

6.4. Ideology and identity in underground circuits

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Abstract

In this essay we seek to approach the possible ideological and identity unity amongst several music circuits, such as noise, near-silence, free-jazz, creole rap, improvisation, electronic and pop or rock lo-fi. We aim to reflect on the different or equal relations between musician networks, critics, curators, enthusiasts and specialized audiences and the political and economical dimensions of artistic movements associated with these underground or counterculture circuits. We will try to deliver an argument aiming to justify the existence of a broader notion of contemporary underground. As previously discussed by Baudrillard and Debord, we will use the concepts of consumption and spectacle to approach an economical dimension of counterculture. Hence we will raise questions on the connection between artistic and political dimension through an historic study of artistic vanguards. Ultimately we will analyse Rancière's words to comprehend the emancipation through DIY culture.

Keywords: ideology, identity, underground, lisbon musical circuit

"We believe that the supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution".
André Breton & Leon Trotsky

Is there a communisation based ideology and identity unity in Lisbon's underground music circuits? That's the question that will lead this whole theoretic communication.

In order to try to verify this hypothesis, we'll distinguish underground artistic expressions from the others through spectacular system (in Debord's words). Although entangled amongst several heterogenic artistic circuits overlapped in an intricate cluster of distinct realities, we believe it is possible to identify what we consider to be underground. Another fundamental concept to understand them will be "communisation", which Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen defines as "the direct destruction of the capitalist production relations and a rejection of the identities of the spectacle, including 'worker', 'artist' or 'writer'". We'll also differentiate ideology and identity from reputation, criticizing Richard Florida's idea of creative cities. There are other authors who criticize Florida but we're particularly interested in ideas from scholars and artists such as Martha Rosler, which writes about a place of critic claims for artists besides "neo-bohemian" cultural consumption and gentrification dynamics presented by Florida.

To fully understand local and translocal musical circuits in the twentieth-first century Lisbon we also need to study artistic autonomy and DIY, which we'll compare to Rancière's notions of emancipation. In this case, what we call "artistic autonomy" is related to artistic production. The people in the circuits we propose to study have been cutting the middlemen, being the

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same person, for example, responsible for the entire artistic process (in the musical case: recording, editing, disseminating, performing, etc.). That emancipation is possible due to a technological evolution but we believe that might also be an ideological-identity element associated with these postmodernists practices; heirs to an anarchist punk culture.

One of the fundamental concepts to understand the underground music circuits is the "spectacle". It is an ever-present conception in the realms of art and politics, as we'll discuss.

Guy Debord's spectacle is an agent of seduction and distraction of the spectator towards the contemplated object. The author considers that this is how the alienation expresses itself: "the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires" (Debord, 1994). Capitalism, in its golden years, could have been referred as "an immense accumulation of commodities" (Palmieri Jr., 2012). With the increased massification of commodities, Debord alleges about "an immense accumulation of spectacles". And he continues, saying that "[t]he present stage, in which social life is completely taken over by the accumulated products of the economy, entails a generalized shift from having to appearing: all effective 'having' must now derive both its immediate prestige and its ultimate *raison d'être* from appearances. At the same time all individual reality, being directly dependent on social power and completely shaped by that power, has assumed a social character. Indeed, it is only inasmuch as individual reality is not that it is allowed to appear" (Debord, 1994).

Jean Baudrillard also addresses these questions affirming that this phenomenon is deeper than just the logic of commodities (which dwells in all areas of social life). The author of *The Consumer Society* claims that everything becomes consumable symbolic patterns.

Studying Baudrillard, Palmieri Júnior claims that "nowadays lifestyles are a production and consumption of signs as well as the establishment or maintenance of a hierarchical order of values, which characterizes the universe of consumption as a reality that goes beyond the economic frontier" (Palmieri Jr., 2012). This notion goes further deeper than the idea of the adulation of commodities as consumable goods. Most social activities takes the form of commodity, whether or not they are material goods. "It is the quantity of labor incorporated in these objects, rather than their concrete qualities, which defines their fate, and this quantity is always reflected in a sum of money. The products created by man thus take on a life of their own, ruled by the laws of money and its accumulation in capital." (Anselm Jappe, 2009)

Lipovetsky also wrote about these ideas, criticizing theories about a post-consumerism. He claims that "this is the post-modern society: not beyond consumption, but its apotheosis, its extension to the private sphere" (Lipovetsky, 2007: 11). And Anselme Japp goes further in his analyses:

There is a profound idiosyncrasy that connects the entertainment industry with capitalism's drive towards infantilization and narcissism. The material economy is extensively linked to the new forms of the "psychological and libidinous economy". (Anselm Jappe, 2009)

There is a strict relationship between consumption, identities and values (Debord, 1994). If capitalism sells itself with the spectacle, than identity is the tool for a "circular process of isolation"². As Debord, who claims that consumerism is the cause of individualization,

² "The reigning economic system is founded on isolation; at the same time it is a circular process designed to produce isolation. Isolation underpins technology, and technology isolates in its turn; all goods proposed by the spectacular system, from cars to televisions, also serve as weapons for that system as it

Lipovetsky affirms that that individualization culminated because of consumerism: "the right of individuals to be absolutely themselves, to enjoy the most of life inseparable from a society that erected the free individual in principal amount and not merely a last manifestation of individualistic ideology; but it was the transformation of lifestyles associated with the consumer revolution that allowed this development" (Lipovetsky, 2007: 9). He also argues that the individual becomes a project and a process choosing amongst a wide range of options which define himself. Consumerism's ideology and marketing promote the belief that one can buy lifestyles and, somehow, identities. If someone wants to be something he would buy and consume that something. This is an helpful idea in order to understand distinct cultural identities. Identity and consumerism are, therefore, strongly linked in the post-modern world. So, one can argue that consumption is avowed as the subject's intention to adhere to certain values (Palmieri Jr., 2012).

There is an overvaluation of individual choice and the individual is put at the center of issues, giving him the right to be "himself and unique", which also reveals a major trend towards personalization in social and even economic relations. As individualism, customization process refers to the rupture towards a system of rigid socialization and the development of a flexible society based on desires' stimulation, spectacle fomentation, sensibility and an alleged authenticity and individual freedom (Lipovetsky, 2007).

Stuart Hall considers that identity becomes a "moving celebration": formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or challenged in the cultural systems that surround us (Hall, 2006).

Taking this into account it will be easier to realize why Baudrillard believes that "it's vital for the system to control not only the production apparatus, but the consumer demand; not only prices but the demand at such prices. The overall effect of what's before and after production itself (surveys, market studies and later advertising, marketing, conditioning) is to steal from the buyer the power of decision and transfer it to the company, where you can be manipulated" (Baudrillard, 1995).

Individualism, while it is an apparent manifestation of freedom, waves a dark side. In his *Liquid Modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman compares this spectacle driven and controlled by consumerism to the false freedom of Aldous Huxley dystopia in *Brave New World*.³

Like all other commodities, culture (massified by cultural industries⁴) is a symbolic object par excellence. Cultural consumerism brings together many of the essential conditions for studying these issues.

strives to reinforce the isolation of "the lonely crowd." The spectacle is continually rediscovering its own basic assumptions -- and each time in a more concrete manner". (Debord, 1994)

³ "Much like those thinking men of another time, Aristotle and Plato, who could not imagine a good or bad society without slaves, Huxley and Orwell could not conceive of a society, whether a happy or a miserable one, without managers, designers and supervisors who jointly wrote the script for others to follow, staged the performance, put the lines in the actors' mouths and fired or locked in dungeons everyone who would improvise their own texts. They could not visualize a world without controlling towers and controlling desks. The fears of their time, much as its hopes and dreams, hovered around Supreme Command Offices." (Bauman, 2006: 58)

⁴ "O efeito tecnológico tem o seu modelo na publicidade omnipresente, na estética das mercadorias do mercado mundial. A ideia de conteúdo não possui qualquer existência própria; ela está à partida ao serviço de uma coisa que lhe é exterior e por isso ela é também casual, tornada irreal de modo formalista e abafada no mero efeito. É justamente para esta dimensão da estética das mercadorias que Adorno e Horkheimer apontam já em 1944, na fase final da totalização do design publicitário no mundo da vida: «A cultura é uma mercadoria paradoxal. Ela está tão completamente submetida à lei da troca que não é mais trocada. Ela se confunde tão cegamente com o uso que não se pode mais usá-la. É por isso que ela

Despite all its controversy and complexity we can try to define underground and counterculture, simplistically, as opposed to the mainstream and against the dominant culture and politics.

In a brief analysis through the past Alexandre Melo observed that the relationship between art and the official institutions (contemporary politics and culture) has had different modalities. (Melo, 2012: 22). But these clashes between the avant-gardes and the cultural-politic canon did not permute a mentality for another, "coexisting [several mentalities] in an internally contradicting complex network" (Melo, 2012: 22). Those historical clashes have had consequences in today's underground, which is entangled amongst several heterogenic artistic circuits overlapped in an intricate cluster of distinct realities. Melo also states that "a first scenario to consider is, roughly speaking, the passage from 'academic art' to 'modern art'. (...) The modern or, later, avant-garde art, emerges as an unofficial art, against the academic and official art, creating their own mechanisms of legitimation within the global society" (Melo, 2012: 22).

The classic Sociology of Art author, Howard Becker, also writes about political concerns of art:

"[Political and administrative leaders] own aesthetic beliefs lead them to view what supports their own political interests as great art or beautiful, and to see what might undermine their interests as bad art, or not even art, mere trash. The merging of politics and aesthetics thus affects what can be counted as art at all, the reputations of whole genres and media as well as those of individual artists. The interests of states vary, and their interests in art vary accordingly. An industrialized society's government may prize order and harmony over discord and «anarchy»" (Becker, 1982: 166)

Due to this increasing complexity we opted for the use the concept of "underground" in order to involve a whole network of people. Later on we'll specify and differentiate deeper, but we understand to be underground not mainstream artistic manifestations, united by a sense of common self conscience⁵, with personal mechanisms of legitimation and a subversive and transgressive approach to official institutions⁶.

se funde com a publicidade... A publicidade é seu elixir da vida. (O seu) produto... acaba por coincidir com a publicidade de que precisa por ser intragável»." (Kurz, 2012)

⁵ Recently the Lisbon record store Trem Azul, which, for lack of "necessary conditions", had been prohibited by health and security police to perform concerts, formal and legally reopened as a bar and concert hall. Speaking at the (re)opening, the president of the company that owns three specialized record companies beyond the store/bar/venue, referred to some "we" that overflowed the shop workers or the hard core artists more interconnected to the label, his "we" was referring to an entire network of musicians, critics, programmers, enthusiasts and the public - a self-conscious of its network identity. Although reopened with all the bureaucratic- legal formalities, the store took a very interesting decision on entry to the concerts: the entry will cost 5€, but this is only 3€ for "musicians". There's no order of musicians, so this ticket policy means that there is a network associated to some musical trends, where often the audience is almost exclusively composed by other musicians and friends/enthusiasts.

⁶ "The victims of the rationalisation of bourgeois society, which standardises and categorises human life and marginalises mankind's spontaneous creativity, are given a voice and awoken to life in art, which in this way, according to Marcuse, functions as a refuge or a waste dump for marginalised experiences and modes of expression. Modern art thus possesses a subversive potential in Marcuse's view." (Rasmussen, 2012: 230)

"If rulers refuse to consider poems as crimes, then someone must commit crimes that serve the function of poetry, or texts that possess the resonance of terrorism. At any cost re-connect poetry to the body. Not crimes against bodies, but against Ideas (& Ideas-in-things) which are deadly & suffocating. Not stupid libertinage but exemplary crimes, aesthetic crimes, crimes for love." (Bey, 1991: 13)

The artist has turned into something like an entrepreneur capable of create profit, despite the historic avant-garde's revolutions (Rasmussen, 2012, Melo, 2012). "The British artist Damien Hirst is of course the most obvious and perhaps most extreme example of this development, where art ends up as nothing but a financial transaction, and the artist cynically overidentifies with capitalism. In the aftermath of Hirst's vulgar diamondstudded skull, *For the Love of God*, the idea of the revolutionary power of art no longer plays any major role in art; whether in visual art, on the stage or in literature. When revolution does finally appear as a reference or theme in art, it is almost always as a historical reference, not as a future possibility" (Rasmussen, 2012: 233).

"Today neither the image nor the word seems particularly antagonistic towards the prevailing order; neither is apparently capable of dissent, not to speak of more extensive subversion", continues Ramussen to argue. "The very limited endeavours of relational aesthetics are a telling indication of this. Here the desire of the avant-gardes for another world has been replaced by the production of 'social interstices'" (Rasmussen, 2012: 233-234). And Matteo Pasquinelli asks the ultimate question to understand what kind of underground culture is possible in a time of spectacular economy:

"This issue is related once again to the question: what kind of underground culture is possible in a time of spectacular economy? What looks like a nostalgic question points in other ways to the political autonomy of the 'social factory' of culture and to new coordinates for cultural agency that may be more effective on the economic ground. The hypothesis advanced here is that the contemporary form of 'underground' has to be found along the new chain of value accumulation — along the new ruins of financial crisis. The good old underground has become part of the cultural industries and the spectacular economy, as well as our life has been incorporate by a more general biopolitical production (that is the whole of our social life has been put to work)." (Pasquinelli, 2010)

There's a particular underground we're interesting in study, which defines himself against some of the ideas worked in the previous chapter, such as spectacle and consumption.

These underground movements have been quarreling with the dominant forms of mass consumerism and spectacle. The alienation that Guy Debord claims to be a result of the spectacle gathers in the same category both entertainment mainstream and underground culture. However, it's the same notion of spectacle that assists us in this matter. Debord states that the spectacle is broad enough to include what opposes it (Debord, 1994). So, even the underground art claims will adopt mainstream formats, although it sometimes might have a different approach to entertainment. While Debord denounces the divestiture of the entertainment spectacle, our counterculture precludes it as something that is not intended to entertain but rather to disturb⁷, something that does not appeal to distraction but to concentration. The whole notion of society of spectacle is therefore something central to distinguish underground from mainstream. Even though sometimes they both share the same aspect, they differ in attitude.

In a radical approach, (anarchist) Hakim Bey's idea on Art Sabotage is one example of how this can be perceived:

⁷ "A arte de vanguarda, praticada nos extremos mais radicais, surge totalmente dissociada dos gostos e da mentalidade dominantes na opinião pública - «as pessoas não percebem», «para as pessoas aquilo não é arte» - e incapaz de se afirmar e sobreviver no mercado" (Melo, 2012: 23-24). In English: "Vanguard art doesn't have a connection to dominant tastes or mentalities - «people don't understand», «it's not art» - and cannot thrive and survive in the market".

Art Sabotage is (...) creation- through-destruction--but it cannot serve any Party, nor any nihilism, nor even art itself (...) Art Sabotage serves only consciousness, attentiveness, awakens. A-S goes beyond paranoia, beyond deconstruction--the ultimate criticism--physical attack on offensive art-- aesthetic jihad. The slightest taint of petty ego-icity or even of personal taste spoils its purity & vitiates its force. A-S can never seek power--only release it. (Bey, 1991: 8-9)

Richard Florida came out with the concept of Creative Cities, an economic perspective on how the creative classes (artists, designers, architects, etc.) are an engine of territorial development. But Florida seems to harbor no interest in the potential of the creative class for liberation⁸ (Rosler, 2010, Pasquinelli, 2010), so we'll need to reinterpret his words in order to understand fully the extent of Identity and Ideology in underground circuits.

As Rosler points out, in Florida's vision "the concentration on taste classes and lifestyle generally evades questions of labor organization and political control. Richard Lloyd, in *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Postindustrial City* (2006), more pointedly finds that artists and hipsters are not only complicit in the realm of consumption but also serve capital quite well in their role as casual labor ('useful labor' in Lloyd's terms), whether, say, as service workers or engaged in freelance design" (Rosler, 2010). One can easily see the resemblance between these ideas and the ones from the Situationists or Henri Lefebvre, who theorized the role of the cultured classes in facilitating the elite management of both labour and urban change⁹.

If we keep on dissecting Florida's words, we might understand that it is like a "gospel of creativity [that] offers something for mayors and urban planners to hang onto — a new episteme if you will. Florida's thesis also finds support in management sectors in the art world that seek support from municipal and foundation sources" (Rosler, 2010). Besides the glamorous cover, it doesn't matter if the bohemian index is good or bad for urban growth.

If the creative cities don't represent an underground ideology and identity, we need to try to define it differently. The concept that might help us to understand what is happening is "communisation". The term is one of the fundamental ideas expressed in *The Coming Insurrection* by The Invisible Committee, an anonymous French group of free thinkers. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen wrote an helpful essay on how to understand this ideas entitled "Art, Revolution and Communisation". "The Invisible Committee and the milieu around the now dissolved periodical *Tiqqun* build further on the radical part of the avant-garde's critique of everyday life in the direction of what they call 'communisation', which is the direct destruction of the capitalist production relations and a rejection of the identities of the spectacle, including 'worker', 'artist' or 'writer'. This is an attempt to transcend art with revolutionary activity in which theory and praxis are united" (Rasmussen, 2012: 235 - 236).

⁸ "The name of this newborn chimera is 'creative cities' — an asymmetrical chimera, as the mask of culture is used to cover the hydra of concrete and real-estate speculation. The chimera of cultural cities is a complex machine, no longer based on the opposition between high and low culture that was central to the Frankfurt School canon of the culture industry. Specifically, culture production is today a biopolitical machine where all aspects of life are integrated and put to work, where new lifestyles become commodities, where culture is considered an economic flow like any other and where, in particular, the collective production of imaginary is quickly hijacked to increase the profits of corporate business." (Pasquinelli, 2010)

⁹ "Our domain is thus the urban network, the natural expression of a collective creativity capable of understanding the creative forces being released with the decline of a culture based on individualism. To our way of thinking, the traditional arts will no longer be able to play a role in the creation of the new environment in which we want to live." (Nieuwenhuys, 1998)

In the Surrealist Manifesto of 1924, the surrealists made clear that they intuitively rejected capitalism's division of life into work and daily life, art and science. Later, the situationists also rejected the "framed" art institution and urged to set creativity free in everyday life combining at the same time these ideas with the revolutionary tradition's critique of modern capitalist society, state and work¹⁰. "The Situationists could draw on the intuitive forecasting by Surrealism of a different kind of daily life, to show that the revolution had nothing whatsoever to do with a group of armed men turning up in front of parliament, seizing state power and announcing that something new will now happen. The revolution is not this kind of separate political event based on seizure of power and a planned route to a different society" (Rasmussen, 2012: 236).

It is now important to reflect about the emancipation in order to complete the underground culture analyses. Jacques Rancière, in his *Emancipated Spectator*, refers that the emancipation "begins when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting and understand that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection. It starts when we realize that looking also is an action which confirms or modifies that distribution, and that 'interpreting the world' is already a means of transforming it, of reconfiguring it. The spectator is active, as the student or the scientist: he observes, he selects, compares, and interprets. He ties up what he observes with many other things that he has observed on other stages, in other kind of spaces. He makes his poem with the poem that is performed in front of him. She participates in the performance if she is able to tell her own story about the story which is in front of her. (...) They are distant viewers and interpreters of what is performed in front of them. They pay attention to the performance to the extent that they are distant" (Rancière, 2007). Although the author refers essentially to the spectator of artistic performances, we can easily associate this idea to a broader notion of spectacle. As Debord claims: "the spectacle is presented at the same time as society itself" (Debord, 2010: 8).

As it were a performance, Debord says that "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation". The spectacle is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images and an objectified vision of the world (Debord, 2010). The process that leads to emancipation in performances is the same needed to interpret of the spectacular world and, that way, reconfigure it. Rancière itself uses Debord as a reference, claiming that "The more man contemplates, the less he is" (Rancière, 2007). This statement is also a reference to Plato's idea of simulacrum¹¹.

Emancipation in a spectacular consumerist capitalist society might have a lot of consequences¹². If society is based in simulacrum, as Debord and Rancière claim, the simple

¹⁰ "'The only useful work that remains to be done is to rebuild society and life on an altogether different foundation.' For the Situationists the revolution had to bid farewell to all the separate spheres and identities, as well as to wage labour and the commodified ways in which we live." (Rasmussen, 2012: 236)

¹¹ See also Gilles Deleuze text "Platão e o Simulacro" in *Lógica do Sentido* (2000).

¹² "Art was a subversive force, in so far as it was no longer rooted in the art institution. To be true to itself, art had to negate itself and the art institution and take part in an all-encompassing overhaul of bourgeois capitalist society. This was why inter-war avant-garde groups like Dada and the Surrealists were involved in attempts to challenge the art institution; all the challenges took place with a view to permitting the creativity with which the artist had been furnished – as part of the constitution of art as an autonomous sphere – to seep out into everyday life. This was why the avant-gardes ridiculed the role and identity of the artist and tried to abolish it in favour of an activation of the viewer, who otherwise only stood passively contemplating the leavings of the artist, and who thus both pointed towards another

act of seeing beyond that could have radical results. But many see this with scepticism. Zygmunt Bauman, about emancipation, argues that we're probably "a generation with greater critical predisposition and whose criticism is more daring and uncompromising than ever", but adds that this criticism is "toothless" and "unable to affect our choices" (Bauman, 2006: 23).

Even the concepts of what is art and how should it be consumed or appreciated might take some conscious and critical groups to question themselves. DIY cultural expressions (but not only) thus arise from the idea that anyone can be an artist and that art should not be a canonical idea¹³. It is born than a culture of fanzines, poetry slam, lo-fi music, performances, graffiti, small budget independent cinema, etc.

As a consequence of spectacular emancipation is the creation of circuits, groups and informal venues. Underground expressions of counterculture where, in a DIY logic, happens revolutionary art.

"But the autonomy of art is both a blessing and a curse", adds Rasmussen, "thanks to it, the artist is on the one hand not subject to externally formulated rules or prescriptions; on the other hand this autonomy also has a built-in limitation, since it means that artistic praxis in reality has limited social impact" (Rasmussen, 2012: 229).

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society and a cohesive existence, but at the same time confirmed the established order and its divisions into 'work' and 'art'". (Rasmussen, 2012: 230)

¹³ "There is nothing more annoying than those museums that become «teaching institutions» and seek to make «culture» «accessible» to the «common people» with a series of explanations on the walls and by means of the headphones that tell everyone precisely what they should feel about the work, videos, interactive games, museum shops, sneakers. . . It is claimed that this makes it possible for culture and history to be enjoyed by the non-bourgeois strata, too (as if today's bourgeoisie were cultured). To me, it is just this user-friendly approach that seems to be the pinnacle of arrogance regarding the popular strata, concerning whom it is supposed that they are by definition insensible to culture, which they can appreciate only if it is presented in the most frivolous and infantile manner possible. This also signals the end of that pleasant, somewhat dusty atmosphere of the museums of the past; pleasant because it seemed that one entered a separate world, where one could relax away from the tornado of activities that always surrounds us, and this was to some extent true because these museums were seldom visited." (Jappe, 2009)

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