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**O Estranho e  
o Estrangeiro no  
Teatro**

**Strangeness and  
the Stranger in  
Drama**

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# THE CULTURAL INFLUENCE OF REFUGEES, A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

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At the beginning of the research project 'Urban Design under Franco and Salazar, City Production by Iberian Dictatorships in the European Context' I only had a blurry idea of the conservative-authoritarian dictatorship known as the *Estado Novo*, which ruled Portugal for 41 years.

The first time I visited the *Praça do Império* was in 1995. From my point of view, it was then and is still today an urban space absolutely out of proportions. Its odd appearance contrasted with the huge number of tourists that invaded the space every day. The secret of this space, having been part of the biggest propaganda show staged by the conservative-authoritarian dictatorship, was not obvious. Neither that with the preparations for the *Exposição do Mundo Português* all the minor buildings or manufactories, which would have distracted the visitor from the landmarks of Portugal's glorious past had been taken away or replaced with pavilions.



Today the praça do império is a popular photo spot.  
Christian von Oppen, Lisbon 2012

Most of the architecture from the 1940 exhibition is gone. Only the 500 years old *Monastery of Jerónimos* and the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* seem to frame the huge *Praça do Império*. Still today many people visit the site and not only the monastery but also those buildings that had been designed by the Portuguese dictatorship to celebrate the *Estado Novo's* social and economic successes.

1940, the year of destiny declared by the dictatorship, was celebrated not only in Lisbon but also all over Portugal. The extraordinary global political situation had a strong impact on the reception of the *Exhibition of the Portuguese World*. With Germany's invasion and its subsequent surrender of France in June 1940, many famous intellectuals and many more had to leave the country which was for them the epitome of democracy, freedom and culture. Many were stranded in Portugal, hoping for passage to the *United States of America*. Portugal was one of the few countries on the continent, which could stay neutral in the global military conflict. Among those who had to leave France was Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. He arrived in Lisbon in December 1940. The

*Exposição do Mundo Português* appeared to him as a fortress for the peaceful Europe of the past:

‘Mais le Portugal ignorait l’appétit du monstre. Il refusait de croire aux mauvais signes. Le Portugal parlait sur l’art avec une confiance désespérée. Oserait-on l’écraser dans son culte de l’art?

Il avait sorti toutes ses merveilles. Oserait-on l’écraser dans ses merveilles?

Il montrait ses grands hommes. Faute d’une armée, faute de canons, il avait dressé contre la ferraille de l’envahisseur toutes ses sentinelles de pierre: les poètes, les explorateurs, les conquistadors. Tout le passé du Portugal, faute d’armée et de canons, barrait la route. Oserait-on l’écraser dans son héritage d’un passé grandiose?’<sup>1</sup>

Alfred Döblin also describes with admiration the centenary show of the Portuguese dictatorship:

‘The ship weighs anchor in the darkness of the night. It was slowly turned and tugged down the Tagus. The centenary exhibition shone like in a fairy tale, as we passed. Its magical light was the last image we had of Europe shrouded in mourning.’<sup>2</sup>

Even Heinrich Mann, the brother of Thomas Mann, visited what he called a remarkable *colonial exhibition*.

We can assume that this was true admiration. All three were familiar with this format of exhibition. At their time grand exhibitions were a popular media to communicate the social project and political message of a state independent from its political system. Probably the *Exposition Internationale des Arts e Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* shown in Paris in 1937 with its competing pavilions was the most popular exhibition of this period.

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<sup>1</sup> Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de: lettre à un otage. Paris 1944, P. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Döblin, Alfred: Schicksalsreise. Frankfurt am Main 1949, P. 345-346.

Architecture and urban design as in the Lisbon exhibitions were a common component of these shows. The exhibition site, pavilions, models and plans were together the perfect tool to communicate the idea of the city or the society of tomorrow. But also smaller exhibitions were used with the same intention. One such example was the touring exhibition *Neue Deutsche Baukunst*, which had been shown from 1940 to 1943 in ten different cities all over Europe. In October 1941 the exhibition was opened to the public in Lisbon under the title *Moderna Arquitectura Alemã*. It is said that 100.000 people visited the exhibition and it had to be closed several times due to overcrowding. The exhibition was certainly a popular success, but what was the political intention behind it?

The exhibition was part of a huge cultural diplomacy effort, designed to support military aggression by securing the acceptance of foreign populations and proving the cultural superiority of the Reich. Apparently the book *Neues Portugal* by Friedrich Sieburg published in 1937 was also part of this cultural diplomacy even though he only officially began to work for the secretary of information in 1939.

Written in the popular format of a travel diary Sieburg's book is an adulation of the social project of the Portuguese dictatorship. In his admiration for Salazar and António Ferro he was very outspoken. He met both in person and also traveled through the country. Sieburg reflected his observations in the official political program of the authoritarian regime.

I would like to highlight two of his observations:

1st the distribution of male and female social roles within Portuguese society

and

2nd the daily life in Lisbon at the time

It is obvious that Sieburg disliked the strong machismo that dominated gender roles in Portugal at that time. He expressed his critique of it throughout his book's, culminating at the books end in the chapter entitled the *violin*. He raised the question as to whether Lisbon was a city for lovers. He concluded that at least on his trip

he didn't find any proof that this was the case. From his point of view Portuguese women still lived in the *shadow of imprisonment as in the time of the moors*. He considered the life of Portuguese women as monotonous and involving little chance to participate in public life. Cafes were reserved for men. Women had to ask for permission to leave home and would presumably become verbally harassed in the streets even so.<sup>3</sup>



A bar in the *Alem Tejo* region illustrating the male dominated and melancholic atmosphere of the 1950s. Kaspar von Oppen, Lousal 1958

The slight melancholy, which from Sieburg's point of view paralyzed everything in Portugal, including love, also dulled the daily life of Lisbon.

Sieburg's description of Lisbon as a calm and poor but clean city with very few cars meets with the description of Ruth Arons who had already fled Germany in the 1930s.

She became a witness to how Lisbon changed from a *village* to a cosmopolitan city within only a few years. After the fall of France in 1940, 100.000 emigrants flooded the city. Initially they were chocked by the social reality of Portugal. In comparison to other European capitals Lisbon appeared provincial with many social

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<sup>3</sup> Sieburg, Friedrich: Neues Portugal. Berlin 1937, P. 260-264

nuisances. Nevertheless, public life changed quickly. Soon people were sitting on esplanades eating cake and drinking coffee and it became more accustomed to see émigré women visiting cafes and smoking in public.<sup>4</sup>

They ignored the unofficial dress code of wearing a hat, gloves and stockings in public. The shirts and skirts of émigré women were considered too short and even greater scandal was their preferred beachwear. When Portuguese women began to adopt the same habits the new beachwear was forbidden.<sup>5</sup>

Generally the harsh rules imposed by the authoritarian regime hampered the development of a cultural life like in Paris. The emigrants were only tolerated as refugees on their way to final destinations. However, something had changed by 1944 when the German historian Willy Andreas made a short trip from Spain to Lisbon. He noted how the image of the city had changed dramatically. Andreas felt like a provincial. He was intimidated by the huge amount of luxury cars, goods and the enormous traffic.<sup>6</sup>

The new prosperous life in this vivid city is also the topic of Herbert Minnemann's article *No shortage of art of living* published in 1959 in a German travel magazine. Minnemann, born in 1913, grew up in Portugal and was obviously an admirer of the Portuguese regime. The only thing, which he considered incompatible with modern life, was the relationship between men and women. Like Sieburg he noticed a woeful masculinism. But at the same time he wrote that the gender issue had improved a lot.<sup>7</sup>

The influence of the emigrants in Portugal certainly wasn't as strong as in other countries, but if there was an influence then it was caused by the women. Not only in reference to the issue of gender equality but also many contributions brought by these women, such as the first Portuguese teddy bear, the first *Portuguese stationary shop*, the children books written by Ilse Losa, or the famous bolas de Berlim.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lissabon: Vom Exil zur Heimat

<sup>5</sup> Heinrich, Christa: Zuflucht Portugal. Exilstation am Rande Europas. In: Filmexil p 23

<sup>6</sup> Andreas, Willy: Reisebilder aus Spanien und Portugal. München 1949, p 131-133.

<sup>7</sup> Minnemann, Herbert: Kein Mangel an Lebenskunst. In: Merian 1959, p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> Heinrich, Christa: Zuflucht Portugal. Exilstation am Rande Europas. In: Filmexil p 12





Bolas de Berlim – reminders of the emigrant’s contribution to the Portuguese daily pastry culture. Christian von Oppen, Lisbon 2014

These stories are an ironic and pleasing part of our history that contrast with the macro-efforts of the imperial cultural diplomacy mission. They show that in the 1930s and 1940s there was a cultural impact on Portugal, but an impact, which was neither wanted by the Portuguese nor by the Germans.

And what stayed from the various attempts of the Reich:

- An image of monumentality, which affects all parts of daily life.
- An inhuman monstrous system, which did not even want to hide its evil grimace.

Unfortunately this bold image doesn’t reveal the complete evilness of the German regime. It ignores all the privileges and amenities connected with the promises of its political project with which the regime had lured its followers.

But at the same time we fail to remember the heritage of all of those who had to leave their homes. Especially the many traces that those people left on their way to their final destination as, for example, in Portugal.

In Berlin you can find a special memorial, the so called stumbling stones, which are laid in the pavement in front of the homes from where people were forced to leave by the German dictatorship. Unfortunately they only have room to mention these people's starting point and most often deadly destination. They do not mention if people had chosen a way via Lisbon in the hope of escaping the deadly terror of Nazi Germany. Some did arrive in Lisbon, which was, as we know today, a safe gateway to wherever they wanted to go. Maybe one day the memorial of stumbling stone will be extended with stepping stones memorializing the help of the Portuguese people and the cultural heritage, which did survive within the daily culture of Portugal.



Stepping stones – some members of these families could escape the deadly terror of Nazi Germany via Lisbon. Christian von Oppen, Lisbon 2014