

Dualities, Intersections and Convergences: Contemporary Art and (POP)ular Cultures ¹

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In modernity, folk art is seen as a timeless art, traditional, of local slant and associated with obsolete oral forms, crafts and handmade. Unlike mass culture, imposed from above, folk art flourishes from below. Beyond a popular culture (pre-modern “relic” to be safeguarded of the erosion caused by modernisation) in opposition to kitsch, there is still a vanguard established in the criticism and in the expansion of its own frontiers, through the appropriation of elements of non-western cultures, incorporating elements from folklore (local) or the urban and global culture. The logic of intersections or of convergences overcomes oppositions. In the historical context of economic and cultural globalisation and the intensification of mobility of people, making two-sided the process of appropriation of the cultural difference, there is a deep connection between the folk art (intertwined with the current culture of the masses) and the contemporary art.

Keywords: Popular Culture; Kitsch; *Camp*; Avant-Garde; Modernism.

The traditional folk art was a living presence in the European villages and cities until the end of the 18th century. However, the first decades of the 19th century came to mark its progressive decline, or, at least, a covert and anonymous existence. The technological revolution in general – associated with the phenomena of rural immigration to cities, the rise of the middle class – dealt the fatal blow.

There is a tendency to see folk art as a timeless art, traditional, of local slant, associated with obsolete oral forms, crafts and handmade, limited to a rural style of life and environment. Expression of a cultural identity, by conveying the aesthetics and values of a community, the folk art arises – in contrast to the classical art – associated with the rough, handmade and household. This design derives from an 18th

century concept of folklore theorized within a specific historical, political and aesthetic context: the development of nationalism and Romanticism. In this period, it appears inseparable from the concept of people (folk) as an outsider entity (beyond class divisions) and the nerve centre of a creative collective soul.

In the late 18th century, the contestation to the rationalism of the Enlightenment entailed assigning the source of artistic and literary creativity to irresistible emotional forces, to nature, to the inner need of the artist, rather than to the skill and knowledge acquired through education and imitation. Qualifying of futile the conventional artistic education, Philipp Otto Runge wrote in a letter of 1802: "We must become children again if we want to attain the best"

¹ This text refers to the lecture given at the International Colloquium «We Are The Folk: Rethinking Folklore in the Twenty-First Century», IELT – Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Instituto Franco-Português, 22nd October 2014.

(Eitner, 1990: 53). In the 20th century Picasso (but not him alone) has fulfilled this goal.

Along with the child, the uneducated peasant is often seen as the depositary of an authentic expression of feeling (guardian of a vigorous natural creativity) sealed to academics or to individuals too immersed on the crippled artifices of modern culture.

In contrast with other types of art, folk art would be a natural phenomenon as opposed to the manufactured; its (alleged) anonymity would be the proof of a spontaneous creation that emanated from a mysterious community devoid of individuality or consciousness. Folk art would be the product of a collective need in time that there was not a ruling class, yet, and there were not folk people as its antithesis; nor a society whose power and resources were distributed on a non-equitable way and structured around lines of conflicting interests. The art would be the expression of a relatively homogenous group.

The Romantic protest against the capitalist alienation would be based on the search of a lost unity and a synthesis of the personality and the collective (Fisher, 2010: 74-75). Discontent fed the dissent manifested throughout the 19th century, bound by the same trend: opposition towards the dominant erudite art and the existing social order. It advocated the need of returning to healthier origins: to the primitive past of mankind (primitive ethnicity and folklore tradition), to the innocence of childhood, or to the incorruptibility of the common people. An identical aversion characterized the modernism/avant-garde movements (20th century), which resulted in tolerance or inclination towards ingenuity in the expression, awkwardness in the execution, originality of the form valued as signs of authenticity (Eitner, 1990).

The development of modern art is associated with a pronounced "preference for the primitive" (Gombrich, 2002: 214-225)², which manifested itself through the appropriation of elements of non-western cultures, incorporating elements of folklore (local) and elements of the popular culture of the urban masses. A legacy reinforced by artists that, drawing on their specific cultural heritage, renewed traditional expressions.

Examples: Kandinsky's *Blue Rider* cover of the homonymous almanac in 1912, inspired by folk images of S. Jorge; Expressionism; Russian art, incorporating manifestations of folk art in modern movements, Byzantine icons and infantile drawings (Goncharova) and popular brochures (Larionov); Paul Klee interest for folklore led him to build 55 hand puppets for his child, 1916-25; *Art Brut*, valued by Dubuffet because it exemplifies an artistic operation, pure and faithful to the innermost impulses of the artist; CoBRa, interested in the folk traditions of Northern Europe, either existing or missing; the decorative claimed by the group Pattern & Decoration – traditionally relegated by western culture to a mere handicraft, feminine and domestic – through the use of decorative patterns of different cultures of the globe, materials and techniques (fabric and sewing). But also: the interest by Gauguin of Britain's folk culture and the admiration for the naïve Rousseau.

Preference for the primitive has worked also as an antidote to the kitsch in the field of art. In a famous essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", Clement Greenberg focuses his attention on the material and social crisis caused by an industry producing shams of art that threat with extinction the traditional forms of culture (Greenberg, 1939: 21-33). Greenberg distinguishes rural popular culture (folk), a kind of pre-modern relic, from mass-culture – a kitsch phenomenon: kingdom of rough-made, artefacts of lower quality. Sharing some connotations of the 18th century folklore (namely: rurality, illiteracy, authenticity, handmade, simplicity

² The translation of the titles of publications and citations present in this paper are responsibility of the author.

of life), Greenberg considers that folklore – decayed cultural heritage – is doomed to languish on vulgarity and pretence, until it disappears entirely, inevitably replaced by kitsch. I.e.: for a culture that is destined for consumption of the masses, imposed from above, that does not respect geographical and cultural borders and which does not presume, just like folk art and traditional erudite art (the traditional humanistic culture), the existence of an integrated culture. In order to not be sacrificed the continuity and stability of high culture and art (his real concern) would be by responding to two dangers brought about by industrialisation: kitsch (the society of consumption, mass culture, dependent on the technological revolution) and the renewed Academy (specialized in the incorporation of official innovation, in to article of luxury or in means of state or business shows). What is required is to save “culture” and “art”. From his perspective, the quality is safeguarded, exclusively, by the modernist remains of the traditional high culture. The defence of the tradition of high art presupposes, according to Greenberg, the defence of elitism, the defence of the aesthetic taste, and also, the separation between art and praxis, and between the aesthetic and the quotidian. Precisely: an opposition to popular art, integrated in the praxis (such as it happens, after all, with the mass-media popular arts, even though he does not admit it).

In relation to Greenberg’s dualism, set between mass culture and the modernist avant-garde, the modernist artist discovers himself (and shows it) in the role of an uncompromising guardian of the boundaries of the two spheres. Mass culture is experienced as a constant pressure intended to restrict the creative freedom. Modernism reveals itself as an effect of mass culture. The role of the avant-garde becomes in this way redefined as a radical art, as opposed (implicitly or explicitly) to the dominant class of society, foreign to popular taste, and whose audience belongs to a small (distinctive) elite of the dominant class, deeply connected by a golden umbilical cord. Valuing originality and difficulty, modernism appeals to a minority, whilst governments (for practical and ideological reasons) are populists.

Popular culture is accused of being a socio-cultural and political of pernicious influence (illusory satisfaction) at the service of mere mercantile and manipulative interests; of being emotional, intellectual and culturally destructive (sublimed substitute); to be the cause of impoverishment and cultural degradation by means of homogeneous products, stereotyped and aesthetically inferior, moulded to the amusement of a large audience of passive consumers (the masses), unskilled and apathetic. Since it is dependent on modern technologies and by consequence devoid of individualized or distinctive expressiveness, the art of the masses could not express (such as folk art) the vision and the distinct modes of being of a people.

The description of popular culture made by its antagonist’s sins, however, by the exaggeration in the caricature. Instead of forming a homogeneous mass of social automata, *mass media* forms a mobile constellation of multiple groups whose programs’ assessment corresponds to their social experience. In reality, popular culture is deeply contradictory in societies whose power are unequally distributed (as it does in the industrial society) depending on class, gender, ethnicity, and other categories that contribute to the sense of social differences. The public is structured in groups of different tastes, reflecting the ideologies and assorted socio-cultural styles, employing multiple interpretive strategies in reading the texts of popular art in order to adjust them to become more relevant and satisfactory to their particular social situation. According to John Fiske, since an authentic folk art does not exist as an alternative in an industrial society, popular culture is necessarily the art by which the subordinate makes their own culture from the resources and commodities provided by the dominant system that subdues them. In a capitalist society, popular culture is contradictory, allows the joint expression of domination and subordination, power and resistance. Against the strategy of the powerful, the art of the weak develops a tactic of guerrilla warfare before the dominant ideology (Fiske, 1989: 19).

The thesis of the supposed extinction of folk culture in industrial societies should be disproved: some of the forms of folklore have vanished and were subsequently re-created (*revival*), others survived or were invented (*fakelore*). They are not confined to the rural areas, to the illiteracy in the literate society or a low stratum of society (Dundes, 1989: 1-35). They exist on numerous and multiple ways, transversal to all strata of society, provided the sharing of a common identity factor (for example: the subculture of Star Trek fans, the Trekkies).

Since the beginnings of the avant-garde art, founded in the critique and in the expansion of its own borders, there is a continuous involvement in avant-garde / modernism with the materials of the low culture or mass culture through the discovery, renewal and reinvention of forms of non-artistic expressivity and display (Thomas and Crow, 1983: 233-265). Before the emergence of Pop Art, the appropriation of waste materials, devalued or marginal, by modernist art was intended to be merely tactical, extrinsic and imminently disposable. It was under these circumstances that the culture of the masses was introduced into the high art (avant-garde); for example: the Gauloises packet of certain collages from R. Motherwell and the elements of advertising in the paintings of Stuart Davis or E. Hopper.

On the contrary, Pop art is unconcerned by the toxic domain of kitsch, betraying to a certain extent a sensitive *camp* (a renovated dandy style, connoisseur of vulgarity in the age of mass culture). Pop art is founded in the commercial art and in the uplifting of their products (illustrations, labels, package design, posters). At the same period, Lawrence Alloway enhanced popular arts (pop culture industrially produced and internationalized) and not exclusively works that used popular culture as serious arts. He commended to their democratic element, the resourceful adaptation to the technological and economic changes in society and the stylistic, technologic and iconographic anti-academicism (Alloway, 1958: 702). He suppressed the anathema that confronted popular culture: of being seen as not

serious, merely fun and evasion. To a questionnaire, Mike Kelly stated that one definition of contemporary "folk art" necessarily implies the loss of certain historical past associations (such as the "handmade") that had sustained its nostalgic investment. The nostalgia demonstrates that the mass culture of today is the folk art of the future. Hence, discounting the idea of nostalgia, the current culture of the masses would be already a folk art (Kelly, 2001: 148).

Pop Art is defined by the transfiguration of the emblems of popular culture in high art (Danto, 2000: 1997). The popularity of Pop art is due to the celebration and transfiguration of a type of items that matter to most people – the most ordinary objects of more trivial lives – elevated to the status of subjects of high art. In this sense, we are witnessing the blurring of the oppositions: high culture / low culture; avant-garde / kitsch; folk art (popular and traditional culture) / mass culture (pop culture).

The avant-garde strategy of redemption of old forms of kitsch (*camp*) can accommodate a process of *kitschification* of avant-garde (an alliance of commercialism, with an appearance of avant-gardism). To conclude, we have selected three contemporary artists whose works exemplify the deep connection with folk art, intertwined and crossed with mass culture.

Pursuing the line developed by Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons (post-artist) operates the convergence of taste of (neo-) avant-garde and kitsch, upon the completion of works in which the handmade (though delegated) and craft are revalued and the demoralised models from a popular art (sold in airport shops) are reconstituted and broaden. The barrier between Pop culture and high art that transfigures it does not disappear with Jeff Koons, despite the desire to counterbalance the identification of art with the refined aesthetic taste of single socio-cultural elite. It recognizes the legitimacy of the aesthetics of cultural products, produced by the arts of mass-media, as they are appreciated by all classes. Result: a kitsch for the rich and a kitsch for the poor?

The paintings of Beatriz Milhazes boast a vast repertoire of images, motifs and compositions. Elements of Brazilian culture (forms inspired by the Baroque; vernacular decorative shapes – carnival, folk art) are combined with geometric abstract art from Mondrian or from Op Art (Bridget Riley). Past and present, abstraction and figuration (geometric patterns with motifs of fauna and flora) live together in a painting made of dense and layered juxtapositions. It is featured by the visual exuberance and exultation of the senses – due to the density, concentration and the dynamic balance of the various elements, pictorial methods and disciplines (lace, embroidery, fabrics and jewellery).

Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane created the *Folk Archive* (1999-2005), a collection of examples (objects and photos) of contemporary popular art (folkloric) in the United Kingdom. Each piece was created to convey a particular message, convey an emotion, or to meet a specific purpose. The mentioned file includes: old and modern relics of festivities and celebrations; ignored achievements by Cafe owners and prisoners; vans for mobile sales; painted eggs; painted or embroidered banners by Ed Hall, ubiquitous in trade union marches and in political demonstrations throughout the

country; the attire used by men in wrestling games, richly embroidered by hand with floral motifs (Cumberland and Westmoreland) in the context of a festival (that dates back to 1387), held in a small community and which has a series of parades and contests. Nevertheless, beyond long standing traditions (rural), the culture of folk/pop is present (memorial to princess Diana, a painting of “The Simpsons”; customized motorcycle helmets and birthday messages; pin cushion in the shape of an ambulance of St. John, and flower arrangements).

The logic of intersections, or convergence, overcomes antagonisms. The historical context of economic and cultural globalisation (matching culture and economy), as well as the intensification of mobility of people (tourists, travellers, expatriates, emigrants, people whose geographical mobility and professional culture allows them to travel – with relative resourcefulness – by/in diverse cultures, locations, intellectual, cosmopolitan and cultural mediators), makes two-sided the process of appropriation of cultural difference. There is a deep connection between folk art (re-created by and crossed with the current mass culture) and the contemporary art.

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