most fundamental desires as a society with collective responsibility and moral accountability».

However, this evolution is not without risks. Ferrarotti (1981) and later Furedi (2017) warn about the changes this institution is undergoing in the perception of both its students and its professors. In particular, the phenomenon of infantilization makes the university similar to a *buffer* in the generational conflict, with professors seen not as educators of mature individuals, but as caretakers of “eternal adolescents.” These are young individuals caught in the structural contradictions of industrial and post-industrial societies, where rapid economic expansion demands increasingly longer educational paths, delaying entry into the workforce and leading to psychological and social disorientation. For these reasons, «universities must re-educate themselves» (Furedi 2017, 186).

While it is true that the elite university has been replaced by the mass university, the latter has inherited many of the previous structural challenges (Ferrarotti 1981). Today's university is facing a profound crisis of legitimacy, having lost much of its cultural and social authority (Viesti 2016).

Other models of university are emerging. It is the case of the civic university (Goddard 2009; Dobson, Ferrari 2023), described by Goddard as the one that «provides opportunities for the society of which it forms part. It engages a whole with its surroundings, it partners with other universities and colleges» (Goddard 2009, 5).

The social university is proposed by Ferrarotti (1981): scientifically rigorous, democratically organized, responsive to its environment, and capable of providing services to its communities. This model aligns with Derrida's (2001) notion of the “University without Condition”: an institution that aspires to do more than merely survive in a troubled world. It is a revolution in how universities conceive of themselves and their relationship to the world. They must reimagine their role on a global scale. This would entail not merely reforming the university, but radically reconceptualizing its position in advancing the public sphere. This vision resonates with calls for the development of the ecological university, described by Barnett (2017) as “a feasible utopia”.

This expanded vision reaffirms the university's role as a socially relevant actor. It transforms the university from a place of encyclopedic training and scientific excellence into an institution committed to community engagement (Martino *et al.*

2025). Universities, once defined as “places of learning” (Corsi, Magnier 2016), must now adopt the broader mandate of centres of civic consciousness. In this reconfiguration, the university acts to strengthen its ties with local and global communities assuming new responsibilities.

At the supranational level, the pathway of cooperation and civic consciousness, to extend the role and the mission of universities, started with the Bologna process (1999), which has encouraged a long (and still ongoing) process of revitalization of the academic space (Lombardinilo 2018).

A further milestone was the Bucharest Communiqué (2012), which emphasized the critical role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in times of crisis:

«Europe is experiencing an economic and financial crisis with damaging effects on society. In higher education, the crisis is reducing the availability of adequate funding and making employment prospects for graduates more uncertain. Higher education plays a key role in overcoming these challenges. Efficient higher education systems provide the foundation for prosperous knowledge societies. Now more than ever, higher education should be at the heart of our efforts to overcome the crisis».

More recently, the European Commission, in its *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation*, reinforced these concerns and urged HEIs to adopt a reticular approach: «For this, we need European higher education institutions to be able to cooperate closer and deeper. Further implementing a European Research Area implies strengthening mobility of researchers and the flow of knowledge, incentivising investment in research and innovation, and enhancing transnational cooperation among higher education institutions» (2022, 1). Taken together, these theoretical pathways anticipate the principles underpinning both the Creative Europe programme and the broader vision of the university as a reticular and networked institution.

2. *University partnerships and cultural production: The Creative Europe Programme*¹

The construction of the Higher Education Area entails a growing academic ability to support international mobility, scientific cooperation and strategic development in communication and dissemination, in line with the wider European academic framework (Lombardinilo 2025). The production of culture plays a pivotal role in the policies of growth, inspiring the ongoing reformist process regarding both Universities and higher education institutions within the European Union (Mazza, Quattrone, Riccaboni 2008). This is essentially true in considering the deep connection between society and creativity, as Cornelius Castoriadis pointed out in 1991: «The social sphere is locus and process of creation. There could not be any history in the true sense of the term if there were no change, rupture, and creation. The social-historical dimension is primarily the emergence of new social imaginary significations» (Castoriadis 2007, 216). While considering the social sphere as the result of the encounter of symbols, messages, contents, Castoriadis reverses the

¹ This paragraph stems from the research project *The Creative Europe Programme 2021-2022: social impact and cultural declinations*, supported by the Directorate General for Contemporary Creativity of the Ministry of Culture – Creative Europe Italy Desk.

traditional interpretation of culture from an individual immanent process into a collective dynamic producing public acknowledgement of creative processes.

Art, music, literature, theatre, cinema, TV series concern the definition and diffusion of the “new social imaginary significations” requiring a well-planned research engagement and a solid economic backing (Knowles 2010; Kornhaber 2020). Culture as an economic fly-wheel for Europe through the solid financing of audiovisual industry: the *European Parliament resolution of 14 December 2022 on the implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture and the EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations (2022/2047(INI))*

«Invites the Member States to promote existing cultural and artistic activities and provide further opportunities for active participation, to increase the ability to reach new audiences, to integrate and mainstream cultural participation objectives in policymaking beyond cultural policy, and to adopt a cultural rights approach shifting away from a narrow focus on access towards meaningful participation, leaving no one behind».

This is what the Creative Europe Programme intends to carry out thanks to a budget of € 2.44 billion, compared to €1.47 billion of the previous edition of the Programme (2014-2020).

The main endeavor of Creative Europe is to support actions that strengthen cultural diversity and comply with the challenges of the cultural and creative sectors. The main targets of Creative Europe concern, on the one hand, the safeguard, development and promotion of the European cultural and linguistic diversity and heritage; on the other hand, its main task deals with the implementation of the competitiveness and economic potential of the cultural and creative sectors, with reference to the audiovisual sector. The three strands into which the Programme is divided sustain these sectors and empower efforts to make cultural production more sustainable, digital and inclusive through the construction of new audience and media consumption. The description of the strands helps focus on the strategic impact of the Programme supporting the convergence of audiences, culture and sustainability:

- the Culture strand deals with the production and trans-border worker circulation of cultural products and the mobility of cultural actors, with the purpose to develop transnational mobility, audiences (accessible and inclusive culture) and innovation, with regard to digitalization, learning and education. In this sector, the promotion of young talents is made possible through horizontal actions (networks, platforms, mobility for artists and professionals, cooperation projects), sectorial actions (music, publishing, cultural heritage) and special actions (European cultural awards, European capitals of culture, support to young artists);
- the Media strand encourages cinema and audiovisual industries in the development and promotion of the products financed, especially movies, TV series, documentaries, video games, cinema, festivals, vod services and markets. The promotion of young talents is supported thanks to programs of education and information addressed to the entertainment of audiences and cinema education;

- the Cross-sectorial strand is dedicated to the mass media sector and promotes media alphabetization, informative pluralism and freedom, with attention to the transnational political cooperation and the development of laboratories for creative media innovation (quality press, freedom and informative pluralism), so as to fuel international exchanges and best practices within cultural and creative sectors.

To the fore is the construction of new research opportunities not only for companies, foundations, private and public institutions, associations, but also for higher education actors and universities, at a time of public fund cuts and the increasing reticular collaborations. The rapid transformation of the academic environment boosted by digitalization, globalization and competition implies the necessity to contemplate both the potential and the effective risks of such knowledge interconnection, to better understand the ongoing and future impact of AI systems and digitalization on the traditional strategies of learning: «Will the university absorb the potentials of this general-purpose technology and use them to develop an open science that exploits this revolution to the benefit of societies and economies? Or will the university's central functions be absorbed by the technology companies that increasingly dominate many sectors of modern life?» (IAU, 2024, 7).

The “risks of the modern university” emphasized by the International Association of Universities in the report *Open Science: The Challenge for Universities* are closely related to this fast transformation of academic spheres soon after the pandemic. The metaphor of “open science” delves into the complexity of such a strategic transition as it deals with the search for new, solid opportunities for innovation for universities, as well as in the field of cultural production (Paltrinieri 2022).

The *European Parliament resolution of 14 December 2022 on the implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture and the EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations* (2022/2047(INI)) underlines the central role played by humanities and more specifically arts in the construction of new ways of social aggregation and creativity: «whereas artistic research should be brought to a peer dialogue with other research disciplines and funded as such, because of both its self-value and its crucial contribution to triggering innovation». In this perspective, the Creative Europe Programme supports this strategy of cultural empowerment in those fields, such as music, theatre, literature, journalism, anthropology, in which temporary employment often hampers long-lasting interests and investments. In other terms, the Creative Europe Programme deals with cultural strategies designed to build a wide European creative sphere in line with the need to involve new audiences dedicated to the so-called world of arts (Becker 1982). Assuming that the Programme intends to enhance reticular connections between public and private subjects, it is important to remark that some co-financed projects involve academic actors and encourage the construction of a shared European sensitivity on the convergence of communicative and symbolic purposes. This is an aspect heralded by Jürgen Habermas (2013 [2014], 12) about European technocracy, social justice and economic solidarity:

«A technocracy without democratic roots would have neither the power nor the motivation to accord sufficient weight to the demands of the electorate for social justice, status security, public services and collective goods, in the event of a conflict with the systemic demands for competitiveness and economic growth».

What is the relation between creativity, public opinion and social growth? The analysis of the academic projects financed in 2021 and 2022 exalts not only the research opportunities provided by European financing strategies not belonging to the traditional public economic supports (Horizon, ERC, PRIN), but also the incentive for higher education institutions concerning research activities in the audiovisual and cultural productions, thus empowering the academic vocation to dialogue, innovation and mobility. This aspect deals with the economy of culture in handling the sustainability of public policies for social inclusion: «In this advanced phase, public policies are required to increasingly face not only the way to improve the accessibility of cultural products and experiences, but also the enhancement of productive and managerial skills in these sectors, in the light of the more and more important contribution they offer to the macro-economic activity» (Sacco 2025, 56).

The backdrop to this is the transition from the “university in democracy” (Habermas, 1967) to the “new university” (Coe 2021) suggesting the analysis of the functional changes ruling the ongoing process of platformization of universities implying new strategies of private and public support to research activities (Lombardinilo 2025; Rivas 2023; Van Dijk, Poell, De Waal 2018).

The investigation into the projects financed by the Creative Europe Programme during the two-year period 2021-2022 shows that Universities took part in 30 projects also involving Italian Universities: 26 projects belong to the Culture strand, 3 projects are within the Cross-sectorial strand and one in Media strand. The average duration of the projects is 30 months. Six projects were coordinated by university institutions: three of them are Italian (University of Milan, Sapienza University of Rome, University of Turin) and the other three are Spanish (Universidad Catolica Santa Teresa de Jesus de Avila, Fundacion Universidad Catolica de Valencia San Vicente Martir, Universidad de Zaragoza). The remaining 24 projects involve European universities as partners, with an average of 8 partners in each project. As regards the Italian presence, the institutions in the Lazio region are the most active subjects in the promotion and the development of academic collaborations, as they are involved in 9 of the projects analysed.

The interdisciplinary dimension of the projects financed by the Creative Europe Program demonstrates that the «rhetoric of research» described by Raewyn Connell (2019, 36) can be overcome, provided that it is possible to support the social and public responsibility of university research, with particular regard to the Mediterranean area. This is a very strategic aspect, confirmed by the successful proposals of Italian and Spanish universities that show their strategic engagement in certain cultural fields such as social theatre, sustainable fashion methods, the digital storytelling of local traditions, rural intangible heritage, film and media literacy, in line with the promotion of their historical roots. The projects financed concern specific strategic sectors of contemporary creativity focused on shared efforts of inclusive and sustainable cultural productions. To the fore is the development of research networks, also aimed at strengthening the social perception of universities and their social impact, so as to cope properly with Stephan Collini’s (2012) pressing stimulus: what are Universities for?. The financial support provided by the Creative Europe Programme to university projects range from 159.296,00 euros (*Shadow-en-route*, coordinated by Sapienza University of Rome) to 2.440.714,00 euros (*WE produce PODcasts*, coordinated by

Roma Tre University). Spanish higher education institutions are the main partners of Italian universities within projects coordinated by foreign actors, as they take part in 5 research projects. For instance, the collaboration between the Universidad Catolica Santa Teresa and the University of Basilicata is at the basis of the project *Immersive digital storytelling of the European rural intangible heritage*. Furthermore, the partnership between the University of Zaragoza and the Roman archeological group led to the project *ClimAID - Building resilience to climate change through cultural heritage and urban arts*.

Table 1: *Projects supported by the Europe Creative Programme and coordinated by Italian Universities*

Italian University head of the project	Department	Title of the project	Extension	Financing	Strand
University of Turin	Department of Humanities	<i>Green E.Th.I.Cs - Green Experience through Theatre Inspiring Communities</i>	41 months (September 2022- February 2026)	1.973.476,00 euros	Culture
University of Milan	Department of Law	<i>Transforming Young People Using Shakespeare</i>	23 months (June 2022- May 2024)	199.998,00 euros	Culture
Sapienza University of Rome	Department of Humanities and Modern Cultures	<i>Shadow-en-route - Shadow theater EasterN ROots Uniting people Toward Europe</i>	23 months (June 2023- May 2025)	159.296,00 euros	Culture

Sustainability and digitalization are the cultural research areas mainly focused upon in the two-year period 2021-2022, since they are behind 6 projects. We can mention both the *Zero waste design* project carried out by the Tuscany Region and University of Gabès (Tunisia) and the *T4H - Tech 4 Heritage* coordinated by the French Production Audiovisual Agency “The Factories” and Sapienza University of Rome. Theatre is a strategic research topic within the Creative Europe Programme, as 5 projects are dedicated to the field of theatre innovation. For instance, *Sustainable Theatre Alliance for a green Environmental Shift* is coordinated by the Théâtre de Liège in collaboration with the Riga Technical University and the Piccolo Teatro foundation in Milan. The least explored research topic in university projects is cinema, inspiring only one project, *The film corner for all. Digital innovative environments for film and media literacy*, coordinated by Fondazione Cineteca italiana together with the Milano-Bicocca University and the University of Galway (Ireland).

With reference to the three projects coordinated by Italian Universities, this survey highlights a shared focus on theatre innovation and drama education. For instance, *Green E.Th.I.Cs. - Green Experience Through Theatre Inspiring Communities* is coordinated by the University of Turin (Department of Humanities) and involves 18 Partner Actors belonging to 12 different countries. The purpose is to empower civic engagement activities in order to trigger awareness of climate change and strengthen the critical thought and proactivity of citizens in line with the European Green deal through performative arts. All documents and research fundings are available at the website <http://greenethics.eu/>.

The project *Transforming Young People Using Shakespeare (Typus)* is coordinated by the University of Milan (Department of Law Sciences) and involves four other partner subjects to develop an interactive approach focused on *Romeo and Juliet*. The task is to spark the integration of young marginalized actors in contemporary society to train new professional subjects possessing stage skills also concerning social and legal sciences (www.typus.it).

Finally, the project *Shadow-en-route – Shadow Theater EasterN Roots Uniting people toward Europe* is coordinated by the Sapienza University of Rome (Department of Humanities and Modern Cultures) and is developed with 4 partner subjects. It is inspired by the ancient tradition of the “theatre of shadows” connecting different cultures and identities. It is conceived as a means to promote European cooperation, as it exploits the history of the “theatre of shadows” to make cultural exchange easier and encourage a shared sense of European Mediterranean identity. The project promotes laboratories and public shows in Italy, Greece and Turkey and involves all participants in the creative process to improve their understanding of the European cultural heritage, as recommended in the *European Parliament Resolution of 14 November 2022 on the implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture and the EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations (2022/2047(INI))*, which «considers that culture and intercultural dialogue make a key contribution to fostering mutual understanding within a society and between different societies, and to restoring communication beyond linguistic boundaries on the international stage in challenging global contexts».

In this context, the so called “community theatre” investigated by Federico Boni regarding the above projects represents a reliable interpretation of the social impact of dramaturgical strategies (Fişek 2019; Angelaki 2019; Auslander 1999), also considering the collective participation and construction of shared environments: «This tension among ethics, aesthetics and sociality inspires all the theatre and performative projects of Creative Europe as their practices deal with the keywords participation and inclusivity. Therefore, they delve into the agency of people and the groups to which these projects are addressed». (Boni 2025, 154). The way these projects coped with the recovery of handicapped and marginalized subjects confirms the impact of interculturalism (Knowles 2010; Kornhaber 2020), from the perspective of artistic live performances (Gemini, Brilli 2024).

The reticular patterns of these projects seem to exalt the strategic role played by academic networks in research activities on contemporary creativity and cultural production, in line with the construction of European audiences supported by the tenets of inclusion, participation and mobility, thus never forgetting that «Universities

represent, collectively, a tremendous social asset, produced by the effort of many thousands of workers and students over long periods of time». (Connell 2019, 8).

3. *Culture and imagination as a European booster*

«Culture is public because meaning is». As Clifford Geertz (1973, 12) points out in his well-known *Interpretation of cultures*, culture belongs to all social phenomena owning public importance and a shared collective. As William Blake reminds us, «eternity is in love with the productions of time»: the more social meanings are acknowledged and interiorized, the more those meanings may reach cultural dominion according to the new techniques of symbolic consumption of the hyperconnected society.

The cultural production supported by the Creative Europe Programme deals with the attempt to link the public and private dimensions of cultural industries that should comply with the principles of inclusion, sustainability and social engagement. Furthermore, the scientific networks supporting the projects financed exalt the reticular patterns required by the European Programme to enhance university research in audiovisual and cultural innovation processes. In other terms, the definition of such research partnerships in cultural creativity must be framed within the European policies for social and economic development also through the involvement of academic expertise in communication and creative processes, with reference to theatre, art and digital narrations (Altobelli 2025; Paltrinieri, Spampinato 2024). As we go through the contents and the results of the above mentioned projects, we retrieve Richard Sennett's image of "the sociable performer" within our shifting times: «There is an aspect of cooperation which is closer to the concern in this study with the bodily, non-verbal character of performance, cutting across all forms of performance, from rituals to stage plays, from dancing to music» (Sennett 2024, 173).

The dialectic between the ritual and the performance concerns the way we are still capable of producing and consuming culture and, in the meantime, of making culture a public shared process pivoted on the exaltation of local identities and common creative pathways (Sternberg 2023). This is one of the main tasks of postmodern universities in developing civic engagement and collective participation. On the one hand, the construction of postmodern universities depends on their degree of attractiveness and authority; on the other hand, it also requires a different way to foresee the impact of knowledge on everyday life, as Ronald Barnett (2013, 2) underlined: «*how might our understandings of the university be expanded?* One answer lies in the imagination: through the imagination, we may hope to widen our sense of the possibilities before us». Creativity and imagination are two sides of the same coin as they may fuel cultural industries and academic institutions as well, providing that Europe plays a central role in this challenge for intellectual and civil growth: «This feat is accomplished ever anew, daily, everywhere where humans live; the perpetual rebirth and reincarnation of the world is what all and any human mode of being-in-the-world consists in» (Bauman 2004, 11).

Reimagining the university is the pivotal purpose of Dirks' work: only "decentralized and more networked" institutions can unlock new opportunities and position themselves more critically in the ecosystem of knowledge. Therefore, they can be framed within the wider strategies of public relevance and funding improvement, at a

time of global uncertainty and multilevel functional risks. This perspective may also shed light on the ongoing complexity of academic governance overturning the positive effects of research partnerships into a rigid administrative procedure contrasting with the need for mobility and worldwide synergies.

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