

# Popular and Visual Culture



Popular and Visual Culture:  
Design, Circulation and Consumption

Edited by

Clara Sarmiento and Ricardo Campos  
with Rúben Rodrigues de Pinho  
and Nuno Duarte

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Popular and Visual Culture:  
Design, Circulation and Consumption,  
Edited by Clara Sarmiento, Ricardo Campos,  
Rúben Rodrigues de Pinho and Nuno Duarte

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## INTRODUCTION

# THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES ON POPULAR AND VISUAL CULTURE

CLARA SARMENTO AND RICARDO CAMPOS

*Popular & Visual Culture: Design, Circulation and Consumption* is a transnational project by authors from Portugal, the United States of America, United Kingdom, France, India and Italy, a project that fosters a multicultural dialogue with multiple origins, both in geographical and academic terms, and covers an unexpected collection of areas, often ignored by mainstream academia. From the onset, this book questions the concepts of visual and popular culture, terms which are currently applied both to describe scientific fields, as operative concepts in theoretical discourse, and to characterize specific civilizational conditions.

In the pages of *Popular & Visual Culture: Design, Circulation and Consumption*, authors are guided by the principles of Umberto Eco, for whom all cultural processes are communication processes, crossed by a multitude of subcodes, decodable through extra- and inter-semiotic conditions and occasions (1976; 1978). Behind facts and objects seemingly unintentional, that common sense tends to consider insignificant, there is a socially determined production of meaning, although often with no identifiable author. In the rituals of everyday judgment, there are many symptoms of Pierre Bourdieu's 'cultural arbitrary', which run the effects of production and reception of meaning that contribute to the images constructed by participants in the social dialogue. When it comes to images, Eco states, we are in the presence of macroscopic blocks of texts analyzable through a set of conventional relations between the relevant units of a graphic system. Iconic signs are actually texts, as evidenced by the fact that their verbal equivalent is not a simple word but a description, an entire speech, or even a book, like this one. The process through which objects acquire their meaning is related to values and socio-cultural constraints that transform them into vehicles of assertion of an identity, or of representation of a space, a context, an experience, with their inherent

aesthetic phenomena and morpho-symbolic characteristics. As any culture can be considered a set of symbolic systems, in this book we explore the status, designation, characteristics, and history of visual and popular art forms from around the world, from Portugal to India, from England to France, from Sardinia to the United States.

For many, visual culture is taken to be a relatively recent area of study derived from a range of disciplinary contributions and academic curricula. Therefore, rather than a well-established discipline, it has become a broad area of research with a tendency for trans-disciplinarity. As such, it encompasses scholars from diverse scientific, artistic and humanistic fields, who seek to understand image, vision and visuality as socially and historically determined human constructions (Walker and Chaplin, 1997). The notion of visual culture also refers to a specific terrain of human cultural production, namely to the universe of visual languages and objects, like graffiti, photography, cinema, advertising, boat-decoration or mural painting. Within this framework, a given community or population's visual culture is understood as a system of pictorial and graphic creation, of visual grammars and their forms of communication. It also includes the social, cultural and symbolic relations established under the construction and sharing of visual goods. Likewise, visual culture is recurrently used as an epithet to describe our contemporary condition, viewed by many as being deeply immersed in the world of images. The central role of audiovisual technologies and media are a possible explanation for this state of affairs, along with the growing stylization and aestheticization of everyday life. All these elements find in images and visual communication the ideal means to construct narratives and confer symbolic meanings to the world.

Visual figurations of popular culture should be studied as the support of a deeply motivated symbolic discourse on the values shared by a community. Its reflective and symbolic dimension is based on the syntagmatic organization of visual motifs and on their paradigmatic relation with the underlying value system. According to Erwin Panofsky, within a culture, visual motifs and their composition become carriers of a secondary, conventional meaning, conveying both abstract and concrete, personal and collective messages (1997 [1939]). Therefore, the pragmatic dimension of the object is closely related to its significant inclusion in the sensitivity of a shared culture. In *Popular & Visual Culture: Design, Circulation and Consumption*, artistic practices of popular culture are seen as paradigmatic acts, as archetypes that enable the analysis of an entire cultural territory. They are related to their status within the community's performative context and patterns of inter-individual communication. The

ultimate goal of a background study on visual and popular culture—like this one—will always be the construction of a text based upon the multiple texts that sustain life in society.

## **Towards a Definition of Visual Culture**

But, after all, what is visual culture? It is far from being an irrelevant question, insofar as we do not seem to find a consensus regarding the term's meaning or content. The term is applied equally to describe an academic theme or discipline, as an operational concept in theoretical discourse, or to characterize a certain cultural context. This vagueness actually leads to some confusion, given that various uses are juxtaposed. Walker and Chaplin define visual culture as a set of “[...] material artefacts, buildings and images, plus time-based media and performances, produced by human labour and imagination, which serve aesthetic, symbolic, ritualistic or ideological-political ends, and/or practical functions, and which address the sense of sight to a significant extent” (1994: 1-2).

It is thus often argued that we live in an ocularcentric era, where vision holds a privileged status over other sensory organs<sup>1</sup>. Classen (1997), Jenks (1995) or Synnot (1992), all defend that vision is currently the most powerful sensory organ, and the one symbolically most celebrated in recent history, given the complex technological apparatus which has been developed to assure the expansion of the regime of the visible. Likewise, it is a fact that, especially since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, different technological inventions have greatly enhanced our ability to visualize the world and communicate through images (Macphee, 2002)<sup>2</sup>. Mirzoeff speaks even of a *visualization of existence*, claiming that “Modern life takes place onscreen [...] Human experience is now more visual and visualized than ever before from the satellite picture to medical images of the interior of the human body [...] In this swirl of imagery, seeing is much more than believing. It is not just a part of everyday life, it is everyday life” (1999: 1).

We are, therefore, more inclined to use the term *visualist* when referring to a cultural model that is strongly inoculated by images and the visual dimension. We would now like to review the distinctions made so far, in order to clarify concepts and make our following arguments easier to grasp. Thus, we may consider: *Visual Studies* (or the academic subject ‘Visual Culture’) construed as a field of study; *visual culture* as subject matter or a theme that can be explored; *visualist culture* as qualitative. We will be particularly interested here in the second meaning, visual culture, as it refers to something which is built and shared by a group of people—a

given society, community or sector—to constitute a specific sphere of culture. We consider that such a theme includes both the ways of seeing and visually representing the world around, and the ways in which this is historically and culturally shaped. Consequently, visual culture does not limit itself to the processes involved in the production of visual communication devices, as it also considers the specific ways in which relations established within the realm of the visual occur. Therefore, this subject matter is derived from the intersection of the spheres of *visibility* and *visuality*. Visibility may be understood simply as that which emerges within the domain of the visible, and as such, is perceived by the eye. Visuality has a broader and more complex scope. It refers to how the gaze (as instrument of perception) and the visible (or perceivable) are historically and socially constructed. Thus, it emphasizes the structural and circumstantial conditions that determine diverse forms of observing and representing reality visually. Visuality is present in ideology, economy, religion, in the individual and collective conscience. It gives shape to ideas, thoughts, desires and needs, and in turn is nurtured by them.

When we speak of visual culture, we are referring to a system made up from a combination of universes and sub-universes, with their agents, objects and specific processes of production, dissemination, and reception of visual goods. It is not a static system, but one whose constant renewal results from the rate at which its agents and technological processes change, as well as from the acting powers that determine cooperative and conflicting relations. It is also a worldview, a particular way of perceiving and portraying reality that is not only connected to forms of seeing, but also to modes of representation which appeal to different languages, cognitive levels and sensory models<sup>3</sup>. We may even speak of a dominant visual culture and admit, for instance, the existence of diverse visual micro- or sub-cultures that correspond to different social groups, aesthetic and ideological proposals, or interests and intentions, which present alternative, though not necessarily antagonistic, ways of seeing and representing the world.

To make these distinctions more operative, one should consider three signaling spheres of visual culture (Campos, 2013). Firstly, as a *visual repository* associated to specific collective contexts, where certain visual languages and signs are constructed and circulated. Secondly, as a mode of visually learning and deciphering reality, considering the cultural and psycho-social nature of perception and cognition. Thirdly, as a *system* consisting of a technological, political, symbolic and economic apparatus, framed by a broader socio-cultural and historical horizon in which it operates, including the number of social agents with different interests and

degrees of power, acting within the field of visibility and visibility. These are spheres which obviously cross and overlap each other. However, in terms of operativeness, they can be considered as coherent fields in which to develop serious, stimulating research on visual culture.

## The Many Shades of Popular Culture

The debate around *popular culture*, *mass culture* and *folklore* pervaded the whole 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1950's, Dwight MacDonald stated preemptorily that "folk art grew from below. It was a spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people, shaped by themselves, whereas Mass Culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audience are passive consumers" (MacDonald, 1957). Theories such as MacDonald's, based upon rigid hierarchies and subjective evaluations of the intellectual elite, are not operative any longer. Obviously, members of the same culture share sets of concepts, images and ideas which enable them to think and feel about the world, and thus to interpret the world, in roughly—and we must emphasize *roughly*—similar ways, as they share, broadly speaking, the same 'cultural codes' (Hall, 1997). This means that culture depends on the approximate but not necessarily identical way its participants interpret the world and events around. Regardless of the importance of communication and of sharing common meanings, in every culture there is always a great diversity in the way social actors interpret or represent any topic. Popular culture is no exception.

In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Portuguese popular culture and traditions, either genuine, ideologically directed or even invented, were imposed and manipulated by the ruling (political and ideological) powers, in order to instil values and norms of behaviour through repetition, example and instruction, as a means of facing the threat of a world in evolution. These practices exploited an artificial, albeit very effective, ideological basis, by selecting a convenient historical past or ethnographic present. Traditional popular culture, in its ideal 'folkloric' form, was a perfect medium for reorganizing Portuguese society. The idea of a 'pure popular culture' that portrayed everyday life from the naive, non-critical viewpoint of 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnographers, matched the regime's ideal of a nation rich in folklore and picturesque customs; a self-celebrating popular culture, created by 'good people', mostly deeply religious peasants or fishermen who led austere, humble lives. Actually, the exaltation of handicraft, traditional costume, archaic subsistence agriculture, and

rudimentary means of transport reflected the endemic poverty that characterized the majority of the country, until late in the 1970's.

Therefore, it is worth undertaking an overview of the forms of cultural organization that kept the ideological world moving within certain countries, like Portugal, as it is worth examining how those forms functioned in reality. Texts and practices of popular culture often move within that which Gramsci calls a balance of compromise between power and consent, that is to say, within hegemony. Hegemonic relations occur within all the groups that constitute society. They also occur within the complex of practices and theoretical activities which the dominant classes use not only to justify and keep their power, but also to gain the consent of and exercise hegemony over subaltern classes (Gramsci, 1934).

Nowadays, the notion of popular culture must always take into account two possible meanings. Firstly, popular culture as *folklore*, as a regional and traditional cultural expression, whose manifestations are produced by the community and for the community, without primordial profit, related to the subsistence economy in the rural and maritime world, and to the primary sectors of economy. And secondly, popular culture as *mass culture*, a global culture whose manifestations are produced by corporations and industries, with the use of technologies and the sole purpose of making a profit, regardless of the participation of the community or the individual (consumer) that is targeted. Mass culture is linked to consumption, leisure, the superfluous, and to the secondary and tertiary sectors of economy. Popular culture is indeed the subject of various interpretations and controversies, having lost much of the sociological and cultural categorizations that served to define a background of cultural productions in opposition to elite and erudite cultures. This opposition has dwindled, due to the wide circulation of cultural objects and behaviours through different social areas and their appropriation by different groups and social media.

In the present, political and ideological hegemonies have been surpassed by the economic hegemony of global capitalism, which also exercises its power over popular culture, both as folklore and mass culture. Indeed, even regional and traditional popular culture and its productions have become increasingly attentive to the market and the rules of demand and competitiveness, and this applies to both utilitarian and non-utilitarian productions. This process of refunctionalisation is controlled remotely by the demands of a heterogeneous mass that, in general, seeks products that are vaguely symbolic of an idealized past. Without advocating here the quest for the fundamental elements of national cultures in the 'soul' of objects designed by the people, traditional handmade products are in fact



likely to become objects of consumption, often no longer expressing a community's cultural identity. The anonymity of the market and the need to 'make a living' can shape and transform craftsmen/women as they shape and transform their own creations.

We will now focus specifically on the 'regional and traditional' approach to popular culture, and discuss its theoretical implications. The concept of 'traditional' is often associated with the concept of 'authentic', which is not always correct, because the maintenance of authenticity is a phenomenon directly linked to continuity and change, as it happens with any cultural process. However, the demand for genuine objects may result in a staged authenticity where cultural objects are produced industrially but accepted as authentic, or at least as fairly similar to their pre-massification status. Though re/invented, such traditions are a clear attempt to create a link of continuity with the past and the identity of a community (Hobsbawn, 1983). But cases of staged authenticity can occasionally lead to the revival of cultural traditions, the renewal of local identities, and even to the invention of new traditions and identities.

Popular iconic and written productions are the outcome of a network of political, economic, ideological and social circumstances, far too often hardly detectable and taken for granted to be critically recognized, even by those who draw, paint or write (and live) under their influence. However, the starting point for any critical elaboration must be the consciousness of what one really is, as a product of all those historical processes which have deposited a multitude of individual traces, without leaving an inventory (Gramsci, 1934). Therefore, Gramsci's invisible inventory may well function as a source of inspiration for popular artists and allow the categorization of their productions, with a set of tacit predefined rules. Nowadays, there are new issues that are added every day to products of popular culture, as a result of the volatile power of the media, although popular artists (who function as spokespersons for the community) have the power to choose what subjects should be ignored and what issues should be portrayed and thus perpetuated.

In his introduction to Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le Don*, Lévi-Strauss argues that any culture can be considered as a set of symbolic systems that express aspects of the physical and social reality and, even more, the relationship that these two types of reality have with each other, and that symbolic systems themselves maintain among themselves (1989). Originating from the social, capturing public and private, local and regional episodes, the iconic-verbal—and therefore symbolic—systems of popular art also create new semiotic universes, when they are narrated orally by their authors, agents, public and researchers. The originality of

popular artists lies not in their careful reproduction of the world, but in a personal, inventive and sometimes unusual mode of seeing objects, through images and discourses equivalent and parallel to reality, that describe a specific socio-cultural universe in a comprehensive and expressive way.

In this book the analysis and categorization of popular culture emphasizes an epistemological paradigm close to Michel Foucault's archaeology of knowledge and to his pursuit of discursive formations and practices or epistemes, which mark different historical eras and shape social orders (1999 [1969]). This book also shares certain characteristics of an inventory and typological organization. An inventory, still according to Antonio Gramsci, has a prospective dimension, because it is never built during the production of the object or event. Indeed, in popular culture, those are not produced according to a pre-existing categorization. Our inventories are admittedly an attempt to create cultural categories, according to what is reflected by the social dimension of textual and iconographic discourse. In his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes also seeks the subliminal discourse, the ideological substrate that hides in texts not of a single author but of history, a concept close to the historical imagination, to the hidden inventory of Gramsci (1997 [1957]). Gramsci argues that we are the product of a historical process that leaves no inventory, just a plethora of traces. Barthes would agree, but maintaining that the inventory can be found in the way we read texts, contexts and metatexts around us, which reproduce a tradition and assume an audience. Even when ignoring the authors of such texts, as in so many manifestations of popular culture, it is possible to recognize their intentions and designs to create certain effects that reflect and dictate how (and what) members of a cultural context (should) think. Aware of this need for contextualization, Bakhtin and Medvedev argue that it is necessary to isolate the object of study and establish its borders, but so that these are not disconnected from the objects essential for its intelligibility (1991). In any study, the establishment of boundaries must be dialectical and flexible and cannot be based on data external to the object itself.

Visual texts of popular culture are also signs with principles of organization and processes of particular significance that require a contextual interpretation, whether they are figurative icons or symbols based on conventional relations. Images are heterogeneous by nature and may coordinate within their limits categories such as: 'images', in the theoretical sense of the term (iconic, analogical signs), plastic signs (colors, shapes, composition, texture), and even linguistic signs. Their interrelation produces the meaning that one learns to decipher, but the

interplay with the context can be a way to disappoint the expectations of the reader, by surprising, shocking or amusing him/her. The composition or internal geography of the visual message is a fundamental plastic instrument, because it directs the hierarchy of sight and the reading of the image. Visual representations stage characters, objects, places and manners, and part of the interpretation of the message is determined by culturally encoded attitudes. Even the interpretation of shapes, colors and light is cultural despite seeming natural. The positioning of characters can be interpreted in relation to social customs or to the viewer him/herself. This interpretation depends on the viewer's cultural awareness and may thus vary, distinguishing itself from the pure and simple recognition of themes and motifs, thus understanding better the message that is constructed beyond the image, and not only with the image. There is here a clear function of complementarity—the function of *relais* of Roland Barthes—between images and words, because the object is always polysemic, susceptible to various readings, that differ not only from reader to reader, but also inside the mind of a same reader over time. It is thus possible to speak of productive reception, which implies an entire work of symbolic interpretation. Interpretation, symbolic activity and creativity are all part of the process of cultural consumption. Therefore, it is possible to adapt to texts of visual and popular culture Michel Vovelle's thoughts on the literary text: “Certes, à mesure que l'on s'avance dans le temps il devient de plus en plus difficile de distinguer cette lecture élémentaire, qui fait du texte littéraire le simple reflet de la pratique sociale du temps, à charge pour nous d'en décrypter les significations latentes, d'un discours beaucoup plus complexe, car chargé d'arrière-pensées multiples” (1985 : 44).

The personality of the artist—either an instituted/conservative or an instituting/innovative character—has the power to interpret, recreate and interrogate social-cultural structures, with a remarkable effect over the understanding, criticism or reproduction of global relations, in a metacultural phenomenon. Systems of representation are the symbols by which individuals and groups interpret themselves and their environment and through which they transmit their knowledge and know-how. The key elements of any cultural territory—including individual people, community, environment, technology, perception of time, and cosmological vision—interact in a constant and universal dynamics, to give life and continuity to culture in all its formal systems and symbolic practices. Artistic practices of popular culture can be seen as paradigmatic acts, archetypes that propitiate the analysis of a whole cultural territory. Their study should relate the nature and status of the object with the

performative and communicational context within the community. Therefore, the ultimate goal of this book is to build new descriptive meta-languages on popular and visual culture, and write cohesive texts from the multiple texts that surround us, because we ‘read’ as texts those objects that are anchored in a complex notion of culture. More than testimonies of ‘resistance’ or of the eternal antithesis between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, objects of popular culture are regarded here as representatives of the identity, values, practices, mental structures, and cultural heritage of a local community. But nowadays, objects of popular culture are also part of a profitable organized network, where they have lost most of their previous social and economic functions, and are reinvented as cultural symbols of new territories, dominated by tourism and global economy, often situated in urban spaces, very distant from their traditional places of origin. Such symbols may contribute to distinguish a certain region in the national and international map. However, here we find a metamorphosis instead of a resurrection of the cultural object, with new functions within new contexts, clearly guided by the rules of capitalism and the tertiary sector. Therefore, present day social scientists, as well as agents of global market economy, cannot dissociate themselves from the above mentioned historical imaginary, or inventory, which has contextualized and supported popular art forms for centuries. Otherwise, they may end up imprisoning such objects in one of the ethnographic theaters and museums of lost practices into which so many cultures have been transformed.

### **This Book...**

The several contributions gathered in *Popular & Visual Culture: Design, Circulation and Consumption* deal, in a way or another, with how popular and visual artefacts and sceneries are socially built, preserved and/or contested. Our main concern as editors was to bring together, not only different disciplinary perspectives, but also diverse empirical phenomena, while approaching the wide subject of visibility and popular culture. The first section of this book is dedicated to empirical research and theoretical reflections on “Popular and Visual Culture in Urban Contexts”. Undeniably, cities are cultural territories crisscrossed by a profusion of groups and people with different cultural affiliations; they are places of exchange, negotiation and inventiveness, giving rise to multiple forms of communication and symbolic expression relying heavily on visibility.

The section opens with a chapter by Ricardo Campos, entitled “Towards a dualistic approach of the urban visual culture: between the

*sacred* and the *profane*”, which discusses the notion of visual culture in the context of urban studies. The concept of visual culture, originally developed within the framework of art history, is still scarcely operationalized in social sciences, a fact possibly explained by its complex and transdisciplinary focus. This concept focus on subjects that, in one way or another, revolve around *vision* and *visuality*, and deal particularly with the social production, communication and consumption of visual and material artifacts. If the contemporary city is as communicational ecosystem strongly influenced by visual stimuli and languages (graffiti, street-art, street signs, advertising, political propaganda), as Campos argues, then it makes sense to debate the pertinence of the concept of visual culture in the urban landscape. This is precisely the intent of Campos’s contribution, focusing specifically on the subject of graffiti and street art in the city of Lisbon, Portugal.

The work carried-out by Patria Román-Velázquez with the Latin-American immigrants living in London is a fascinating depiction of how the visual landscape is collectively appropriated and transformed, acquiring specific cultural traits. “Elephant & Castle”, a deprived area in the centre of London that is currently undergoing an ambitious program of urban redevelopment, is the home of many Latin-American businesses set up in the beginning of the 1990s. Over twenty years, Latin Americans have transformed the area and, in the process, contributed to a distinctive ‘Latin Quarter’ atmosphere, as acknowledge in local policy documents. According to the author, this urban regeneration has been received with skepticism by Latin American local retailers who fear for their future presence in the area. By analyzing this particular urban case, “Latin Americans in London: Claims over the identity of place as destination” engages with debates about the movement of people across different geographical locations and their contribution to the changing character of places. Furthermore, it explores how diasporic communities negotiate and claim their territory in the global city. This is done by relying on visual records and documentary evidence based on ethnographic research conducted at various times throughout the last twenty years. The timing of the research is important because it captures a moment of transition and raises questions about the sustainability of the largest and oldest Latin areas in London. Revisiting the area under the current context of regeneration allowed the author to examine another significant moment for Latin American shops, one that will define whether this distinctive Latin neighbourhood will survive or not.

James Dickinson’s chapter focus on one of the most striking features of contemporary cityscapes: graffiti. However, far from being focused

exclusively on contemporary graffiti, Dickinson proposes a wide geo-historical exploration of the phenomenon, demonstrating the long-lasting importance of this form of vernacular communication. “The Writings on the Wall: An ABC of historical and contemporary graffiti” begins by outlining a history of graffiti, noting its origins with the democratization of writing in the ancient Greek polis, extensive presence in Roman cities such as Pompeii and Herculaneum, and revival in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Taking into account the diversity of contemporary graphic and pictorial expressions popularly defined as graffiti, Dickinson proposes a systematic analysis, identifying and comparing three main types of urban graffiti: popular, political, and community-based. The author goes on to compare and contrast gang and hip hop graffiti as important genres of contemporary community-based graffiti. Noting their shared origin in conditions of extreme economic and cultural deprivation, the author describes the different sociological characteristics and aesthetic practices of gang wall writers and hip hop graffiti taggers and crews. These differences help explain the global popularity as well as visibility of the hip hop style. Finally, using Philadelphia as a model, the author addresses the responses to the explosion of urban graffiti—ranging from criminalization to domestication through urban redevelopment schemes—which promote mural art as a tool of neighborhood rebuilding, thus remaking cities as landscapes of visual consumption.

Ana Gonçalves’s chapter, “Cardiff, A Multiethnic City: Photography, Memory and Identity”, deals with the renovation of Cardiff’s cityscape. The capital city of Wales was dubbed as the world’s most prominent ‘coaltropolis’ in the late nineteenth century. Cardiff was an attractive site for immigrants from different parts of the world, contributing to the multiethnic nature of some districts like Butetown, also known as Tiger Bay, usually under a sensational and pejorative tone. By 1950 this district, which extended for no more than a mile, was believed to be the home to a particularly multiethnic community which shared the everyday life practices of the docklands’ working-class, housing around 6,000 people from more than 57 different nationalities. However, as the demand for the ‘black gold’ progressively dwindled throughout the twentieth century, Cardiff endured an acute process of deindustrialisation in tandem with high levels of unemployment, an exasperating condition that eventually led to the revitalisation of the whole waterfront area, both in urban and economic terms, and to the splintering of the community, whose members were rehoused in other parts of the city or in the city’s suburbs. Cardiff has, nevertheless, continued to host different waves of immigrants throughout the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries

who, persuaded by manifold reasons, have elected the Welsh capital as their new place of residence. Taking some amateur and professional photographic projects as points of departure, this chapter examines the multiethnicity that underpins present Cardiff and question how the individual and collective memories and identities of these immigrants are (trans)formed and articulated with their sense of belonging to the Welsh capital, and how they concur to mould the city's cultural identity, especially one that has, in recent years, been shaping under the umbrella of a mainstream re-imag(in)ing rationale, epitomised in the buzzword triad of civic boosterism, cultural regeneration and consumption upheaval.

The second section of the book concentrates on the contemporary reality of "Reinventing and Representing Popular and Visual Culture". The first contribution comes from Clara Sarmento, with the chapter "New Images and Old Traditions in Portuguese Popular Culture", which analyses how individuals, community, environment, traditional techniques and cosmological vision interact, in order to give life and continuity to culture, in its formal systems and symbolic practices. Specifically, Sarmento studies the painted wooden panels of the Portuguese *moliceiro* boat, which belong to a cultural area that has filtered and adapted in a very peculiar way the various influences received over time. Far from the fatalism of neighbouring fishing communities, the rural lakeside of *Ria de Aveiro* developed an enlightened and humorous critical vision, in a lasting dialogue between tradition and modernity. However, during the dictatorial regime of *Estado Novo*, Portuguese popular culture was supervised and manipulated by hegemonic political powers in order to create an ideal identity that would match the official paradigm of the 'good mild people'. The *moliceiro* boat, with its colourful images and expressive sentences of popular inspiration, also echoed national mythologies and suffered the influence of institutional channels of instruction and propaganda. Likewise, the chapter discusses how the *moliceiro* boat and the discourse it has motivated (re)create and represent Portuguese popular culture, its values and social conditions, how they echo conflicts of acceptance and resistance, and express the inventory of a community's identity, imaginary and practices.

Sandra Marques, an anthropologist who has developed a long-term ethnographic research in West Bengal (India), is the author of the chapter "Goddesses and women: divine images in Bengali urban culture", about the social significance of the sculpted and pictorial images of deities, expressions of popular art that are an important part of Indian urban visual culture. These deities are incorporated within the existing social organization and submitted to regular rituals of worship and care, demanding sensualized

and humanized relationships. In her essay, Marques focuses particularly on the relationship established between human subjects and the images of female Hindu deities that are popular in Kolkata. Ascribed attributes of appearance and personality, expected desires and behavior, as well as the ritualized care to which these images are submitted, are explored as tools that reproduce normative references for Bengali women's identity and appearance.

The interaction between the urban environment and street artists who look at the city as a giant canvas increasingly captivates imagination. The primary appeal of the street survives, even if urban art has been introduced in the platforms of contemporary visual culture. This fascination is explained by the anonymity of the street artist, at a time when everything seems to be accessible, when everything is exposed by the media, and freedoms are lost in the name of public security. The work of street artists in general is crossed by conflicts, tensions and cultural borders. Nowadays, cities integrate endless tendencies, from the most basic to the most demanding in terms of artistic sophistication. If, on the one hand, the more erratic graffiti maintains an unquestionable presence, on the other, a growing number of artists with roots in the urban space is moving into galleries. The cases of Basquiat, Haring and Banksy are paradigmatic. They have conquered galleries and museums, with some critical voices questioning their integrity, because they seem to criticize capitalism, while being part of the speculative system of commercial art.

But it is not only the space where art should figure that is questioned. Mechanisms of legitimation—who dictates what should or should not be accepted and displayed—and the market itself are also at stake. The action of street artists questions the art market, the economic value of visual art forms in relation to its aesthetic or historical value, based on the point that, from the outset, what is illegal and ephemeral in the public space should be a pure act, indifferent to capitalization. The public space has been increasingly privatized, with cities full of visual signs over which there is little control and whose only criteria seem to be economic: those who have the money to pay can put whatever they want on the city walls. The issue of private property is delicate because it underpins one of the structures of contemporary society, where 'to be' is mistaken for 'to have'.

This is precisely the focus of Vanessa Besand's chapter "The Heritage of Urban Visual Culture in American Painting of the 1980's: Graffiti and museum art". In the 1980's, in the United States, a connection was created between street art and museum art. Through galleries in Soho, graffiti artists from the streets of New York had their works exhibited in unexpected places. While many judged this passage from the street to the



museum, and from the subway train to the canvas, as inadequate and devaluing for graffiti, some artists born in the streets managed nevertheless to stand out and become painters in their own right. Without denying their roots in graffiti, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, to mention only the most famous, gave painting a new direction, by playing beautifully, in a postmodern way, with the mixture of styles and influences. Besand's chapter studies this specific visual practice (its aesthetic manifestations, artistic heritage from culture both scholarly and popular, its social and ideological issues), by focusing on how popular culture and scholarly culture, street culture and museum culture, have managed to merge. But beyond the appropriation of a form of street art by artists rapidly recognized by scholarly culture and nowadays enshrined in the pantheon of 20<sup>th</sup> century American painting, the chapter also examines how social, cultural and political conditions in the United States have hindered the recognition of pure graffiti artists in the art market, and instead allowed the recognition by the general public, as well as by aesthetes and art specialists, of Basquiat and Haring.

Madhuja Mukherjee's work focuses on the co-relation between cinema and (literary) high culture between the 1930s and 1940s. "Of Bhadrāmohila, Blouses, and 'Bustofine': Re-viewing Bengali high-culture (1930-1940) from a low angle" studies the liaison of cinema with literature, along with its specific function in the process of institutionalization of the so-called *Bhadralok* ideology, in the linguistically, politically and economically marginalized areas of Bengal, India. *Bhadralok* is best understood as the 'English educated urbanized gentlemen', whose class, caste and communal identities were often displaced on to the realm of education and culture. Technologies and aesthetics may be studied through a wide spectrum of effects, ranging from what Lev Manovich describes as special-effect interactive cinemas, to the ways in which Samira Makhmalbaf argues for digital revolution and the possibility of a plethora of self-images being produced by 'other' nations. While questions of politics, language and industry are crucial for this chapter, it also examines the 'otherness' of film and video aesthetics, which confronts *Bhadralok* cinemas and its industrial networks.

Francesca Cozzolino's "Observing the Artification Process: The case of *Murales* in Sardinia" proposes to incorporate the evolution of a phenomenon of contemporary mural painting created in Sardegna and of its recent 'reevaluation' and 'reclassification' in artistic terms. The first murals were created at the end of the 1960s in the town of San Sperate. In the following decade, the practice of mural painting underwent an important development in the town of Orgosolo, that at present has about

300 murals. The majority of the murals reflect current political events, attracting numerous groups of national and international tourists. The evolution and diffusion of murals throughout the island and the debates that have arisen from their varied uses have provoked intellectual interest, bringing with it a sense of legitimization within the art world. The chapter presented here is the result of a study conducted between 2005 and 2009, and relies on the concept of *artification* in order to understand how murals reached their most advanced stage in the town of Orgosolo, where they were not initially deemed artistic works. Cozzolino also discusses the dynamics of cultural heritage applied to the recognition of murals as ‘cultural assets’, which demonstrates the advantages and limitations of the concept of *artification*.

The final section of the book, “In the Field: Projects on Popular and Visual Culture”, is primarily focused on recent or ongoing non-academic projects, carried-out by public entities or associations, which by some means address the topic of visual and popular culture. All the projects described herein show how images, sceneries and visual artifacts may be strategically appropriated and reinvented by particular social actors, sustaining specific symbolic or ideological programs.

In “Heritage and Culture as Instruments of Qualification of Urban Spaces”, Alain Chenevez studies the case of the *Musée Urbain Tony Garnier*, in Lyon, France. For long closely related to historical monuments, heritage serves to reconstruct *a-posteriori* the history of state nations, legitimized in a mythical and monumental dimension, thus reinforcing the myth of the great works of mankind that should be kept for posterity. Nowadays, there is an increasing demand for heritage, by social groups who have seized and used the concept according to their own political and economic interests. This phenomenon has caused a material and semantic change in heritage, and also much criticism and discussion by art historians. Relying on contemporary examples, the chapter highlights the dynamics and multiple movements that are expressed in the world of heritage. Public or pragmatic, heritage is a political act, a rating system and a symbolic construction of values where the state, local authorities and social groups work and struggle to build and impose their definitions of the world, always in line with their particular interests. Heritage is a space of reward, of profit or sanction, a key issue of our societies, partially arbitrated by the state, which plays a key role in the hierarchy of groups and social territories.

The chapter by Silvia Câmara has the particularity of addressing the specific case of a programme designed by public entities to promote urban art. “An Inventory Methodology in Urban Art: Concepts, Criteria and

Norms” introduces the *Galeria de Arte Urbana* [Urban Art Gallery] (GAU) project in the city of Lisbon, and evaluates the entire process, from the point of view of public authorities and officials. This pioneer project, inaugurated in 2008, undertook the inventory of surviving and lost graffiti and street art in Lisbon, thus preserving the memory of a visual manifestation that is, in essence, ephemeral. Although it was based upon manuals of good practices for cataloguing canonic disciplines such as painting and sculpture, the registration of Lisbon’s graffiti and street art was more of an empirical procedure than a theoretical one. The works in question share characteristics typical of the conventional fine arts milieu, but their transitory and anonymous condition required the development of new procedures of cataloguing and inventorying, bearing in mind specific aesthetic, technical, temporal and spatial criteria.

Cristina Novo’s project, described in “Popular ID: Portuguese visual identity in hypermedia remediation”, is an application that resulted from the original survey of graphic elements from different forms of Portuguese popular culture. According to Erwin Panofsky, in his *Essays on Iconology*, visual motifs of popular culture, once related to topics and concepts conveyed by literary sources or by oral tradition, become carriers of both secondary or conventional meanings and of abstract as well as collective notions. Likewise, visual motifs of popular culture are seen here as a creative practice instead of a static reality, to use the stereotype related to the universe of ethnography and the immutability of tradition. In order to preserve the artistic potential of popular culture, Popular ID produced a visual and interactive database, where traditional forms of artistic expression are adjusted to the communicational and aesthetic trends of the present. Popular ID is available both in the virtual space of the internet and in personal computers, with a strong educational component of awareness and promotion of Portuguese popular culture. Through digital experimentation and interactive play, users access graphic demonstrations that establish an interdisciplinary connection between the Humanities and Information Technologies, in pursuit of a common vocabulary. Popular ID offers a visual language with an historical dimension, so that the public in general may ‘consume’ selected aesthetic objects of Portuguese popular culture. At a time when identity is used as a political and economic asset, Popular ID comprises an independent aesthetic message that adds a new dimension to the recreational graphics of popular culture.

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This book celebrates a new stage in the long-standing collaboration between the Centre for Intercultural Studies and the Laboratory of Visual Anthropology of the Centre for the Study of Migrations and Intercultural Relations (CEMRI) of the Portuguese Open University. The idea of writing this book was born during the International Conference “Urban Visual Culture and Expressions of Popular Art” and the Workshop “Theoretical and Methodological Approaches to Urban and Popular Visual Culture”, which took place at ISCAP/IPP, in November 2011, in a joint initiative of CEI and CEMRI.

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The journey continues...

Clara Sarmiento and Ricardo Campos  
Porto and Lisbon, May 2004

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> However, as Rose (2001) points out, the idea of the hegemony of vision is contested by authors who, amongst other examples, point out the importance that the image has assumed in some medieval and pre-modern models of spirituality. Likewise, Mitchell (2002) indicates a series of fallacies in the common discourse that are responsible for some exaggeration when it comes to establishing the hegemony of vision and the image in contemporary times.

<sup>2</sup> The aspiration to the visual domination of the world is present in numberless tools, such as the telescope, the microscope, the chronophotography, x-rays, the photographic and filming camera, television, digital devices or the computer, all of which play an important role in our story.

<sup>3</sup> Our experience of the world is always multi-sensorial. Despite being generally perceived as innate, natural, universal and transparent tools, we must bear in mind that they are culturally and historically shaped. Classen (1997) therefore speaks of different *sensory models* according to the varying relevance, hierarchies and uses attributed to the senses.

**PART I.**

**URBAN CONTEXTS OF POPULAR  
AND VISUAL CULTURE**

