

## Cultural Elite in A Local Space

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### **Abstract**

*My study focuses on the shapers Debrecen's – the second biggest city of Hungary – culture, and my research aimed at getting to know the cultural life of Debrecen, the opinion leaders who have the most influence on it, the members of the local cultural elite, and to reveal patterns and trends in their medium as a function of locality. The question was how a cultural elite operating in a local space interprets its role as a culture shaper, what kind of elite image and roles and functions it usually attributes to members of the elite. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between 2017 and 2020 among cultural elite members in Debrecen. I looked for people who had been active in the arts in Debrecen during the period of the research, whose work had been recognised with a state or professional award and/or who had been at the head of a cultural institution in Debrecen during the research period.*

**Keywords:** Culture, Cultural Elite, Locality, Hungary, Debrecen

### **INTRODUCTION**

Culture plays a crucial role in shaping society and social relations. The shapers of culture, the members of the cultural elite, also influence the society that legitimises their power.

In my study, I focus on the cultural elite in Debrecen, because Debrecen, as the centre of the Eastern region and the second biggest city in Hungary, and due to its specific identity, its intellectual atmosphere, its dominant historical past and traditions, has a local culture and elite that has a significant impact on the life of the city and the surrounding settlements – and the city council has a clear goal to strengthen this role at the regional level, also in cultural terms.

Among the members of the cultural elite of Debrecen, which is the subject of my investigation, I include all artists working in Debrecen whose profession has been recognized with an outstanding professional or state award, and I designate them as the artistic elite within the cultural elite. Artists recognised solely by the city are not the subject of my current research. I have excluded awards given by the Debrecen council because the dimension of recognition and prestige may be distorted by awards linked to local values and interests. In addition to the artists, I also consider the persons who are at the head of the cultural institutions in Debrecen, i.e. who are in a decision-making position in terms of culture, as belonging to the group already mentioned, and who represent the positional elite within the cultural elite. This concept of the elite in my research is based on the first elite research in Hungary conducted after the fall of communism in 1993, which has since been conducted in several waves, in which the leaders of the research considered those who held leading positions in cultural life as well as artists who had been awarded state prizes to be members of the cultural elite (Szelényi et al., 1995).

During the qualitative research, I wanted to find out what the elite image of the sample is like, how much the perceived and the real elite image converge, how they perceive the cultural life of the city and how they assess its functioning.

### **Who Can Be Considered Members of the Cultural Elite?**

Although there are no well-defined and universally accepted notions of elites among researchers, especially with regard to cultural elites, most agree that there are three groups of elites:

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Political,  
Economic and  
Cultural elite.

These groups can be delimited and distinguished on the basis of the types of capital they possess (Szalai, 2001). This means that a significant part of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital is distributed among these three elite groups, and to be elite, one needs to possess at least one of these types of capital. Pierre Bourdieu (2010) distinguishes three types of capital: economic, cultural and social. The way in which capital is distributed between different social groups makes it possible to describe social structures, in particular who belongs to the highly educated classes in society (Bourdieu, 2010). Bourdieu's theory of capital (1978) thus helps us to understand the power position of highly educated groups. The theory is based on the idea that cultural capital is the basis of cultural power, i.e. that the holders of cultural capital gain(ed) advantages in the cultural sphere. The French sociologist distinguishes three different types of cultural capital. 1) Incorporated cultural capital, also known as embodied cultural capital, is the most time-consuming form of acquisition, preceded by a process of learning and absorption. 2) Objectified cultural capital, i.e. materialised cultural capital, is the possession of cultural goods such as paintings, musical instruments, books, etc., but does not involve the understanding of these objects without investing energy. 3) The third type within cultural capital is institutionalised cultural capital, measured in terms of ranks and titles (Bourdieu, 2010). Other theories, such as Gouldner's (1979) theory of cultural capital, argue that it is critical language that can create a new social group (Fónai, 1995), and that it is the free formation and expression of ideas that distinguishes the intellectuals and/or elites from the non-elites. According to Bourdieu's (2013) rules of art, intellectuals operate as a kind of social outsider, according to an internal set of rules, without interest. It is this kind of artistic freedom and independence that Bourdieu refers to that allows for the emergence of a critical language within the cultural field, which can be a characteristic and a key feature of the cultural elite as a social group. It is also important to note that regional types, different roles and functions influence who we consider to be members of the cultural elite. Just as intellectuals and intellectual elites have the fundamental function of defining and communicating culture and its goals (Fónai, 2008), this role becomes even more powerful and decisive in local spaces.

If we approach the cultural elite from the perspective of classical elite theory, then according to István Bibó's (1986) theory, the fact that this social group transmits values also means the production of cultural products and values, or, to put it less nicely, the production of culture. In this sense, culture refers to moral behaviour, human relations, the cognition and refinement of needs. In the process of culture-making, the elite thus provides a pattern for living life, which creates the basis for culture. This type of elite role, which we can discover in Bibó's writings, can be strongly paralleled with the functions and roles of the intellectuals. The role of the intellectuals – which can also be interpreted as the role of the cultural elite – is independent of power, eternal, and its main task, together with the creation of value, is the creation of culture, i.e. the organisation of society along the lines of norms and culture (Kovács, 2015).

Approached from the perspective of José Ortega's philosophy of culture, culture offers people something to hold on to, to rise above the difficulties and problems of everyday life, to break free from its cycle. If we adopt this philosophical approach to culture, we can see the creators of cultural products as a kind of interpreter, responding to what happens in everyday life. These reflections and their interpretations in turn have an impact on individuals, who are able to reorganise their lives through the so-called pre-interpretation by elites. In this sense, spontaneity as a general feature of life and everyday life is fought against by culture in order to create security through cultural products by providing patterns, norms and values (Csejtej, 1980).

In the Pareto interpretation of classical elite theories, if we try to place members of the cultural elite in the categories of governing and non-governing elites, we can see that they can fall into both categories. Cultural policy-makers, the main decision-makers in cultural life, belong to the governing elite, while influential intellectuals in non-decision-making positions in cultural life, like the artistic and scientific elite, belong to the non-governmental elite (Kristóf, 2011a; Pareto, 1963). This type of categorical approach to cultural elites can be paralleled with the concept of cultural elites that I have used in my research. This means that I divided the local cultural elite into two categories in my investigation and distinguished between artistic and positional

elites. The members of the artistic elite are artists and creators with local ties – the non-governmental elite in Pareto terms – while the members of the positional elite are cultural actors who, by virtue of their decision-making position at the head of local cultural institutions, influence the development of cultural communities and processes – the governing elite.

In my research, in addition to the above-mentioned categories of artistic and positional elites, I consider it important to take into account the dimension of personal abilities and prestige, i.e. beyond the position – external interpretation – in the social structure, what characteristics – internal interpretation, self-definition – distinguish the members of the elite within social groups. In this connection, I will quote a Hungarian researcher's – Erzsébet Szalai – general definition of elites, which I myself adopt as the definition of elites in my research:

*"In the spirit of neolite theories, elite researchers use the term elite to refer to the main holders of power by more or less tacit agreement - those who make the most fundamental decisions in society that have the most lasting impact on the life of society."* (Szalai, 2001: 13)

A further characteristic of the elite is that it is a social formation that is higher up in the social hierarchy, i.e. a leading group (Müller – Takács, 1998). One idea of the authors cited can be paralleled with Pászka's (2010) interpretation of elites:

*"Elites are fundamentally determined by the social relations in which they exist. In societies with different structures, different types of elites emerge, with different structures, which can be described by different criteria."* (Müller – Takács, 1998: 3)

This means that the role and functioning of the elite can be understood in the particular society and even the local space in which it operates. According to Mills (1962), the elite, the leading layer of local societies, is the group of individuals who make the most important decisions affecting the local society. I therefore consider it particularly important to explore how cultural elites operate in a regional centre. Debrecen is an appropriate location for this research because it is Hungary's second largest city, a major centre of rural life in the Eastern region in Hungary, and its proximity to the Romanian border offers further opportunities. However, despite being Hungary's second largest city and the centre of a very large geographical area, the way in which culture is formed and shaped behaves and operates is different from that in Budapest. This is also due to the fact that culture-making in Hungary is very strongly capital-centred. The elite members I have studied can be both part of a national elite sample and members of a local elite, by playing their elite role in the life of a rural town instead of the capital city orientation typical of nationally recognised elites. These specificities are mainly due to their locality.

## **The Elite Definition Of Study And Research**

In my research, I consider cultural elites to be all those individuals who not only shape but also have a lasting impact on the cultural life of Debrecen by setting a good example for cultural consumers to follow. This culture shaping consists of two components. On the one hand, there is the *creative activity* and, on the other hand, the *organising activity*. I consider those who are essentially creative and artistic to be part of the cultural elite. Iván Szelényi defines the cultural elite as persons who are in an *important decision-making position for culture* (Szelényi et al., 1995). The authors Müller and Takács define the position of decision-makers in this way: *"The elite is fundamentally determined by its decision-making position: its members participate in decision-making processes because they are in a position to have the necessary information"* (Müller – Takács, 1998: 4).

I call the cultural actors in these decision-making positions within the cultural elite the *positional elite*, as they are at the head of cultural institutions that influence the shaping of culture and the host communities they form. Mills (1962) refers to what I define as the positional elite as the power elite, which captures the essence of the importance of the decision-maker position. However, I do not include this dimension in my research in terms of aspects other than institutional decision-making positions, so the cultural policy perspective is not part of my research. In her recent book on the wide range of elite definitions and approaches, Luca Kristóf (2021) points out that while normative roles are emphasised in many definitions, social sciences tend to define elites from a more power-based perspective. This power manifests itself in the fact that elite members are involved

in various decisions, thus influencing the members of society, but also in the fact that they have considerable power of influence because of their network of contacts and their position in society.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology of my exploratory research on the cultural life of Debrecen and the cultural elite of the city is based on three main pillars. Firstly, I conducted semi-structured interviews with people I had identified as part of Debrecen's cultural elite. In most cases, the semi-structured interviews, which lasted 1-1.5 hours on average, were recorded face-to-face and on tape, and allowed me to learn about the personal and professional life of the cultural elite in Debrecen and their relationship with the city, their image of the elite and cultural elites in general, as well as their future plans for the cultural life of the city, in which their own work is embedded, their individual desires and fears, and their own (imagined) place in the local cultural sphere and institutional system. The research took place between 2017-2020, during which time I conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with a total of 34 cultural elites.

During the research, the primary question was how a cultural elite operating in a local space interprets its role of shaping culture, what kind of elite image, roles and functions it attributes to its members, i.e. what kind of *elite image the sample under study has*:

Is there a difference between the elite image of the positional and artistic elite in the literature and the sample?

What characteristics and roles do respondents attribute to the cultural elite?

In relation to this question, I examined *the perceived and actual image of cultural elites, external and internal expectations of elites, different characteristics and roles within cultural elites, and self-definition*.

In laying the foundations for this study, we have seen how classical theories and elite studies in general assign functions, roles and characteristics to elites and, within them, to cultural elites. Thus, the external expectations of the elite are known, but it is worth examining what internal motivations drive the members of the cultural elite in comparison, how they view the elite, i.e. what image of the elite they have and how this is consistent with external expectations. I interviewed the elite members I visited along the lines of an interview schedule.

**Table 1: Interview register of the cultural elite in Debrecen interviewed between 2017-2020**

1. interviewee	woman	positional elite	59 years old
2. interviewee	man	artistic elite	54 years old
3. interviewee	woman	artistic elite	68 years old
4. interviewee	man	artistic elite	64 years old
5. interviewee	man	artistic elite	48 years old
6. interviewee	man	positional elite	52 years old
7. interviewee	woman	positional elite	65 years old
8. interviewee	man	positional elite	52 years old
9. interviewee	woman	artistic elite	47 years old
10. interviewee	woman	positional elite	48 years old
11. interviewee	woman	artistic elite	57 years old
12. interviewee	man	artistic elite	61 years old
13. interviewee	man	artistic elite	76 years old
14. interviewee	man	artistic elite	37 years old
15. interviewee	woman	artistic elite	61 years old
16. interviewee	man	artistic elite	43 years old
17. interviewee	man	artistic elite	61 years old
18. interviewee	man	positional elite	48 years old

19. interviewee	woman	positional elite	54 years old
20. interviewee	man	artistic elite	30 years old
21. interviewee	man	artistic elite	76 years old
22. interviewee	man	positional elite	36 years old
23. interviewee	man	artistic elite	35 years old
24. interviewee	woman	artistic elite	47 years old
25. interviewee	woman	positional elite	57 years old
26. interviewee	man	positional elite	56 years old
27. interviewee	woman	positional elite	42 years old
28. interviewee	woman	positional elite	47 years old
29. interviewee	man	positional elite	48 years old
30. interviewee	man	artistic elite	35 years old
31. interviewee	man	artistic elite	33 years old
32. interviewee	man	artistic elite	74 years old
33. interviewee	man	artistic elite	54 years old
34. interviewee	woman	artistic elite	47 years old

Source: own editing

During the research period, I managed to interview a total of 34 cultural elites. As can be seen in Table 1, although men were proportionally more highly represented among the cultural elites, nearly 40% of the interviewees were women. In terms of the distribution of artistic and positional elites, artistic elites were more represented among the respondents, with over 60% representation. The average age of the sampled cultural elites during the research period was 52 years, the youngest being a 30 year old artistic elite, while the oldest was 76 years old, both members of the artistic elite.

### Who Can We Consider As Members Of The Cultural Elite At Local Level?

In the theoretical introduction, we have seen how elites can be understood in society as a whole, what are the roles and functions of elites in general and of cultural elites. In the course of my research, I saw it as particularly important to investigate how the people I included in my study as cultural elites perceive the elite, who they consider to be elite and cultural elites. In analysing the interviews, I distinguished four types of self-definition of elites. There are those who consider the transmission of values to cultural elites as a task (type 1), but also the ability to influence by example (type 2). In addition to these, two types of responses are also observed, namely those who consider cultural elites to be members of the cultural elite (type 3). Finally, there is also an approach that focuses on the grassroots organisation of culture and cultural policy (type 4). These types and their most striking characteristics are summarised in the table below (2).

**Table 2: Typical dimensions of self-definition of cultural elites**

Types	Type 1: value intermediation	Type 2: Sampling and knowledge influence	Type 3: Intellectual roles	Type 4: Grassroots and the influence of the cultural policy
Their features	high culture cultivators and interpreters; transmitters of values; mirrors for society	in the classical sense the exemplars; a model for the majority; a major influence in some area of culture; daily presence to ordinary people	any thinking, intellectual person; higher university degree; consumer of culture; member of a special culture community	cultural-loving city government; university workshops; the dichotomy of telling and accomodating people; pulling the crowd

Source: own editing

When interpreting the cultural elite, interviewees approached the possibilities of definition from several dimensions. It is clear from the responses that there are very different perceptions of who the cultural elite are, and these different interpretations are heavily distorted by the way in which the interviewees view members of the intelligentsia and cultural policy actors. Cultural elites see themselves mainly as a medium, as a transfer agent, and thus as a kind of mediator, who, with the support of cultural policy, speak to the intellectual elite in the language of art, and transmit values. However, none of the responses reveal the functions and/or roles of classical elite theories in relation to elites – majority-minority, elite-mass and leadership-obedience dichotomies – but rather, intellectuals in the classical sense are theoretically positioned as elites on the basis of the responses.

If we try to divide the answers into groups, we can basically see that some people interpret the elite in terms of creation, in terms of the high level of representation of a particular art form. In these responses, the creative activity appears, a kind of shared artistic consciousness and vocation, and the importance of communicating values, which is already the basis of classical elite theories.

Members of the cultural elite are often identified with high-level cultural practitioners – regardless of their position, measured more in terms of artistic achievement – or those who understand and cultivate culture, producing cultural products – in many cases even if their economic value is negligible. In many cases, the answers include an elite function, which I have also identified: the transmission of values – and even, in some cases, the definition of values.

*"Quite early on I found a poem by Ady (a hungarian poet) that articulates for me (what the cultural elite means to me - the author), a lifelong goal that has been constantly hovering in front of me, it is in his poem The Weeping Desire of Goodness, "Not even to lie about dreams, yet to give a cheerful faith to others". To me, this beautifully encapsulates what can be a professional creed, that of giving cheerful faith to others. [...] and to some extent, what we show society should be a mirror." (Interviewee 15)*

This quotation, and the interviewee's additional thought alongside it, reflects the fact that one of the tasks of the elites through their art is to respond to changes at the individual and social level, to fundamental changes in life, that art and artists must offer coping strategies to members of society and, if you like, through their art, they must elevate their recipients from the profane world.

**Table 3: Expectations of belonging to the elite, as expressed by elite members**

Expectations of elite membership, as defined by elite members:
intellectual qualification
understanding and/or practice of the arts
knowledge of the local cultural environment
an established network of contacts
familiarity with high quality, culturally influential people

Source: own editing

It is interesting that when talking about elites and elite membership, most people started to describe a group of people who belong to it along different dimensions and expectations. For example, they should have an intellectual education in the classical sense, understand and/or cultivate the arts, be familiar with the local cultural milieu, have an established network of contacts and know certain high quality individuals who have an impact on culture, as one elite member put it:

*"I am indeed part of a society. But is it elite or not? If I go out on the street, I don't think I'm elite, but I belong to a society." (Interviewee 13)*

When trying to interpret elite roles through the responses, it is important to highlight, as I mentioned above in relation to elite functions, the role of exemplarity and influence towards members of society. Exemplarity is also an important role in the responses of elite members, who think of elites as exemplars in the classical sense, a narrow group of people who go before the majority, the masses, serving as a good example. However, the dilemma arises as to how visible this role is in everyday life, how noticeable is the direction taken by the leaders, i.e. is there a broad middle class that understands the guidance of the cultural elite, or can the cultural elite

appeal to the lower strata of society. This is an important question, because the cultural elite must be present, otherwise people are unaware of it. In this sense, the cultural elite and the institutional system surrounding its members must make the elite known so that it becomes visible and understandable, the elite can legitimize things and only in this way can it become understandable that people can institutionalize their own knowledge through the elite members. The everyday presence of the cultural elite can therefore be an important point of contact with the masses, with ordinary people.

*"Communicate values, not each other!"* (Interviewee 23)

In addition to providing a sample, it is also important to have influence in some area of cultural life, but in a narrower sense, it can also be said that in at least one of the various artistic disciplines, the elite members must be actively involved in the processes, and it is very important that they directly and personally influence its development in some way.

*"We need people who are consensually acceptable and who have put something on the table that is completely uncoverable. You need people who are sensitive, who can speak to people through their actions, and I kind of believe that. But I do not know any such people. There are so many who are good in their own field, but who are so charismatic and all-encompassing in their activities and attention, I do not know of any. The thing is, the artists I know are very individualistic and not really communal. Which is probably related to the concept of art."* (Interviewee 19)

When defining the cultural elite, the concept is often confused with the concept of the intellectuals, i.e. those who constitute the receptive audience of a given art form, i.e. the cultural consumers in the classical sense. Although it is not directly evident from the responses, it is clear that those who approach the concept of cultural elite from the perspective of the recipient are part of an institutional system, and their recognition is therefore more strongly dependent on the feedback from the recipient, so that the importance of their own creative and value-transferring role is overshadowed or given a different interpretative framework from that of the classical intellectual elites who consume and understand artistic content. Cultural elites are thus often referred to as receptive communities who are to some extent above everyday life, with the potential to receive culture at a high level and quality. For example, they were described as thoughtful, intelligent people who are actively interested in and engaged with culture, but often also as people who have become over-understood in the arts and culture. Furthermore, the concept of intellectual elite emerged as a concept in the interviews, in a different context than Standeisky (2016) talks about them, because in our case, the intellectual elite are those consumers and mostly cultural influencers who are somewhat telling people, opinion leaders, but not professional critics of culture. Luca Kristóf (2021) calls the members of the group referred to here as the intellectual elite cultural stars, who are different from the cultural elite in that they have no real power, although they can influence those interested in culture. They are therefore a wealthier class who can buy culture and have the means to consume it, but also have influence. This raises the dilemma that it is difficult to define who is an artist and who is a member of the cultural elite, because this said a kind of cultural influence, the role of influencer, or 'celebrity' if you like, is (can be) misleading.

*"Who does it include? It's a cliché, but for the most part we very often meet doctors with advanced university degrees who perhaps find it relaxing to think from a different perspective than the traditional, familiar one. [...] Who the cultural elite are, I don't know."* (Interviewee 14)

Some of them said that they always thought of the cultural elite in the sense that they are the ones who consume culture, not only living in a cultural medium, but also actively shaping that medium by their presence, by going to exhibitions, attending exhibitions, going to the theatre and seeing performances, attending concerts, reading evenings, and being informed about cultural developments, being familiar with the latest publications and even with the artists themselves.

The cultural life of the city, the role of grass-roots initiatives and the connection with them become a very important dimension in the interpretation of the cultural elite image, but the cultural policy of the city also plays a prominent role in this issue, or we could even mention economic factors. In the case of the city of Debrecen, several respondents linked to institutions maintained and run by the municipality stressed the importance of the role of a culture-loving city government in having a mayor who is able to develop a municipality where

urban development – which is important mainly in economic terms – also extends to the field of culture and provides infrastructure opportunities in which the operation, existence and presence of artists is adequately guaranteed. It is also important to mention that those who also expressed their opinions on cultural policy issues during the discussion considered it important to have an established cultural policy view as an artist and not to feel politically influenced, so cultural policy support is important, but freedom of thought ultimately determines the elite, as Standeisky (2016) also put it in an essay.

*"It is difficult to define who constitutes the cultural elite in which city or town or village. One could give very interesting examples for each of them. In Debrecen, obviously, the city government, it seems that there is a culture-loving city government, and it supports in every way these institutions that transmit culture or pass on culture or try to promote culture. In that sense, the city leadership can be the cultural elite who set the direction, but it can also be a grassroots one."* (Interviewee 16)

In terms of the replacement and reproduction of cultural elites, interviewees mentioned many examples and good practices to follow. The fact that Debrecen is a university town is a very important aspect of the regeneration of the elite, since the university is also the intellectuals' reception and education centre of the region. Although it is a major deficiency and an increasingly dominant leitmotif of local cultural discourse that the city does not have an arts university, the fact that it has its own faculty of high level musicians is of paramount importance. But it is not only the Faculty of Music that offers a high quality arts education, as those interested in cultural studies can also find their place and opportunities in the Faculty of Humanities. The existence of the Alföld Journal, the Institute of Literature and Cultural Studies with its broad spectrum of cultural training, and the Alföld Studio, which is the result of joint work and cooperation, for example, as a classic workshop, are very important for the production of intellectuals and elites.

*"And there are writers who have not left, and they represent a very progressive, good, strong bastion. It's the visual arts that are interesting. Here, too, there are already people from the middle generation who are quite strong as lone warriors. If the older people will let them, they will have space. [...] After a few years of silence, the theatre is starting to strengthen again, and the Deszka offer is quite good. You can say that in small areas something has started, not started, it's working."* (Interviewee 29)

Beyond opportunities, training, workshops, networking, what else is needed to become an elite member, most said that without invested work and dedication, you cannot belong to a circle/group - and for positions this is of paramount importance. But it is also worth keeping a critical eye on the people in different positions, as there is very little line between being a "sizzling genius" who can manage the culture well or simply being well-adapted to certain situations.

*"Some people who can serve a system, a situation, very well without believing in it, belong to the elite as well (...) The good cultural elite is the one that can pull the masses along with it, the one that has to teach them."* (Interviewee 17)

### **How Do You Measure Success Or Recognition Within The Elite, What Is The Secret?**

What distinguishes the elite, the artistic works of the elite, is a difficult to measure but important aspect of their transcendence of mediocrity: *"mediocrity is the death of the profession."* (Interviewee 1) The suggestion that the security of state support and/or municipal/state-run institutions "makes artists happy" was raised as a strange paradox, as it provides a kind of existential security even if something does not work well, i.e. it does not work, it does not have an impact, it does not attract a sufficient audience. Anyone who can thrive in this system without support can be said to be successful. But the paradox is that without the existential security that state, municipal, grant or subsidy support can provide, it becomes a very long process to succeed in the art market sector, and it cannot be done without marketing, without an artist being able to define his or her own value.

Another important factor for success is the immediate feedback that elite members receive from an audience or from their recipients. For this type of success, respect and knowledge of the recipient is essential, as is the ability to convey to them the artistic value that the recipient may need at that time, in that time and in that community.

On the other hand, self-marketing can also have quite damaging effects on the perception of elite members. *"It's not necessarily good for the culture, that you don't have to be an achiever anymore, you don't have to be one, you just have to look like one. Today, marketing is more important than actual performance."* (Interviewee 17) What does this mean?



Think, for example, of situations where amateur actors are sought to appear on a television programme. These people become performers, cultural influencers for a wide range of people, they determine thinking, public discourse. This is the negative impact of celebrity, mentioned earlier, on the perception of those who move in the cultural sphere.

*"Those who are easy to accommodate. This is not positive at all. Anything that's rapid has an effect, and that's sad, because obviously that's what makes us have the flash stars and the notion of stardom. It's a terrible devaluation of who can be a star and part of the culture."* (Interviewee 17)

Another interesting dimension of success is how someone becomes an iconic figure of a city, town or community. When I asked cultural elites who are the most influential figures in the cultural life of a city, they considered important characteristics such as being iconic, being a leading artist in the city, being a pulling force, or even being the person people turn to on the street, before listing names. Who becomes such a charismatic person is more a function of the image and communication of that person from the outside than of performance. This is not, of course, to say that those mentioned as iconic figures are window dressers and that there is no achievement behind their work, indeed this is unquestionable. Rather, it is also a question of marketing the city, of who we highlight among our artists, who we make visible. Such iconic figures, mentioned by the cultural elite, are mainly working (or have worked, but some have also done strong organisational and cultural work during the research period) in the field of theatre – Sándor Csikos (actor of the Csokonai National Theatre), Anna Kubik (actor of the Csokonai National Theatre), Anna Ráckevei (former director of the Csokonai National Theatre, currently an actor) or Edit Bódor (former director of the Főnix Event Organising Nonprofit Ltd.), but also the late actors Ottó Simor and Árpád Kóti from Debrecen.

When looking at the reputational elite group, it is interesting to note that people working or creating in the different artistic disciplines of the city do not know each other's work in depth enough, as few of the respondents could name any elite member who has had an impact on the city, its population or the host community. It is also important to see that these mentions were very esoteric, and the interviewee usually chose a reputational elite within their own artistic discipline. This phenomenon and problem could be an interesting research question and a field for further observations. What could be the reason for the lack of recognition or understanding of each other's work among artists and cultural institution managers in a city? Could it be the particular institutional structure of Debrecen, or the struggle for scarce resources that makes the elites narrow-minded and uninterested?

### **Reflections on The Cultural Life of Debrecen**

When discussing the cultural life of the city, the lack of vibrancy, i.e. alternating quality cultural programmes, and the lack of charismatic personalities were raised. The mention of this lack is somewhat in line with the lack I experienced when mentioning reputational elites. Exactly what the reasons for this are – as I mentioned above, a separate study could explore – cannot be known, to see from the interviews, but what was mentioned, for example, is that:

*"I don't know the people of Debrecen that well, because most of them, unfortunately, go to Budapest (the capital of Hungary)."* (Interviewee 34)

*"There's no space, I don't know the others, but there must be a lot of them, and that's a problem. In Debrecen there is no opportunity, no space, no money, no support. ... You don't have to leave Debrecen, but to do that you have to somehow give space or support something."* (Interviewee 31)

As these two interviews illustrate, there are two problems that arise from the fact that the culture makers in Debrecen do not know each other. The first is that many of them are oriented towards the capital if they want to make a living as artists and become nationally influential artists. The other is the lack of appropriate spaces (either physical or facilities) where the different artistic disciplines can meet and think together.

Beyond the shapers and cultivators of culture, respondents were more optimistic about cultural consumption, as they consider that more and more people are visiting cultural institutions, people are more open to different

types of cultural events and the city administration is more open to different cultural developments. So cultural consumption is on the up.

But while supporting development, we must also recognise that the cultural policy decisions that shape the city's cultural life are not always positive from the point of view of the cultural elite. Most of all, there is a negative voice among artists regarding institutional choices and opportunities. During the period of the research, local artists could only be present in the tripartite division of the visual arts institutional system in type 2 or type 3 exhibition spaces, reinforcing a sense of alienation and distancing.

## SUMMARY

*"People forget what you say, people forget what you did, but they never forget how you made them feel, and that's the most important thing. If you touch the heart, that's what matters."* (Interviewee 2)

The interview passage quoted as the motto of the summary could be the ars poetica of all culture-making and culture-shaping elites. This excerpt is an inclusive approach to when the cultural elite of a local space works well, but as we have seen, there are many other aspects to the definition of cultural elite. Four types of self-definition can be distinguished along the lines of value transmission, exemplarity and influence, intellectual roles, and grassroots organisation and cultural politics. The indispensable prerequisites for belonging to the cultural elite are an intellectual education, an understanding and cultivation of the arts, and embeddedness in local cultural life. In addition, it was interesting to see that in many cases the intellectual elite was identified by the interviewees as members of the cultural elite, and that they interpreted themselves as artists, outside the social strata. But it is also important to point out that in most cases it was also difficult to mention other elite members by name, because despite the size of the municipality, elite members move/work in a relatively closed cultural circle, which is difficult for other artists to penetrate, and thus we can speak of a closed cultural circle.

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