Culture Management Must Fuel Socioenvironmental Change

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Abstract

In the face of the unprecedented socio-environmental challenges of the Anthropocene, characterized by the interconnected crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, inequality, and more, the traditional approaches to culture management must evolve. Beginning with an analysis of the current state of polycrisis – including ecological boundaries breached and social inequalities exacerbated – this paper emphasizes the systemic nature of these challenges and argues for a redefinition of culture management that integrates both cultural and natural systems. It critiques the conventional understanding of culture management as limited to the administration of cultural institutions, advocating instead for a broader perspective that acknowledges culture's integral role in shaping human-environment interactions. Drawing upon a variety of interpretations of culture, ranging from its broad anthropological functional conception as humanity's adaptive mechanism to specific manifestations such as national, ethnic, religious, or organizational cultures, alongside sector-specific perspectives focusing on both cultural institutions and grassroots initiatives, as well as individual involvement in cultural practices, this paper argues for a paradigmatic shift towards nature-culture management. The purpose of this is to align human – and therefore cultural – activities with the environment on a global and local scale. An illustrative modelling exercise showcases the shift from traditional cultural management within a stable world towards a more conscientious and impactful approach that responds to the demands of the polycrisis, drawing upon the principles of Kate Raworth's doughnut economics. The proposed "bucket wheel" model of culture management, which focuses on the value mining for sustainable well-being, highlights the circulation of values that promote positive social and environmental outcomes. This paper concludes by highlighting the pressing need to embrace this paradigm shift in culture management to effectively address the challenges of the Anthropocene. This finding underscores the necessity for cultural interventions that transcend existing paradigms, emphasizing the potential of culture management to drive socio-environmental change and contribute towards a sustainable future for people and the planet.

Keywords: culture management, climate crisis, degrowth, doughnut economics, polycrisis, meanings of culture management, sustainable development

The State of the Polycrisis

We live in times of undoubtful anthropogenic grave climate-ecological crisis that is threatening human civilization, as we know it and life on the planet itself (Guterres 2021, 2022a, 2022b). However, climate change is only one of nine planetary boundaries, six of which were transgressed in 2023: biogeochemical flows, biosphere integrity, climate change, freshwater change, land-system change, and novel entities. Ocean acidification is almost breached, and aerosol loading exceeds the boundary in some regions. Only one, stratospheric ozone levels, has experienced a slight recovery (Richardson et al. 2023; SRC 2024).

These are accompanied by derivative social crises, such as those pertaining to food, economics, migration, health, democracy, and above all, somehow encompassing all of them, the crisis of inequality. A study from 2019 revealed that the 26 wealthiest individuals owned as much wealth as the poorest 50% of the world's population (Quackenbush 2019). In 2017, the mean income, as gauged by GDP per capita adjusted for price differentials across nations, exhibited a 172-fold difference between Qatar and the Central African Republic (Roser 2019). During the COVID-19 global pandemic, the wealthiest 1% acquired almost two-thirds of all newly generated wealth, amounting to twice the share obtained by the less affluent 99% of the world's populace (Christensen et al. 2023). As the wealthiest individuals systematically accumulate more wealth, the disparity between them and the poorest widens. Contrary to what the Kuznets curve implies, economic growth in capitalism does NOT constitute a rising tide that lifts all boats (Piketty 2014: 24). Instead, in its current state, and in its fetishized form known as "growthism", neoliberal capitalism drains life out of both people and the planet[1] (have I mentioned the ongoing anthropogenic sixth mass extinction?, cf. Ceballos et al. 2015), privileging a select few entities, whether countries, companies, or individuals. This ideology perpetuates the belief in the feasibility of infinite resource and energy consumption on a planet with finite capacities (Hickel 2021: 1107), despite the recognition of growth limitations for at least half a century (Meadows et al. 1972).

There is more to consider. The wealthiest not only accumulate capital, preventing its fair distribution around the world to address the majority of the aforementioned crises – they also bear responsibility for breaching planetary boundaries. For example, the average person emits a million times fewer greenhouse gases than a billionaire (Oxfam 2022). The poorest 50% of the global population accounts for

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[1] The current socioeconomic system demonstrates a clear disregard for whom it siphons vitality from – it is explotitative towards humans and extractivist towards nature, yet one could interchange the adjectives, and the statement would remain valid – it is exploitative towards nature and extractivist towards people, ultimately leading to exhaustion for both. Capitalism, particularly in its current neoliberal phase, is heterogeneously draining, and therefore, as Donna Haraway states: "There will be no nature without justice. Nature and justice (…) will become extinct or survive together" (1992: 311).

approximately 10% of total lifestyle consumption emissions, while the wealthiest 10% is responsible for nearly half of them (Oxfam 2015: 4). Furthermore, households in low-income countries emit more than 2000 times fewer greenhouse gases than superrich households in the US (Starr et al. 2023). As if that were not sufficient, according to climate justice research (Roberts, Parks 2006; Meyer, Roser 2010; Jasikowska et al. 2022), the wealthiest entities (countries, companies, individuals) will experience the least suffering, despite their significant contribution to possible socioenvironmental collapse, whereas the poorest will endure the most suffering, despite their minimal contribution.

However, ought one advocate for alterations in the conduct of affluent individuals, organizations, or nations? Should any choose to abandon the "business as usual" approach, which is the systemic path responsible for the various crises we are currently facing (Wright et al. 2018: 460), independently – the system would promptly find a replacement. It is the system itself that requires alteration rather than its individual components. However, it is these components that possess the capability to enact such change, certain aspects of which are situated, I argue, within the realm of culture management.

The situation is complex. One could describe it not only as the swirl of interconnected crises of the Anthropocene (Pałasz 2021: 1, 3) but also as the need to urgently address the Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2024), which themselves represent heterogeneous map of socioenvironmental crises that require simultaneous consideration. Perhaps the most appropriate term for this is "Polycrisis", a concept that has been in use for more than two decades, denoting "interwoven and overlapping crises", the "complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrollable processes, and the general crisis of the planet" (Morin, Kern 1999: 74; cf. Lawrence, Janzwood, Homer-Dixon 2022). In the following pages, I will propose a nuanced understanding of cultural management that is suited to the challenges of Polycrisis.

I will argue that in the face of the multifaceted crises of the Anthropocene, particularly the socioenvironmental challenges outlined by the concept of Polycrisis, there is a pressing need for a reimagined approach to culture management. This entails expanding the traditional understanding of culture management beyond the administration of cultural institutions to encompass a broader scope that integrates cultural and natural systems. This paper proposes a transition from conventional culture management practices to a more responsible and impactful model that addresses both social needs and environmental sustainability. This shift involves leveraging culture management as a tool for promoting values that facilitate socioenvironmental change and navigating the interconnected crises of the modern era. Through various conceptual models, the text illustrates how culture management can play a central role in fostering sustainable development and addressing the challenges posed by the Anthropocene. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a paradigm

shift in culture management towards a more holistic and transformative approach that aligns with the urgent imperatives of the present moment.

What is culture management?

A straightforward response is that culture management encompasses all aspects related to the administration, governance, management, and regular functioning of cultural institutions. This interpretation is also endorsed by the title of the journal in which this paper is published. However, for the purpose of addressing the Polycrisis, this conception may need to be broadened.

Management can be defined as a mechanism for ensuring desired outcomes consistent with the objectives of any given organization (Drucker 2000: 39). However, culture management can be construed in various ways, contingent upon one's understanding of culture. It is pertinent to delve into these interpretations, particularly to broaden the scope of concerns that culture management professionals contend with in practical applications, education, research, activism, and beyond.

Let us commence with the broadest sense of culture, which will enable us to perceive culture management as organizing the culture itself. While there are numerous interpretations to explore (Kroeber, Kluckhohn 1952), the one presented here is aligned with the functional perspective. According to this view, culture is regarded as an aspect of the human life environment that would not exist without humans – an inherent attribute of humanity (Barańska 2006: 67) – and functions as an essential adaptive mechanism for individuals and groups in response to their surroundings (Malinowski 1960: 121, 133), a point crucial for addressing the Polycrisis. To cite the classic – ulture is a "gradually developing system of adequate adaptations of the human organism, and of human groups to the satisfaction of basic needs and the gradual raising of the standard of living within a given environment" (ibidem: 144). In this context, the environment is depicted as distinct and detached from human influence. However, it is widely acknowledged that human activities significantly affect the environment to the extent that we now inhabit the Anthropocene (Steffen et al. 2015; Chwałczyk 2020; Richardson et al. 2023). Conversely, the environment also impacts human society. Consequently, it is erroneous to perceive culture as separate from nature (Haraway 1988; Latour 2011). Instead, we should adopt a perspective that integrates both elements, referred to as "natureculture" (Malone, Ovenden 2016). In response to the multifaceted challenges posed by the Polycrisis, it is imperative to develop strategies for managing this interconnected system in a sustainable way. This entails conceiving culture management as the endeavour to reconcile human activities with the environment on a macro/global scale, encapsulated within the framework of natureculture management, which integrates cultural and natural systems into cultural management practices. Figure 1 shows

the most comprehensive understanding of culture management, which can be addressed through activities at the global level, including both top-down initiatives such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals campaign and bottom-up movements such as Fridays for Future.

Similar dynamics are observed on a somewhat smaller scale, referred to as the meso level, which encompasses national (Morden 1999), ethnic (Nagel 1994), political (Formisano 2001) or other more situated and localized cultures, as well as organizational cultures (Smircich 1983). Within these domains, it is reasonable to conceptualize culture as an internal variable capable of being shaped and subject to influence (ibidem: 347). However, mesoculture has historically not always been perceived in this manner. This situation reflects the distinction made earlier between an autonomous nature and an adaptable culture in the broadest sense, albeit in reverse: meso-culture is commonly seen as something separate from its participants, suggesting that it should be conserved and preserved akin to nature rather than intentionally altered and actively shaped, with the exception of organizational cultures – these have, for some time, been actively crafted as instrumental resources aiding organizations in achieving their objectives through the process of organizational culturism (Willmott 1993). In a sense, other current mesocultures, such as national, ethnic or religious ones, may be considered taboo. In this context, culture management can be construed as a rather revolutionary endeavour encompassing the organization of cultures: shaping values, norms, identities, and behaviours through various means, including media, education, and community engagement. Similar to macrolevel cultural management, the aim should be to harmonize these cultures with their environment, incorporating both cultural and natural elements and promoting harmony among them while ensuring cultural cohesion, inclusivity, and resilience while also addressing social and other inequalities and natural-cultural tensions. They should not be solely shaped to achieve specific objectives, such as organizational or political ones; rather, such shaping should strive to attain strategic objectives, such as meeting basic needs or enhancing living standards, while upholding heterogeneous harmony. As depicted in Figure 1, this understanding of culture management lies at the border between what could be termed cultural practices (activities within the cultural realm) and culture management in the traditional sense (e.g., promoting national culture through the activities of cultural institutions).

Delving further, we encounter the prevalent – sectoral – understanding of culture management, which revolves around organizing the cultural sector or within the cultural sector itself – specifically, organizing cultural institutions, as shown in Figure 1. This, on the one hand, encompasses the top-down, hierarchical management of cultural institutions, such as museums, theatres, and cultural centres, by authoritative bodies such as ministries of culture or local governments, including cultural policy formulation; on the other hand, it encompasses operationalization of cultural policy in the field (Lewandowski 2011: 21), organization of coordinated

activities of cultural institutions and undertaking of various organisational responsibilities within them (Barańska 2006: 66), including routine tasks such as coordinating the activities of museums, theatres, galleries, enhancing public access, and the participation and appreciation of culture. This level focuses on managing the cultural sector itself, including the administration and governance of cultural institutions and infrastructure as well as performing day-to-day work activities in this field. Sectoral culture management involves policy formulation and execution, strategic planning and operational management, resource allocation by national or regional governmental bodies, cultural ministries, and international organizations, as well as the promotion of cultural activities, heritage, artistic expression, or cultural education.

The depiction of culture management expounded above inevitably omits anything not arranged in a top-down manner, such as some aspects of living culture in academic (Fatyga 2017) but also common understanding – as independent – thereby offering only a limited perspective. If culture management facilitates the creation of art and culture (Orzechowski 2009: 16), it can do so not only through hierarchical frameworks but also through informal grassroots endeavours. The domain of culture management transcends the boundaries of cultural institutions and sector, occurring within both formal and informal milieus. It manifests within enduring or ephemeral organizations offering services and commodities akin to those provided by cultural institutions, across diverse sectors or in nonformal settings, encompassing primary or secondary activities (cf. universities, as well as clubs, churches, and other similar establishments). In this regard, culture management is intricately interwoven with every organization, as they all either coordinate broadly conceived cultural events or involve themselves in various forms of cultural education (which may not necessarily be artistic). In Figure 1, this particular understanding of culture management should be positioned at the boundary between the classical understanding of such practices (e.g., state-funded cultural events and activities not conducted by cultural institutions) and other activities within the cultural realm (cultural practices).

Finally, at the microlevel, the individual assumes the role of cultural management subject. This could encompass anyone engaged in activities linked to the broader spectrum of cultural management, as discussed previously. It could be an individual seeking to exert influence over culture in its widest sense through the creation of cultural artefacts traditionally associated with the arts, such as writing books or organizing discussions, or through the production of anything other that is human-made. It could also be someone involved in shaping national, ethnic, political, or organizational culture, wielding influential tools such as the media or proposing bottom-up, intuitive, perhaps improvised social innovations, or undertaking preferred routine tasks. It might be an individual serving as a government minister of culture, overseeing the formulation of cultural policies, or a director of a cultural institution or a member of staff at an art gallery or cinema. It could

also involve individuals organizing gatherings of people sharing common interests, outside the traditional cultural sector. In each instance, we encounter an enriched concept of the cultural manager: a gatekeeper who influences which values will dominate within particular communities (Barańska 2006: 67–68) through the prioritization of certain values over others. And values form the essence of any culture. The circulation of values associated with artifacts, products, services, and organized initiatives constitutes the core activity of the cultural manager. In this light, culture management involves creating conditions conducive to positive human development (Orzechowski 2009: 16) through culture, which serves both as a resource and a goal, guided by its manager (Lewandowski 2011: 29). At the microlevel, individuals play a crucial role as cultural managers within their communities and organizations. This involves creating, interpreting, and disseminating cultural meanings and practices through various forms of expression, including art, literature, media, and everyday interactions. Individual cultural managers contribute to the shaping of cultural norms, values, identities and behaviors within their social networks, workplaces, and civic spaces. They certainly exceed the conventional understanding of culture management, entering the realm of activities within the cultural domain (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Traditional and transgressive culture management in a stable world

Source: own elaboration.

Modelling the fueling of socioenvironmental change through culture management

Figure 1 shows the traditional and transgressive understandings of culture management discussed earlier. These descriptions outline the prevailing perceptions of culture management, which are characteristic of a stable world rather than a world experiencing Polycrisis as diagnosed in the first section of this paper. On the graph, culture management is depicted as part of culture, which in turn is depicted as part of nature – thus overlooking the interconnectedness between the three. Moreover, the nuanced understandings of culture management outlined are either entirely aligned with the classical understanding or at least partially, merely extending into the realm of culture and not encompassing nature. In the subsequent paragraphs, I will endeavour to model the proposed transition from culture management in a stable world, which separates culture and nature, to culture management tailored for Polycrisis.

In Figure 2, all five aspects of culture management described in the preceding section of this paper and depicted in Figure 1 have been repositioned. Previously situated within the central realm of culture management, they are now located at the interface between nature and culture, wherein culture remains merely a component of nature rather than an interconnected entity. This decentralization aims to address simultaneous cultural and natural needs, aligning more closely with the concept of natureculture management rather than solely culture management. The movement of the five understandings of culture management from culture towards the border of culture and nature forms a star-shaped pattern. Conversely, the final appearance of the graph resembles a shield – serving as a fitting metaphor for confronting the crisis equipped with resources that can prove beneficial. These considerations underpin the graph's title: "Star-Shield of transition towards more responsible culture management amidst Polycrisis."

Figure 3 illustrates the concluding phase of the transition outlined in Figure 2. All five understandings of culture management are positioned at the nexus of nature and culture. One may question why the culture management depicted in this graph is characterized as only responsible rather than impactful towards the Polycrisis. This is because, in my interpretation, situating the five understandings at the boundary entails addressing the crises-related issues, encompassing both natural and cultural aspects, solely within the day-to-day operations of organizations, groups, and individuals. This entails mitigating harm but not directly influencing stakeholders, whether through programmed cultural activities or through engagement, outreach, or advocacy in relation to the social environment. In this sense, we encounter culture management that may be termed sustainable or conducted in a sustainable manner. However, I contend that this approach is insufficient for addressing the challenges posed by the Polycrisis, a point that becomes clearer upon examining the final figures.
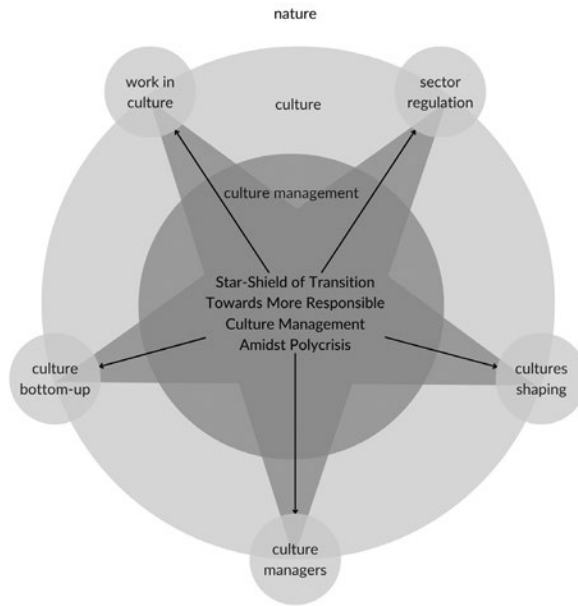
Fig. 2. Star-Shield of transition towards more responsible culture management amidst Polycrisis

Source: own elaboration.

Figure 4 seeks to integrate the concept of responsible but not impactful culture management within the framework of doughnut economics (Raworth 2017, 2024). The doughnut model of social and planetary boundaries visually depicts a safe operating space for humanity, which entails avoiding crossing nine planetary boundaries (ecological ceiling; SRC 2024) while simultaneously meeting social needs outlined by the Sustainable Development Goals (social foundation; UN 2024): "between social and planetary boundaries lies an environmentally safe and socially just space in which humanity can thrive" (ibidem). The five understandings of culture management operate within this safe space, avoiding harm to nature and fulfilling the social needs for which they are traditionally intended. The structure of the safe culture management model depicted in Figure 4 resembles that of a tambourine, an instrument notable for its ability to attract attention through sound. This association aligns with public relations efforts, which frequently emphasize corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities primarily for promotional purposes rather than genuinely positive contributions to nature or society. Hence, the model is designated as the "Tambourine of responsible but not impactful culture management amidst Polycrisis."
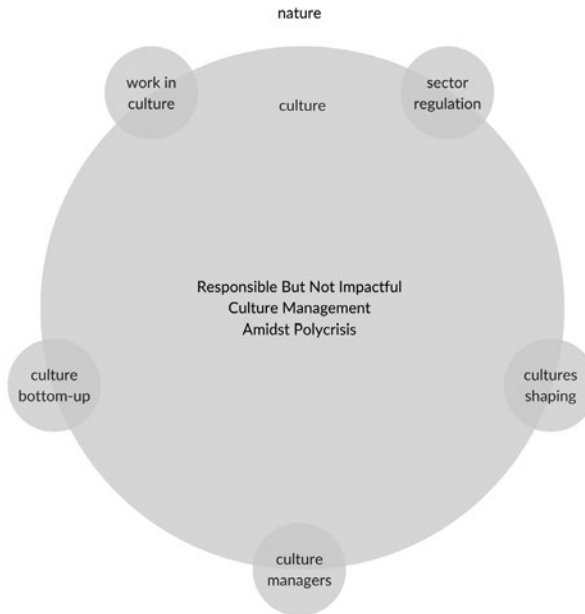
Fig. 3. Responsible but not impactful culture management amidst Polycrisis

Source: own elaboration.

In Figure 5, we encounter not only a depiction of sustainable culture management poised to confront the challenges of the Polycrisis but also a "sustainabilizing" approach aimed at fostering sustainability among audiences, other stakeholders, and the entire social environment. The curved arrows symbolize the mechanisms by which culture management can be made sustainabilizing, namely, through values – mined and circulated to drive socioenvironmental change, addressing both social needs and adherence to planetary boundaries. Ironically, the graph bears some resemblance to a symbol of the Anthropocene[2]: the bucket-wheel excavator used in large-scale surface mining (cf. fig. 6, 7). Here, the concept of mining for treasures shifts from the fossil industry to the realm of culture, imagination, and inspiration, highlighting that values are tangible resources capable of fueling the necessary socioenvironmental transition. In this model, the circulation of values by the industry concerned with values, namely, culture management, in all its traditional and transgressive forms, becomes the mechanism to effectively address the Polycrisis in a responsible and impactful manner.

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[2] During the Ende Gelände events for climate justice, hundreds of activists occupied a bucket--wheel excavator at a surface mine in Germany (Leftvision 2015: 1:22).
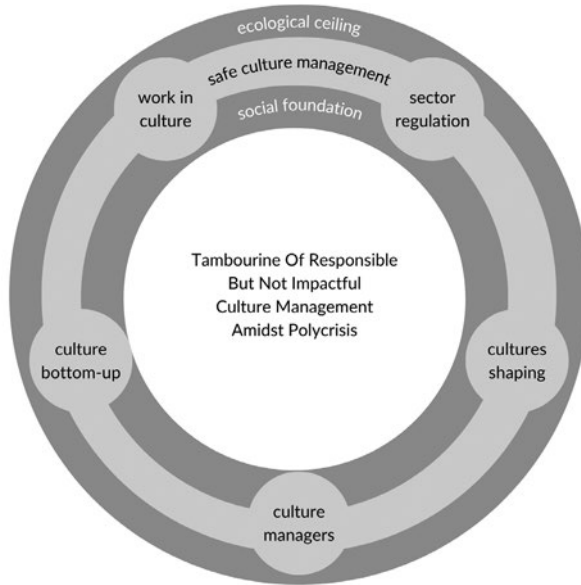
Fig. 4. Tambourine of responsible but not impactful culture management amidst Polycrisis
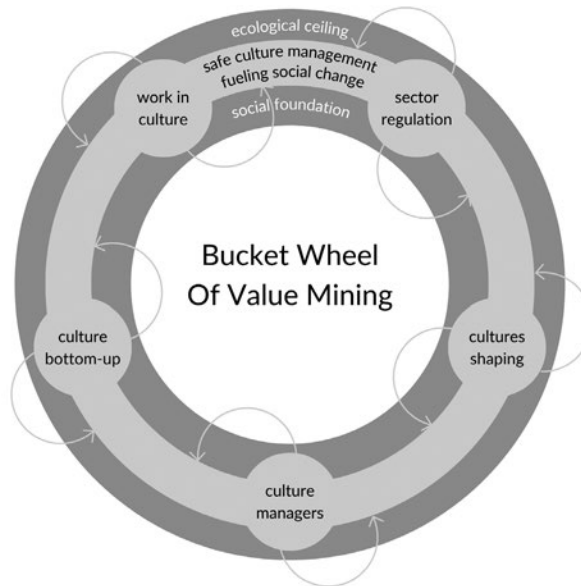
Source: own elaboration.

Fig. 5. Bucket wheel of value mining/bucket wheel of culture management as value mining for good life for all within planetary boundaries

Source: own elaboration.

Fig. 6. Bucket wheel excavator

Fig. 7. Bucket wheel

Conclusions

The operations of every organization in the 21st century must be sustainable. And sustainable development itself aims to reform the progress model of human civilization (Wołczek 2014: 206). Consequently, it seeks to reshape culture. In this context, sustainable development is culture management – and culture is not only one of the pillars of sustainability (cf. Hawkes 2001) but the very core of it. By expanding the scope of culture management to encompass not only sustainability but also meaningful impact, we can contribute to the creation of a sufficiently good common world. As proposed in the discussed model, this involves value mining and the circulation of values among diverse stakeholders. Although (due to numerous limitations) the concept lacks practical examples of such activities in this paper, they can be deduced from the understanding that all culture management endeavors should be sustainable in three respects: conducted in a manner compatible with nature and society, aligned with values that promote environmental and societal welfare in programmed cultural activities, and capable of influencing stakeholders to adopt more sustainable practices (cf. Pałasz, Tabaka 2021). Nevertheless, further research and case studies in this area would be greatly beneficial.

The proposed shift from traditional and transgressive culture management in a stable world (Fig. 1) to a bucket wheel model of culture management as value mining for good life for all within planetary boundaries (Fig. 5) could face a grave threat if the transition towards sustainability is not universally embraced to a sufficient degree. During times of crisis, culture often becomes the first sector to lose the interest of politicians and businesses (Potoroczyn 2014: 19:52; cf. Klein 2007). Hence, immediate action in culture management is imperative now, as the window of opportunity may soon close. As the crisis worsens, culture may become marginalized, and its potential for rescue may be lost indefinitely. Conversely, if the transition to sustainability is deemed insufficiently effective and alternative measures, such as degrowth (cf. Kallis et al. 2020), are implemented, culture management will need to adapt to postgrowth changes, such as a general reduction in the working week or extended periods of leave (Hickel 2020), which will result in significant amounts of free time. The responsible and valuable management of this time is also a task (a great challenge but also a magnificent chance) for culture management, both for existing and new institutions (cf. Pałasz, Wydra 2024).

Culture management is a complex system in which culture, cultures, sectors, sectoral and individual activities, as well as value mining, gatekeeping and circulation, intersect. The delineation of levels from macro to micro is merely conventional, as within the bucket wheel of value mining (Fig. 5). These levels converge, collaborate, and mutually influence each other as equal actors. There is no ontological abyss between them; scales emerge from actors' mutual understandings and contextualizations – they are the results of the actors' activities (Abriszewski 2012: 282). As

Michel Callon and Bruno Latour articulated, "An actor grows with the number of relations he or she can put, as we say, in black boxes" (1981: 284–225). Throughout this research, certain black boxes have been unpacked, and relations within them have been reconfigured.

Donella H. Meadows, one of the authors of the seminal Club of Rome's report on the limits to growth (Meadows et al. 1972), which laid the foundation for the concept of sustainable development and therefore for the discussed reconfiguration of understanding of the role of culture management in the face of Polycrisis, years later proposed a list of points at which to intervene in a system when attempting to effect systemic change. She termed these leverage points (Meadows 1999). Initially, she identifies the most potent of these as "the mindset or paradigm out of which the system – its goals, power structure, rules, its culture – arises" (Ibidem: 2). However, she immediately ads one that is even more impactful: "the power to transcend paradigms" (ibidem: 3):

> It is to "get" at a gut level the paradigm that there are paradigms, and to see that that itself is a paradigm, and to regard that whole realization as devastatingly funny. It is to let go into Not Knowing, into what the Buddhists call enlightenment. (…) If you have no idea where to get a purpose, you can listen to the universe (or put in the name of your favourite deity here) and do his, her, its will, which is probably a lot better informed than your will. It is in this space of mastery over paradigms that people throw off addictions, live in constant joy, bring down empires, get locked up or burned at the stake or crucified or shot, and have impacts that last for millennia (ibidem: 19).

And this, in essence, is why culture management must fuel socioenvironmental change.

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