

WHEN ART MEETS CRISIS The portuguese story and beyond

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Abstract The article focuses on how the Portuguese arts have dealt with the Portuguese crisis, in the years 2011-2014, when the country was subjected to a financial bailout. The approach is based on a cross-section analysis, considering the domains of literature, fine arts, visual arts and cinema, music and performing arts. It emphasizes three distinct and complementary ways through which the relation between arts and society was developed in these years. The first way is the directly political positioning of artists, through artistic works and performances. The second way is the presence of the crisis as a background of several artistic creations of this time. And the third way is the one by which the crisis projects a new light into consistent topics of the Portuguese artistic imagination, stressing the centrality of collective identity and self-reflexivity. The Portuguese case suggests how promising can be for the sociological explanation of social processes the consideration of their cultural and artistic dimensions.

Keywords: Portugal, fiscal crisis, arts, cinema, popular music, literature.

Resumo O artigo focaliza-se no modo como as artes portuguesas lidaram com a crise portuguesa nos anos de 2011 a 2014, altura em que o país foi sujeito a um resgate financeiro. A abordagem é baseada numa análise transversal, tomando em conta os domínios da literatura, das belas-artes, das artes visuais e do cinema, da música e das artes performativas. O artigo enfatiza três formas distintas e complementares através das quais se desenvolveu a relação entre as artes e a sociedade nestes anos. A primeira forma relaciona-se com o posicionamento político direto dos artistas através do trabalho artístico e suas performances. A segunda forma centra-se na presença da crise como pano de fundo de várias criações artísticas nessa época. E a terceira forma é aquela em que a crise projeta uma nova perspetiva nos tópicos consistentes da imaginação artística portuguesa, reforçando a centralidade da identidade coletiva e da autorreflexividade. Assim, o caso português sugere quanto pode ser promissora a consideração das dimensões culturais e artísticas na explicação dos processos sociais.

Palavras-chave: Portugal, crise financeira, artes, cinema, música popular, literatura.

Résumé Le propos de l'article est d'analyser la façon dont les arts portugais ont fait face à la crise portugaise au cours des années 2011-2014, quand le pays était soumis à un rachat financier. L'approche est basée sur une analyse transversale, en examinant les domaines de la littérature, des beaux-arts, des arts visuels et des films, de la musique et des arts performatifs. On souligne trois formes, différentes et complémentaires, par lesquelles la relation entre les arts et la société s'est développée pendant ces années-là. La première forme concerne le positionnement politique direct des artistes, à travers leur travail artistique et leurs performances. La deuxième forme prend la crise comme contexte et enjeu de plusieurs créations artistiques de ce temps-là. La troisième forme envisage les moyens par lesquels la crise projette une nouvelle perspective sur les sujets durables de l'imagination artistique portugaise, en renforçant la centralité de l'identité collective et de l'autoréflexivité. Ainsi, l'analyse du cas portugais suggère la possibilité d'enrichissement apportée par la prise en considération des dimensions culturelles et artistiques dans l'explication des processus sociaux.

Mots-clés: le Portugal, crise financière, arts, films, musique populaire, littérature.

Resumen Este artículo se focaliza en cómo el arte en Portugal ha lidiado con la crisis económica durante los años del rescate financiero (2011-2014). La metodología de este trabajo se basa en una muestra que toma en consideración diversas áreas como la literatura, las artes plásticas y visuales, la música y las artes escénicas.

El artículo pone de manifiesto tres formas diferentes, pero complementarias, en las que el arte y la sociedad han interactuado y se han desarrollado durante estos años. La primera de esas formas hace referencia al posicionamiento político directo de los artistas, a través de sus trabajos y de sus actuaciones. La segunda es la presencia de la crisis, como tema de fondo, en muchas de las creaciones artísticas de esta época. Y la tercera es la forma en la que la crisis ha alumbrado nuevas perspectivas y formas de entender ciertos temas de la imaginación artística portuguesa, destacando la importancia de las identidades colectivas y la autorreflexividad. Así, el caso portugués sugiere cuán prometedora puede ser la toma en consideración de las dimensiones culturales y artísticas a la hora de explicar sociológicamente determinados procesos sociales.

Palabras-clave: Portugal, crisis financiera, artes, cinema, música popular, literatura.

Introduction: the crisis, the “troika” and the arts

Subsequently to the international crisis originated in 2008, in the heart of the North-American financial system, and in the context of the European sovereign debts crisis, several countries belonging to the Euro Zone were forced to ask for external financial aid.¹ This was the case, in 2010, of Greece and Ireland, and in 2011 of Portugal. In all these cases, the aid was provided by the joint effort of the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), constituting a “troika” of European and international institutions. In order to obtain the aid, each country had to apply for an “assistance programme”, whose terms implied (a) a heavy and frontloaded pack of fiscal austerity, (b) a sequence of reforms aimed at reducing labour costs and public expenditures, shrinking the public economic sector and deregulating the labour market, and (c) a close external surveillance on the decisions undertaken by the national government that could have fiscal impact.

Ireland was the first country to exit the programme, in 2013. The Portuguese programme ended in May 2014. Both countries were therefore able to conclude their respective “adjustments” in the three-year period that was initially scheduled. Greece did not achieve this goal, and in that period Cyprus also submitted to an external bailout, from which it has in the meantime also exited.

The assessment of the outcomes of the Portuguese programme is a matter of intense political controversy. The “memorandum of understanding” that first launched it was negotiated, in April and May 2011, by a resigning minority government, led by the Socialist Party, and it was supported by the two right-wing parties (PSD and CDS). Following the general election held in June 2011, PSD and CDS formed a government coalition.

Independently of the opinions on the merits and outcomes of the assistance programme, there is a general awareness of the tremendous sacrifices it demanded both from the society and the economy. If one compares the main economic and social indicators of 2014 with those of 2010, the conclusion is quite obvious: there was

1 The article is based on results of the research project “Portugal Facing the Mirror. Identity and Transformation in Literature, Cinema and Popular Music”, financed by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, and developed at the Institute of Sociology of the University of Porto, Portugal.

some progress in fiscal consolidation and in the deficit, and a major set-back in terms of the growth rate and volume of GDP per capita, employment levels and average income, number of people in poverty and social-economic inequalities. Still, in order to fully apprehend and evaluate the effects of the “troika” policies, one has to look beyond these figures, and investigate further into the domain of social representations. It is not only the “material” standards of personal and social life that are at stake; symbolic and moral issues are also relevant.

An unexpected change of development path implied a new awareness of the structural frailties of the national economy and the unanticipated effects of the adoption of the euro as the common currency. This led to a significant revision of the popular assessment of the European integration, which had usually been valued as the single most important success of the Portuguese democracy. The conditionality of the assistance programme, meaning that all the relevant government’s decisions regarding fiscal policy — which encompassed most economic decisions — had to be previously approved by Brussels, Frankfurt and Washington represented a huge limitation of the sovereignty of the Portuguese state. The moral topic was, and still is, a crucial feature: were the Portuguese people paying the inevitable price of lasting habits of low economic commitment, financial incautiousness and conspicuous expenditure that, according to many news media from Central and Northern Europe, supposedly characterised the Southern countries? Was there a “sin” to pay, as the German language suggested, using the same word both for “debt” and “fault” — with austerity serving as the act of contrition? And what was the responsibility of national elites — economic, social and political elites — in the trajectory that brought the Portuguese economy and state to a situation of imminent default?

These topics — Europe, sovereignty, collective behaviour and elite’s responsibilities — polarized many representations and discourses expressed in the public space, namely in the media. They dialectically interacted with the issues of power, hegemony, and asymmetries, on whose grounds the Portuguese situation could also be described as the output of a wrongly designed monetary union that aggravated, instead of attenuating, the economic differences between the core and the periphery of European Union, and perversely reinforced the political hegemony of Germany and its imposition of an austerity orthodoxy on the whole Euro Area. The assistance programme could even be seen as a formidable attack against the welfare system that the Portuguese democracy had gradually built up, and the repositioning of its economy in the traditional role of a provider of low cost manpower.

In any case, how should this delicate historical moment be interpreted? What lessons were to be learned? How should citizens and civil society organisations react? How could a new vision and interest of the Portuguese people be forged? How could new energies and players be mobilized in this sense?

Sociology can give some help in addressing these questions. Its most important contribution — in comparison, for instance, with the conventional macroeconomics — resides in the combination of the analysis of available objective indicators and the inquiry into the less crystallised realm of symbols, beliefs and representations. Our assumption is, furthermore, that this sociological endeavour can further benefit from the study of art.

The artistic perspective of the social crisis is crucial since, as intellectuals, artists participate in the social reflections and debates in and about any historical circumstances. They tend to work on those circumstances and the ideas, emotions and behaviours they arouse in people, as materials for creation, because their works and performances configure representations of, and discourses on, social reality. The critical nature of an epoch like the current one emphasizes all these ingredients: the leading role of the intellectual and the relevance of cultural critique; the abundance of materials for the artistic work on time, context and identity; and the self-reflexivity of society and of its various constitutive fields in what concerns their foundations, problems and future.

However, one should not limit oneself to the consideration of arts as another subject for sociological research, to be added to the remainders. As Howard Becker (2007) suggests, art is a form of “telling about society”, as sociology and many other disciplines of knowledge. Images and words convey, organise and disseminate ideas and interpretations, just like the maps of cartography or the tables, figures and graphs of statistics. They are neither to be merged nor interchangeable, since they depend upon very different postulates and they put in action quite distinct ways of thinking and talking. Therefore — the difference allowing for dialogue — they can be taken as parallel discourses on society, relating one to the other. It is this sort of “epistemological partnership” (in the words of Jean Majastre cited by Péquignot, 2007: 286) that can justify the use of art as “an instrument of research” (Péquignot, 2007: 287), and not only as subject of sociological research.

Alternative ways of considering the arts in a sociological analysis of facts and representations could certainly be followed. One could look for the effects of the economic and social crisis on the literature, music, cinema and other artworks produced in that context — even if the refracted nature of those effects must be acknowledged. One could try to apprehend the consequences of the crisis to the structure and dynamics of the cultural field (or art world), and its relationship with the government and the public policies. But here the focus will be on art as a form of knowing, interpreting and problematizing social realities: on its power to perform, reconstruct and interpellate history and society; its capacity to simultaneously immerse in, and distance from, social context.

The aim of this article is, therefore, to observe how the Portuguese arts have dealt with the Portuguese crisis, in the years 2011-2014, when the country was subjected to external aid and a “bailout”. The approach will be based in a cross-section analysis, considering the domains of literature, fine arts, visual arts and cinema, music and the performing arts. In the next section, a few examples of *directly political positioning* through artistic performance will be given. Section 3 will then illustrate the presence of the crisis as a *background* to several artistic creations of this time. In section 4, it will be argued that the crisis projected a *new light* into consistent topics of the Portuguese artistic imagination,² stressing the centrality, within it, of issues of

2 The phrase is used here by homology with the “sociological imagination” coined by C. Wright Mills (1959), in this case to refer to the specific ways of thinking and doing that make sense for arts and artists.

collective identity and self-reflexivity. Finally, some conclusive remarks will point out the usefulness of this sort of analysis to the sociological understanding of the national and European current situation.

Artivism in the “troika” years: the crisis as a theme

At 5th July, 2014, the National Museum of Contemporary Art — also known as Chiado Museum, in Lisbon — inaugurated an artistic installation by an emergent artist, Rui Mourão (born in 1977). Its title was *Os Nossos Sonhos Não Cabem nas Vossas Urnas* (Our dreams don't fit in your ballot boxes).³ The visitors could see, in a wall, fragments of video films, reporting scenes of protest: people interrupting the Prime Minister's speech at the Parliament, people contesting the official visit of Chancellor Angela Merkel to Portugal, people organising street demonstrations to protest against the increases in transport fares, to denounce financial cuts in health services, to parody bankers and politicians, or to call citizens to civic participation. Statements and testimonies by social activists could be heard at five headphones. They explained the use of art to mobilise people and to express social protest: a form of *artivism*, meaning the articulation of art with political and civil action. The opening ceremony of the exhibition was followed by the occupation of the museum, throughout the whole night — a gesture of which the museum's director had not been previously informed (for his own protection, said the organisers). The exhibition ran until the scheduled date, at the end of September 2014, with no further incidents.

Other initiatives of political upheaval by artistic means or of manifesting artistic solidarity with social protest took place. For instance, at 15th June, 2013, the first part of the *Oresteia* trilogy by Aeschylus was staged at the municipal theatre of Matosinhos, near Porto (the second biggest city of Portugal).⁴ As it was the day of a national demonstration against the government and the “troika”, the company (Companhia de Teatro de Braga, that is, Braga Independent Company) started the performance echoing the demonstration and singing slogans like this: “Yes to culture, no to ‘troika’!” Another company, Teatro Praga (Praga Theatre) recreated in 2014 a traditional form of Portuguese popular comedy — the *revista*, which typically consists of a series of dialogues, songs, marches and dances united by a very strong carnivalesque critique of contemporary social, moral and political facts. The show, *Tropa Fandanga* (an idiomatic expression for “ridiculous people”), was really a success, both with critics and the public.⁵ But, in each performance, the parodic atmosphere was suddenly interrupted by the monologue of one of the youngest actors, who described their own precarious professional situation and denounced it as a treason to the dreams of his parents' generation, those who had accomplished the transition to democracy, in the mid-1970s, believing that they were thus preparing a much better future.

3 Exhibition at the Museu do Chiado from 05/07/2014 to 28/09/2014, curated by Emília Tavares.

4 Ésquilo (Aeschylus): *Agamémnon* (458 b.C.), staged by Rui Madeira, observed at 15/06/2013.

5 Staged by Pedro Zegre Penim et al. and performed by Teatro Praga, première at 20/02/2014.

Analogous political statements through or within the context of works of arts can be seen in cinema and visual arts. The Portuguese Centre for Photography, a public institution, commissioned twelve photographers to take as source of inspiration aspects of the current social situation. The result was a collective exhibition, *12.12.12*, that ran at the Centre from February to April 2013.⁶ The overwhelming topic was the economic privation operated by the crisis and the “troika” policies: people queuing at the entrance of social security offices, people revolving the urban dustbins in search of still usable things, long queues waiting for buses that take too long to come, abandoned public works, misery and exclusion. In 2015, the film director Miguel Gomes directed the trilogy *As Mil e Uma Noites* (Arabian nights), working on stories of the everyday life crisis experienced by the Portuguese during the years of 2013 and 2014, where the lines between fiction and reality account for the strangeness and excess of the documented real lives.⁷ In the same year, the documentary *Dreamocracy*, by Raquel Freire and Valérie Mittheaux, was released, which dealt with the organization of demonstrations and other forms of massive mobilization against austerity measures.⁸

Nobody should be surprised by the particular incidence of political and social criticism in popular music. A song by the band Deolinda, “Que parva que eu sou” (What a fool I am), denounced the precarious condition of the young generations, the most educated generation in Portuguese history, still condemned to unemployment or bad jobs and to personal instability.⁹ It quickly became an anthem of many social protests. In 2012, the rapper Capicua released her self-titled album.¹⁰ One of its most important songs was “Medo do medo” (Fear of the fear), a very harsh critique of a society that accordingly placed fear as a means of domination and alienation, immobility and adulation to economic, social and political powers. The latest album of Mão Morta (Dead Hand), a Portuguese alternative rock band, points out the responsibilities of Portuguese elites and exhorts to direct action against the political oppression. Its very title — *Pelo Meu Relógio São Horas de Matar* (By my watch it is time to kill) — suggests metaphorically the resort to extreme violence; and the videoclip directed by Rodrigo Areias emphasizes this provocatively radical message, staging the lead singer of the band armed with a gun and shooting people, while images of social demonstrations and the faces of former or current political leaders appear.¹¹

Therefore, social criticism and political activism were explicit components of several artistic works and performances in Portugal, in the “troika” years and taking them as the main motif. Both the social situation and the adjustment policies that were seen as factors producing or aggravating it were the targets of such a

6 Collective exhibition at the Centro Português de Fotografia, Porto, from 23/02/2013 to 21/04/2013.

7 Miguel Gomes, *As Mil e Uma Noites*; volume 1, *O Inquieto*; volume 2, *O Desolado*; volume 3, *O Encantado*, Portugal/France/Germany/Switzerland, 2015, 381’.

8 Raquel Freire & Valérie Mittheaux, *Dreamocracy*, Portugal, 2014, 80’.

9 Deolinda, “Que parva que eu sou”, in *Deolinda no Coliseu*, Sons em Trânsito, 2011.

10 Capicua, *Capicua*, Porto, Optimus Discos, 2012.

11 Mão Morta, *Pelo Meu Relógio São Horas de Matar*, Leiria, Rastilho, 2012; Rodrigo Areias, *Horas de Matar*, Portugal, 2014, 4’.

criticism. And the artistic engagement — the already mentioned *artivism* — was seen as an indispensable and effective instrument to mobilize and combat against the ideological hegemony and the political power of the “troika”, the government or the entire political establishment, and the mainstream economists and politicians. This did not exclusively originate within marginal artists or organisations, but also in the institutional core of the Portuguese cultural field. And likewise, it led to a reconsideration (if not revision) of the political dimension and social responsibility of art and artists. The collective exhibition held in the Chiado Museum from December, 2012, to March, 2013, carried the very significant title (in English) *Are You Still Awake?*¹² It was an exhibition about the political discourse and positioning in the Portuguese contemporary fine and visual arts, since the 1974 Democratic Revolution until 2012. Colonialism and post-colonialism, gender and sexual identities, ecology, political resistance and critique, dystopias, and the meaning and pertinence of revolution were among the main topics. But the most striking feature of the curator’s option (Emília Tavares, the same curator that would eventually curate the Mourão’s exhibition with which this section began) was indeed the message conveyed by the title: are you still awake — still aware, still available for criticism and agency?

Hard, shadowy times: the crisis as an ambience

The economic, social and political context of the years 2011-2014 — the years of imminent financial default, external aid and “troika”’s surveillance — were challenging times for political activism in and through arts. The examples that were given in the last section evidence the centrality of this situation as a subject and a motif for artistic expression and engagement. They also suggest that the overall panorama in the cultural field was not structurally distinct from the one characterizing the social and political arenas: certainly a higher degree of turbulence, but no radical disruption that could question the very pillars of social order.

However, this is not the only way through which the Portuguese crisis haunts the artistic imagination. Its less explicit presence (less than the *artivism* form) is not at all ineffective.

First, the hardness of the ongoing events grants a renewed pertinence to classic inquiries into the nature of human agency and destiny. For instance, the staging of two celebrated Shakespeare’s plays update their political dimension. In 2012, the last staging due to the influent Portuguese stage director Joaquim Benite, that his death left incomplete (being subsequently completed by his disciple Rodrigo Francisco) was Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*.¹³ His reading stresses the political

12 *Are You Still Awake?*, collective exhibition at the Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporânea/ Museu do Chiado, Lisbon, from 13/12/2012 to 30/03/2013, curated by Emília Tavares.

13 William Shakespeare, *Timão de Atenas* (1623), staged by Joaquim Benite and Rodrigo Francisco, performed by Companhia de Teatro de Almada, première at Teatro Municipal de Almada, Almada, 20/12/2012.

dimension of the moral lesson of Shakespeare's allegory: the vacuity of vanity and richness, the loneliness of the former rich citizen immediately abandoned by the flattering friends as soon as they perceive his financial difficulties, his radical rebellion against all forms of social life. In a more direct manner, stage director Nuno Cardoso, revisiting in 2014 Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, prefers the political register (the incapacity of the military hero to use the political arts of courtliness and dissimulation) to the moral one (the theme of the hero first betrayed and then betraying by revenge).¹⁴ Other illustrations could be added: one of the most relevant for our analytical purpose is the recreation of the 1956 play by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *A Visita da Velha Senhora* (The visit of the old lady).¹⁵ Staged by Nuno Cardoso, it involved the new Companhia Maior (Major Company), whose actors are amateurs or former professionals older than 60 years. The city of Gullen, once rich, subsequently decayed and collapsed. Now, the inhabitants are anxiously waiting for a city's daughter, who had to leave it longtime ago, and meanwhile became astonishingly rich. But, to save the city that once expelled her, the "old lady" demands nothing less than the death of her former local boyfriend, that had betrayed her. Will the city accept such a brutal price to assure its bailout? Is there a sort of collective fault that must be expiated by anything causing a huge pain? Everything, from the staging to the programmes distributed to the audience, directs the attention to this similarity: Portugal is Gullen, the old lady is the international aiders, the conditionality humiliates far beyond any reasonability, and independently of individual responsibilities it is indeed the community as a whole that has to be sacrificed.

Second, the presence and effects of the economic and social crisis show up as a sort of background for descriptions and narratives deployed on different topics. As the familiar drama taking place in Lisbon's suburbs in 2010, powerfully filmed by João Canijo — *Sangue do Meu Sangue* (Blood of my blood) — comes to its tragic end, the radio news focus on the financial crisis and its consequences.¹⁶ The austerity policies that force severe financial cuts in the national health services, both in Portugal and Spain, contextualise the experience of Joaquim, suffering from HIV and subjected to an experimental treatment in Madrid — in the extraordinary film by Joaquim Pinto, *E Agora? Lembra-me* (And now? Remind me).¹⁷ And so on and so forth.

Third, this background forms a sort of negative, shadowy ambience that somehow pervades the whole artistic endeavour. Three striking examples can be taken in distinct arts. The sadness and loneliness staged in Vítor Gonçalves's film, *A Vida Invisível* (The invisible life) becomes even more moving as the urban décor is the gentrification interventions in Lisbon, with the building of new elegant zones and the rehabilitation of the main historical square; the promise of future they anticipated

14 William Shakespeare, *Coriolano* (1607-1608), staged by Nuno Cardoso, performed by Ao Cabo Teatro, première at Teatro Nacional D. Maria II, Lisbon, 09/01/2014.

15 Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *A Visita da Velha Senhora* (1956), staged by Nuno Cardoso, performed by Ao Cabo Teatro and Companhia Maior, première at São Luiz Teatro Municipal, Lisbon, 27/03/2013.

16 João Canijo, *Sangue do Meu Sangue*, Portugal, 2011, 131'.

17 Joaquim Pinto, *E Agora? Lembra-me*, Portugal/Spain, 2013, 164'.

turned to be, melancholically, frustration and despair.¹⁸ The events reported in *Quando o Diabo Reza* (When Devil prays), the 2011 novel by Mário de Carvalho — a ironic story of petty delinquency and family disputes — take place in Lisbon, during a noisy election campaign to which the novel's characters dedicate an absolute indifference. And also does the narrator, as these are the three last sentences of the book: "The campaign was over. The election took place. Some won, some lost" (Carvalho, 2011: 159). Finally, the well-known Portuguese photographer Paulo Nozolino placed his 2012 exhibition under the auspice of Ezra Pound's poem *Usury* (Usura).¹⁹ There were nine triptychs of black-and-white photos, describable as a moral pronouncement against whatever confiscates and alienates human beings, depriving them from dignity, and an alert to the indispensability of collective memory. The photographer portrays victims of war, migrants, refugees, poor people. And one of the triptychs is named *Europe* — a lamentation on Europe's uncertainty.

Reconfiguring time and space: the crisis as a revealer

It would then be a mistake to confine the sociological inquiry into the artistic problematization of the Portuguese crisis to the explicit discourses and representations. Section 2 illustrated that explicit presence. But it is not the only form one must keep in mind. As section 3 demonstrates, equally relevant are the more oblique, nevertheless real and effective presence of the social crisis as a sort of background and ambience, in which topics and tones of the artistic imagination acquire (new) meaning and significance.

Do these two complementary ways exhaust the interplay between social context and artistic activity in the "troika" years? The conventional sociological approach would be tempted to answer affirmatively: those were the refracted effects of the crisis on the Portuguese world of art, those were the artistic reactions and re-interpretations raised in such a time and context. One could extend the research on content, but along these two main lines.

However, this is the point in which, in our view, one must abandon the conventional approach, and seriously conceive art and sociology as "epistemological partners". The relation between the social context, challenging as it is, and the art work, autonomous and situated as it is, cannot be subsumed under the (complex) causality chains at stake. They have also to be regarded as *independent* social processes that *dialogue* one with the other. The specificities of the context — here, the fact that it involves a huge crisis, both in political-economic and in moral-symbolic terms — do illuminate certain features and outcomes of that dialogue, which began before the crisis and would continue after its end. They act as *revealers*.

If we look, in the first place, to the oeuvres that some of the most prominent artists — as writers, film directors, composers, stage directors, choreographers,

18 Vítor Gonçalves, *A Vida Invisível*, Portugal, 2013, 103'.

19 Paulo Nozolino, *Usura*, exhibition at Espaço BES Arte & Finança, Lisbon, from 20/09/2012 to 04/01/2013, curated by Sérgio Mah.

and so on — have been constructing throughout their career, and that grant them relevance, coherence and individuality, and then we examine the specific works they created in the “troika” years, one fact is striking for many of them: the new context of these years does not significantly alter the main traits that characterize and singularize their oeuvre. At the same time, two other impressive realities arise. On the one hand, the crisis ambience accentuates certain features of the composition and/or certain features of our reading and reception of each oeuvre. On the other hand, and foremost, it is precisely the internal structure of the oeuvre and the relation it undertakes with its time that feeds and improves the social understanding of the occurrence and significance of that (hard, shadowy, critical) time. “Social understanding” comprehends both the vivid experience of readers, viewers and listeners, and the collective values, symbols and dispositions that the art field, as such, proposes to the public and society.

This applies to several artists working in the context of the Portuguese crisis. Film director Pedro Costa has built up, since the 1980s, a quite singular work, in European and international terms. It can be said that at least one of his main focuses is the reinvention of his country: the metamorphosis of the last European colonial power into a peripheral Member-State of the European Union, having to deal with its colonial memories and sequels. These sequels include the presence of thousands of immigrants coming from the former African colonies to work in the construction industry, public works and unskilled services, who are relegated to suburbs and ghettos, struggling for survival in terrible conditions — that the recent crisis did aggravate. Pedro Costa’s point of view on Portugal is exactly this one: the point of view of black, foreign, uprooted, poor people living in miserable neighbourhoods of Lisbon, epitomized in his main actor and character, the Cape-Verdean Ventura. In 2014, his film *Cavalo Dinheiro* (Horse money) situates Ventura in a hospital, static or walking with no purpose through dark corridors and tunnels, receiving the visits of his wife and friends (hard, sad, black, impressive faces) and chaotically remembering past events, including the Colonial War, the “25th April” — the day of the military coup that overthrew the Portuguese dictatorship, in 1974 — or his migration to Lisbon, the marriage, the work, the fights.²⁰ In the most important sequence of the film, Ventura shares the elevator with a petrified armed soldier, the eyes closed, as he were a statue — and his long discourse in Cape-Verdean Creole faces and questions that disturbing symbol both of the colonial oppression in Africa and of the democratic liberation in Portugal. Has this something directly to do with the social crisis and the “troika”’s surveillance? No. But the point is that this central, permanent theme of Costa’s oeuvre — the enormous dignity of people carrying on that kind of non-existence associated to sub-urbanism, misery and otherness — assumes a new meaning and relevance, both artistically and politically, in the framework of that crisis and surveillance.

The same goes concerning the work of probably the most influential of living Portuguese novelists. António Lobo Antunes published three novels in the 2011-2014

20 Pedro Costa, *Cavalo Dinheiro*, Portugal, 2014, 103’.

period. Here, the last one, *Caminho como Uma Casa em Chamas* (I walk like a burning house) is perhaps the most important. Individuals and families facing existential deadlocks live in the eight apartments of an old building in Lisbon. Each of them (or former lovers, friends and relatives) tells us stories of suffering, frustration, treason, decay, solitude. They talk about dreams and hopes that seem irreversibly lost. In the attic of the building, hidden from all but the young girl that feeds him, still stuck to its premodern views and confident of their permanence in the country's mentality, but simultaneously aware that times are gone and now he is only "the echo of a extinct authority" (Antunes, 2014: 357), lies Salazar, the dictator that ruled Portugal during four decades. And that old building, in the centre of the capital, full of frustrated lives and with no future ahead, appears as a possible symbol for the entire country — Portugal walking like a burning house, possessed by past and present torments and despair.

Again, this is not in any sense a novelty in Lobo Antunes's oeuvre, which emergence should be credited to the dramatic conjuncture of the 2010s. On the contrary, it is a recurrent motif, since the first books published in 1979 and 1980. The Portuguese history, as it is revived by urban people, namely by those who experienced first the colonial war in Africa and then the expectations and deceptions of the democratic revolution, has been a permanent topic and source of Lobo Antunes's writing. Still, his characteristic interpretation, and the way he transforms it and expresses in literary terms, provides a really powerful insight into the hard times of crisis and external aid.

If one considers from the same perspective the work of another very important Portuguese novelist, Lídia Jorge, a similar portrait can be drawn. Her 2014 book, *Os Memoráveis* (Memorable people) pays a vibrant tribute to the young captains who toppled, 40 years ago, the dictatorial government. The "unfinished fight" that was the 1974 revolution (as defined by one of the characters, see Jorge, 2014: 296) has to be rescued from its historical defeat. And its heroes, victims of their own intestinal quarrels, and then victims of misunderstanding, injustice and persecution, have to be reestablished in their entire, authentic dignity. 40 years after the democratic dawn, the partial loss of sovereignty and self-government implied in the "troika" 's assistance programme illuminates in a grey, crepuscular light, this memory.

The examples could be multiplied. Notwithstanding, one may summarise this first branch of the interplay between art and its time, in the context of a huge crisis, in the following terms: the context does not change the meaning and significance of rooted and lasting motives of various oeuvres; still, it impregnates them with a specific tone or colour, both regarding (as Adorno, 1991 [1957] would say) their "textual structure" and its interpretation.

Meanwhile, this does not consume all the instances and features of that interplay. A second branch must be found in the emergence or re-emergence of themes and issues brought into the artistic imagination.

The re-examining of recent history is one of them. Again, this did not start in the "troika" years. After a period in which the events of the 1974-1975 decolonization were still fresh and traumatic in the collective memory, and the colonial experience only could be portrayed either from the negative prism of colonial powers or

from the positive one of the colonized nations, the Portuguese culture gradually began to admit and incorporate new perspectives on that historical stage. The publication in 2011 of Dulce Cardoso's novel, *O Retorno* (The return) was a breaking event. The Portuguese colonization in Africa and the dramatic conditions of the return to Portugal of hundreds of thousands of former Portuguese settlers and migrants in Angola or Mozambique were approached from the point of view of a young boy from a humble family with peasant origins (Cardoso, 2011). This basic option changed the narrative and the assessment of recent history, somehow humanizing it. In 2012, the film *Tabu* (Taboo), by Miguel Gomes, would go further in that direction: the Portuguese colonial rule in Africa (with its oppression and exploitation of native people) was reinterpreted in the framework of the social and cultural experience of those Europeans who, in the 1960s, had imagined Africa as a promise to fulfil their own dreams of youth, freedom and future.²¹ This does not diminish the fault, the historical crime committed by the intruders, indeed, in a certain way, stresses it; but it also gives a specific context of meaning to the fact and its sequels. In 2014, in the new film by Margarida Cardoso (*Yvone Kane*), the Mozambican drama of the post-independence and post-civil war era parallels the drama of Portuguese people personally or familiarly related to the African experience.²² A similar parallel had been designed, three years earlier, concerning Angola, in Lobo Antunes' novel *Comissão das Lágrimas* (The commission of tears, Antunes, 2011)

The re-examining of recent Portuguese history through its tense relationship with Africa is not the only way to re-centre Portugal. Another obvious way is its dialogue with Europe, and namely with what, within contemporary Europe, symbolises the "North" — the pole of world power both in ideological and economic terms. As already mentioned, the European integration (from 1986 onwards) was consensually perceived as the happiest achievement of Portuguese democracy. The difficulties generated by the enlargement of the European Union towards east, by the shortcomings of the euro currency and, foremost, by the sovereign debts crisis of 2010, outlined a new framework. The peripheral position of Portugal, as a "South" within the "North", and the emancipatory potential of that position, inasmuch as it could favour a distant and thus critical view, counterbalancing the hegemonic representation of the world order, could be reinterpreted as a positive singularity. Its effects would transcend the narrow limits of a national case to reach the complexities of the imagination and construction of a new cognitive and social international order. This idea (see Santos, 2015) was also a source of inspiration for Portuguese artists and curators. One impressive example can be found in the programme *Next Future*, held by the greatest cultural institution of the country, the Gulbenkian Foundation, and coordinated by curator António Pinto Ribeiro, from 2009 to 2015. Typically the evolution of contemporary culture is reinterpreted from the point of view of the challenges raised by urban scenes and cultures and the triangular ongoing dialogue between Europe, Africa, and Caribbean and Latin

21 Miguel Gomes, *Tabu*, Portugal/ Germany/ Brazil/ France, 2012, 118'.

22 Margarida Cardoso, *Yvone Kane*, Portugal, 2014, 117'.

America. This theme of “Southern” eyes questioning and simultaneously reviving the European centre gives meaning and relevance — within the broad framework of post-colonialism, interculturalism and globalisation — to many of the programme’s initiatives. It is not surprising that, for instance in the collective exhibition held in 2014 and significantly titled *Artistas Comprometidos? Talvez*. (Engaged artists? Maybe.), works by young Portuguese artists join emergent artists coming from countries like South Africa, Mozambique, Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, Guatemala, Morocco or Austria, to rethink and redefine the political halo of the artistic imagination.²³

But maybe the most interesting stream of what has been tentatively described as the dialogue between art and its time-space, in the context of a huge, systemic crisis, resides in the impulse to reevaluate Portugal itself. Celebrating the 40th anniversary of the 1974 Revolution, one of the key art institutions, the Serralves Foundation, presented the first comprehensive exhibition about the SAAL initiative — that had been an entirely new experience of popular participation in urbanism, then launched by the revolutionary government and led by strongly committed architect.²⁴ Serving as a celebration, it was somehow a recall to contemporary agenda of two issues: architecture and politics; architecture and social participation. It also urged the 21st century visitors, in a hugely depressed nation, to reappraise a vibrant feature of its own recent history: the militant and euphoric participation of common people in the reshaping of their destiny. In the field of modern dance, several attempts were made to stage mutually challenging encounters of contemporary choreographies and choreographers with folk motives, rhythms and interpreters.²⁵ In a quite distinct direction, capitalising the “pop” reach of theatrical, spectacular re-staging of folk traditions, the painter and sculptor Joana Vasconcelos built up, in these years, a personal, international trademark, immediately transformed into a rather official icon and messenger, for Portugal’s external marketing.²⁶

Notwithstanding, it is perhaps in the field of cinema that one can see the most promising approach to Portugal by artists working in the country, in the 2010s. Once more this new trend is prior to 2011. In fact, it can be dated from 2008, the year when film director Miguel Gomes, born in 1972, presented an unexpected freshly

23 *Artistas Comprometidos? Talvez*, collective exhibition at the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, from 20/06/2014 to 07/09/2014, curated by António Pinto Ribeiro.

24 *O Processo SAAL. Arquitetura e Participação 1974-1976*, exhibition at the Fundação de Serralves, Porto, from 31/10/2014 to 04/10/2015 (and at the Canadian Center for Architecture, Montréal, from 12/05/2015 to 04/10/2015), curated by Delfim Sardo.

25 Namely, Francisca Francisco, *A Viagem*, première at Guimarães 2012 — Capital Europeia da Cultura, 16/03/2012; and Clara Andermatt, *Fica no Singelo*, première at Teatro Viriato, Viseu, 13/12/2013.

26 Joana Vasconcelos was invited to organise a grandiose exhibition at the Palais de Versailles, in 2012, then was the official representative of Portugal in the 55th Venice Art Biennale, in 2013, and, in the same year, would beat all the records of public affluence to her exhibition in the Palácio Nacional da Ajuda. Working with a variety of materials, and characteristically re-using and re-framing folk and pop motives, Vasconcelos regularly addresses issues of collective identity, national symbols, emblems and narratives, mass culture and its relation to history and heritage, as well as the dialectic between crafts and art, art and heritage, traditional and contemporary arts, art and industry.

perspective in Portuguese cinema, with *Aquele Querido Mês de Agosto* (That beloved month of August).²⁷ A mix of fiction and documentary, the film projects an entire new light on the everyday reality of the central mountainous region, marked by emigration, during the month of holidays, flirts, festivals, forest fires and the yearly return of emigrants. One year later, in 2009, it was released *48*, by Susana de Sousa Dias, a documentary of the Portuguese dictatorship, that lasted from 1926 to 1974. The film screens photographs of the political prisoners from the police files, along with the voices of their own current narratives of incarceration and torture.²⁸ In 2011 Gonçalo Tocha's *É na Terra não É na Lua* (In Earth, not in the Moon) was released, an innovative and emic approach to the life, beliefs and institutions of a Portuguese community, in this case the few hundred inhabitants of Corvo, the smallest and faraway island of the Azores archipelago.²⁹ And in 2014, another young director, João Pedro Plácido, revisited his grand-parents' village, in the rural North, now reduced, because of the emigration and the exit to urban areas, to a few tens of people.³⁰ This documentary takes as its main character a local youngster, working in the family farm, and from his living world draws an empathetic portrait of the community, evidencing the tenacity and simplicity of those tireless labourers that resist to an almost fatal decline. Meanwhile, Joaquim Pinto chose the mountain to situate his already mentioned *E Agora? Lembra-me*; and Paulo Rocha stressed, in his last film, a personal testimony, his own social origins in traditional communities simultaneously used to local primary economy and to transatlantic emigration.³¹

One could go on. But maybe the point is already clear. In 2011-2014, the period of economic crisis, external aid, fiscal austerity and limited sovereignty has also generated a new context of meaning, both to revisit and extend consistently central motives of several oeuvres — as we have seen regarding film directors as Pedro Costa or novelists as António Lobo Antunes or Lídia Jorge; and to develop emergent or reconsidered themes of Portuguese cultural imaginary, such as the relationship with Africa, the relationship with Europe or the self-awareness as a nation and society. There is no direct link, let alone causality, between social processes that occur at distinct levels: the socioeconomic dynamics and the artistic imagination. But one illuminates the other, redefining relevance, suggesting meaning, and proposing interpretations.

Concluding remarks: on the complexity of the oblique

As far as we know, there is not yet a significant sociological literature — internationally available — on the cultural and artistic dimensions of the period of

27 Miguel Gomes, *Aquele Querido Mês de Agosto*, Portugal/France, 2008, 147'.

28 Susana de Sousa Dias, *48*, Portugal, 2009, 92' 50".

29 Gonçalo Tocha, *É na Terra não É na Lua*, Portugal, 2011, 180'.

30 João Pedro Plácido, *Volta à Terra*, Portugal, 2014, 78'.

31 Joaquim Pinto, *E Agora? Lembra-me*, Portugal/Spain, 2013, 164'; Paulo Rocha, *Se Eu Fosse Ladrão... Roubava*, Portugal, 2013, 87'.

“troika” ‘s intervention in Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Cyprus. This article should be taken, therefore, as a methodological proposal, and its preliminary empirical testing.

The proposal can be summarised in three sentences. The political discourse and social criticism originated in the artistic imagination and expressed in artistic language, being effective in any given context, takes an increased pertinence and value in times of systemic crisis; one must consider it, when trying to understand the whole scope of that crisis. But this is not the only way by which the crisis is perceived and represented in symbolic and aesthetic terms, since it also forms a sort of background, an ambience framing and influencing those terms. Last but not the least, it is not possible to work out a comprehensive understanding unless one fully reckons the autonomous nature of “art” vis-à-vis “society” and the dialogical relationship thus generated between “art” and “society”.

At the first level, one should identify, describe and interpret the artistic problematization of politics, economy, ideology and common sense — by means of art installations, documentaries, fiction, performances, exhibitions, and so on. These art works can be put in relation one with the other, and each or all of them with the social context and events. It would be an error, however, to treat them as direct effects or causes, the mechanical causality being the wrong way to apprehend the social situation and role of art, independently of which is considered the cause and which the effect (see, among others: Hennion, 1993; Heinich, 1998; Lahire, 2010). If there are effects — and certainly they are, in both directions — they are *refracted* by the specific stance and grammar of art.

At the second level, the presence of social contemporaneity in the artistic imagination is even more diffuse. It is less a contingency factor than a more general ambience — an *atmosphere* that permeates either the sensibility of creators (authors and interpreters) or the sensibility of audiences, or indeed both. Lending from Hans Robert Jauss (1982) a concept that seems quite illuminating here, that atmosphere impregnates both the “horizon of reception” and the horizon of creation of art works. In that sense, the context stays as a background, whose oscillations contact through intersection or tangency with the oscillations in artistic inventiveness and discourse.

At the third level, we take into full account the reciprocal autonomy of social processes and look for the dialogical interaction they may have. There is an internal dynamism of the artworks — internal to the authorial project and deployment, and internal to the cultural field or art world to which it refers. If, as Becker (2007: 192) underlines, “context” is really important to understand the art works, the context is first of all the set of art works, resources, rules and procedures: their history, structure and conditions of possibility. There is also the dynamics of the social environment, in its several dimensions and their systemic interrelation. These two realities, that for the sake of simplicity we name respectively “art” and “society”, cannot be merged, or one subsumed under the other. That said, it is precisely their reciprocal autonomy that makes them interdependent, dialoguing in terms that it is an empirical issue to report and characterise. The context — in this case, the huge systemic crisis of the 2010s — can propitiate a new meaning and relevance, or reinforce (or even dissolve)

the meaning and relevance of a motif, a theme or a form. The context may favour the emergence (or maintenance, or disappearance) of subjects and styles. The artistic imaginary may create a pertinent framework in order to lay people and institutions interpret, take account of and position themselves regarding the present they live and the future they envisage. The way art works put in perspective social time-space can help apprehending it, as they produce knowledge as well as emotions about it. And all this matters, for a sociological inquiry into “facts” and “representations” that refer to a critical period, challenging the very nature of national institutions and identities, and their placement in the world system.

In all the three levels, things are oblique — and that is perhaps the decisive remark. There are no straight lines, no conspicuous relations, no obvious links, between arts and their social context. The role of arts in mutually constituting social settings requires that one thinks about different forms of interplay between art and social context, with neither dialectic nor monistic explanations capturing the inherent complexity. One must deal with ambiguity, openness, polysemy — with obliquity. But obliquity does not imply unaccountability. One has only to design an appropriated approach to complexity. This article has been an attempt to contribute to such a design.

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Receção: 10 de abril de 2017 Aprovação: 08 de junho de 2017