

A Cultura Popular Portuguesa e a Construção do Folclore Nacional

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Resumo:

“A Cultura Popular Portuguesa e a Construção do Folclore Nacional” estuda um objecto – o barco moliceiro da Ria de Aveiro – e o discurso por ele evocado, enquanto representação, invenção e re-invenção da cultura popular de uma região portuguesa. Contudo, esta comunicação pretende também ver através do objecto, isto é, “atravessar a [sua] opacidade inoportuna”, tal como propõe Michel Foucault em *A Arqueologia do Saber*.

O barco moliceiro da Ria de Aveiro e os seus painéis decorativos, mais do que um caso de tradição *versus* modernidade, constituem uma representação da identidade cultural de uma comunidade intimamente ligada ao ecossistema lagunar. Os tradicionais painéis do barco moliceiro são representações simbólicas intersemióticas dos valores, práticas e representações partilhadas pela comunidade local.

Os textos icónicos e escritos patentes em cada barco são produto de uma rede de circunstâncias políticas, ideológicas, sociais e económicas, dificilmente reconhecidas mesmo por aqueles que desenham, pintam e escrevem (e vivem) sob a sua influência. Mas ao longo do século XX, o moliceiro e seus painéis participaram numa complexa dialéctica entre as representações do discurso oficial e a sua real função social, económica e simbólica, gerando todo um imaginário histórico, toda uma recriação folclórica, todo um “inventário” (cf. Gramsci) que motivou, contextualizou e sustentou esta forma única de arte popular.

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I. INTRODUÇÃO.

The so-called *moliceiro*, a traditional working boat characteristic of the Ria de Aveiro, was chosen to illustrate the point of this study. The *moliceiro* was traditionally designed for gathering and transporting the seaweed, or *moliço*, that grows in the Ria de Aveiro and is used to fertilize sandy soils. They still operate inside a geographic area that covers the entire surface of the Ria. Built of pine, the boat is flat-bottomed, with very low sides, a shallow draught and an unmistakable, extremely curved bow. Traditionally propelled by a trapezium-shaped canvas sail, a pole or track rope, outboard engines are not uncommon additions today. The first documental references to the *moliceiro* date back to the first half of the 18th century, but this does not mean that *moliceiros* did not exist previously, only that such a local popular artefact and related practices did not deserve the attention of political and religious (i.e. literate) authorities.

The most original characteristic of the *moliceiros* is the set of four different panels that adorn the bow and the stern, all of which are covered with distinctive paintings in bright colours, underlined with a handwritten phrase. The bow panels follow the curve of the beak, whilst the stern panels are almost rectangular in shape. Both sets of panels have a bright border of several coloured strips of flowers and geometric figures. There is a multitude of subjects in the panels of a *moliceiro*, in styles that range from the crudest drawings to exquisitely painted images. The artist, who might also be the builder or a reputed amateur hired for the task, chooses the subject spontaneously or as suggested by the boat owner. In this case, the owner proposes a subject or theme, which the artist then illustrates according to his talent and imagination.

An examination of more than five hundred panels, recorded during regular periods of fieldwork between 1988 and the present, confirmed the existence of 5 main groups of images and inscriptions, and several subcategories: Comic (satirizing sex, work, institutions and famous characters); Religious (celebrating Christ, the Virgin and the saints); Social (depicting work – gathering seaweed, fishing, farming and ship-building – and ecological problems; celebrating nature, popular culture and local festivals, or illustrating common sayings and words of wisdom);

Historical (images of kings and queens, knights and soldiers, writers and navigators); Entertainment (referring to folk tales, television, the cinema and football).

While tracing out the history of the *moliceiro* culture, this essay examines the power relations it expresses and its ambiguous past and present relationships with the political and the economic power. The study used for this work, however, goes beyond models of social oppression and resistance, towards a model of ‘articulation’, to use António Gramsci’s concept, as an example of one community’s transformative practices and creative processes. Similarly, Bakhtin and Medvedev defend that one must isolate the object of the study and establish clear parameters that do not, however, segregate it from other objects that are essential to its intelligibility. The process by which objects become capable of meaning is related to socio-cultural values and conditioning factors that transform them into vehicles for the affirmation of an identity and for the representation of a space, a context, an existence. In the present case, “a people who paint their boats and launch them into the waters of a lagoon, create an album of images through which they express their vision of the world” (Rivals, 1988: 254).

This study adopts an epistemological paradigm close to Foucault’s premise of the archaeological method and his search for epistemes or discursive formations and practices that mark different periods in history and shape the various social practices and orders. The study also stresses the importance of the inventory and of the typological organization. According to Gramsci, an inventory possesses a prospective dimension, as it is never created during the social production of the event. Thus, Gramsci’s cultural investigation must begin with an inventory of the complex assortment of historical processes, or ‘historical imaginary’, that shape the present. The popular historical inventory is part of society’s collective, heterogeneous and frequently contradictory notion of the meaning of History.

II. POPULAR CULTURE AND THE PORTUGUESE *ESTADO NOVO*.

According to Gramsci, in *The Prison Notebooks*, ideology should be understood in terms of ideals and practices that, when they are presented as universal truths, are in effect maps of meanings that uphold the power of certain social groups. Above all, ideology does not stand apart from everyday routines.

During the long years of dictatorship, Portuguese culture and traditions, either genuine, ideologically directed by the Estado Novo or even invented, tried to instil certain values and norms of behaviour through repetition, example and instruction, as a means of facing the threat of a world in evolution.

The idea of a 'pure popular art' that portrayed everyday life from the naive, non-critical viewpoint of 19th century ethnographers, matched the Salazar regime's ideal of a Nation rich in folklore and picturesque customs; a self-celebrating popular art, created by 'good people', mostly deeply religious peasants or fishermen who led austere, humble lives. Actually, the exaltation of handicraft, traditional costume, and rudimentary means of transport reflected a way of life very similar to the subsistence living that the regime afforded Portuguese villages.

During the Estado Novo, popular art forms such as the moliceiro panels also echoed official mythology as a more or less direct consequence of institutional channels of education and propaganda. Ideologically oriented stereotypes were appropriated and reproduced by the collective memory, who adapted them according to their life experience and common sense.

III. EDUCATION AND OFFICIAL CULTURE: CONTROL *VERSUS* RESISTANCE.

1. THE INFLUENCE OF STATE IDEOLOGY.

Instead of primary school's educational role, the Estado Novo valued its ideological and disciplinary functions. The official national textbook was a single volume, one for each year, containing texts for reading, a section on mathematics and a long section of Catholic doctrine. Published under close government supervision by the Ministry of Education, they remained unchanged for decades, with minor formal changes in the mid-1960s.

In most cases, a person read (or even touched) only one book during his/her lifetime and its importance and influence was, of course, enormous. That single book was the textbook the government had designed and approved for use in primary schools. Through it, the nation was taught a single world-view, the sole ideology the regime allowed, strictly categorized as either good or evil. These teachings were even more effective as the messages were reinforced by clear, detailed and brightly coloured illustrations.

Primary school textbooks placed their texts in rural settings, always within Portugal. Even when the text itself had nothing to do with the rural world, the accompanying image would establish a connection. Text and image were complemented with proverbs and traditional stories representing oral knowledge and the collective memory of a peasant society, and by patriotic and religious symbols.

In the Estado Novo textbooks, History, according to Lévi-Strauss, replaces mythology, with the same function. Wisely led by their teachers, as they learnt to read children were also learning the official world order.

In destitute fishing and peasant communities, illiteracy was extraordinarily high. For most fishermen, school was a mere bureaucracy, as the minimum level of compulsory education was essential for obtaining a professional fishing licence. The Ria de Aveiro was no exception. As far as the *moliceiro* was concerned, its crew, builders and painters were either illiterate or hardly able to sign their names when they applied for their licences or registered their boat with the Port Authority. Because of this rural community's low level of literacy, the sentences that underline the panels (always full of spelling mistakes) were traditionally painted by the few 'literate' artists in the region.

The textbooks had an obvious influence over the symbols and images that were painted on the *moliceiro*, especially in the Historical and Religious panels, particularly those depicting historical characters such as king Dinis, the saintly knight Nuno Álvares Pereira, Henry the Navigator, Vasco da Gama, Pedro Álvares Cabral and the poet Camões. On the *moliceiro*, all these

characters were similarly portrayed in a solemn, static way, with different levels of accuracy and talent, but always following the same model. It is still easy to notice the influence of the image that illustrates the text “Camões” (in the fourth year reader) over several Historical panels depicting this famous Portuguese writer, adopted by the regime as the symbol of a glorious cultural tradition.

The glory, faith, ingenuity and wisdom of such historical characters is conveyed, in both panels and schoolbooks, through symbolic motifs such as the sword, the flag, the ship, the castle, the map, the astrolabe, the compass or the book (Camões’s epic poem *Lusíadas*). The Maltese Cross identifies the sails of the ships from the Age of the Discoveries, whose image illustrates the cover of the fourth year reader. Omnipresent in Estado Novo iconography and, consequently, in textbooks (and even in the classroom), the Cross was represented as the hero’s companion and source of inspiration. This holy cross and the Portuguese flag appear in every category of panels except, as a sign of respect, in comic panels.

Religious panels give preference to the protective maternal figures of the Virgin Mary, Queen Saint Isabel and the local Saint Joana of Aveiro. Queen Saint Isabel and Saint Joana were the subject of several texts in which their sanctity and miracles were reported as true, unquestionable historical facts.

Textbooks also taught children the stereotype of women as mere mothers and housewives, a ‘noble mission’ girls had to accept since early childhood. According to the ruling ideology, women happily sacrificed their lives, working hard in their home for their family, with children as their reward and major blessing. Once again, agriculture was the sole non-domestic activity books allowed and celebrated for women.

Textbook readers and *moliceiro* panels shared a limited referential universe in time and space, one that is confined to small villages, rural environments, peasant communities, family and everyday work. The notion that hard work in the open air was healthy and an advantage prevailed, though panels sometimes complained about the misery, difficulties and dangers of work in the countryside and at sea.

Some moralistic texts were even directly transferred from schoolbooks to the panels of the *moliceiro*, such was their ideological impact. The panel entitled “A good deed”, for instance, where a young man carries an old woman’s bundle of wood, copies both the image and the title of the homonymous text “A good deed”, from the fourth year reader, besides inspiring other panels.

Similarly, the text “Two Portuguese” recalls the notion of “one great united Nation”, which originated panels such as “Our blood is the same colour”, “We’re both children of God” and “Different in colour, but we share the same country”, where different races worship the Cross and the Portuguese flag, as equals.

Although these ideological messages were conveyed in books aimed at children aged seven to ten years, this does not mean that we should consider the art of the *moliceiro* as the product of childish minds. In reality, painters simply retained, reproduced and, sometimes, adapted the few teachings they learnt in primary school and that the social, economic, cultural and religious context perpetuated in everyday life.

Nevertheless, and in order to avoid subversive messages or shocking images (in moral and political terms), between 1957 and 1964 – the most repressive years of the regime – even the *moliceiro* panels had to be registered (with a transcription and description of both sentences and images) at the local Port Authority, together with the boat.

Moliceiros have also taken part in local religious-secular popular festivals (*romarias*). At first they were simply a means of transport but in the 1950s their role began to change. Local press reports of popular festivals underwent an evolution throughout the 20th century, as a reflection of ideological, political and social (r)evolutions. During the first years of the century, and still under the influence of the Romantics, there is a genuine fascination with the ‘beauty and purity’ of popular culture. With the 1910 Republic and the period of political instability that followed, rival local factions appeared to take possession of popular festivals and use them as political weapons, accusing each other of bad planning, management and propaganda, in bitter sensationalist articles. Later, when the Estado Novo began to reorganize (i.e. to ‘normalize’) the Nation, local powers also

manipulated local festivals, which become artificial celebrations of the so-called 'folklore'. After a moralizing clean-up that extinguished all vestiges of ancient pagan practices, Catholic authorities took strict control over the religious aspect of these events. Consequently, press articles criticized the so-called 'immoral pagan practices' and emphasized the ever-growing elitism of these highly civilized and orderly 'modern' festivities that attracted tourists and middle-class visitors from all over the country. Their original actors and owners, the local people, had become secondary characters who acted for the pleasure of foreign visitors.

The colourful moliceiros are indeed excellent symbols for local folklore, and they have inspired a series of events where popular culture becomes 'cultural entertainment' to be consumed by an outside public. In March 1954, Aveiro hosted the first Moliceiro Panel Competition – created, supervised and judged exclusively by local representatives of political power – in which the three most 'typically' decorated boats (true meaning: painted with colourful scenes of rural bliss and harmless misspelled sentences) received lots of official attention and propaganda but a modest monetary reward. According to Gramsci, this strategy of rewarding individual or group activities considered by higher authorities as worthy of praise and distinction, must be integrated in the 'civilizing' actions of the State, a strategy that is always immediately published in the official media.

2. ELEMENTS OF CULTURAL RESISTANCE.

Despite what has been said, under the cover of hegemony, messages with double meanings would come across. Authorities were particularly attentive to and actively supervised this potential means of popular communication, hence of popular subversion. The moliceiro paintings were the main unauthorized and anonymous method by which the local people could express themselves, a fact that encouraged parody, grotesque and subversive messages as a counter-celebration of official values, as perceived by Bakhtin.

The anonymous moliceiro artists developed their own codes, myths, heroes, and social standards. Isolation, homogeneity of conditions, and mutual dependence among subordinates favoured the development of a local culture, often with a strong ‘us *versus* them’ imagery. Bakhtin describes this sub-discourse of symbolic defiance, whose anonymity and festivity evade certain everyday relationships of power, replacing them with different relationships, less asymmetrical perhaps but still aware of power. The practical result is that popular culture – where these panels are included – achieves the anonymity of collective property, constantly adjusted, revised, abbreviated or even ignored. The multiplicity of authors provides a protective cover, and when it no longer serves current interests sufficiently, it vanishes: panels are changed, repainted, rewritten or simply erased.

Moliceiro paintings tended to be seen as the product of a rude, simple and naive local picturesque. For almost a century, essays and ethnographies repeated those words, guided by cultural bias. Indeed, spelling mistakes, together with simple straightforward images in local settings, seem to prove that they are the product of an ignorant, self-centred community. However, social actors sometimes actually staged (and still stage) their own ignorance, creatively exploiting those stereotypes designed to depreciate and dominate them. Considered as ignorant by political and scientific authorities and aware that any kind of direct criticism would be severely punished, painters would hide criticism behind the mask of ignorance in order to divert the authorities’ attention. As Eric Hobsbawm stated: “the refusal to understand is a form of class struggle” (1973: 13).

Epic symbols, for instance, were not just reproduced but also adapted to local heroes: the ship-builders and sailors who work within the sphere of the moliceiro are traditionally pictured on horseback, in a warrior-like attitude, often with sword and shield and a flag and castle in the background. This is an original and subversive adaptation of the national saga to the local saga of common subsistence.

On the other hand, openly political texts such as “Estado Novo”, “The Head of State” and “The Government of the Nation”, a predictable presence in every year’s schoolbooks, which praised Salazar’s and his regime’s virtues, had no influence on the *moliceiro*’s writings and panels, though some ethnographies of that time tried to deny this fact. Ancient History, a remote past with its semi-legendary heroes, was celebrated by popular tradition as a wealthy, peaceful golden age, just like the mythical past of kings, queens, knights and princesses of oral tradition. It was, however, impossible to celebrate contemporary mystified History, which the surrounding reality of poverty proved to be mere fiction. *Moliceiros* ignored political issues (even major issues, such as the colonial war); they did not criticize authorities, but they did not praise them either.

As far as the stereotypes about women are concerned, in the real world of the *moliceiro* they did not work exactly like the official representations and discourses intended. In order to guarantee the family’s subsistence, women had (and still have) to work a lot outdoors, and housework and childcare were but small tasks in their long list of everyday chores. Women, as commonly depicted in the *moliceiro* panels, are peasants, fishmongers (*varinas*), fisherwomen (working on the beach and hauling the nets, an essential and very hard task in the traditional fishing process), always workers in their working environment, without any reference to childcare, housework or even maternity (except for the comic panels that satirize pregnant brides). The reading selections in the textbooks portray family scenes in a rural context, with clear hierarchies symbolized through the height of the characters (men taller than women). On the contrary, couples, as depicted in the *moliceiro*, are of a similar height and share the same functions, as they are equally active and relevant in everyday life.

The official image of the hard-working self-sacrificing peasant was celebrated in serious social panels about work, but it could be heavily satirized in comic panels as well. In a region so close to the sea, fishermen were celebrated in an almost epic manner, instead of peasants. High-sea fishermen were never satirized, revealing an attitude very close to the rhetoric of the regime, which

purported to represent high-sea fishermen as the legitimate heirs of the heroes of the Discoveries, a mere rhetorical device, as they actually lived in miserable conditions.

Indeed, ideological supervision by central and local authorities was not totally effective. Painters satirized typical drunkards in the local pub (*taberna*) with a humour that exposed the comic side of reality, instead of following the institutional moralistic discourse. Even so, the moliceiro's comments are always light-hearted and amusing, because reality actually complements strict good and evil – or allowed *versus* forbidden – patterns of behaviour, based upon religious, state and paternal authority, with rather pragmatic and flexible notes, that have survived for decades.

IV. THE *MOLICEIRO* CULTURE IN THE PRESENT: STILL STAGING TRADITION.

The purpose of the moliceiro has changed considerably in the past few decades. The former invaluable instrument of an entire region's economy has become a mere tourist attraction, a symbol whose preservation depends on each owner's goodwill and financial ability. Pollution, economic evolution and emigration have driven many people away from this unique way of life. Chemical fertilizers have replaced the seaweed as fertilizer for the sandy soils, the salt industry has plummeted and roads have stolen the moliceiro's role as the main means of transport for the riverside population. Although a thousand moliceiros were registered with the Aveiro Port Authority in 1935, nowadays, there are only about forty. Boat building almost ceased during the decades of emigration of the late 1960s and 1970s, but since the mid-1980s moliceiros have been revived as cultural assets. With increasing frequency, local mayors and authorities are ordering new moliceiros from the surviving artisans, to be used for tourism and guided tours of the Ria, for local museums or international exhibitions, and for public display in a nearby canal as cultural heritage. Private companies also operate sightseeing tours aboard moliceiros. The tradition of the moliceiro is not doomed to disappear because the boat was adapted to a new social and economic reality, thus assuring its survival and eventual multiplication. Conversely, had the moliceiros and boat owners

persisted in working only for a rural environment that does not exist anymore, the boat would have been sentenced to an inevitable end.

Nowadays, popular culture and its production have to be increasingly attentive to the market and to the rules of demand and competitiveness, and this applies both to utilitarian and non-utilitarian productions. This process of refunctionalisation is controlled from afar by the demand of a heterogeneous mass that, generally speaking, searched for products that are vaguely symbolic of traditional Portugal. Without wishing to advocate for the demand for “the fundamental elements of Portuguese culture” (Dias, 1961: 97-119) in the ‘soul’ of the objects conceived by the people, the handcrafted product is nonetheless liable of becoming a commodity that in many cases no longer is the expression of a community. The anonymity of the market and the need to earn a living can shape and transform the artisans, as these shape and transform their own pieces. In the case of the *moliceiros*, for example, during the last two decades there has been a clear rise in the number of comic erotic panels whose originality and easy humour greatly appeal to tourists, although until then these subjects were traditionally in the minority and less explicit, though numerous. The comic effect was usually the product of verbal innuendo. Resorting to more and more unequivocal and elaborate images, present day comic erotic panels attract professional and amateur photographers who, in turn, disseminate their images to other potential visitors and to the media, all of them sources of profit for the region.

When Gramsci’s inventory comes first and it is the object that has to adapt, when the market economy – the economic power that has actually replaced hegemonic ideologies – does not understand culture itself, the cultural heritage is seen from outside, dependent on the images that others create and divulge. Thus, we get consumer goods that, albeit acclaimed, are part of a commercial context that is removed from the reality that created them, and we lose the possibility of understanding their function and meaning.

The demand for genuine products may result in a staged authenticity, in which cultural objects purport to be produced and accepted as genuine, or at least, as reasonably similar to the pre-

massification situation. Hobsbawm considers that invented traditions are an attempt to create a continuous link with the past and with a community's identity (1983: 9). The concept of 'traditional' is frequently associated with 'authentic', which is not always correct, as the maintenance of authenticity is a phenomenon that is directly connected to the process of continuity and change. Nonetheless, this staged authenticity may occasionally lead to the cultural rebirth of traditions, to the renewal of a local identity and even to the invention of new traditions and identities.

Once again, we take the example of festivals. The celebration of moliceiros and their paintings has never been a genuine popular practice. Instead, it is a recently-invented tradition, to again quote from Hobsbawm, that is exploited, even today, by political and especially by economic and commercial powers who artificially multiply reasons and occasions for such a profitable tourism-oriented celebration. At first, in fact, the boat owners were very reluctant to participate in those competitions and they had to be threatened and bribed with consolation prizes in order to take part in the showy boat parade, along the central canal in Aveiro. This attitude has changed considerably nowadays, as these monetary prizes are one of the few remaining ways that the owners of moliceiros have for reaping some profit from their boats.

In effect, the real importance of these events resides not so much in the strategy for preserving the marks of the past, but most especially in recovering the more genuine aspect of the festival, that of a collective celebration in which everyone is potentially a leading actor. During the celebrations, regattas and festivals, the roles become confused and it is increasingly hard to distinguish tourists from locals, as the latter may behave like tourists on their own grounds. The interchange of codes and cultural practices, albeit only ephemeral, blur the frontiers that separate high culture from popular culture, in a desecration of the conventional criteria for aesthetic legitimacy.

Nowadays, we cannot speak of a 'rebirth' of the moliceiro boat, but rather of its 'metamorphosis', as we have not returned to the living conditions of the past nor has the moliço any

function in this new social context. The *moliceiro* reappeared at the end of the 1980s, as a cultural object of interest to tourists, regardless of its original function, which could have been any other. The *moliceiro*'s metamorphosis occurs at the level of its function, of its meaning, as one element of an entire socio-economic structure, whilst retaining the significant, the shape, the object itself.

Generally speaking, in the ongoing recovery of the *moliceiros* for tourism, modern painters tend to imitate or even reproduce traditional images. They try to stage the past in the present. They exaggerate their traditionalism as they reinvent tradition. The historical examples of great kings, warriors and navigators, along with the neo-epic celebration of high-sea fishermen, have survived. In our time, they are even represented in a higher proportion, if we compare present panels with their counterparts of the fifties and sixties. Luis de Camões, for instance, is represented more often now than then. During our fieldwork, we found many examples of renewed traditional panels: “May God be your guide fishermen”; “God and Country!” (a soldier-knight); “The whole sea is ours!!” (Henry, The Navigator); “The pen and the sword in his hands” (Luis de Camões); “Old times in Newfoundland” (traditional cod-fishing).

Present-day painters reproduce those ideologically oriented symbols as if they were the remnants of some lost rural paradise, as they attempt to reinvent what they consider to be picturesque, genuine, popular, part of the national heritage (whatever this means for them, though they know it means high profits). Still, they do not quite – or they pretend not to – understand that such images and messages are misplaced in time and space. The surrounding ideological context has radically changed. Moreover, what was once seen as ‘genuine’ was indeed what the State taught and allowed; it was by no means a trustworthy representation of reality.

Modern painters, some of them with a secondary school education or even graduated in Art, appear to set aside the modern artistic techniques that they master, as they try to create popular-like yet not popular paintings, in an attempt to obtain the prestigious social status of popular artists. Now, there is even a reputed female *moliceiro* painter, who is also a secondary school teacher of Visual Arts. The dialogue between the artist and his/her materials becomes not only a form of

elevation but also a rebellion against poverty, by turning a seemingly worthless object (a wooden boat meant to collect seaweed) into a delicate work of art. There is a considerable pecuniary reward for a commonly recognized amateur talent, though nowadays those amateurs have already been engulfed by the tourism-oriented machine established around the *moliceiro*. In fact, the pressure to build new boats and to renew the panels on time for the numerous summer festivals, as well as the tourists' easy preference for 'perfect' drawings that do not require a complex interpretation, lead to a growing demand for new and skilled painters. Increasingly less popular and more qualified, these new painters sometimes find it difficult to resist to a manifest display of their artistic skills.

Of the new subjects that have been introduced to modern panels, the figure of women is now depicted in a two-fold manner. The difference between the local woman (always a *varina* or countrywoman) and the 'other' woman (the woman from the cinema and television, from the city, that is to say, the modern urban woman) is denoted by their clothing and functions: work and working garments (headscarf, blouse, round skirt, apron, bare feet), in the first case; leisure and leisure clothing (suggestive red dresses, long hair, swimsuit or underwear), in the second. Artists tend to over-emphasize the female body, depicting women in a carnivalesque manner. The production (work) symbology is also full of allusions to reproduction (sex). This can be seen in the several metaphors in which women are referred to as fish or a good catch, and in the erotic paintings of women, in a context of work (fishing, hunting, gathering seaweed, farming) that becomes one of pleasure.

The *varinas* and fisherwomen continue to be strong, full of spirit and quick comebacks, subservient to man in theory but powerful in practice, an inversion of the traditional social role that was assisted by the massive emigration of their men folk. In an ongoing context of poverty and general hard work without exception, unmarked by stereotypical bourgeois behaviour, the 'foreign' woman is never included in laudatory panels such as those that praise *varinas* and fisherwomen; on the contrary, she is the object of extremely satirical paintings where she is mocked because of her sophistication and laziness. These women are represented in their beds and boudoirs, lying on a

couch watching television, sunbathing on the beach, or strolling around the spaces where others (the locals) work.

Modern women are represented in erotic situations, where they are respectively the object and the subject of sexual desire and sexual encounters. But, nowadays, women are actually men's peers when it comes to express their sexual intentions and awareness: in panels satirizing condoms, for instance, women are the ones who actually instruct ignorant men on how to use them. When these women are represented as varinas or rural workers, discourse may become poetical and laudatory, but parody still prevails, with witty remarks and comments full of sexual innuendo, where women lead the way.

In the panels on everyday life and work, we note a Bakhtinian carnivalisation in the reversal of the roles of men and domestic animals. The donkey is frequently depicted with human characteristics, as a farmer, bad student, wise guy and, especially, as a politician. There is a reversal of roles and positions on the scene, such as a man carrying a donkey on his back or pulling a cart whose reins are held by a donkey. In the popular imaginary, this reversal represents a more or less secret desire to also invert the social order of eternal poverty and domination. In the post-Estado Novo Portugal, any resistance that may remain in moliceiro culture takes the form of heavy mockery and is directed towards those authorities that make so difficult the once free and careless exploitation (i.e. dilapidation) of the Ria's resources and – above all – towards the eternal scapegoats of democratic Portugal: politicians.

Police authority, for example, is always satirized. And so are priests and monks, because of their alleged luxury disguised as virtue (a panel: "Which one has sinned the most?"), though religion itself is under no circumstances satirized. All professions are celebrated because all work is honourable; but all professions can also be themes for caricatures without malice, with the exception of the Master moliceiros, painters or ship builders and high-sea fishermen, because of the dangers they face. In the symbolic dispute, the winner is the voice of the people as expressed by the

voice of the *moliceiro* through satire, criticism and complaint, thanks to the freedom of expression that has been guaranteed by democracy.

Bearing these examples in mind, it is easy to conclude that resistance (in the shape of satire) is much stronger and declared in our time, and aims at the once almighty and revered agents of the church and of authority, as well as at the agents of a democratic regime that, ironically enough, released people from oppression. The recently acquired freedom of speech did not discipline the acid wit of *moliceiro* culture, on the contrary, as we have witnessed with the diverse representations of women, sex, politicians, clerics, and police officers.

One rarely finds panels that allude to middle-class life scenes: the panel depicts the people/worker, based on his everyday activities, or the royalty/nobility inspired by popular imagination. Nowadays, the great vehicle of social elevation and levelling is television, and its influence appears not only in some panels (where TV sets are actually represented) but also in the new characters and events that appear in the *moliceiro* panels: football players like Figo and Jardel; Amália; “menino Tonecas”; politicians like Mário Soares or António Guterres and the crisis and scandals they had to face; the feud between Rui Rio e Pinto da Costa; the Portuguese entrance to European Union in 1986 and the illusory prosperity of the European funds; o Euro (and its previous designation “Ecu”); EXPO98; *Big Brother*; renowned socialites who become overnight TV commentators and hosts of ephemeral shows; the national craze of the 2004 European Football Championship as well as the 2006 World Football Cup; the rivalry between local football teams, among many others. A reiterated or polemic news event (like the illegal bullfights of Barrancos, or the Brazilian nudist community of Colina do Sol) may rapidly generate a new panel, for rapid consumption and soon replaced, for the sole reason that it has appeared on television.

All these events, subjects and characters are democratically offered to people by television, an obligatory item in every household of modern Portugal. Except for the football related examples, all other cases are represented with intentional grotesque traces and subject to very satirical observations. Television merges images and words, just like a *moliceiro* panel, and thus becomes an

irresistible source of inspiration for painters, especially when the immediate reality has run out of subject matters for scorn. However, the Portuguese football squad, as well as local football teams, are revered symbols and regarded as proud representatives of a nation, city, village or region's identity and are therefore untouchable subjects, portrayed accordingly. The national saga of Discoveries has found in football a suitable though unexpected successor: both create an illusory sense of pride and divert attention from the actual situation of the country.

Television is free and democratic; everyone has access to its contents, which are commented without any restraint or responsibility. Every person may become a commentator and expert on any topic, regardless of literacy and instruction, as television offers endless subjects for both individual and collective catharsis. By representing, commenting and satirizing these and other topics, modern *moliceiro* culture illustrates in a very lucid way the two sides of the unrestrained power of television.

V. CONCLUSION.

Popular culture can be used as an allegory and converted into a historical, ethnic and ethical heritage, which allegedly belongs exclusively to an ambiguous character called 'the people'. In fact, from the onset, the concept of 'popular culture' suffers from a semantic ambiguity as a result of the multiplicity of meanings that are couched in each of these words. Popular cultures tend to be characterized as the mores of subordinate social groups, in defiance of subjugation. Popular culture, nonetheless, more than a permanent and systematic form of resistance, is the various expressions of a social group's mode of living with that dominance (Grignon and Passeron, 1989).

Consequently, some objects of popular culture, such as the *moliceiro* boat and its panels, are rearticulated so as to produce oppositional meanings, thus creating forms of symbolic resistance. Popular culture is shaped by the dominant class's attempt at hegemony and by the forms of opposition to this attempt. This does not consist simply in imposing a mass culture that coincidentally agrees with the dominant ideology, nor simply in spontaneous oppositional cultures.

This is instead a space of negotiation between both, where cultural and ideological values and features, both dominant and subordinate, mix in different exchanges.

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci provides another essential clue for any serious and inclusive study of popular culture, when he affirms that “the starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory” (11,1,i).

In his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes also searched for the subliminal discourse, the ideological substrate that is hidden in texts that are not written by a single individual but authored by History, a concept that is close to that of Gramsci’s historical imaginary, or the occult inventory.

This is precisely the lesson that the history of *moliceiros* teaches sociologists: the written and iconic texts which are visible on each boat are the product of a network of political, ideological, social, and economical circumstances, hardly detectable and often too distant or taken for granted to be critically recognized, even by those who draw, paint and write (and live) under their influence. However, Gramsci’s ‘invisible inventory’ is the source of inspiration for traditional panels and allows their organization into categories, with the pre-established set of rules tacitly followed for each one. In our time, new subject matters are added everyday as a result of the volatile power of the media, though the popular artist (a spokesperson for the community) chooses which subjects should be erased and which ones should be reproduced and perpetuated.

The eager quest for the source of genuine Portuguese culture, inspired most of the pseudo-scientific discourse that, in the 20th century, intended to transform the account of popular traditions into a description and justification of national identity itself. Therefore, this brief history of *moliceiros* also confirms that institutional channels of instruction and propaganda, official representations of reality, and documental sources in general must be carefully evaluated when studying a country dominated by censors and by hegemonic powers for decades. Poetic and political devices were used in combination in order to build and preserve the allegory of tradition as

the guardian of true national identity; the myth of glorious origins that legitimated the self-proclaimed prestige of subsequent governments, as well as several other manipulated truths, often still repeated at present.

More than evidence of 'tradition' or 'resistance', objects such as the moliceiro boat are now considered as representing the cultural identity and heritage of a local community closely linked to a specific ecosystem like the Ria de Aveiro. In the present case, the moliceiro panels are symbolic inter-semiotic representations of the values, practices and representations shared by the community. But nowadays the moliceiro paintings are also part of a lucrative economic and tourist structure organized around the object-boat, that has lost almost all its former social and economic functions and has been reinvented as a nationally and internationally recognized cultural symbol for the Ria de Aveiro, that clearly distinguishes this region from its competitors in other tourist regions. Once again, it is important to emphasize that what we have here is a metamorphosis instead of a rebirth of the cultural object, with new functions within a new context, clearly oriented by the demand of the tertiary sector.

Nonetheless, present-day agents of tourism and market economy cannot disassociate themselves from the historical imaginary or from the inventory that motivated, contextualized and sustained this form of popular culture during centuries, under pains of creating, also in Portugal, the ethnographic theatres or the museums of lost practices into which so many cultures have been transformed.

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