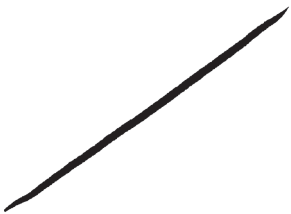


THE ROLE OF CRITICAL CULTURE
IN THE AGE OF AI:
THE THINKING FESTIVAL -
*OUR WORLD: A CRISIS OF
MEANING*

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Abstract: This article explores the interplay between technology, knowledge, and meaning in the age of artificial intelligence and cultural automation. Drawing from the inaugural Thinking Festival—an interdisciplinary event hosted in November 2024 at the University Politehnica of Bucharest—the study examines how lectures, workshops, and debates fostered reflection on ethical and epistemological challenges posed by technological transformation. Under the central theme “Our World: A Crisis of Meaning,” the festival convened students, academics, entrepreneurs, and international thinkers, offering a space for dialogue across fields. Featured guests included writer Paul Kingsnorth, robotics expert Rustam Stolkin, researcher Felicia Milian, and storyteller Daniel Druhora, whose contributions bridged disciplines such as extreme robotics, bioethics, literature, and digital culture. These encounters created a rich environment for questioning how meaning is shaped or fragmented in technologically mediated societies. The article argues that idea-driven festivals like this one can serve as laboratories of critical thinking, offering young people tools to navigate a reality increasingly shaped by automation and symbolic disorientation. It also underscores the importance of transdisciplinary dialogue and reflexive education in fostering a renewed culture of meaning in the post-digital age.

Keywords: critical thinking, artificial intelligence, epistemology, cultural education, transdisciplinarity, storytelling, robotics, ethics, humanism, immersive pedagogy, interdisciplinary dialogue, digital culture, meaning crisis, educational innovation.

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Introduction

In an era dominated by technological acceleration, the pressure on critical thinking and cultural discernment is becoming increasingly acute. The rise of artificial intelligence is no longer merely a technological phenomenon—it constitutes a civilizational rupture that reactivates, in novel forms, enduring questions: What does it mean to be human? What is meaning? How is truth constructed in an information-saturated world?

This paper offers an in-depth analysis of an educational, transdisciplinary, and performative experiment: the *Thinking Festival* – “Our World: A Crisis of Meaning.” Held in the heart of Bucharest, the event brought together some of the most influential contemporary meaning-makers across diverse fields, including robotics, bioethics, storytelling, literature, philosophy, and visual arts.

The festival was not merely an academic conference, but rather an interdisciplinary, performative, and transformative space where nine students—selected through a competitive process—engaged deeply, both individually and collaboratively, with projects proposing real-world solutions grounded in their

own research and ideas. Supported by the Ministry of Culture, the initiative culminated in a major public conference held at the Aula of the Grand Hotel Bucharest, alongside a pitching session and a high-profile public debate.

This study argues that the originality of the *Thinking Festival* lies in its capacity to cultivate a pedagogy of meaning, a culture of intergenerational responsibility, and a space for cultural entrepreneurship. As such, the event emerges as a compelling model of educational, philosophical, and cultural intervention within an increasingly algorithmic yet epistemologically unstable world.

Recent academic studies have emphasized the profound implications of AI in reshaping not only educational practices but also the epistemological frameworks within which meaning and knowledge are negotiated. Khalabuzar and Shymanovych explore how AI-mediated environments challenge traditional models of critical engagement, especially in language and cognitive learning contexts (Khalabuzar & Shymanovych, 2024). Similarly, Chaparro-Banegas and Mas-Tur argue that education must now confront new paradigms of critical thinking necessitated by AI's integration into cultural discourse (Chaparro-Banegas & Mas-Tur, 2024). These insights underscore the relevance of initiatives like the Thinking Festival, which function not only as pedagogical interventions but as arenas of cultural resistance and epistemic reorientation.



Thinking Festival. (2024).
Panel discussion at Grand Hotel Bucharest, inaugural edition – Our World: A Crisis
of Meaning.
Bucharest, 24 November 2024. Author's personal archive.

Originality and Scientific Contribution of the Festival

The *Thinking Festival – Our World: A Crisis of Meaning* was not merely a cultural or educational event in the conventional sense, but a methodological and epistemological intervention into the very notion of higher education—at a time when the boundaries between science, technology, art, and ethics are becoming increasingly porous. In an era marked by hyper-specialization and the functionalization of education, this festival proposed a pedagogical framework that prioritized critical thinking, metacognition, and cognitive transversality within a space that was both emotionally safe and intellectually rigorous.

Its originality lies in repositioning education as a space for “living thought”—a context in which knowledge is not simply transmitted but cultivated as a way of questioning, contesting norms, and forging connections across traditionally siloed epistemic domains. Methodologically, the event operated within a rhizomatic structure, eschewing rigid hierarchies between speakers and participants, between “hard sciences” and the humanities, between theory and practice, and between knowledge and lived experience.

More than a cultural event, the *Thinking Festival* functioned as an educational and epistemological laboratory for the informal validation of emerging ideas. The nine student-led projects were subjected to a rigorous process of critical dialogue and iterative refinement, facilitated through one-on-one mentoring sessions with international researchers, industry experts, and leading entrepreneurs. These intensive interactions not only sharpened the conceptual and practical dimensions of each initiative, but also enabled a profound reconfiguration of the relationship between the participant, the learning process, and the real possibilities for interdisciplinary collaboration.

Participants came from a variety of institutions—including the National University of Theatre and Film (UNATC), Politehnica University of Bucharest, SNSPA, and the “Ion Mincu” University of Architecture and Urbanism—creating a learning environment enriched by academic and cultural plurality. This diversity was leveraged through a pedagogical structure encompassing masterclasses, applied workshops, one-to-one consultations, and roundtable discussions with professionals from a wide range of fields. Furthermore, students had the opportunity to publicly present their projects before an audience of over 100 attendees, thereby engaging in a real-world exercise of public communication and professional validation.

The integration of the final public conference—*Our World: A Crisis of Meaning*—within the festival program marked a pivotal moment of knowledge articulation in a broad, transdisciplinary context. Moderated by researcher

Daniela Ionescu and featuring distinguished speakers such as Paul Kingsnorth, Rustam Stolkin, Felicia Milian, and Daniel Druhora, the conference served as a true example of “academic performance.” In front of more than 100 participants, the dialogue transcended the conventional format of academic presentation, becoming a scenography of ideas: a performative mode of critical reflection and a coherent response to the dissolution of meaning in contemporary public discourse.

In a landscape where educational innovation is often equated with digitization and procedural efficiency, the *Thinking Festival* advocates for a different paradigm—one that conceives of cultural education as encounter: between ideas, people, epochs, and expressive modes. Thus, its scientific and interdisciplinary contribution cannot be measured solely through quantitative metrics, but rather through its capacity to generate new forms of understanding, to stimulate critical consciousness, and to rehumanize our relationship with knowledge.

Within this framework, the scientific contribution of the Thinking Festival must also be read as a form of epistemological activism—one that aligns with emerging scholarship on transdisciplinary pedagogies and post-digital criticality. For instance, Wu underscores the urgency of shifting pedagogical design toward cultivating “why” and “how” reasoning in the era of ChatGPT and AI-dominated classrooms, advocating for cognitive engagement that transcends rote learning (Wu, 2024). In resonance, Makhachashvili and Semenist conceptualize AI-infused education as a networked, sociocultural intervention that reconfigures disciplinary boundaries through computational and communicative paradigms (Makhachashvili & Semenist, 2024). The Thinking Festival, though not driven by formal academic metrics, internalized these dynamics—embedding them in an organically designed learning environment where reflexivity, creative risk, and intellectual courage were not only encouraged but structurally embedded.

This resonance between theoretical models and lived pedagogy was further embodied in the festival’s processual architecture. Drawing on care-based frameworks, Nolan et al. emphasize that authentic transdisciplinary education requires affective and ethical engagement, where empathy and critical thought co-emerge in the resolution of real-world challenges (Nolan et al., 2025). Likewise, Okada and colleagues’ CARE-KNOW-DO model—adopted by UNESCO to foster transversal skills in AI-augmented contexts—supports educational settings where learners operate as agents of inquiry and transformation, not merely recipients of information (Okada et al., 2025). The Thinking Festival embodies this spirit: a performative matrix where thinking was not only thematic, but operational—embedded in the design of every interaction, from project mentoring to public presentation.



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Outcomes and Impact on Participants

One of the foundational premises of the *Thinking Festival* was the belief that education, culture, and research are not unidirectional processes, but rather forms of relational knowledge in which every student, mentor, lecturer, organizer, or volunteer becomes—through active engagement—both transformable and transformative. In this light, the most meaningful “outcomes” cannot be quantified through standardized metrics, but must instead be understood as processes of interdisciplinary learning and the cultivation of cultural entrepreneurship.

For the nine selected students—drawn from fields as varied as engineering, artificial intelligence, performing arts, and bioethics—the festival offered more than a professional opportunity; it was a direct confrontation with the most pressing global trends in research, innovation, and critical reflection. Individual sessions with international experts and entrepreneurs went far beyond project feasibility assessments. They generated an authentic epistemological space where open dialogue addressed the responsibilities of knowledge, the fragility of disciplinary boundaries, and the latent anxieties of contemporary thought. Within this context, students were both challenged and supported to integrate cutting-edge insights from robotics, AI, bioethics, the arts, and entrepreneurial

practice in order to reformulate their initiatives—not merely as solutions, but as ethical and cultural responses to contemporary crises.

Participants were thus trained not only in argumentation and project pitching, but also in active listening, question reframing, and the cultivation of what might be called *slow curiosity*—an increasingly rare intellectual virtue in an educational ecosystem marked by acceleration and performance metrics. Mentor feedback was often less technical and more existential in nature: *What kind of world does your project assume? Whom does it truly serve? What symbolic costs does it imply?*

The festival's impact extended beyond the formative sphere of the students, reaching a broader audience—particularly through the final public conference held at Aula Grand Hotel Bucharest. With over 100 attendees—students, university faculty, entrepreneurs, and journalists—the event became a liminal space, situated at the intersection of academia and the public sphere. The pitching session, followed by the awards ceremony hosted by representatives of BCR and prominent public figures such as Gabriela Suci (Vice-Dean, Faculty of Film – UNATC), Viorel Chesaru (CEO, Chainsaw Europe), Irina Roncea (strategic communication expert), and Marius Ioniță (CEO, Alumil Romania), confirmed that the projects presented were not mere symbolic exercises, but concrete initiatives with potential for real-world implementation.

More significant than external validation, however, was the internal impact on participants. For many, the festival functioned as a form of *return to self*—a rarefied context of shared vulnerability, reflective silence, and moral introspection. In this light, the impact of the *Thinking Festival* cannot be reduced to a list of measurable outputs. Rather, it must be understood as a reformulation of the contemporary educational ethos. In an age obsessed with metrics, the festival's central theme served as a reminder that meaning is not something to be quantified, but cultivated—through dialogue, contradiction, and community.

Formation of an Interdisciplinary Collaboration Network

One of the most valuable outcomes of the festival lies in the network of connections forged among participants, mentors, entrepreneurs, and institutions. Not only were individual ideas nurtured, but the exchange of competencies, methodologies, and cognitive frameworks was actively encouraged and amplified. In this way, the festival created bridges between the arts, sciences, entrepreneurship, and humanist reflection. It generated transdisciplinary collaborations with the potential to extend well beyond the temporal confines of the event itself.

By fostering a collaborative ecosystem across traditionally siloed disciplines, the festival cultivated a space where epistemic diversity became a resource rather

than a barrier. The resulting network—comprising universities, research centers, private enterprises, and cultural institutions—has since evolved into a dynamic community of inquiry and experimentation. This outcome signals the event’s deeper value: not merely as a forum for idea exchange, but as an incubator for long-term interdisciplinary alliances grounded in mutual respect and intellectual openness.

Such forms of cognitive interweaving are not accidental, but emblematic of a larger epistemological shift that redefines how knowledge is generated and circulated across domains. As Godemann argues, knowledge integration within transdisciplinary settings is not simply an additive process—it requires a restructuring of cognitive and communicative frameworks to accommodate diverse epistemic cultures (Godemann, 2008). This dynamic was fully enacted within the Thinking Festival, where disciplinary borders became zones of creative friction and intellectual hybridization. Furthermore, Clark and Wallace highlight the critical role of collaborative networks in sustaining interdisciplinary inquiry, emphasizing that durable integration occurs when educational structures foster mutual intelligibility and shared problem-orientation across fields (Clark & Wallace, 2015). The emergent alliances from the festival exemplify this kind of sustainable, inquiry-driven network—open-ended, context-responsive, and anchored in both conceptual rigor and relational trust.

Disciplinary Intersection: Toward a New Paradigm of Applied Thinking

The festival’s most significant scientific contribution lies in its transdisciplinary model of knowledge production—one in which the interpretive and ethical tools of the humanities (hermeneutics, ethics, narrative analysis) meaningfully intersected with the empirical and algorithmic tools of technology (robotics, biotechnology, artificial intelligence) under the shared horizon of a global crisis of meaning.

Rather than presenting a superficial juxtaposition of disparate fields, the event fostered a genuine framework for integration: not merely formal collaborations, but methodological and epistemological confrontations between the natural sciences and the humanities. This dialogue produced a shift in perspective—one that challenged the participants to reconsider the foundations of knowledge itself.

Through this approach, students and public audiences alike came to understand that the apparent chasms between robotics and narrative, between biotechnology and ethics, or between cinema and neural networks, are not ontological divides but shared problem-spaces. This reconfiguration of disciplinary

boundaries constitutes, in itself, a form of research: an emergent methodology for engaging with the complexity of contemporary life. It is precisely through such integrative paradigms that new pathways of meaning, responsibility, and innovation can be charted.

Such integrative practices respond to a growing recognition within academic research that neither technological nor humanistic perspectives alone suffice to confront the multidimensional crises of our time. As Pedersen highlights, the convergence of social sciences, humanities, and empirical disciplines fosters not only innovation but a rethinking of the research process itself—one grounded in reflexivity, dialogue, and mutual transformation (Pedersen, 2016). Similarly, Somerville and Rapport emphasize that transdisciplinarity, properly understood, does not dilute disciplinary rigor but reconstitutes it through problem-oriented synthesis, where philosophical and scientific insights are co-constitutive rather than competitive (Somerville & Rapport, 2002). The Thinking Festival exemplifies this paradigm: a living laboratory in which narrative, ethics, and robotics were not isolated themes but vectors of co-constructed meaning—tested, articulated, and performed through intellectual collaboration.

A Transdisciplinary Event with Formative Stakes

Unlike conventional academic conferences—often perceived as unidirectional and rigid—the Festival proposed a pedagogy of presence. All international guests, including Prof. Rustam Stolkin, Daniel Druhora, Paul Kingsnorth, and Felicia Milian, engaged in one-on-one sessions with the nine selected students participating in the pitch program, offering tailored mentorship and personalized guidance over the course of four intensive days.

This level of relational intensity was described by moderator Daniela Ionescu (researcher at the Extreme Robotics Lab, University of Birmingham) as “an event where the audience—particularly the students—became the true center of the conference.” Not only were the guests’ ideas spotlighted, but the students’ nascent projects were also given a genuine space for validation and critical interdisciplinary dialogue.

The festival’s pedagogical architecture draws inspiration from what Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger theorize in *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* as communities of practice, where learning emerges through authentic engagement with expert practitioners rather than abstract transmission of knowledge. This approach fundamentally challenges the conventional power dynamics of academic discourse, creating what bell hooks describes in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* as a “democratic educational

environment” where hierarchies dissolve in favor of genuine intellectual exchange and mutual recognition. The transformative potential of such encounters is further illuminated by Paulo Freire’s concept of critical pedagogy, outlined in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which emphasizes dialogue as the fundamental medium through which both teachers and students become co-investigators of reality. Within this framework, the Festival’s intensive mentorship sessions functioned not as expert pronouncements delivered to passive recipients, but as collaborative investigations into the pressing questions of our time, where the wisdom of experience met the urgency of emergent perspectives, generating new forms of understanding that neither mentors nor students could have achieved in isolation.

Theoretical and Epistemological Contribution

The discussions held during the public conference finale, *Our World: A Crisis of Meaning* (organized at the Grand Hotel Bucharest, with over 100 attendees), transcended the boundaries of a purely technological discourse. The guests’ interventions articulated a lucid critique of technological utopianism, grounded in fundamental questions regarding human identity, collectivity, and the sacred in the digital age.

- **Rustam Stolkin** critically examined the notion of “intelligence” ascribed to machines, arguing that most AI systems are in fact highly primitive forms of mathematical optimization, bearing little resemblance to human consciousness or intuition.
- **Paul Kingsnorth** offered a theological reading of technological progress, suggesting that in the absence of spiritual anchoring, contemporary civilization risks “creating gods out of silicon.”
- **Felicia Milian** presented a theoretical argument concerning the collective nature of biological intelligence, challenging the very premise of “artificial intelligence” by contrasting it with emergent natural systems such as slime molds or the human microbiome.
- **Daniel Druhora** emphasized the necessity of slowing down and reclaiming meaning in the human experience, advocating for a rehumanization of technology through empathic and narrative-centered design.

The theoretical coherence emerging from these diverse perspectives finds resonance with what Jacques Ellul presciently diagnosed in *The Technological Society* as the autonomous development of technique, wherein technological systems

begin to operate according to their own internal logic, increasingly disconnected from human values and purposes. This critique gains contemporary urgency when considered alongside Sherry Turkle’s extensive ethnographic research in *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, which documents the profound psychological and social costs of substituting technological mediation for direct human encounter. The festival’s speakers collectively articulated what might be understood as a post-digital humanism—not a rejection of technological capability, but a fundamental reorientation toward technologies that serve rather than supplant essential human capacities for meaning-making, spiritual reflection, and authentic relationship. Their interventions suggested that the crisis of meaning in contemporary culture stems not merely from technological disruption per se, but from our collective failure to maintain what Albert Borgmann terms “focal practices”—activities that engage our deepest human capacities and connect us to sources of significance that transcend utilitarian calculation.



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Epistemological Dimension: What Does It Mean “To Know” in the 21st Century?

The conference moderated by Dr. Daniela Ionescu (Extreme Robotics Lab – University of Birmingham) was not merely an occasion for knowledge dissemination but a critical inquiry into the contemporary conditions of knowing. In an age shaped by algorithmic networks, automation, and artificial intelligence,

the discussion extended beyond traditional dichotomies between science and technology, probing instead the transformation of epistemology itself.

Questions such as:

- What constitutes intelligence?
- How do we differentiate a living organism from a network of binary signals?
- What remains “human” in a world of augmented cognition?

...were not addressed as abstract speculations but as lived philosophical provocations, explored through mentoring sessions, interdisciplinary dialogues, and exercises in applied thought. As such, the Thinking Festival functioned as a space of emergent research, where the boundaries between scientific knowledge, professional formation, and philosophical reflection productively dissolved. Methodologically, the event situated itself in a hybrid domain: between applied epistemology, cultural intervention, and a pedagogy of critical inquiry.

This epistemological investigation gains particular urgency when considered alongside the transformations that Karen Barad theorizes in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, where traditional subject-object distinctions collapse in favor of what she terms “intra-active” modes of knowing that acknowledge the fundamental entanglement between observer and observed. The festival’s approach resonates with Michel Serres’ prescient observations in *The Parasite*, where he anticipates how technological mediation fundamentally alters not merely what we know, but how knowledge itself is constituted through networks of relation rather than discrete acts of cognition. These insights find contemporary expression in N. Katherine Hayles’ analysis in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, which traces the dissolution of humanist epistemologies in favor of distributed cognitive systems that challenge anthropocentric models of intelligence and meaning-making. Within this theoretical constellation, the festival’s participants found themselves navigating not simply new technological tools, but entirely reconfigured epistemic territories where the very categories of knowledge, intelligence, and human agency required fundamental reconceptualization through direct engagement with both artificial and biological forms of cognition.

Conclusion

The Thinking Festival: Our World – A Crisis of Meaning was not merely an event but a collective experience of reconnection with meaning in an era marked by technological acceleration, sociocultural fragmentation, and epistemological uncertainty. Through interdisciplinary dialogue, applied workshops, and authentic encounters between students and international mentors, the festival reactivated a rare space—one where questions are more valuable than hasty answers, and professional training organically intertwines with human becoming. In a world where technology increasingly defines the grammar of power, the festival reopened essential inquiries: What does it mean to be human? What roles do art, science, and belief still play in post-industrial societies? Can education still cultivate meaning without reducing itself to utilitarian formats?

Without claiming definitive solutions, the festival cultivated what is increasingly absent from contemporary public life: authentic attention, collective reflection, and the courage to interrogate dominant paradigms. Through this methodological and ethical openness, the Thinking Festival emerges not merely as a meditation on the crisis of meaning, but as a possible beginning—of a new epistemic culture in which education, technology, and humanism do not negate each other, but mutually regenerate.

The festival's significance extends beyond its immediate pedagogical achievements to suggest broader possibilities for cultural and educational renewal. What emerged from these four intensive days was not simply a successful academic gathering, but a prototype for what educational philosopher John Dewey envisioned in *Experience and Education* as genuine experiential learning—where abstract knowledge transforms into lived understanding through direct engagement with complex realities. The transformative encounters between mentors and students embodied what Martin Buber theorizes in *I and Thou* as authentic dialogue, where participants undergo fundamental shifts in perspective through genuine meeting with otherness. Perhaps most importantly, the festival demonstrated what Ivan Illich advocated in *Deschooling Society*—the possibility of learning environments that transcend institutional constraints to create spaces where knowledge emerges through voluntary association and shared inquiry rather than curricular mandate. In an epoch where educational institutions increasingly mirror the mechanistic logic of technological systems, such experiments in meaning-making represent not merely alternative pedagogies, but acts of cultural resistance that preserve essential human capacities for wonder, critical thought, and collaborative creation. The festival thus stands as both achievement and invitation—a demonstration that despite the apparent dominance of algorithmic rationality, spaces of authentic human encounter and transformative learning remain not only possible but urgently necessary for navigating our collective future.

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1. Thinking Festival (2024) *Panel discussion at Grand Hotel Bucharest, inaugural edition – Our World: A Crisis of Meaning*. Bucharest, 24 November 2024. Author's personal archive.

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