

3.5. "The Garage were I was born": Coimbra's musical scene in the 1990's

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Abstract

The present paper aims to overlook the existence of an alternative field of social interaction among individuals who aroused against the dominant traditions from the 1990s in a local context: Coimbra. This field consolidated its form by *rock n' roll* music identifying a restricted group of individuals. They were involved in a local social context of music production and demand as a group of *music lovers* who lay their beliefs on rock as life's philosophy. The question that led my path through this group was to understand what does exist in music, which comprehends it as a social phenomenon of interaction, sociability and identity, reluctant to counter-cultural dynamics in Coimbra. In this sense, I argue that artistic practices are social practices embedded in emotional, symbolic and transgressive languages.

Keywords: Coimbra, music-scene, rock n' roll, counter-cultural dynamics and music sociability's

Introduction

Music could exist even if there were no world at all
Arthur Schopenhauer

The present paper seeks to acknowledge a group of individuals that aroused in Coimbra during the 90's, which I studied for my master dissertation in sociology. This group, restricted in their social milieu and composed by heterogeneous music values, was involved by different social backgrounds from a permeability of arts and politics to philosophy and music production. They had structured a local subfield of music creation and production associated to rock and punk rock music. Understanding rock music as a social and complex phenomenon, which is simultaneously well thought-out between society and structure, Coimbra's case as a local music scene is paradigmatic. Its analysis offered a view point of how the relationship between rock and society states a singular relation. In a sociological framework, rock is an autonomous empirical object of social study due to its space and time of emergence. A space in which social context and interactions consolidated a range of subjective meanings and attitudes towards a collective imaginary. And in a time where social and historic conditions appears to modify social behaviours structuring social actions and practices in order to define individuals beliefs.

As Coimbra's case, its rock music scene emerged by a restricted group of "music lovers" (Hennion 2001) that overhang established values to a peculiar life style of irreverence away from traditional social values that characterized the city's life style, such as its *fado* music and the well known image of its University, side by side with the students life in the academy; and

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in a time period where social-historic conditions appeared as a sign for artistic liberty and subversive creativity, which rock music comes into sight as an opportunity for a lifetime to produce the genre of music they exacerbated: *Rock N' Roll*.

By studying these individuals "social trajectories" (Reynold, 2000), understand as a heuristic interest to "convey and incorporate values and meanings related to a set of practices" (Guerra, 2012: 1), and since the use of biographies within the scientific field leads to an acquisition and expansion of knowledge about subjective attitudes and significations as "regulators of social practices" (*ibid*), the main question that led my journey in Coimbra's rock field was to understand what does exist in music, that comprehends it as a social phenomenon of interaction, sociability and identity, reluctant to counter-cultural dynamics in a local context. I argue that artistic practices are social practices embedded in emotional, symbolic and transgressive languages. As an alternative field of music production these languages are constructed subjectively within relations and interactions between individuals who share same interests, conducting musical sociability in a continuous learning of interdependency, well defined as *Do It Yourself* (DIY). For them, this was the official way of living life: proposed by *rock n' roll* interests and an irreverence style of life, they assumed as their individual knowledge, influenced not only derived by their social interactions, but by including the way they practice and relate with them. A will of collective principles against the dominant hegemony of their social milieu and moral values (Martins, 2013).

From culture to musical scenes: artistic practices as social process

Culture is an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary concept sometimes misunderstood in the scientific occidental literary (Garofalo, 1993: 231). To narrow the concept in its meaning to the prosecution of my argument, by culture, I would define as all the forms and practices derived from customs, traditions and values that people seek in order to give sense in their everyday life. These meanings can be visible, or are visible, in the case of rock music culture through behaviours, corporal aesthetics and moral values which embodies a system knowledge that characterizes the way why individuals integrate social group formation. In this sense culture, as a concept that infers people's subjectiveness to their actions, relates life styles to practices incorporating a process of meanings. The perceiving of this process constitutes the bases of an analysis of social phenomena in the culture sphere, mainly in youth culture, leading a comprehension between culture, music and group formation, or generally, music and society.

Regarding rock music as a "common culture", as Paul Willis postulates as everything that is ubiquitous, sturdy and strongly consolidated in sharing and carrying objects with meanings between individuals (Willis, 1990: 2) its importance as a sociological and empirical object of study compiles a rich framework which enables two essential ideas. First, to stipulate a relation between music and society, while a singular one, demonstrating how music influences and its field of production can structure group formation, especially youth belonging to different social stratifications to the composition of local music scenes. And secondly, the perception of counter-culture dynamics including expressions, signs and meanings that youth, in their everyday life, seek for creativity affirming their presence and identity to express the potentialities of their cultural (*ibid*) and subversive creativities, such as musical aesthetics and performances in stages and streets.

The conceptual link between culture, music and group formation has been theorized by Birmingham School in the late period of the II World War. This relation enabled a theoretical framework for the study of musical consumption and social formations, chaired by identity issues that mattered for the track of relationships facing social structure (Frith, 1996). Other studies emerged by relating identity to social class condition and culture, such as Paul Willis (1978; 1990; 1998 [1978]) who studied the relational process between rock music and motorcycle bikers; Dick Hebdige (1988; 1998 [1979]) who empirically demonstrated that Mods and punk rock were associated to anarchism side by side to an *avant-garde* aesthetics; Will Straw (1998 [1983]) who studied heavy metal, musical genre slighted by critics and neglected by theorists; Lawrence Grossberg (1993; 1998 [1986]) which defined *rock n' roll* and admonishing its death; Tony Jefferson (1976) and his study of *Teddy Boys*, relating their social identity to social structure; John Clarke (1976) and the *Skinhead Culture* in a logic of structuralism, and Dave Laing (1994) who studied the social reception of punk reiterating the phenomenon in classist terms accentuating its private accessibility and its public invisibility.

These conceptual frameworks enabled a paradigm transition from subculture theory to a new theoretical framework of analysis. Towards social and technological changes that emerged from the late 1960s and 1970s the subcultural framework declined basing its analysis from a social deviation perspective and by relating identity as a collective and symbolic response to the conditions of social class (Cohen, 1997). The nature and function of youth subcultures was based on a rupture between tradition values and the labour class workers. Further more, as Paula Guerra states: "empirical data has demonstrated the complexity and fluidity of youth cultural practices that could not be analysed by the prism of subculture as a homogenous unity of tastes and belongings based on social classes" (Guerra, 2013: 117 and Bennett, 2001).

Some authors defend the re-conceptualization of subculture concept drawn under a sociological theory where juvenile identity could evidence the reflexivity, fluidity and its fragmentation (Bennett, 1999, 2011; Muggleton, 1998; Redhead, 1990) that seems to mark the modern ages of how youth culture seems to advocate interests to their cultural practices. This theoretical transition states a new paradigm in the study of youth culture based on everyday dynamics, music and life style. As Redhead (1990), Muggleton (1998) locates the paradigmatic transition of youth culture framework over the fragmentation and proliferation of new cultural backgrounds from revivalism, hybridism to transformism. These alternative backgrounds induced the way how individuals seek new visual images for the construction of their social and cultural identities (Bennett, 2011). As a collective construction, these new images, dynamics of everyday and life styles forms what can be called as "music scenes". For Will Straw (1991), a *music scene* reflects a state of particular relations between individuals and social groups, which merge from *clusters* of music styles which are capable to structure spaces of social interaction. Not by class or community but by incorporating an analysis based on aesthetic sensibilities and everyday life.

This perspective agglomerates local, translocal and virtual, in an assumption dedicated to music or life styles, envisaging relations and dynamics that occur in the context of everyday life. This dynamics are accentuated by subjectiveness and musical sociability that are reflected in the quotidian and visible in behaviours and corporal aesthetics. As Paula Guerra states: "the relevance of such perspective reflects its contribution for the comprehension of cultural practices and consumptions and the relation of the everyday life in its different spatial

contexts²" (Guerra, 2010: 446). Importantly the concept reveals values and social representations, in which such musical sociability occurs, gauging an elucidative reflection about clusters of intermediaries and musical genres.

From culture to music scenes, artistic music practices recalls liberty and free expression on creation and creativity. Despite this relation depending on the political, social and historic contexts of societies, this reflects the conditions of how music scenes affirm in a social milieu. How individuals who participated in Coimbra's scene do affirmed their identities and music productions towards its social context? In which singular relations did the rock music scene appeared? Which musical sensibilities and how musical sociability's structured their everyday life? I would like to address these questions towards the social and historic conditions of the emergence of Coimbra's rock music scene. Second, describe how musical aesthetics and sociability's were important to consolidate the interactions of the everyday life. At last, advocate the importance of the "official" and "informal" ways as a motivator to the counter-cultural dynamics of Coimbra's scene.

From interactions to musical sociability's: Coimbra's musical scene

In Portugal the cultural and the artistic sphere had a late development. While in the 1960s and 1970s social movements surrounding artistic expressions and free liberty in their creations and creativity, Portugal was under a dictatorship that cost a late development mainly in both fields. Its social structure reflected a domain of an elitist class that was "restricted and conservator, composed dominantly by an agrarian, commercial and financial bourgeoisies" (Abreu, 2010: 248). In the 1970s, with the end of the fascist regime, the commercial sector opened its doors to a new variety of music market and consumptions. Here, rock music was in its preliminary stage of development (Guerra, 2013). But its social acceptance was still far considered as an artistic form. In Coimbra, in the 1990s, *rock n' roll* was still considered a form of social deviation, with its subversive and transgressive performances in stages and streets.

During the 1990s Coimbra renewed its cultural and musical creation. In this time, a restricted group triggered a wave of cosmopolitanism, life stylization and a forefront of artistic stimulating expressions of rock and punk rock music, imported from the United States and England. These musical influences instilled as germinators of the sociability's of the individuals that marked Coimbra's scene. Other influences as literature, from the *beat generation* as Jack Kerouac to Allen Ginsberg, and classics of cinema such as sci-fiction, horror and sexploitation, were all cultural consumptions that developed an alternative subfield of musical production. The effects focussed on the questioning of the status quo, by extrapolating practices and creativities embedded by subversive emotions and symbolisms and engendered by revivalism, hybridism and transformism in their everyday life time.

This cosmopolitan universe configured an alternative cultural landscape necessary for the local construction of the music scene. It framed an artistic expression and aesthetic against the boredom and stagnation felt locally. The city was well known for its rock music due to this group of individuals whose claims enhanced an aesthetic performance establishing the limits of their freedoms for creativity. In the same time, they saw an opportunity in music production

² All Portuguese citations were by me translated to English.

for the achievement of their musical careers, allied to the ideology of DIY, which consequently established a rupture between parental morality and the urban boredom.

Their achievements and social interactions, during the 1990s, were assimilated as a *rebellious romanticism*. Rebellious as nonconformity against the boredom of the city, allied with a social criticism against the hegemony values of culture, popular and traditional customs, and the strong weight of the university's image in the city and all that surrounds it, such as the image of the *student doctor*, the academic festivals and the rituals associated to the *freshmens* (Estanque and Bebiano, 2007; Frias, 2003). Secondly, romanticism invested by social representations of their cultural consumptions, mainly due to the influence of bands like *Sex Pistols*, *The Clash*, *Ramones* and *Velvet Underground*, which created collective imaginaries of a style of life related to their way of believing, reproducing locally same behaviours. Sometimes these behaviours were misunderstood as social deviation, but always seeking an alternative way to deal with the everyday life.

These musical consumptions praised a privileged vehicle to the individuals in integrating the field of music production, planning musical projects, values and stylizations. This was also a privileged way to consolidate social interactions, by sharing knowledge, reconstruct and reproduce cultural consumptions to their behaviours and attitudes towards daily life. In confluence of different social groups, similar in their aesthetics, frequency of same local spaces and musical genres, they formed an extensive network with complex interactions.

Mainly three genres were the base of all musical sociability's, mirroring a picture of multiple lived stylization. First, rock, associated to *rockabilly*, *psychobilly* and *porkabilly*, aesthetically was defined by visible corporal demarcations such as hair styles, black colour clothes and cripplers; second, punk, with jackets characteristically having metal peak sharp points with musical inscriptions and troop boots; last, hardcore, usually demarked with a casual urban visual style, long sleeved shirt with square effects and tennis as preferred shoes. These different musical languages embodied by emotionality, symbolism and transgressivism composed the interior of the scene, nourishing a typical musical creation and aesthetics in behalf of a collective imaginary.

Aside the social criticism, irreverence and romantic rebellious, the network of proximity, constituted by family and friends were crucial to define musical sensibilities and consumptions. Especially the network of friendships created by ties of solidarity that protruded tastes and musical aspiration were fundamental to some of these individuals' careers. This network was also fundamental to structure local knowledge (Cohen, 1997) about *rock n' roll* music, which started during the time in high school where social interactions gained a space to trade musical tastes and knowledge, by sharing music catalogues and fanzines, alternative social media that established the underground narrative. Scholar learning's were indeed set aside and the artistic and music activities were always primordial in their interests and tasks in the everyday life. In a dilettantism or DIY logic, the informal learning was portrayed in informal spaces, recreating a milieu of informality which enhances individual's aptitudes of autonomy and independency. In this way, informal milieu was the official way to learn what was necessary to learn. More complex then at first sight, this network developed in an amateur way, with all its artistic practices, gathering interests, significations and necessities associated to music production.

Much of these informal spaces such as basements, attics, streets, public gardens and garages were spaces of sharing knowledge, rehearsal and social interaction. They formed "underground schools" in which Coimbra's music scene saw two of its most influential bands being born: *É Mas Foíce* and *Tédio Boys*. By there musical deconstruction narrowed the music

scene to rock music articulating multiple genres from psychobilly to hardcore, and nourishing a transgressive culture which they staged a romantic irreverence against the system and the hegemony culture. The first band, *É Mas Foice*, appeared in the 1980s mixing rock and popular folklore, allying provocation to their theatrical performances. The conversion of their artistic expressions and transgressive attitudes in stage over passed the reflexes of social criticism and irony. The second, *Tédio Boys*, was a stand out band of the time that started at the very end of the 1980s and the beginnings of the 1990s, in the punk rock panorama and revolutionary in its musical deconstruction. They hold an aesthetic performance embedded by artistic influences from *Screamin Jay Hacking* and *The Cramps*, musical standards as *psychobilly*, *punkabilly* and *porkabilly*, which characterized their style music, and the typical image of their appearance in public by the breaking of visual standards and normativity.

Both bands triggered from specific social contexts, from different senses of necessity and different personifications. For the first, one emerged for the criticism of political ideology and social critique, the other, for the criticism of boredom and against the hegemony culture of the popular and traditional; for the later, one theatrical in performances, the other, as transgressive visual normativity. These aspects demonstrate how rock, as a sociological object of study, can be said to have a singular relation within society. Individuals incorporate their social meanings to their daily actions, in the specific case as music scenes, individuals incorporate their subjectiveness to their music productions. In this sense, music it's not only a way of living life, but a way of how music can be understood as life.

All these free spirit of revivalism, hybridism and transformism was lived in a diverse set of social spaces. These spaces contributed for the understanding of certain ideologies and symbolic materials, which are mediated by the context and social condition of existence of the individual's (Bennett, 1999; 2005). They were spaces of cult, side by side to underground practices and sociability's enclosing visual and corporal aesthetics to an alternative concept of music. The reliability of these spaces accentuates individual's freedom and liberties during social interaction. Aside the importance of these spaces to social relations, they were also fundamental to another group of individuals that played an important role in the scene: the DIY producers. These individuals formed a small group of music producers, technicians, amateurs or even musicians themselves, aiming a common feeling, as Paul Willis argues (1990). Mainly by sharing and carrying objects with meanings between individuals from a *common culture* keeping the rock spirit always alive. Some of the names are known in the scene: *Arame farpado*, *ArtRites*, *Off The Records*, *Psychotic Reactions* and *Zona Centro Hardcore*, and have the same imperative objective: to promote and to spread regular activities of concerts of alternative music, incorporating in their logic of work, a DIY ideology, keeping cultural activities and it's dynamics, in fulfilling an alternative cultural agenda in Coimbra.

Conclusion

Music is not only a way to escape the daily routines. It embodies a complex understanding and relationship to social life, to social contexts of its emergence, presence and to delimitate identities. It's a construction and solidification of social representations and practices that flows in between consumptions, productions, emotional, symbolic and transgressive languages, codes and signs that ensure the social group strengthens.

Coimbra's music scene is a peculiar example of how individual's incorporated their consumptions to music productions in building an alternative agenda and demonstrating their

collective will towards *rock n' roll*: artistic practices, social representations, subjective attitudes and local knowledge, formed a set of resources that solidify their imaginaries and identities. Here, identities were constructed through differences in existence. In the same sense as Stuart Hall defines it, when questioning *who needs identity?*: "to refer to the meeting point, the point of suture between, on the one hand, the discourses and practices which attempts to 'interpolate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which constructs us as subjects which can be spoken" (Hall and Gay, 1996: 5). We need identity to position ourselves as subjects of knowledge. Assuming Coimbra's rock scene, the language of consciousness that is assumed in the prosecution of artistic practices corresponds as languages of the subjects social representations and they are always constructed across a lack between us and the others. Thus, this corresponding won't be identical to the subjects which are invested in them (*ibid*). In the same time, local spaces, social relations and interactions, DIY learning's and the sharing objects formed a "common culture" (Willis, 1990) in fulfilment of the expressions, signs and meanings that youth seek for creativity, presence and identity to potentially subvert the cultural hegemony that stagnated their way of living life.

This restricted group, some of them known as musicians others not, developed a subfield of alternative music production, and following a plural path defying the expressions of their social existences, finding in the music field the same assumption as Arthur Schopenhauer: "music could exist even if there were no world at all".

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