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REDRAWING THE LINES.

POSTCOLONIAL LISBON AND OTHER MODERN EUROPEAN FORTRESSES

In the so-called postmodern world, a world in which boundaries between disciplines, art genres and discourses, the popular and the erudite, are supposed to be blurred, a world in which borders between nations and identities, the inside and the outside, are described as porous, and cultures celebrated for their mongrelisation, other limits and interdictions seem to persist or, alternatively, return with a vengeance. Are we inhabiting a post-post-modern moment, the comeback of modernity?

In an striking parallel to walls and fortifications around continents and countries – such as ‘Fortress Europe’ and the wall dividing the US from Mexico – boundaries between the social and the artistic are increasingly kept under surveillance, not only by social scientists with their classic suspicion of volatile, imprecise, or unrealistic artistic languages, but also by artists, curators and critics, now eager to preserve their own distinctive field aloof from political and social issues, afraid the latter may contaminate their pure, aesthetic intentions. The cultural turn – with its close association of the poetics and politics of cultural phenomena, namely as a way of questioning the disciplinary surveillance of the hard core of knowledges and powers, and the ensuing interdisciplinary dialogues – is wearing off, just as nationalism and ethnic identities seem to harden around religious and other differences, a tendency that, not the “clash of civilisations”, but the threat of the crash of the global financial and economic system may reinforce.

Despite such redrawing of disciplinary boundaries, an unexpected consensus has emerged in the last years. If social scientists appear to be increasingly suspicious, at least in Portugal, of issues of multiculturalism and ethnic and racial difference, art practices and discourses seem to share this positioning, albeit for opposite reasons, but recurring to an identical argument: the mistrust of the smallest hint at some kind of ‘political correctness’. Behind the apparent dissent, there emerges another consensual approach: the universality either of citizenship ideals or artistic criteria, according to an implicit certainty, as regards western or European superiority, no matter how much postcolonial approaches may have tried to unsettle them.

Of course, things are more complex than this argument makes it seem. Difference and multiculturalism are still being engaged with, frequently as a form of official, paternalistic, discourse on ‘intercultural’ affairs or ‘conflict management’, in which ‘voice is’ supposed to be ‘given’ to those who lack it. The marketing of difference is another still - but for how long? - striving field, with its investment on ‘expressions’ of a presumed hybridity that ultimately ignores complex forms of identification that cannot be summed up under the motto, to take a familiar example, of Lisbon as a ‘Creole’ or ‘multicultural city’. This is also a way to entertain a kind of wishful thinking as regards the proverbial European respect for the ‘Other’ that ignores the asymmetric contexts that posit, define, ‘difference’, and those who have ‘culture’ and are thus to be ‘tolerated’.

The actuality of Europe’s multiculture (Gilroy) is not to be disputed, unless it leads to ignoring other barriers in ‘postcolonial’ Europe which result from the increasing precariousness of labour and other emerging social question. These do not, however— as some are all too ready to claim —, make of racism and other forms of discrimination, in which economics are only one among the issues at stake, mere secondary aspects.

Although images of contemporary Greece bear sometimes a striking familiarity to those that French *banlieux* exhibited in 2005, thus putting into jeopardy what some Europeanists still like to regard as the site of the ‘continent’s origins’ or ‘roots’, one cannot haste to simplify the comparison, although it also begs for a more differentiated approach, as concerns ethnic and racial issues in post-post-modern times. Nonetheless, the fact is that the attacks and raids on public buildings, such as universities and schools and other public spaces, as well as the assault on private property – as the more ‘visible’ element in those events that cannot, of course, in both cases be reduced to its spectacular impact - demand a more complex approach to a wide range of phenomena that contemporary societies in Europe are facing and that inherited social models cannot give response too.

This also applies to political discourse. Cosmopolitanism has been traditionally associated with a precise form of imagining space, i.e., the city as the ‘civilised’ locus of democratic exchange, of negotiated differences around a common citizenship, a tension that can no longer be subsumed under the slogan “all equal, all different”, a supposed dialectics between the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’ that does not take into account not only the complex processes of

identification, but also the dissent that people, who take seriously what it may mean ‘living with difference’ on effectively democratic terms, have to encounter.

But how is cosmopolitanism to be practiced, if the city persists in creating barriers between insiders and outsiders? If traditional boroughs of Lisbon are inhabited by recent immigrants, they are easily fixed into specific territories, such as Martim Moniz, Praça de S. Domingo or Restauradores, some parts of Alfama, former Jewish and Moorish ‘ghettos’, a testimony to the ever permanent ‘multicultural’ character of the city, as well as its more tolerant and racist moments.

Those who have settled longer ago, and whose descendants were born in Lisbon, seem to have been relegated, banned, to non-places, the *banlieux*, the banned sites, where project housing is the privileged location for reporters to invent sensationalist news on criminality, violence and difference, in order to divert a bored and impoverished ‘white’ middle class during torrid Lisbon summers from other social preoccupations. Thus the ‘majority’ can find a compensation for their frustrations in their ‘superior’ manners, their ‘European civilisation’ which ‘ethnic minorities’ or ‘immigrants’ do not share. While enjoying *kuduro* concerts and other ‘African’ or Creole sounds in the open air during the city’s summer festivities, ‘indigenous’ locals seem to view with suspicion the invasion of summer resorts by Black, mainly male, youngsters, as was the case of the famous ‘Arrastão’ event (www.eraumavezumarrastao.org), or the idea that living with difference entails a serious questioning of received paradigms as regards who belongs to the nation, Europe, or the ‘West’.

Are mongrelisation and hybridity a way of disavowing the actual, imposed borders on those whom discourses of ‘difference’ insist on segregating through subtle exclusionary practices?

Is citizenship, as a form of providing equal rights to everyone, a way of ensuring effective equality to those who want to belong, but insist on clinging to – last but not least, because they feel they are not wanted - their (re)invented ‘difference’?

The spaces now occupied in Lisbon by project housing – the ‘problematic neighbourhoods’, from *quartiers problématiques* in French, where ‘second generation immigrants’ mainly live

,cohabiting and interacting with poor ‘white’ populations – are delimited, reminds us Mónica’s work, by a line formerly traced by the military road, in order to contain foreign invaders during the Napoleonic wars. Significantly, the event that contributed decisively to build a new form of collective national memory against an invader, after the Castilian or Spanish one, seems to reproduce the need of the nation, a persistently invented tradition, to define itself as something homogeneous and pure against potential contaminations.

But paradoxically, the same neighbourhoods frequently described and discriminated against as ghettos, resist that all too familiar labelling, as they insist on drawing from their own tradition and the locally found one, thus pointing to the inevitable interdependencies of (post)colonial histories, despite their intrinsic violence. Thus the (in)famous ‘Portuguese house’ – the title of a famous *fado*, that my generation cannot avoid associating with the authoritarian and repressively petty bourgeois atmosphere of pre-democratic and colonial Portugal – reappears under new guises, according to unexpected perspectives and juxtapositions, now clad to follow Mónica’s suggestive installation, in Black, and something else.

This points to other stories beyond a proverbial Portuguese tendency to mix racially and culturally, an inevitable consequence of any colonial setting, apart from all kinds or more or less apartheid measures, differently introduced according to diverse geographical and historical contexts.

And it seems to underline, as well, the tense negotiations lived by those who inhabit the borderlines of what is still defined as national (‘Portugueseness’) and the transnational (‘European’), as the images in the video *High Life* depict in an imaginative way.

Blackness seems to be accepted in Lisbon in order to market the city as part of a cosmopolitan global space, characterised by the juxtaposition of the exotic and the familiar, as is the case of Luanda-Lisboa *kuduro*, increasingly popular in London too. The music and nomenclature of Buraka Som Sistema translate well into the vitality of such enterprises and experiences that are easily co-opted by, but also resistant to, economic interests. But if *fado*, the Portuguese national music par excellence since the late 19th century - the age of the invention of traditions (Hobsbawm/ Ranger) – is increasingly understood as a hybrid form of music, and globally marketed as an exotic form of world music, it is nonetheless regarded as a mainly ‘Lusophone’ manifestation. Although seen as the result of the mixing African origins with

Brazilian sounds and transatlantic travels, the Atlantic still seems to resist the adjective of 'Black', in consonance with other narratives on Portuguese imperial histories.

What other ways of imagining space and time can be thought of as alternative to the understandings that, despite proclaiming the blurring of boundaries and disciplines, are still prone to ensure the segregation of those who belong and those who do not according to surveillance procedures that define the territorial limits to be inhabited? How is one to unravel the tight knots that are still part of a consensual idea of Europe and its nations? How are barriers and suspicions to be questioned? What about strategic defensive moods that divergent discourses and knowledges, ultimately partaking of similar, although apparently distinct, discourses on their legitimacy and efficiency?

Perhaps by attempting to break, persistently, stubbornly, the boundaries, making increasingly obvious the common contexts that inhabit them and legitimate the segregation of difference under different disciplinary and political banners.

Abandoned places, destroyed neighbourhoods, such as those depicted in this book, thus serve less as a way to stimulate a meditation on ruins, evidencing the transitory character of a universal human nature, as the Baroque allegory emphasised (Walter Benjamin), than to point to the (unequal) transits across the (Black) Atlantic and beyond it. Houses shattered by the will to modernise retain nevertheless the traces and fragments of lives, unfulfilled in their aspirations, but nonetheless fully lived, bringing evidence to the ways in which they influence and were influenced by an urban space that cannot be simplistically equated to a classic cosmopolis.

The contemporary, postcolonial space resists, but therefore begs for, more diverse forms of culture, regarded in their full modernity, and less in their exoticism as global Black cultures, either in their vernacular or avant-garde moments.

Everyday life does not have to be the exclusive object of social sciences, and art cannot be seen as the realm of artistic discourses. Both should be considered in their tensions, and productive conflicts in post-colonial Europe, namely in those countries, such as Portugal, that

have built their national identity around an alleged exceptional role in ‘world history’, a role that has not avoided the country’s traditionally subaltern role in local and global contexts.

In a moment in which the redrawing of boundaries seems to be the more effective, artistic projects such as the present one can be a reminder of the complex interdependencies and encounters with diverse demands and aspirations deriving from the concrete everyday experiences of all those who strive for a better life, regardless of increasing economic restrictions and inequalities.