ART, CULTURE AND SELF-/REPRESENTATION IN AMERICA: CONCEPTUAL SNAPSHOTS

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Abstract

The present paper is to refer to the meanings that the terms **art, culture, identity and/or self-/representation** have when they interrelate in the context of diverse historical epochs, the present time included. The transgression of the meanings of the terms 'art', 'culture' and 'society' is embodied in Raymond Williams' idea that **the arts** can be defined if transposed in different **cultures** framed by various **social elements**, **and only in this/by means of the interweaving of these components.** Following Williams' pattern of analysis, the paper is to discuss about the above mentioned set of concepts as seen in the USA at various times. And since at a certain point cultural acts tend to become global or universal, it is to find out how much of the artistic/cultural/social/political phenomena that such a discussion implies extend to other nations.

Keywords: self-representation, society, identity, aesthetics, poetics

Much has been written about the influence of **art** (literature, music, painting, sculpture, theatre, architecture, film) on **society**, or vice-versa. The arts, as Talcon Parsons states in *The Social System* (Cornwell 1990: 32), function as a symbol-system through which **culture** is transmitted, learned and shared; they also create national identity. The social history of the arts would then register the changes in the 'rhythm of life' as having been reflected in art (stated by Arnold Hauser in 1951 in *The Social History of Arts*) – this being the very process of **construction of identity** at individual, group and even at national level.

Art, in the definition of Raymond Williams:

> "is remarkably similar, in its pattern of change, to *industry*. From its original sense of a human attribute, a 'skill', it had come, by the period with which we are concerned, to be a kind of institution, a set of body of activities of a certain kind. An *art* had formerly been any human skill; but *Art*, now, signified a particular group of skills, the 'imaginative' or 'creative' arts. *Artist* had meant a skilled person, as had *artisan*; but *artist* now referred to these selected skills alone. Further, and most significantly, ***Art*** came to stand for a special kind of truth, **'imaginative truth'**, and *artist* for a special kind of person, as the words *artistic* and *artistical*, to describe human beings, new in the 1840s, show. A new name, *aesthetics*, was found to describe the judgment of art, and this, in its turn, produced a name for a special kind of person – *aesthete* […] As *art* had produced *artist* in the new sense, and *aesthetics aesthete*, so this produced *a genius* to indicate a special kind of person. These changes, which belong in time to the period of the other changes discussed, form a record of a remarkable **change in ideas of nature and purpose of art**, and of its relations to other human activities and **to society as a whole**" (Williams 1982: xvi).

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In *Democracy and the Arts* (1990: 32-44), Terry Lynn Cornwell offers a **sociological view of the arts**, stating that art and its definitions have been subjected to change over time and in different societies:

Aristotle analyzed drama when illustrating his general theory of art. In *Poetics*, it is stated that all artists 'imitate action' and the arts themselves are distinguished by the *object* imitated, the *medium* employed and the *manner* or mode of imitation. Furthermore, the natural instincts of imitation and harmony and rhythm cause humans to experience pleasure in response to a work of art. Imitation causes pleasure because recognition of what is being imitated occurs, while harmony and rhythm cause pleasurable awareness of the form of art. From the Middle Ages to the 19th century, art was tied to religion and structures along rigid class lines (Cornwell, 35). The church used art as a unifying element of extra-aesthetic forces. Arts patronage followed the patterns of the dominances of classes, of social and economic institutions over society. Literature and the visual arts were the heritage of monasteries and churches, and peasants continued the tradition of folk art. Later, the rise of a commercial economy and the secularization of society and culture provided greater access to arts. To come back, until the 16th century, almost all artistic products were of religious influence. The Renaissance registered a demand for more works of art and artists turned from artisans into free intellectual workers (36). The Elizabethan Age permitted a mix of classes evident in the audiences of Shakespeare's plays. In the 18th century, there are registered changes in the structure of cultural audiences. In the 19th century, middle classes have evidently more access to arts:

> "Correspondingly, with a democratizing era in the United States, this attention by the masses to art was described by the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville in his epic chronicle of society in the nineteenth – century America: "I do not believe that it is a necessary effect of a democratic social condition and of democratic institutions to diminish the number of those who cultivate the fine arts; […] the production of artists are more numerous, but the merit of each production is diminished"[…] **Tocqueville also found very little American poetry. The democratic mind, he believed, is very less likely to produce poetic literature than the aristocratic mind**: "Aristocracy naturally leads the human mind to the contemplation of the past, and fixes it there. Democracy, on the contrary, gives men a sort of instinctive distaste for what is ancient. In this respect, aristocracy is far more favorable to poetry; for things commonly grow larger and more obscure as they are more remote; and for this two-fold reason, they are better suited to the delineation of the ideal" […] In general, the United States that Tocqueville observed seems to be importing European art, as well as attempting to produce art of its own – all with the goal of **increased mass audience participation**" (Cornwell 1990: 36-37).

In the 20th century, aesthetically, the definition of art changed and it became anything that would cause an aesthetic experience, as social philosopher John Dewey would state (apud Cornwell 1990: 39). What is interesting is that, according to Alexis de Tocqueville, the

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American mind as democratic found little in common with poetry. However, the great contribution of twentieth-century American democracy is that it constructed a type of poetry to fit this "democratic mind" and it did not contemplate the past, as an "aristocratic mind" would do, but it was immersed in its "now"/contemporaneousness. Similarly, Roy Harvey Pearce describes the situation of the American letters and the 'poetic' in the nineteenth century, discovering that there is an 'anti-poetic' attitude in the American writer, and then the poets had to transform this anti-poetic into "**the poetic"** (Pearce 1987: 138): "Man in America exists at once in spite and by means of the anti-poetics which the forms of his culture have made inevitable […] The greatest burden was the poet's, on whom fell the necessity of getting at and expressing the significance of man in forms – language, the myriad aspects of culture it embodied, and the anti-poetic attitude it set – which actively militated against the existence of poems. The poet had to make a self-induced blindness to poetry a means to poetic insight. Through his own sense of the anti-poetic life of men in his society, he had to discover the poetic quality immanent in that life. He had to make its possible man an actuality; as poet, he had virtually to create man" (Pearce 1987: 140).

In the nineteenth century, and in early twentieth century, the USA still registered a type of art that "was defined socially as an activity of the elite, but aesthetically the definition began to change" (Cornwell 1990: 39) especially when encompassing fine art, performing arts, media arts, and folk arts – all constituting a **more democratic arts policy**. It is Werner Sollors who associates American art forms with ethnicity, in his *Beyond Ethnicity. Consent and descent in American Culture* (1986: 237): "It is customary to ascribe the origins of **America's most characteristic art forms – jazz, musicals, and movies** – to the influences of ethnic diversity […] Since there is no ontological connection between a country and a form, however, such critiques are often based on the political impulse of the moment." In the United States, poly-ethnicity as the very source of diversity shaped what is currently labeled as "characteristically American"; when stating that diversity contributes to unity, this induces the idea that **art ceases being elitist** because of entering the domain of diversity and, consequently, of mass culture. One has to have in view issues like immigration, race, regionalism, ethnicity as constructing the "**uniquely American cultural idiom**" (6-7).

> Works of ethnic literature – written by, about, or for persons who perceived themselves, or were perceived by others, as members of ethnic groups – may thus be read not only as expressions of mediation between cultures but also as handbooks of socialization into the codes of Americanness […]
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> These writings have complemented popular culture in providing newcomers, outsiders, and insiders with the often complicated mental construction of American codes. At times, these codes may be contentless and merely contrastive definitions against an old world. With the help of such procedures America appears as the "un-Europe" characterized by negative catalogs as the land without kings, bishops, or medieval castles. Among more specifically defined codes are suggestive images of exodus and deliverance, newness and

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> rebirth, melting pot and romantic love, jeremiads against establishment figures and lost generations – all of which, most important, contribute to the construction of new forms of symbolic kinship among people who are not blood relatives […] In this sense **ethnic literature provides us with the central codes of Americanness**. (Sollors 1986: 6-7)

The 'twentieth-century' insistence on accepting ethnic difference in America contributed to **shaping mental formations and cultural**, as well as **artistic constructions**; it also coincided with a new democratic arts policy which made high art and high culture (High Modernism included) **give the floor to 'low' art, 'low' culture** and consumerism (may one say 'low' Modernism?). This extended to all contemporary societies. The problem with high versus low culture is that it is the source for **cultural struggle in issues of POWER**; it is about the re-location of power and resources in economic, political and cultural spheres. In other words, as Herbert J. Gans states (1974: 3-4): "It is about which culture and whose culture should dominate in society, and represent it as the societal or national culture in the competition between contemporary societies and in the historical record of cultures or civilization. As such, the mass culture critique is an attack by one element in society against another: by the cultured against the uncultured, the educated against the uneducated, the sophisticated against the unsophisticated, the more affluent against the less affluent, and the cultural experts against the laity. In each case, the former criticize the latter for not living up to their own standard of the good life."

In terms of power, the dichotomy 'high/low' culture can be translated into the issue of the "power elite". Whether high or low, cultural power elites are those that "have the most of what there is to have, which is generally held to include money, power, and prestige – as well as all the ways of life to which these lead" (Mills 1957: 9). "Have the most" is determined by the position that they have in the great institutions that exercise power. Consequently, power also means elite in terms of class hegemony. It is interesting to connect class hegemony with opinion makers, therefore 'opinion controllers'. There is no doubt that mass culture dominates today. Moreover, the very reason for this is to be found in the impact that mass media has on all social 'discourses' of today:

> In terms of the **modern theory of the self**, we may say that the media bring the reader, listener, viewer into the sight of larger, higher reference groups – groups, real or imagined, up-close or vicarious, personally known or distractedly glimpsed – which are looking glasses for his self-image. They have multiplied the groups to which we look for confirmation of our self-image.
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> More than that: (1) the media tell the man in the mass who he is – they give him identity; (2) they tell him what he wants to be – they give him his aspirations; (3) they tell him how to get that way – they give him technique; (4) they tell him how to feel that he is that way even when he is not – they give him escape […] It is the formula of a pseudoworld which the media invent and sustain. […]

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> But the media, as now organized and operated, are even more than a major cause of the transformation of America into a mass society. They are also among the most important of those increased means of power now at the disposal of the elites of wealth and power; moreover, some of the highest agents of these media are themselves either among the elites or very important among their servants. (Mills, 1957: 314-315)

What is evident these days, in the impersonal atmosphere of mass culture, is that power and authority only formally resides in the people since the power of initiation is evidently held by small circles of men; they are the opinion-makers and they are those that are able to transform personal troubles into social issues by means of diverse pseudo-realities or worlds.

In his *The Consumers of Culture* (1997: 5-6), Alvin Toffler affirms that the United States suffer from an inferiority complex regarding their culture; that this idea that Americans are uncultivated and primitive was stated by generations of artists and social critics and even by contemporary 'creators of taste'; that it is time the Americans stopped being ashamed of the status of their art; that the increase of consuming culture – in other words, more access of mass to art – is a threat for the so-called elite. Therefore, the more interested in music, theatre, ballet, painting or poetry the Americans are, the surer is that all criteria of excellence generated by a cultivated elite will be ridden roughshod over by a mob of uncultivated people having money and being 'eager' to learn (6).

Shall then one wonder if other or almost all contemporary 'cultures' suffer from the same syndrome? Does this consumer society and culture have anything to do with the picture of art today? If art reflects the "changes in the rhythms of life", as stated before (Cornwell 1990: 32), than what changes does 21st century art register? The answers are numerous and they all speak about the loss of belief in the autonomy and authority of the arts or of culture in this consumerist age. They speak about a crisis in the domain of the arts and of culture in general: "In the present-day swarming of the objects of art, of constructions and reconstructions of museums, in the multiplication of the objects of collection there is the symptom of a crisis of contemporary art and even of culture in general […] In short, if it had not been for some objects to which the western tradition attributed the quality of "objects of art", we would be inclined to believe that the Dow Jones of public auctions is the only criterion that promises to determine the aesthetic value of fine arts […] Cotemporary art museums and all fashionable galleries are the places where the elites of the new liberal societies practice the cult of the new golden calf: the market of the objects of art." (Karnoouh 2001: 135-136) Claude Karnoouh explains the unfortunate contemporary crisis in art and culture by referring to the principle of "everything is possible" that determined an unfortunate mutation of 'the social'. This proliferated individualism as legitimacy for profit and it gave way to its counterpart: the lonely mob organized in a democratic and consumerist culture. This is the very cause for making social ethics coincide with immediate material comfort. Aesthetics and culture are just some accounting objects in

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a market that functions only in the name of profits. It is the end of utopia, of philosophy, of the avant-gardes, and the victory of utilitarianism in all its forms; social sciences offer social, economic and political prophylaxis, technical development equates and contributes to the pursuit of happiness, language is a simulacrum of communication, and media and showbiz are out of the control of those who manipulate them (Karnoouh 2001: 138-141). In the view of the same anthropologist and philosopher, Apollinaire's "Be modern!" meant the death of the avant-gardes that proclaimed the idea of no limits in creating art. Modern art coincides with progressivism; modernist art promotes permanent innovation by means of intentional mutation of forms, of the discovery of primitive art, of non-aesthetic art, of waste and industrial objects as art; the decades that followed Modernism (the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s) used all resources and possibilities; moreover, contemporary progressivism coincides with consumerism in stating that everything that is 'modern' is profitable; art is commodity or merchandise or else it is not art today. This induces a very fashionable and apparently innovative concept: that of "neo-s" or "post-s"; today everything is public or goes public, and it is neo- or post-: -modern, -romantic, -Victorian, -expressionism, -communism, -Puritanism, -populism, -fascism…everything is new or neo-, though everything repeats itself. Beauty, Good and Truth has turned into Money, says Claude Karnoouh (144-146).

One of the problems of today is that "**art** and **literature** encompass a great many ideas and experiences which are hard to reconcile with the present political set-up. They also raise questions of the quality of life in a world where experience itself seems brittle and degraded. How in such conditions can you produce worthwhile art in the first place? Would you not need to change society in order to flourish as an artist? Besides, those who deal with art speak the language of value rather than price. They deal with works whose depth and intensity show up the meagerness of everyday life in a market-obsessed society. They are also trained to imagine alternatives to the actual. Art encourages you to fantasize and desire" (Eagleton 2004: 39-40). To continue: could this postmodern world be a re-thinking of modernity? Is it nothing more than an excessive and disillusioning modernization and modernist-ization, and if so, could the early 20th century have initiated most of what one experiences today? Terry Eagleton provides an answer: "'Act locally, think globally' has become right acts globally and the postmodern left thinks locally. As the grand narrative of capitalist globalization, and the destructive reaction which it brings in its wake, unfurls across the planet, it catches these intellectuals at a time when many of them have almost ceased to think in political terms at all. Confronted with an implacable political enemy, and a fundamentalist one at that, the West will no doubt be forced more and more to reflect on the foundations of its own civilization" (2004: 72-73).

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