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Arts and the University: Institutional logics in the developing world and beyond

Abstract

This paper discusses the emergence of arts education at universities and associated institutions of higher learning in the developing world after 1945. In the first part, the question of the university as an institution will be discussed from the point of view of neo-institutional theory and especially the processes of isomorphism that have been frequently described in this theoretical approach. The second section examines the emergence of arts education in the Global South between 1950 and 1970, i.e. at the height of the Cold War. The third section proposes a topology of arts education and the differential realisation of these models in different parts of the world. The final section shows how in one country in the Global South, New Zealand, concrete steps have been taken at universities to realise a decolonial epistemology through the creation of culturally specific spaces which adhere to the cultural exigencies of the host cultures.

Keywords

Neo-institutionalism; arts education; theatre studies; theatre training; decolonisation of the curriculum

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This paper discusses the emergence of arts education at universities and associated institutions of higher learning in the developing world after 1945.¹ To understand current debates on decolonising the university, especially in the area of the performing arts, it is necessary to engage with the historical development of tertiary education in the Global South. Current attempts to reform curricula, or to advocate for decolonial epistemologies need to engage with the apparent paradox that institutions appear notoriously resistant to change, often called institutional inertia, while on a research level continual, even

relentless, innovation and originality are the order of the day. The context of education and training in the performing arts in the Global South is primarily the university rather than conservatories which remain in Europe the main locus of professional training. The article is divided into four sections. In the first part, the question of the university as an institution will be discussed from the point of view of neo-institutional theory and especially the processes of isomorphism that have been frequently described in this theoretical approach. The second section will look at the emergence of arts education in the Global South between 1950 and 1970, i.e. at the height of the Cold War. The third section proposes a topology of arts education and the differential realisation of these models in different parts of the world. The final section shows how in one country in the Global South, New Zealand, concrete steps have been taken at universities to realise a decolonial epistemology through the creation of culturally specific spaces which adhere to the cultural exigencies of the host cultures. It will be argued that such models may provide a pathway to create greater pluriversity in the so-called 'universal' university.

The temporal focus will be on the Cold War period, roughly the 1950s to 1970s, as it played out in the postcolonial world, but the analytical focus will not be specifically on the geopolitical aspects of the conflict. It will come into play in other ways, however, especially regarding the organizational forms adopted in specific countries. My approach is based on institutional theory, in particular sociological neo-institutionalism, which has gained enormous influence in the broader field of studying institutions and organisations. The paper departs from recent research into what can be called the global university (Readings 1996; Mittelman 2017). This research either critiques the neoliberal, corporate university or studies the incontrovertible success story of the university as an institution and how it disseminated throughout the world, especially in the last fifty years. Sociologists David Frank and John Meyer note:

A once-parochial institution particular to Western Christendom has spread to all parts of the world—sometimes with colonialism, but often independently, as societies have voluntarily and eagerly subscribed to this institutional goose, hoping for its putative golden eggs. (Frank and Meyer 2020, 11).

Although it originated in mediaeval Europe as an appendage of the church, the university has become one of the most successful institutional models to emerge from the nineteenth century. Its success story is nowhere more observable than in the Global South, where universities have been founded at the same rate as in more developed countries and in some cases even superseding them. John Meyer observes that “even in sub-Saharan Africa, which enters postcolonial society with almost no tertiary education, we find the same growth pattern... Some African countries now easily have enrolment ratios that exceed European countries of a few decades ago” (Krücken and Drori 2009, 359).

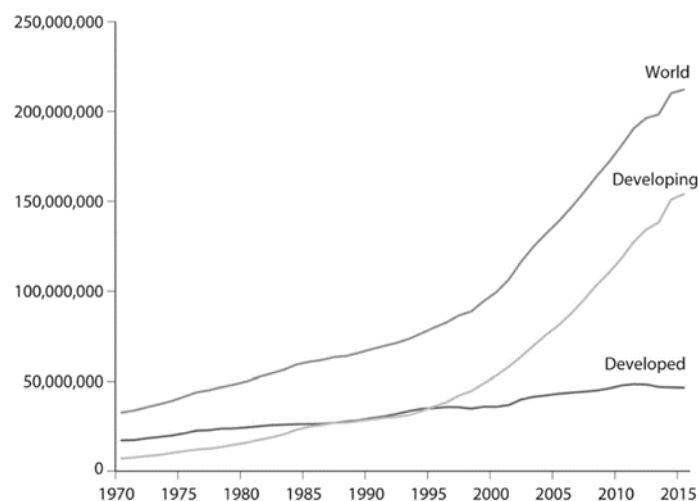


FIGURE 3.2. Gross Tertiary Enrollments 1970–2015—World, Developed Countries, Developing Countries.

Fig. 1 Tertiary enrolments 1970-2015. Source: Frank & Meyer 2020, Figure 3.2.

The university: almost always the same but not quite

David Frank and John Meyer propose the controversial thesis that the institutional model of the university is distinguished principally by its overwhelming homogeneity. They argue that as an *institution* the university is largely homogenous, whereas as an *organisation* it demonstrates high levels of heterogeneity. This observation is backed up by empirical data going back to the late nineteenth century, the period in which the university begins its diffusion around the (non-European) world. They define the university in neo-institutional terms as being based on common beliefs rather than on a highly differentiated and specialised response to specific problems and fields of knowledge. The university, they argue, is so successful because it is largely isomorphic: its content, the types of courses, research specialities, even the designations of professorships, vary little around the world. This does not mean that nothing changes. New disciplines are introduced but they are adopted relatively uniformly around the world. Before 1945 there were only a handful of departments of theatre studies (probably less than ten), today there are hundreds.²

Any specific university derives meaning and authority from its status as a particular instance of a permanent, widespread, and now global institution: “So physics and economics or sociology are presented in Kerala, India, as though they had every element in common with the same subjects in Berlin, Germany” (Frank and Meyer 2020, 22). While this may seem a somewhat outrageous claim (surely sociologists in Kerala study different sociological phenomena than their counterparts in Berlin?), it is more comprehensible if we understand the theoretical foundations on which the empirical research is based.

Both authors are neo-institutional sociologists. Indeed John W. Meyer is one of the founding fathers of this highly influential strand of institutional research and has authored a number of widely cited papers (several are collected in Krücken and Drori 2009). Fundamental to neo-institutional theory is the distinction between institution and organisation. While organisations may be highly disparate, they operate often within an

institutional framework that constrains them to become isomorphic, i.e. they begin to resemble one another.³ Isomorphic processes usually result from the dynamics at the organisational level where the latter form into 'organizational fields' where there is initially a lot of diversity but ultimately they align themselves with prevailing 'myths' (Meyer & Rowen 1977) at the institutional level in order to gain and retain legitimacy. Myths are rationalized institutional rules that come to have the status of obvious truths.

The legitimating myth of the university as a "world institution" and perhaps the most important conveyor of the "global knowledge society" is its commitment to and responsibility for a body of knowledge that is believed to be "universally or ultimately true" (Frank, David John, and Meyer 2020, 3). They term this a "cosmological supposition" that reality is the same everywhere and always, for example, the belief in the existence of gravity. There is probably no university in the world where it is not generally accepted that gravity exists or indeed that the world is round, whereas there certainly exist groups of individuals who do contest this (but they are not generally active in universities). This means that such knowledge can be examined and taught under one cultural and institutional frame so that it can be discussed and compared in highly distinct cultural localities.

These "cosmological" foundations of the university are in no way at odds with its rationalised qualities. Frank and Meyer do argue, however, against an understanding of the university in functionalist terms as far as its educational activity is concerned. Indeed, they argue, whenever societies have attempted to redefine the university in terms of rationalised specialisation, it has very often failed, and the long-term result has been a reabsorption of such specialised organisations into the bosom of the university proper.

It is equally important to assume and accept that human beings everywhere can acquire access to this knowledge through training and learning. Persons who possess an adequate level of education, normally acquired through schooling, can begin the process of gaining knowledge and some may even ultimately extend it (by doing a PhD for example). It is also obvious that the university as a place of knowledge acquisition and expansion is, or should be, indifferent to questions of nationality, race or gender. The university is in this neo-institutional understanding quite literally universal.

University education also affects personhood and identity. The authors note that the certificates and diplomas acquired at university provide the holders not only with an elevated social status but that this status remains a lifelong symbol of achievement. University degrees do not have an expiry date. They can even have a certain resonance beyond death (gravestones will often enshrine an individual's academic credentials). In Germany, the doctoral degree – and in Austria even the old *magister* degree, - is integrated into the holder's name, leading to changes in passports and identity documents. They also argue that the impact of the university on human identity has been significant, perhaps most obviously in the sense that it confers on individuals the status of altered personhood. The latter is "institutionalised in human rights, and it is assumed to be invariable across social groups, and indeed the whole world" (2020, 7).

Despite the impact on human identity and the universalisation of a concept of personhood, universities have proven to be particularly ill-suited and ill-equipped to actually engineer social change on a purely functional level: "The university was relatively useless as an instrument for basic social progress" (*ibid.*, 15). This is because much of the teaching and research done in universities seems to be detached from any immediately plausible social benefit: its very "academic" nature almost precludes the university from

being an efficacious actor in the social field. The commitment to basic research means by definition that the knowledge generated does not provide immediate utilitarian benefits but is more abstract and generalised. Therefore, the authors argue, the mediaeval church institution should have given way to many more specialised centres for research and training. This was indeed attempted at different phases in its history: after the French Revolution, throughout the Soviet Union and its spheres of influence, and in the early period of the United States before the research model of the German university was adopted. These proved, however, to be relatively short lived and impractical because the functions they were designed to perform were often superseded by the development of knowledge and research and often became obsolete. Not so the university, which proved much more flexible and adept at absorbing change, integrating new fields of knowledge without fundamentally altering the institution itself.

The university as institution has been able to accommodate and even flourish under myriad organizational forms: state-financed and fee-paying, state-financed without fees, private endowment, church- or faith-based and so on. The neo-liberal corporate university with its proliferation of self-assessment, and evaluations doesn't fundamentally alter the institution as a belief system. It manifests itself rather on the organizational level where we see strong isomorphic forces at work too, as marketization (mal)practices find purchase around the world. They are especially pronounced in those systems that are operated with budgets dependent on a high number of fee-paying students.⁴

Learning the arts: proto versus real universities

Under the broad umbrella of the isomorphic development of the university model, other institutions of higher education also sprang up, sometimes in direct competition with, sometimes broadly allied to the university. Initially they were distinct from the latter. These included music conservatories, art academies, military academies and polytechnics, whose distinguishing characteristic was an emphasis on professional training with little to no interest in basic research. Art schools have of course a long lineage that in Europe goes back at least to the seventeenth century. Although the French *école des beaux-arts* was originally a highly selective and elitist organisation, it was emulated wherever the French language was spoken which, in the light of French colonialism, was in a great number of countries. The same can be said for music conservatories which spread in the nineteenth and in the twentieth centuries beyond the European continent. In fact, arts institutions are probably the most expansionist of all the various "kin institutions at the margins of the university", as Frank and Meyer term them (2020, 27). In their analysis of higher education in the twentieth century, they calculate that schools of law, medicine and theology grew 30 times between 1895 and 1969, whereas schools of art "grew by orders of magnitude around 200" (Figure 2).

TABLE 2.1. Proliferation of Universities and Other Institutions of Higher Education

<i>Minerva</i> 1895	<i>Minerva</i> 1938	<i>Minerva</i> 1969
248 universities & colleges	1,066 universities & colleges	3,892 universities & colleges
231 other institutions of higher education:	1,870 other institutions of higher education:	10,182 other institutions of higher education:
61 agriculture	187 agriculture	658 agriculture
7 art	129 art	1,734 art
6 business	124 business	1,386 business
12 education	158 education	1,280 education
33 law	251 law	690 law
56 medicine	337 medicine	1,159 medicine
32 polytechnic	237 polytechnic	2,627 polytechnic
24 theology	447 theology	648 theology

Figure 2 (Frank and Meyer 2020: 26, table 2.1).

Indeed, the arts seem to be much better suited to such proto-universities than to the university *sui generis* with its much more generalised principles and commitment to basic research. The budding cello player, while certainly not indifferent to the history of music, has quite different and compelling requirements than a music historian who probably feels happier in a university-type faculty of arts than in a music conservatory. If we follow the principal of institutional isomorphism then the latter is not to be found in the relationship between the proto- and the ‘real’ university but rather in the forms adopted by the many arts institutes across the world. In 1969, the *Minerva Jahrbuch* lists “the Hanoi Dance and Ballet School, the Rhodesian College of Music, the Pyongyang Institute of Dramatic and Cinematographic Arts, and the Kabul Art School” (Frank, David John, and Meyer 2020, 26) It can be safely assumed that at the Hanoi Dance and Ballet School the same études at the bar were being practiced as in Moscow or Leningrad and the Rhodesian College of Music provided instruction in classical music like the conservatories in Europe.

Frank and Meyer base their global analysis of the university on the *Minerva* yearbooks (1891 – 1969). Subtitled *Jahrbuch der gelehrten Welt*, these almanacs were published in Germany from the late nineteenth century and aimed to record all universities, scholarly disciplines and even individual scholars. They also included supplements on museums, libraries, archives and research institutions. Publication ended in 1969 when the task of tracking higher education from a global perspective became impossible. The following analysis is based on data from the early and mid-1950s and late 1960s in respect to institutions devoted to the arts, especially architecture, music, the fine arts and theatre /dance, the categories referenced in the publication. For ease of reference, I have concentrated on the proto-universities, conservatories and arts academies, and not on the programmes offered within universities as part of BA programmes because they are normally not recorded.

The yearbooks distinguish between Europe and “außereuropäisch”, i.e. outside Europe which includes the United States. I have disaggregated the data and created a new category for the United States because the sheer number of organisations certainly rivalled Europe

by the 1950s. It is important to note that the data recorded in the yearbooks is by no means exhaustive but is certainly representative of the relative importance of the artistic genres and disciplines represented.

Figure 3 compares the relative number of organisations in the respective art forms. Even in Europe in 1952, only 15% of organisations were devoted to the theatre and dance compared to 33% for the fine arts and 46% for music. This number decreases significantly when we look outside Europe (excluding the United States): in 1956, only roughly 6% offered training in theatre and dance compared to 47% in music, 45% in the fine arts and 30% in architecture. In the USA music (57.4%) and the fine arts (52%) predominate with theatre and dance at basically the same low level (6.4%) as in other non-European countries.

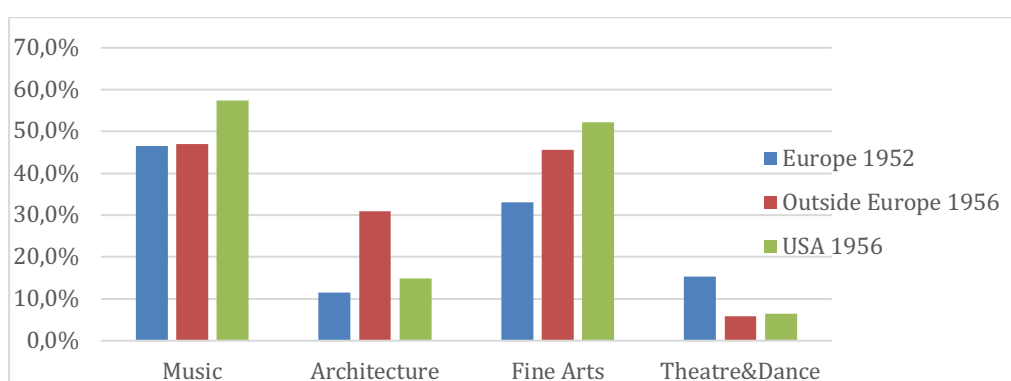


Figure 3: Arts Education worldwide 1956. Source: *Minerva 1952 and 1956*.

These numbers improve somewhat a decade later (Figure 4) when now 9% offer theatre and dance and we see a relative decrease in the other art forms. The importance of architecture in non-European countries compared to Europe is notable and is linked to the fact that most of these countries were developing countries and therefore invested significantly in training and architecture.

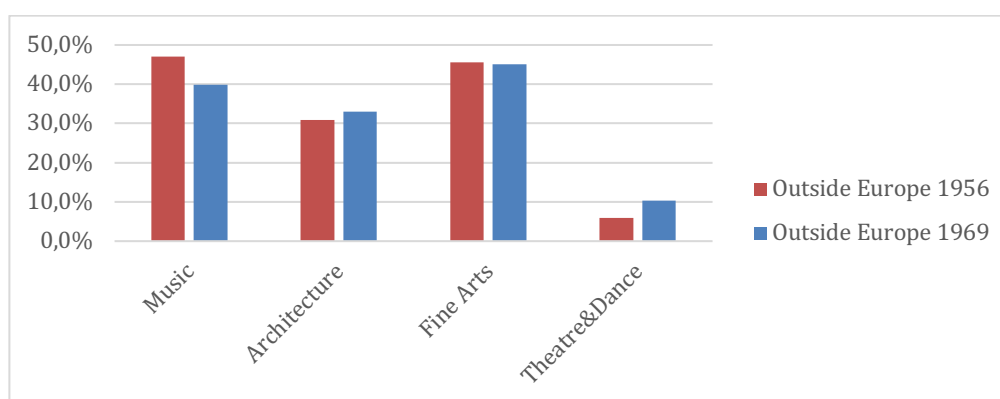


Figure 4: Arts Education outside Europe (excluding the USA) 1956 and 1969. Source: *Minerva 1956 and 1969*.

The geographical distribution demonstrates similar overall growth rates in the decade between the mid-1950s in the late 1960s. Except for Algeria, Morocco and Egypt in the North and South Africa, Africa has according to the Minerva yearbook no institutes whatsoever.

By 1969, the situation changed significantly. In West Africa, a School of Drama at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria had been established as well as other arts institutions such as an *École nationale des beaux-arts* in the Ivory Coast and a similar school in Senegal. In East Africa, there is a conservatory of music in Kenya, and another in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). The background to this expansion is a massive effort to invest in universities by local governments, the former colonial powers such as Britain and France as well as American state and philanthropic aid, where the big foundations such as Rockefeller, Ford and Carnegie were particularly active. In numerical terms, the number of institutes outside Europe and USA grows from 137 in 1956 to 332 in 1969, an increase of almost 60%. However, the number of institutes with a theatre and/or dance focus remains still quite small at the end of the 1960s.

Universitization of theatre education

The number of specialized theatre training institutions outside Europe and USA remains small: in the absence of professional theatre in many of these countries, the need did not and – in some cases – still does not exist. This section of the paper is devoted to what I shall call the “universitization of theatre education”. Rather than trying to count the different organisations (Minerva discontinued publication in 1969), a topological approach will be followed (Figure 5). The evolution of theatre education and studies can be better understood on the basis of an institutional typology which reveals ever greater isomorphism.

Type/model	Conservatory and national drama schools	Theatre university: example GITIS	MFA	BA/MA	University of the Arts
Main geographical distribution	Western Europe, Commonwealth	Russia, China and former Socialist countries	USA	global	global

Figure 5: A typology of tertiary-level theatre education and training.

Seen from a global perspective the integration of theatre studies, education and training conforms to roughly five types or models which we find in different countries with a different emphasis depending on linguistic and cultural heritage. The oldest model is the conservatory, which goes back to the nineteenth century (and in some cases even further). A conservatory is by definition vocational, highly specialised and usually pays only lip

service to scholarly endeavour or research. The best acting conservatories are highly prestigious such as RADA in London, or the Ernst Busch Hochschule in Berlin. A special feature of the developing world and the settler colonies are the various national drama schools established within a few years of one another in Australia (NIDA 1958), India (NSD 1959), Canada (the bilingual NTSC, 1960), and somewhat belatedly in New Zealand (NZ Drama School, 1970), to name only some. They are primarily acting schools which may also include directing, design and other theatre professions, and now are sometimes affiliated with a university. Here too we see a high degree of isomorphism which is reflected not just in their names that almost invariably bear the notion of ‘national’ but also in curricular content and support through state funding.

A second widespread model is the MFA (the Master of Fine Arts) which we find mainly in the USA and in a few anglophone countries. Here professional training is integrated institutionally into the university, departments often have an academic branch, where they are termed “theory and criticism”, but the primary focus is on the “industry”. The MFA is an institutional response to the need for high-level artistic training in the absence of state-run conservatories so the university stepped in to provide the organizational framework. The first university to admit students to the degree of Master of Fine Arts was the University of Iowa in 1940.

A third model, which I term here the theatre university, emerged in Russia after the October Revolution and became enshrined in the famous GITIS (*Gosudarstvennii Institut Teatralnogo Iskustva*). In 1922, GITIS was established in Moscow, as the name suggests, as a State Institute for the Theatre Arts. It had gone through a number of name changes in a genealogy going back to 1878 when it was part of a music school under aristocratic patronage. Its current self-description reads:

GITIS is the largest and oldest independent theatrical arts school in Russia, founded in 1878. We train students in various disciplines and provide *a combination of traditional university education* and innovative up-to-date methods. More than 1500 students from various countries study at the School. GITIS is proud to be a direct heir of the famous Stanislavski’s system.⁵

Its *Modellcharakter* lay in the combination of a university-type education in the liberal arts and humanities with vocational training in different genres of the performing arts.

The new Soviet form became the model for many similar institutes wherever the Soviet Union exercised influence directly or indirectly. Imitations or approximations were established in most Eastern European countries including former Yugoslavia, East Germany (GDR), China, in Syria, Iraq and Mongolia. The special characteristic of this proto-university was the combination of a broad selection of specialised training for different genres of the performing arts and departments devoted to theatre history and criticism, and sometimes even dramaturgy.

With the end of the socialist system in 1989 in Europe, the GITIS model lost its isomorphic force. Although it still exists in Russia, its imitations in former East Germany, for example, were disestablished or reformed in such a way that most of the university components (especially theatre studies) were relocated to universities and the vocational training part consolidated as proper conservatories or as part of Universities of the Arts. With its 1500 students, GITIS is a very small university indeed, and in fact is not really a

university at all but rather an extended conservatory, a proto-university at best in Frank and Meyer's terminology.

BA/MA

The study of the performing arts, whether as a humanistic discipline or for vocational purposes, remains a hybrid affair. While the GITIS model proved attractive as long as state funding was available, it was (and is) a very expensive form of tertiary education for very few students. Across the capitalist world, we find another kind of isomorphism at work, namely conservatories being either integrated into or allied with universities. This process is perhaps most observable in the UK where traditional conservatories were either associated with universities, or new universities, mostly former polytechnics, opened up theatre and dance studies programmes that had a large component of practical work. Conservatories always precede university study of an art form because they absorb and 'institutionalize' the older master-apprentice model.⁶ What we can observe in the realm of the performing arts since 1945 is an unmistakable trend towards integrating training into the university, thereby confirming the thesis that as a rule proto-universities are eventually folded into the university proper. This led in the 1990s to major problems because the university has by definition an increasingly important research component, and most of the staff engaged in providing training for the theatre arts were not research-active in the sense defined by the classical university. There were two solutions to this problem, both of which were followed in the UK and other countries. One was to set up a research department which saw the implementation of MA and PhD programmes at august conservatories such as the Central School of Speech and Drama and an affiliation with an established university (in this case the University of London). The other was to redefine artistic work as research where researchers were either practitioners reflecting on their practice or where the research component of artistic work was recognized as such rather than being distinct from it.

The discipline of drama studies in the UK had always seen itself as different and able, at least potentially, to unite "the heart and the head" (Boenisch 2020, 238) and thereby counteract the increasing specialization of academic disciplines. Ever since the foundation of the first department at the University of Bristol in 1947 (Shepherd, Simon, and Wallis 2004, 7), practical work had been part of the curriculum without any claims to providing professional training, which did not mean of course that graduates did not go on to become artistic professionals. The driving force behind the 'practical turn' in theatre and performance research emerged in the 1990s with the global move towards quantifying research and using it as a benchmark for so-called 'excellence'. As Frank and Meyer note, the university has tilted in the past two decades away from teaching and towards research, at least at the so-called 'research universities' with the new denomination itself a sign of a need for internal differentiation: "The institution increasingly prioritizes active knowledge production, such that research now rivals, or perhaps even trumps, the knowledge transmission in teaching as the university's central purpose" (Frank, David John, and Meyer 2020, 61).⁷ Global North countries reacted in different ways but since the 1990s there has been an ineluctable movement towards adjudicating success and thereby access to mainly state funds through research 'outputs'.⁸ The decisive turning point according to David Whitton was not integration of practice itself, but rather the claim repeatedly made

during the 1990s that the creative process of the artist-researcher and their results (mostly artistic performances of some kind) should be evaluated as valid outputs analogous to peer-reviewed articles or monographs (Whitton 2009, 80). This claim has been largely accepted in the academy in the anglo-world (excluding the USA perhaps). It is still contested in some European countries with their traditional institutional divisions between conservatories and universities, where ‘practice’ still plays a relatively minor role.⁹

Theatre and the University of the Arts

Tertiary education in the creative arts has expanded significantly since 1945. As we noted above, there has been a 200-fold increase over the past century. The most recent institutional response to integrating the creative and especially the performing arts into a university-like structure has been the emergence of Universities of the Arts. This a relatively new development, at least under the current name. As a Google Ngram survey (Fig. 6) reveals, the term is almost non-existent before 1980.

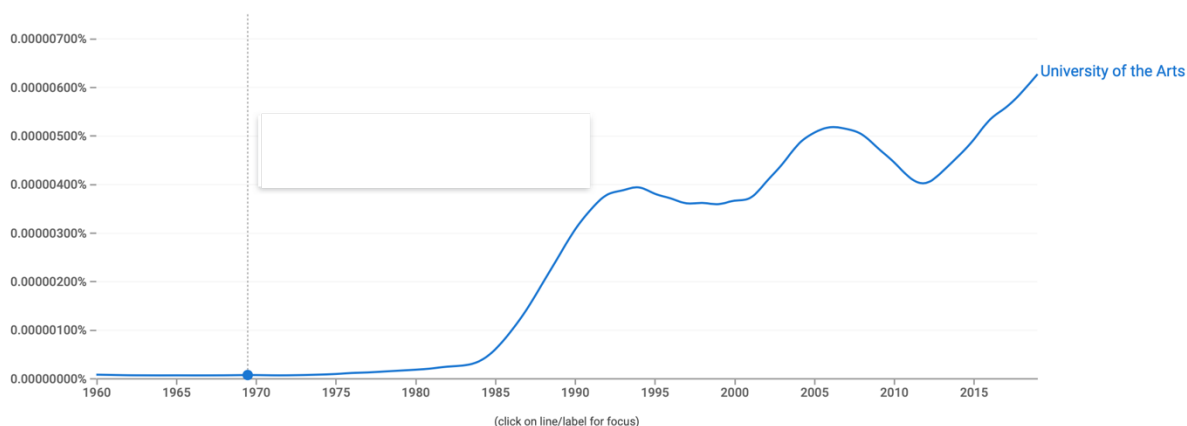


Figure 6: Frequency of the term ‘University of the Arts’ in the Google Corpus 1960-2019.

By 2000, there were already scores of organisations terming themselves a ‘University of the Arts’ in some variation of the name. These range from the Universität der Künste in Berlin, the University of the Arts in London (UAL) to the University of the Arts in Alberta, Canada and to the University of Arts from Târgu-Mureş in Romania. The Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne is now a faculty of the University of Melbourne.

If we look at a constant-case sample of four organisations using the title ‘University of the Arts’ or a variation of it, we can observe the historical evolution from one specialized art form, often a music conservatory, to a much broader church encompassing many denominations and disciplines (Figure 7). It is noteworthy that the university status was in most cases only granted after 2000. This is a sign of broader isomorphic trends that pushed various ‘schools of arts’, academies and such-like, even if they were state-funded, to become universities in their own right or to come under the wing of an established university as an additional faculty.

Despite enduring cultural and geographical differences, the four featured examples have a number of factors in common. Firstly, none was founded *ex nihilo* but rather emerged from various predecessor organisations, incorporations and mergers. Each organisation is usually proud to point to its lineage, claiming in some cases a pedigree going back to the seventeenth century as in the University of Arts, Berlin. The usual foundational narrative sees them being set up as training academies for the fine arts or as music conservatories. The theatre arts are seldom seen before the twentieth century and often not until after 1945. In most cases, we can also observe a constant process of restructuring, renaming, mergers and incorporations before the final (ultimate?) university status is achieved: the institutional point of no return. Usually there is an intermediary proto-university status, a common feature of the 1960s and 1970s when private academies came under the wing of state.

Name	Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne,	University of Arts Târgu-Mureș, Romania	University of the Arts, Berlin	University of the Arts (Philadelphia)
Established	1972	1950?	1975	1985
Predecessors, mergers and incorporations	Victoria Art school (1867); School of Music (1974);, the School of Drama in 1976 the School of Dance 1978 i Film and Television (1992).	Hungarian Conservatory of Music and Dramatic Arts in Cluj-Napoca (1946); Art Institute in Romanian in Cluj-Napoca (1948); Szentgyörgyi István Theatre Institute (1950); Studio Theatre (1972); Acting department in Romanian (1976); Academy of theatre (1991);	<i>Staatlichen Hochschule für Bildende Künste and der Staatlichen Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst 1696 (die Kurfürstliche Academie der Mahler-, Bildhauer- und Architektur-Kunst); 1822 das Königliche Musik-Institut Berlin; 1951 Max-Reinhardt-Schule für Schauspiel</i>	Philadelphia College of the Performing Arts; Philadelphia College of Art, (1870), the Philadelphia Musical Academy (1877) the Philadelphia Conservatory of Music (1944), the Philadelphia Dance Academy..
University status	2007 Faculty of University of Melbourne	2009 University of Arts Târgu Mures	2001 (UdK)	1985
Programs and disciplines	18 disciplines from acting to social practice and community engagement	8	70 degree courses	41 programs in 6 six schools (Art, Design, Film, Dance, Music and Theater Arts.)
PhD	yes	Yes in Theater Studies (2005)	yes	PhD in Creativity
students	1300	530	3500	1700
faculty				

Figure 7 Four Universities of the Arts.

(Theatre) Arts and alternative epistemologies

In the Global South, particularly in Africa and Latin America, a vigorous debate has emerged critiquing the university on account of its ties with colonialism, or even more fundamentally with enlightenment thinking. Is there an alternative to the university, one that has little or no connection to its colonial heritage? Do the performing arts within the university have a special role to play in this ongoing debate? Firstly, the university does not have a monopoly on knowledge production and diffusion. Perhaps the most significant development in the academy in the field of the creative arts, especially in the Global South, is the widespread call to “decolonize the curriculum”. This discussion ranges from pragmatic attempts to revise reading lists to much more fundamental calls for a decolonial epistemology, the latter forming “the rallying cry for those trying to undo the racist legacies of the past” (Mbembe 2015, 8). I shall engage with Achille Mbembe’s paper, “Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive” (2015) and discuss it in relation to the observations of Frank and Meyer, the neo-institutional sociologists from Stanford, whose study only mentions the term ‘postcolonial’ in passing, although it does explore colonial traditions in the diffusion of the university.

Mbembe’s intervention is a wide-ranging critique of South African universities in particular but some of his arguments can be extended more generally to what could be broadly called the neo-liberal university which sees in tertiary education a wealth-generator for the country both through the improvement in human capital and more brazenly as a way to generate cash by charging fees, especially for foreign students. The latter is a critique that applies to large sections of tertiary education across the globe, especially in the anglophone world. (It is also the financial model that has come to a screeching halt in the wake of the Corona crisis). I shall focus here on those parts of his argument that pertain more narrowly to “decolonizing the curriculum” and the colonial epistemological heritage.

Mbembe’s critique is multi-faceted and refers principally to the way current curricula result from a fixation on European epistemologies, especially the Eurocentric canon:

a canon that attributes truth only to the Western way of knowledge production...It is a canon that disregards other epistemic traditions...Western epistemic traditions are traditions that claim detachment of the known from the knower. They rest on a division between mind and world, or between reason and nature as an ontological a priori... The knowing subject is thus able, we are told, to know the world without being part of that world and he or she is by all accounts able to produce knowledge that is supposed to be universal and independent of context. (2015, 9)

The philosophical claims define a basically Cartesian ontology which still holds for those fields that define themselves as scientific in the sense of the natural sciences. The final point – Western epistemic traditions lay claim to universality – would probably find agreement with Frank and Meyer, with the added proviso: universal in as much as the knowledge is legitimated institutionally through the university.

Mbembe’s argument moves through a discussion of ‘Africanization’ as ‘decolonization’, a historical phase of the early post-independence period, which was savagely critiqued by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1962). For Fanon Africanization meant an ideology enabling the emerging African middle class to transfer wealth to themselves,

“masking what fundamentally was a “racketeering” or predatory project – what we call today “looting” (Mbembe, 11). It also leads to what Fanon calls “retrogression”: when “the nation is passed over for the race, and the tribe is preferred to the state”. This leads ultimately to xenophobia and racism among Africans: “In other words”, Mbembe notes, “we topple Cecil Rhodes statue only to replace it with the statue of Hitler.” (12) Mbembe follows Fanon’s radical understanding of decolonization as a form of “self-ownership”, i.e. a property of the individual subject that is a radical departure from the European, colonial heritage, “a politics of difference as opposed to a politics of imitation and repetition” (13). The ultimate goal of which is to free people “from the shock realization that the image through which they have emerged into visibility (race) is not their essence” (15).

He then shifts to a discussion of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s work (mainly *Decolonizing the Mind*, 1981 but see also Ngugi 2012) for whom Africanization means re-evaluating African languages as a vehicle of communication in more spheres than the everyday, especially for the arts and the stage. More broadly, Ngugi understands Africanization as a “re-centering” project, i.e. placing African culture and traditions as the main focus rather than seeing them as a derivative extension of European traditions. Decolonization for Fanon and Ngugi and by extension Mbembe means breaking out of these colonial predeterminations with the ultimate goal of creating “a new species of men” (sic!). Borrowing from Latin American critics of European epistemology such as Boaventura de Sousa or Enrique Dussel (and one could add Walter Mignolo), Mbembe evokes the notion of “pluriversity” in place of the university, “a process of knowledge production that is open to epistemic diversity” (19).

How can we, if at all, reconcile the “universalizing” nature of the isomorphic university with calls which, in most cases, prioritize the local and would seem to question fundamentally the “cosmological” foundations of the university as a place of unitary truth production and reproduction. If the university’s truths are broadly universal (which does not mean that they are implicitly European or Western but only that they are agreed upon wherever the university is not constrained by state or religious interference), then that would seem to counteract moves towards a fundamental localization of knowledge production and dissemination.

One could argue with Frank and Meyer that the university is so successfully universal because it can absorb and sustain pluriversity not only on an organizational level (where it is obvious) but also epistemologically. The thinkers Mbembe cites all studied and most worked at universities and their ideas circulate there and beyond. Indeed, it is the very basic foundation of the university that a plurality of ideas is able to circulate (the Humboldtian freedom of teaching and research). Where this is curtailed institutionally – say by a repressive state – then the university is threatened at its very core. This why at the height of the Cold War – with the exception of the McCarthy era – both Marxists and Marxist ideas were able to circulate relatively freely throughout Western universities and have a significant impact on the humanities (some would say too much).¹⁰ The question is more why certain ideas and ways of thinking have more purchase than others and how pluriversity can be better encouraged.

Perhaps the performing arts in particular have the potential to encourage and realize such pluriversal approaches. We have seen that in the Global South the older European models of the conservatory never really took root except in former settler colonies. Education in the arts has been located largely in the university because there has never been a justification for highly specialised conservatory-style training. The battleground, if we can use the term, will remain in the university. The university of the arts, itself an

outgrowth of conservatory-style training, successful as it has proven in the Global North, has never fully established itself in the Global South either.

There certainly exist examples of localized, alternative epistemologies being integrated into the university. Most if not all universities in New Zealand now host a traditional Maori *marae*, or meeting place, which is not just used for ceremonial purposes but is also a place of learning, a venue for conferences (the ceremonial *hui* is now used almost synonymously as a word for conference). This has no doubt been assisted by the fact that Maori language and culture are relatively unified, notwithstanding the importance of tribal affiliations. The first university-based *marae* was established at the University of Auckland in 1983 after considerable debate and controversy. It was followed by Victoria University in Wellington in 1986. Now most, if not all, New Zealand universities have integrated *marae* into their architecture and systems of teaching and research.



Figure 8. *Fale Pasifika* on the Auckland University campus. In the background are the offices of the Department of Pacific Studies and the sculpture *Toa Pasifika* by Samoan sculptor, Fale Feu'u. (Photo: Christopher Balme).

The most recent addition is the *Fale Pasifika* (Figure 8) at Auckland University (2004) which is particularly relevant to the topic of decolonizing the curriculum because it demonstrates that the model established by the earlier struggles to establish Maori *marae* on university campuses can be extended to other cultural groups as well. Auckland is the largest Polynesian city in the world and hosts communities from all over the Pacific. Just as the Auckland Maori *marae* was not based around a particular tribal group as is normally the case for *marae*, but aimed at all Maori, so too was the *Fale Pasifika* designed in a pan-

pacific or pan-polynesian mode. Although recognizably Samoan in shape, it integrates elements from other islands as well. Perhaps most importantly it is embedded in a teaching and research environment, typical of the university. It is used as a performance and exhibition space, among many other functions. Both the *fale* and the *marae* are quintessential performance arenas, spaces of ritual encounter.¹¹ They are used intensively for the performing arts as well as a broad range of teaching and research activities.

The importance of an alternative epistemology in the area of theatre training can be seen in the way the New Zealand Drama School (Figure 9) was quite radically refashioned in the early 1990s to absorb and accommodate Maori performance culture. It is now better known by its Maori name, Toi Whakaari, and the curriculum is heavily influenced by Maori customs and protocol.¹² The refashioning of this national conservatory as a bicultural training institution demonstrates how theatre training can be successfully decolonized. Although somewhat controversial at the time, it is now accepted practice.



Figure 9. Atrium of Te Whaea, the National Dance and Drama centre which houses both Toi Whakaari and the New Zealand School of Dance. Toi Whakaari: NZ Drama School, Te Whaea, Wellington, New Zealand. (Photo credit: Philip Merry).

Conclusion

If alternative, potentially decolonized, epistemologies can take root anywhere it will be in the area of the arts, especially the performing arts. Following the argument of this essay, we can state that the arts have always been on the margins of the university, the most marginal of the "kin institutions at the margins of the university". The reasons for this marginalization have been enumerated above: the adherence of the arts to an alternative "belief system" that is only partially compatible with the dominant institutional framework of the university. This marginality harbours a strange paradox. As we have seen, the

provision of arts education worldwide proliferated more than other disciplines over the past century, 200-fold in fact. The arts struggle more than other disciplines to find their place within the university with models ranging from non-university conservatories to fully developed, autonomous (and usually highly selective) Universities of the Arts. For the Global South, the university proper has provided the most reliable haven where the unique combination of teaching, research and artistic practice has provided the arts, perhaps, with a greater degree of freedom to experiment with alternatives that the traditional disciplines do not have. The challenge is to balance the isomorphic tendencies of the globalizing university with innovations of a local nature that can potentially regenerate and be fed back into the pluriversal university.

Endnotes

- ¹ Research for this paper was conducted with funding received from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 694559 – Developing Theatre).
- ² The QS World University Rankings listed in 2020 693 universities offering 'performing arts' as a subject: <https://www.topuniversities.com/universities/subject/performing-arts>. The same isomorphic processes can also lead to the disappearance of disciplines. For example, QS no longer lists 'cultural studies' as a subject of study, a discipline that expanded in the 1980s and 1990s.
- ³ The economic historian Douglas North explains this distinction between institutions and organisations famously as the rules of the game (the former) versus the players (the latter): "Institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction", while organisations "are groups of individuals bound by some common purpose to achieve objectives." (North 1990, pp. 3 and 5).
- ⁴ Most recent discussion of the university has focused on the adoption of the neoliberal model around the world with its supposed potential to generate economic growth by collecting substantial fees, especially from foreign students, thus becoming part of a globalized economy. For Frank and Meyer even the neoliberal university is still just an organizational variation with many subforms of the still largely isomorphic institutional model.
- ⁵ <https://www.gitis.net/en/about/>. **Emphasis added.**
- ⁶ The extremely small 'master classes' at academies of fine arts and one-on-one tuition at music conservatories retain aspects of the master-apprentice model.
- ⁷ See, for example, the Russell Group, established in 1994, a lobby organization consisting of currently 24 UK universities that define themselves as "world-class" and "research-intensive".
- ⁸ This is manifest in various research excellence initiatives that emerged in the 2000s with considerable and predictable isomorphic dynamics and interchangeable acronyms: the REF in the UK, the Excellence Initiative in Germany, ERA in Australia, the Canada First Research Excellence Fund etc. While the names and organizational forms vary considerably (sometimes even in the same country) the overall aim of diverting additional research funds to leading players in a competitive system is the same. While the aim appears to be to differentiate on the national level (universities are not all the same), internationally isomorphism reappears as countries copy and vary the same idea.
- ⁹ Some departments of theatre studies in Germany still do not have stages or any kind of performance spaces.
- ¹⁰ An exception is the US during the period of McCarthyism where universities, especially state universities, were targeted. See Schrecker (1988). In Germany, the *Radikalenerlass* (a law passed at the height of RAF terrorism campaign) meant that you could give a seminar on Marxism without repercussions but membership in the German Communist Party (DKP) might cost you your job or future state employment.

¹¹ For a whole series of ‘rituals of encounter’, see <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/on-campus/life-on-campus/pacific-life/the-ritual-of-encounters.html>.

¹² See, for example: “Toi Whakaari’s teaching and learning model (...) draws on mātauranga Māori and tikanga marae frameworks.” This can be translated as Maori knowledge and marae custom and protocols: <https://www.toiwhakaari.ac.nz/academic-policy>.

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