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**Contrasting narratives:
Art and culture in the public sphere**

IDALINA CONDE

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Av. das Forças Armadas, Edifício ISCTE, 1649-026 LISBON, PORTUGAL, cies@iscte.pt

Idalina Conde Department of Sociology, ISCTE (Social Sciences, Business Studies and Technology Institute); CIES – Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology, associated with ISCTE. E-mail: idconde@mail.telepac.pt

Summary

The aim of this paper is to present the ambivalence of perspectives - contrasting narratives - of art and culture as has appeared in the public sphere since the 90's, in particular in Portugal. The research, published in several papers of work since 1996, was conducted empirically with statistical and documentation analysis, surveys and interviews, and a permanent ethnographic observation of the different arenas, profiles and discourses relating to art and culture. The paper proposes a series of theoretical and methodological lines to understand this context, and the importance of two major concepts – reflexivity and citizenship – to articulate the sociology of art, sociology of culture and sociology of contemporary societies.

Key-words: art, culture, ambivalence, reflexivity, citizenship

1. Ambivalence¹

The title of this paper – contrasting narratives – explains why I begin with the notion of ambivalence. As Zygmunt Bauman said in the opening of his book published in 1991, *Ambivalence and Modernity*, this “possibility of assigning an object or an event to more than one category” is a “failure of the naming function of language” to express the multiplicity of reality. Ambivalence is, then, “a specific-language disorder” and “the main symptom of disorder is the acute discomfort we feel when we are unable to read the situation properly and to choose between alternative actions.”²

So, I thought it appropriate for this conference, which can be seen under the sign of ambivalence about art and culture, as well as expressive and instrumental values, to note my “discomfort” when I approached perspectives on art and culture, particularly in the 90’s and until the first years of this century in Portugal. My research on different areas, profiles and discourses has given me a perception of various lines that allow at least two narratives for recording this period’s history. I am referring to the structural changes, emerging trends and symbolic meanings of what we call “the 90’s”³.

¹ Paper presented at the conference *Arts, Culture and the Public Sphere. Expressive and Instrumental Values in Economic and Sociological Perspectives*, organised by the Research Networks Sociology of Arts and Sociology of Culture of the European Sociological Association (ESA) in Venice, IUAV University, 4-8 November, 2008

² Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991, p. 1

³ Idalina Conde, 1996 - “Cenários de práticas culturais em Portugal (1979-1995)”, *Sociologia - Problemas e Práticas*, nº 23, Lisbon, CIES/ISCTE; 1996 - *O(s) Público(s) da Fundação de Serralves* CIES/ISCTE (with Eduardo de Freitas); 1998 - “Contextos, culturas, identidades” in António Firmino da Costa and José Manuel Viegas (orgs), *Portugal: que modernidade?*, Oeiras, Celta; 1998 - “Artistas e cientistas: retrato comum” in António Firmino da Costa and José Manuel Viegas (orgs), *Portugal: que modernidade?*, Oeiras, Celta; 1998 - “Práticas culturais: digressão pelo confronto Portugal-Europa”, *OBS - Revista do Observatório das Actividades Culturais*, nº 4; 1999 - *A “Sala do Veado”: o lugar da arte num museu de ciência*, CIES/ISCTE; 1999 - “Profissões artísticas e emprego no sector cultural”, *OBS - Revista do Observatório das Actividades Culturais*, nº 7; 2000 - “Feminisation trends and profiling the future. Women in arts and media professions: Portugal” in Danielle Cliché, Ritva Mitchell and Andreas Wiesand (eds), *Pyramid or pillars - unveiling the status of women in arts and media professions in Europe*, Bona, ARcult Media (with João Pinheiro); 2000 - “A nossa múltipla condição” in Maria da Graça Ventura (coord), *A definição dos espaços sociais, culturais e políticos no mundo ibero-atlântico (de finais do séc. XVIII até hoje)*, Lisbon, Edições Colibri; 2001 - “Women in the arts in Portugal” in AA.VV., *Boosting gender equality in higher arts education - a handbook*, Amsterdam, ed. ELIA - European League of Institutes of the Arts; 2003 - “Portugal em fim de século: uma modernidade plural” in Jorge de Freitas Branco and Salwa Castelo Branco (eds), *Vozes do povo*, Oeiras, Celta; 2003 - “Desordem - e arte contra a cultura” in José Rebelo (coord), *Novas formas de mobilização popular*, Porto, Campo das Letras; 2003 - “Making distinctions. Conditions for women working in serious music and in the (new) media arts in Portugal” in AA.VV., *Culture-Gates. Exposing professional “gate-keeping” processes in music and new media arts*, Bona, ArCultMedia; 2003 (with Teresa Duarte Martinho and João Pinheiro) - “Para além do consumo? Liberdade.” in *Experimentadesign 2003/Bienal de Lisboa* (catalogue); 2004 - “Desentendimento revisitado” in AA.VV., *Públicos da Cultura*, pub. by Observatório das Actividades Culturais, Lisbon

However, my purpose here is not to paint a national portrait. Although the Portuguese situation is specific and semi-peripheral in the European context, we share sufficiently global tendencies to justify a larger or a more reflexive presentation. For this reason, I will try to offer a short list of perspectives, each one with presuppositions, and possible tensions between celebration or subversion implicated in their concepts of art and culture. And, certainly, inspiring questions such as “How are we dealing with this kind of ambivalence in our sociological narratives?”

2. Two narratives

The first narrative describes the major expectations and institutional developments in the cultural field since the 80's in Europe, mostly experienced later in Portugal.

In this country, the 90's were also a decade marked by the creation of major institutions (particularly in Lisbon) and the organisation of major events such as the European Capital of Culture (Lisbon in 1994, Porto in 2001), the EXPO – Universal Exhibition of Lisbon in 1998 and , six years later, EURO 2004 (for football). However, it was a diversified form of development, combining various symmetrical movements: the roles of central and local government, the growth of the tertiary sector in the cultural field, and the progressive dynamism of metropolitan and smaller towns, as well as certain local areas.

In this context, the main issues are exactly the same as those debated in other countries (governance and cultural policies, cultural markets, artistic professions, marketing, management, audiences, democracy, internationalization, etc.), enveloping a general and inclusive concept of culture, leisure, arts, crafts, industries, creativity – the newest label – ranging from the radical to the conventional. A concept that feeds, then, a unifying discourse with both instrumental and expressive values. In other words, culture as a context, a condition or a resource for development (economic, urban, tourist), empowerment, cohesion and identity: all aspects of citizenship or, better expressed, all aspects emphasizing the cultural dimensions of this citizenship.

However, the consensus around culture can be disturbed. The perspective changes when we enter the second narrative, not of “art” within its eclectic and vague notion but, more specifically, of contemporary art and the more critical and radical movements of the 90's. In addition, their legacy to the core of artistic references, as we

observed, for instance, in the last edition of *Documenta Kassel*, which provides an acute and political message about the world and to the world – and the problems of our world⁴.

This second perspective offers a critical reflexivity – some would say renewal of the counterculture – which imposes another way of questioning culture, imposes also another way of questioning citizenship in the public sphere (how it is comprised, with what ideologies, segregation and powers), and the “deconstruction” of various aspects of contemporary societies. That is why art seems to be placing itself against culture, at least against certain global dimensions associated with risk, domination, exploitation, mass consumption, media imperialism and alienation.

Even recognizing the ambivalent nature of – and the strategies put into play by – these movements *vis-à-vis* what they called “the system”, and also the ambivalent relationship with issues such as globalization, technology, popular culture and media culture (simultaneously contested objects and contexts for the emerging “alternatives” in the 90’s, quite analogously with the global movements' counter-globalization), it is important to consider that notion of critical reflexivity and its repercussions in a more problematic relationship of this art with instrumental values and pedagogical matters. For instance, the relationship with reception, audiences and communities, which is not as easy or evident as pronounced or expected by cultural policies.

Let me quote some words from a choreographer and performer in a discussion on contemporary dance in 2001: “We, while artists, we are not teachers, we are terrorists”. “Terrorism”, he said, is “the survival of the political side» in the artistical mission. “But your responsibility is as when the panther eats the gazelle” - answered another creator.⁵

In the metaphor, the gazelle represents the public when captured in the vulnerability of its perceptions and expectations, so frequently frustrated in the face of an art that cannot stand for delight but for an abyss. The public in front of images, the majority of them deceiving, revolting, disturbing and, consequently, interesting, exposing human and planetary landscapes with violence, segregation, divergence, inequality – or “anomie”, solitude, despair or “ontological insecurities” as Anthony

⁴ *Documenta Kassel 18/06 – 23/09*, Catalogue, 2007

⁵ Quotations of João Galante and João Garcia Miguel in *Documento 10 mais 10 – contributo para uma cartografia da Dança Contemporânea em Portugal*, Lisbon, ed. Forum Dança e RE.AL/Resposta Alternativa, 2001, mentioned in Idalina Conde, “Desordem – e arte contra a cultura” in José Rebelo (coord), *Novas formas de mobilização popular*, Porto, Campo das Letras, 2003.

Giddens⁶ would say. They do not intend to seduce, despite the fact that they may use a playful or ironic approach, but to question and to denounce with critical consciousness.

Hence, the protocols of communication and frames for reception changed under the deconstructionist, postcolonial, digital and ethnographical turns in contemporary art, the last one being the basis of the above mentioned semantic and iconographic ties between art and society. The public is sabotaged in its representations, stereotypes and ideologies (including of art and culture), but this is an artistic strategy to produce strangeness and open people's minds to other ways of perceiving the world. Another possibility within the multifaceted experiences with the public(s) is involvement in the “relational aesthetics” promoted by discrete or site-specific projects and interventions in proximity with communities who invest in a rebuilt sense of community⁷.

Finally, the second narrative still covers two important aspects. First, an eloquent synchrony of apparently distinctive dynamics of centres and margins⁸, which could represent a process of pluralism and, to a certain extent, a permutation of symbolic powers. The dichotomy of centres/margins changed (like other binomial oppositions such as institutions/networks, commercial/non-commercial, still persistent in certain sociological descriptions) bearing in mind that the “underground” originally incubated in the margins was actually converted into an “alternative mainstream” recurrently exposed by the programming agendas of the so-called institutional powers⁹.

⁶ Anthony Giddens, *The consequences of modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991; *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991 (*As consequências da modernidade*, Oeiras, Celta, 1992; *Modernidade e identidade pessoal*, Oeiras, Celta, 1994).

⁷ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, Dijon, Les Presses du Réel, 1998; Marc Jimenez, *La querelle de l'art contemporain*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 2005; Idalina Conde, “Arte e Poder”, opening lecturer for the XVII Summer Course *Art and Power*, Institute of Contemporary History – New University of Lisbon, 19-22 September, 2007

⁸ In the same year, 1994, of Lisbon – European Capital of Culture, a group of 14 artists opened in this town their association, a gallery and interdisciplinary platform that became one of the first new alternative symbols: ZDB, “Zé dos Bois”, a humoristic portuguese “translation” of the name Joseph Beyus. Cf. Idalina Conde, “ZDB – a place of reference” in *Veneer/Folheado – a multidisciplinary arts exchange project* (catalogue), Catalyst Arts, Belfast, 30 October-22 November, 2003

⁹ Though this process is well known in the confrontation and succession of generations in the artistic spaces, comparatively with the 80's, the 90's accented the critical, subversive and interstitial profile of the new comers. See, for the 80's, Idalina Conde, “Transformações no campo artístico português” in *A sociologia e a sociedade portuguesa na viragem do século* (Actas do I Congresso Português de Sociologia), 2º vol., Lisbon, Editorial Fragmentos/Associação Portuguesa de Sociologia, 1990; “Recent changes in portuguese artistic field” in R. Waits, W.Hendon e J.Schuster (eds), *Cultural Economics 88: an european perspective*, Akron - Ohio, Association for Cultural Economics, 1990; “Transformations dans le champ artistique portugais” in André Ducret, Daniel Vander Gucht e Nathalie Heinich (dirs), *La mise en scène de l'art contemporain*, Bruxelles, Les Éperonniers, 1990

The second aspect is the emerging properties of new circles (interdisciplinary, hybridism, informality, flexibility, interstitiality, connectivity and trans-locality favored by new technologies) that predicted what Manuel Castells indicated as the main features of the “network society”¹⁰. Nevertheless, these circles and platforms were not recognized as initial prototypes of this paradigm until the recent re-evaluation in Portugal of the specific grounds for creativity¹¹.

3. Reflexivity

Approaching the conclusions, I must return to and rephrase the question of departure – how we can deal with this multiplicity and these ambivalences – in terms of a desirable sociological reflexivity. I will summarize it in three points.

Firstly, I point to the need for the frequent triangulation of three sociologies – art, culture and contemporary societies – to understand the plurality of meanings, contexts and relationships between art(s) and culture(s). Avoiding the “abstraction” of concepts, we must clarify that the first narrative for culture mixes at least three cartographies with different borders and contents. That of the cultural sector on the basis of an institutional and administrative definition; that of the cultural space, an extended space with porous frontiers open to global areas or issues (communication and new technologies; literacy; globalization and multiculturalism; politics; regulation; public spheres etc.), and also a wider cartography of cultural dimensions in society such as values, lifestyles and identities. Analogously, the other narrative showed a number of sources for artistic reflexivity, not confined to aesthetics but extended to the political and even sociological and anthropological reflexivities relating to contemporary societies.

As the second point I note the need for theoretical and methodological pluralism, assuming the added-value of multidimensional (and multcentred) research, as well the heuristic confrontation between grand and grounded theories. In my work it has happened in several ways. For example, the empirical ground proved the insufficiency

¹⁰ Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Volume I, *The Network Society*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000 (1996) (*A sociedade em rede*, Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2002)

¹¹ They were recognised before in the European context, namely in two important reports: *In from the margins – a contribution to the debate on culture and development in Europe*, Council of Europe, Culture Committee, Strasbourg, 1997; AA.VV., *Creative Europe – on governance and management of artistic creativity in Europe*, Bonn, ERIC’arts/ARCult Media, 2002

or partiality of notions such as those of “cultural field” or “art worlds” (to quote recurrent authors like Pierre Bourdieu and Howard Becker ¹²) to portray the contemporary condition and presence of the new media in several areas: classic and electronic music, visual and performing arts. I prefer the grounded concept of trans-local spaces crossed by several flows (or “scapes” as formulated by Arjun Appadurai ¹³), as a wider contender for possible complementary uses of those and other notions/authors and respective frameworks.

I could say almost the same about mediations: the need of a more complex mapping than the traditional perspective centred on the profiles and functions of the mediators. In this mapping we must consider the crucial role performed by three mediations that actually combine cultural and artistic spaces with social and global environments. These mediations are a network based organizations, new technology and several kinds of discourses. I mean aesthetic, cultural, social and political discourses which serve as substantive resources for artistic reflexivity – modes of thinking and working in contemporary art – as well as operational mediation used by curators and programmers to conceive the agenda-settings (and conceptual frameworks) for art exhibitions and the production of cultural events.

That is why – the third point – we need a more regular inclusion of the discursive dimensions, both iconic and semantic, in our analysis. And this attention, both to the actors' discourse and the actors' use of discourse, recognizes the importance, too, of reflexivity as a double connection concept. The connection between art and sociology, as expressed in certain civic and ethical issues of contemporary art, functioning like a “social scanner” and even redefining the artist's role as “ethnographer” and “public intellectual”¹⁴. And the connection between the sociology

¹² Idalina Conde, “O sistema, o campo e o mundo – paradigmas na sociologia da arte”, preface in Alexandre Melo, *Arte*, Lisbon, Quimera, 2001; “Duplo écran na condição artística” in Helena Carvalhão Buescu e João Ferreira Duarte (eds), *Narrativas da modernidade: a construção do outro*, Lisbon, Edições Colibri, 2001

¹³ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at large – cultural dimensions of globalization*, Public Words, Vol.1, Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 1996 (*Dimensões culturais da globalização: a modernidade sem peias*, Lisboa, Teorema, 2004)

¹⁴ Idalina Conde, “Interpelação (pela) ética”, in the catalogue of the exhibition *Paisagem Económica Urbana*, Galeria Graça Fonseca, Lisbon, 1997; Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, 2000, New York: Lukas & Sternberg (*Postproduction – la culture comme scénario: comment l'art reprogramme le monde contemporain*, Dijon, Les Presses du Réel, 2004; Hal Foster, “The artist as ethnographer” in *The return of the real: the Avant-Garde at the end of the century*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1996; Carol Becker, “The artist as public intellectual” in Gigi Bradford, Michael Gary, and Glenn Wallach (eds), *The politics of culture: Policy perspectives for individuals, institutions, and communities*, New York, The New Press, 2000

of the arts and general sociology, or sociologies, where reflexivity is precisely a major concept related to agency and the new paths and challenges for citizenship¹⁵.

In conclusion, reflexivity and citizenship appear as necessary conceptual references for the understanding and processing of ambivalence(s) in the contemporary context. To rephrase, then, the initial words of Zygmunt Bauman, they help us “to read the situation properly”, like possible bridges between perspectives that do not allow them be reduced to “a choice between alternatives”.

¹⁵ Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Scott Lash, *Modernização Reflexiva – política, tradição e estética no mundo moderno*, Oeiras, Celta Editora, 2000; Nick Stevenson, *Culture and citizenship*, London, Sage, 2001; Maria Augusta Babo, «A reflexividade na cultura contemporânea», *Revista Comunicação & Linguagens*, nº 28, Lisbon, 2000.