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The image as a source of sociological knowledge: Performativity, flaneurie and the narrativization of self

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Considering the image as a social and cultural product, and not a neutral one, we will focus on the ways to determine how social dynamics are imbedded in a visual object. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to enquire how performativity, flaneurie and the narrativization of self appear in some pop-rock music videos. In this sense, to capture the relation between a social practice (flaneurie), a cultural disposition (performativity) and a symbolical discourse (narrativization of self) in a highly-consumed cultural product such as pop-rock music videos, we followed a qualitative approach to our theoretical object.

Key words: Image, performativity, self, space.

INTRODUCTION

Image is usually conceived as a tool of collecting data. That is, photography (although less, video) as an ethnographic tool can collect certain kind of sociological information relevant for further enquiry. Image is a social product and it is precisely this feature that enables it to compact (and unveil) complex and not immediate nets of social practices.

On another level, we will discuss a complementary perspective: the image as an ethnographic producer of knowledge. In this sense, we will approach a certain apparent paradox in music videos, one of the most celebrated cultural objects of the last decades. In other words, how can an artistic endeavour played between studios and stages, such as pop-rock music, transmit good deal of their symbolical enchantment with an imagetic device. To answer to this apparent paradox, we choose to briefly describe and sociologically interpret eight representative pop-rock music videos with a common pattern: some kind of flaneur (and/or flaneurie) as a central focus in the video. To be more precise, our centre of attention will be the following topics: the epitomes of the street and the space as visual artefacts in rock videos, even more if that territory is not explicitly or implicitly spoken in the lyrics; the circulation of the video performer (the artist or the non-artist) as a form of two interconnected social dimensions:

performativity and narrativization of the self in the formation of processes of self and hetero-identification; the intimate connection between sound, space and image. In the end, it will be possible to trace this specific visual product as a possible way, among others, to disclose relevant social and cultural practices.

As far as image is concerned in its tools photos and films, for example, one may admit the feasibility of visual elements to understand social reality (Denzin, 1994). The researcher will mention this stage of image among ethnographic model as image as collector of data, of sociological relevant data. This classic approach regards the role of the image tools (more than the image itself) as techniques to come closer to social dynamics. In this sense, photographs or video can operate largely as instruments for the social researcher to work on a qualitative terrain.

In a second stage, one can identify a complementary and subsequent role of image. That is, image as a source of data. Once again, sociologically relevant data. This second feature does not exclude the previous one but is partly an extension of it. It is enough to say that the major difference here relates with the object where the first feature focus visual techniques, image as a source of data works more directly over the image itself as a source of sociological knowledge¹. More than a

¹ One can find a theoretical common ground between this proposal and the principles of serendipity of Robert Merton (Merton, 1996) or the grounded-theory thesis of Glaser and Strauss (Glaser and Strauss, 1997).

technique or a method, image resonates here a more theoretical place. When Douglas Harper argued that “image has a polissemic quality” and that photos could “create a dialogue between the complementary meanings of the image” (Harper, 2003) then, the imagetic universe can be considered as a metaphor. Not only in a literary sense, but in the way that image encodes social practices and cultural meanings. Bearing in mind this pivotal observation one is able to enhance the range of the imagetic/visual universe. Ethnography works here as a way to disclose relations and social practices hidden in music videos. At the same time, it seems pertinent to mention that the researcher is never a neutral actor and that his or her observations are always contingent relating the awareness of the social conditions of social awareness (Bourdieu, 1980).

This paper documents more the presence of determinate social practices and social representations among a selected set of pop-rock videos than any kind of general approach to the world of music videos. Not only the chosen examples will try to show the existence of determinate cultural dispositions in eight pop-rock videos (contributing to support the idea already stated that imagetic objects reveal social properties), but also that the image can be equated as a theoretical category for sociological and ethnographic enquiries.

Flaneurie, performativity, narrativization of the self and...

Before analysing the music videos, we will approach some topics on the relation between flaneurie, performativity and narrativization of the self. In order to frame this set of concepts, Beverley Skeggs points out to: the concern with lifestyle, with the stylization of life, which shows that the practices of consumption, the planning, purchase and display of consumer goods and experiences in everyday life, cannot be understood merely via conceptions of exchange-value and instrumental rational calculation. Rather, they can be conceived as a balance of the instrumental and expressive which consumer culture brings together (Skeggs, 2004).

It is significant that all this process has been specified as monitored by a controlled de-control of the emotions (Featherstone 1996). In a few words, a rational pursues of an aestheticized lifestyle lives along an immersion in sensuous, highly-emotional and expressive modes of self-production. Self-production of the aestheticization of everyday life (AEL) coexists with the aestheticized production of the individual self. In this sense, the AEL balances between an emotive and hedonistic pursue and a rational calculating endeavour.

Furthermore, the dynamics of converting social action into countless small happenings oriented by aesthetic purposes lives side-by-side with what Featherstone

(1996) defines as urban strollers. According to him, the contemporary urban strollers play with and celebrate the artificiality, randomness and superficiality of the fantastic *mélange* of fictions and strange values which are to be found in the fashions and popular cultures of cities. Parallel to Baudelaire (1964) or Simmel (1978) *flâneur*, the stroller designates a moving social agent through the streets of the city searching for appealing feelings and simultaneously exposing its aesthetic corporal and clothing devices. At this point, Eagleton (1996) introduces the concepts of “body talk” and “body as practice and project”, featuring the role of the aestheticized body in postmodern culture. Eagleton’s formulation depicts remarks on the body increasingly sculptured and on the social agent as a performer. That is, social agent as a capable actor to monitor and screen his *life-art*². These topics on the connection between postmodern art, the AEL and the performativity of the self can now be discussed in a deeper approach.

For instance, in Giddens, the self and its performativity are highlighted in the book “the constitution of society”. There, Giddens connects the concept of social action with the reflexive and quasi-independent action of the actor. Actors not only monitor continuously the flow of their activities and expect others to do the same for their own; they also routinely monitor aspects, social and physical, of the contexts in which they move (Giddens, 1993). The social agent is an actor capable to transform social actions occurred in the structures in some sort of a performance. Hence, Giddens presents a notion of the individual as a performer one. This autonomy of the agent (or the actor as Giddens prefer to define) presents a double-binding strategy. On the one hand, there is a process of individuation. This is a process largely studied in all sorts of theories of modernity (Elias, 1983; Giddens, 1996; Habermas, 1987; Day, 2001; Poovey, 1995). In this way, let just one register the relevance and pertinence of the constitution of the individual as a result of the processes of modernization. On the other hand, this last process is bonded to a notion of individual transformation of structures, that is to say, a notion of individual creation of social phenomena taking the individual performer as an empowered creator. An empowered creator presupposed to design central features of social life. And here lies the main feature of performativity, that is, the possibility attributed to individual for him or her to create from the onset new

² Louis Wacquant stated in his “Body and Soul” that the body must be appropriated by Sociology as a tool of inquiry and knowledge (Wacquant, 2004). The body is readable because it is marked by social and symbolical imprints in all its extension. The body is always attached to a context which moulds it according to specific conditions: the art where social classes with cultural capital embedded their lives, the street violence attached to boxers and youngsters in the slums (favelas) in the Rio de Janeiro (Davis 2007), or the hard-work impressed in tired bodies of South Korean workers (Koo, 2001).

social and cultural ambiances. Giddens' emphasis on the notion of competent agent (Giddens, 1996) lives together with the viewpoint of a self portrayed as a reflexive project for which each human being is responsible for himself or herself: we are not what we are but what we do of ourselves (idem 67). Once again, our concern here relates with the declared concept of performativity. In this way, performativity activates the possibility of the individual to detonate actions in social landscape. So, as more creative and more genuine social agents may appear, more and more, one can affirm the presence (and preponderance) of an aestheticized individual performance.

In this chapter, Willis (1996) highlighted the bridges between cultural processes of aestheticization and performativity: creative practices produce their own grounded aesthetics, not aesthetic in dead corpses; in things to impress or refine, grade or exclude corpses to be warmed up occasionally. Hence, this symbolical creativity attributed to new cultural activities is not anyway in things, they are in sensuous human activities of meaning-making (idem 131). The relevance imputed in creative (and creator) activity emphasizes the importance of performativity as a pivotal concept that binds the process of individuation and the AEL. A possible theoretical tool to apprehend this link can be Lash and Urry (1999) concept of aesthetic reflexivity. Their concept develops Giddens' notion of rational reflexivity by identifying the role and the place of aesthetic expert systems³ as mediators in the reflexive regulation of everyday life (idem). If one remembers the concept of controlled de-control of the emotions quoted above, then it becomes feasible to recognize the role of the aesthetic in the framing of rationality itself. In this sense, aesthetic expert systems provide material and symbolical tools used and managed by individuals in order to promote their inner social lifestyles.

But it is not merely rationality, reflexivity and the conduct of the self that are influenced by the AEL. Identity is also defined, among other things, by aesthetic processes. Hall (1996) interpret identities as products of narrativization of self in the sense that identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse. Once again, the formation of the most complex and intimate instances of the self, personality, systems of thought, identity, and individual action, relies strongly on aesthetic devices. Aesthetic devices materialised in performativity, in a conception of the social agent as a singular creator of a unique stylized lifestyle and of a deliberate stylization of daily life (idem 13) (our emphasis) in order to present it to the outside world. The role of aesthetics in the definition of cultural universes relies strongly in the impact of the commoditization in art and in the subsequent

transference of aesthetic properties to the centre of social life, most notably, into the field of lifestyles. Life becomes a matter of styling conducts and the (search for) style orientates individual⁴ procedures.

To summarise, as we have tried to expose, aesthetics (and any form of artistic production) can operate as a principle of social structuration, most notably in what concerns identities, social relations and cultural lifestyles, all of these relevant factors in contexts of auto and hetero self formation. For instance, Performativity has a strong commitment in this process of formation of performative selves, in the sense that it presupposes an autonomous individual in the determination of his or her actions in society. The individual performance relapse the collective paradigms of subjectivity. Flaneurie works as a part of performativity; Narrativization of self has a strong commitment in this process of formation of performative selves, in the sense that it presupposes a social expectation to present one's life as a spectacle, whatever its scale. The identity present itself as an ensemble of discourses and a mix of life individual-driven experiences less than, let's say, a class construction as this was relevant in Fordist age.

... Their presence in eight pop/rock videos

Simultaneously analytical and empirical in its scope, this paper deals with the music video as a mainstream cultural and visual product of the last decades. In this sense, the videos of pop-rock songs became more and more central in music industry of the last three decades. The development of television channels dedicated exclusively to the broadcasting (24 h a day) of music video on a global scale in the 80's (MTV and VH1) and the explosion of internet channel "You Tube" in the last years certify the wider impact of the video as one of the most celebrated cultural products in the recent two or three decades. One can recur to Habermas (1987) concept of colonization in order to try to understand the impact of communication technologies over the music industry. In fact, the music started to be visualized and imagined in imagetic terms, contributing to a certain pattern in the production of pop and rock music. It would be unilateral to only consider the evolution of music videos in this topic. Their semantic universe started to be increasingly a cultural object where the sound, the word and the image combined and conjugated between themselves. In pop-rock videos, the sound becomes, in a certain sense, subordinated to the primacy of image.

³ The use of film, television, poetry, travel and painting are among the devices presented by the quoted authors.

⁴ The aestheticization of everyday life obviously concerns the self but it also spans to wider spaces. Here we are thinking of Zukin's complex network of hotels, restaurants, theatres, cinemas, pop concerts, art galleries, airports, and of culture producers and culture brokers that intermingle today's big metropolis, as it was described in "Loft Living" (Zukin, 1992). This net of economic and institutional apparatus captures the way how the political and the commercial fields absorbed art as a new source of investment.

The music video offers numerous possibilities to recreate and rebuild artistic and cultural languages deployed by many musicians. This range of possibilities enabled the music video to become a symbolic commodity. In one hand, the video advertised the music to broader audiences, to broader markets, upsurging as a central commercial product to expand the musical market(s). In the other hand, and which is more relevant for our research, the music video confronted the music consumer with the video as an object of symbolical attraction⁵.

In this section, we will objectify the concepts presented in the previous part of the article. To be clearer, this section deals with the modalities of determinate social dynamics and how they are (re)shaped in eight pop/rock music videos. The selection of the following music videos relates with their strong impact in pop-rock music in the last fifteen to twenty years and for their acquaintance of some sense of flaneurie, performativity and/or narrativization of self. That is, people strolling in the street (or in another place) as a central feature of the video, and the modalities of their performative role inserted in a frame of unfolding and narrating their experiences, constituted the main analytical criterion for the chosen videos.

“Everybody hurts”, REM (1993)

REM's music video “everybody hurts” starts to trace the thoughts of people in a traffic jam. Resembling strong connections with the lyrics of the song, in this video one finds the street as a platform between delusional lives and the perspective opened to personal freedom opened in the end of the video. As a first state of mind it is easy to find a strong sense of suffering and emotional pain. Some of the subtitles in the video representing the thoughts of people stuck in the traffic jam (and, metaphorically, in their lives) points out the frustration and the pull back of individuals practices towards their intimate living. “They are all stuck”, “silence is golden”, “nobody can see me”, “you die, you turn to dust”, “leave me alone” are some of the most present subtitles/thoughts in the video. Faced with this strong sense of a life stopped somewhere in the road, we see the band coming out of their car and the singer Michael Stipe starting to sing the final part of the song. Appearing as an appeal of the artist to break the routines of the everyday life, everyone gets out of their vehicles and go on together in the highway.

⁵ For instance, David Harvey worked the relationship between the image and the commodity in the flexible accumulation paradigm: the commodification of images of the most ephemeral sort would seem to be a godsend from the standpoint of capital accumulation (Harvey, 1990). The subjective identification between the cultural consumer and the commodity is defined by the author as a central component of nowadays turbulent culture.

“Streets of Philadelphia”, Bruce Springsteen (1993)

In the case of Bruce Springsteen's “Streets of Philadelphia”, there is a more evident strolling through the streets of the city. In a realist-fashioned style, Springsteen's video developed the notion of the street as a place for common everyday life. But where in the previous video the street was claimed as a space for liberty, for people to move on, here the street is more a synonym of an oppression. Homeless people resemble a strong appeal for this vision. At the same time, there is a sense of personal quest in an oppressive context. Springsteen sings “I was unrecognizable to myself” and the video traces back to the street itself as a place of one's evaluation of its true (individual) self. The street also points out to a notion of plasticity in the way that it is inhabited by different sociabilities according to the period of the day. At night, homeless people are the only living people in the streets, showing how social exclusion and poverty are phenomena correlated with the urban life. The performativity of the stroller, of the artist is confronted with the immobility of people living in the streets, unable to develop performative actions.

“Bitter sweet symphony”, The Verve (1997)

A third music video crossed by the dynamics of narrativization and performativity, among others, is The Verve's “Bitter Sweet Symphony” (1997). In a minimalist endeavour, this video works on the concept of the self versus the rest of the world. In other words, the framing of the singer during a path along the streets where he keeps walking straight ahead, and without moving away the obstacles, is a fascinating narrative of a personal mark in the sidewalk. That is, as a metaphor of an individualistic performance on the street, both in relation to other people and the space. Differently from Parkour⁶, a street sport where the player moves in multiple and aleatory directions according to the constraints of space, here the singer moves in a linear manner, claiming the street as a territory to tell the world his own performance. More than appropriating the space, as in Parkour, The Verve's singer, Richard Ashcroft, is consecrating a performance of the individual taken as the fundamental unit over the rest of society. The scene where the singer jumps over a stopped car shows particularly well how performativity, how the individual construction of (one) self occupies a pivotal node on this symbolical issue. This pavement journey appeals directly to the line “I cannot change, but I am here in my mold, I am here in my mold”. The singer moulds the space, or desires to, as he walks down the street.

⁶ One music video dealing with this street sport is Madonna's “Hung Up”.

“Yellow”, Coldplay (2000)

In the year 2000, the British pop band Coldplay became successfully known worldwide with their hit single “Yellow”. Although the music video features the singer Chris Martin on a beach (and not in a street), what matters here is the concept applied to the relation between the performer, the (social) performance and the space, independently of its physical nature. Consequently, the wet look-alike of the singer, the dark sky just after a rainfall and the linear path of Coldplay’s frontman on the beach, constitutes the references from where the narrative is produced. Whereas in Springsteen’s video, for example, the path was fragmented and random, in this two last analysed videos, we found out a straight-ahead and linear trajectories, where the first approach reduces the significance of the individual to the labyrinth of the city, in the other ones there is a common ground for the development of a self (and singular/individualistic) performance on and over the space. To be brief on this matter, an individualistic performance, the performativity as it was described previously, presupposes supremacy of the individual on the space, that is, looking to the space as a fix and strictly physical object where the individual imprints his or her marks. At the same time, an individualistic performance presupposes supremacy of the individual *over* the space, in the sense that the character in the video appears alone and effectively prepared to face the world. In Coldplay’s video, the singer stands against the bad weather (metaphor of a collapsed relationship), enabling the upsurge of the individual, and his personal narrative, to the forefront of the video.

“Hard to explain”, The Strokes (2001)

This egotistic stance can be effaced from music videos, at least apparently, and new languages appear. For instance, in 2001 the American garage-rock band “The Strokes” created a huge hype around the globe, and most prominently in the United Kingdom, with the video of the song “Hard to explain”. In a more postmodern fashion, this video shows car races, aeroplanes taking off and landing, flying simulators, bombings, images of the planet Earth, a monkey dancing and skiing on the ice, beautiful women with bottles of champagne, electric circuits, solar system, elevators and rolling stairs, all of them combined and continuously reproduced. A chaotic and undetermined world seems to be the most visible (and even, feasible) motto of the video. Even the band members just appear few seconds on the video and the presence of human beings is residual. Here we are, paradoxically, in an opposite pole but of a same narrative structure. The individual took a secondary role in the video, not to say a dispensable place, but the

symbolical discourse deals with some of the same characteristics. The unintelligible world is one that is “hard to explain”. But it has a narrative of itself. The world as it is presented in the video: chaotic, random and punctuated with ephemeral moments, but still an object carrying a specific discourse. In this way, the world-natural, technological and social world-tells a story to the viewer, showing its own complexity. As a personification, the world performs itself in the video dressed as a collection of events and facets, as an album of moments, feelings and characters. At the same time, the world-inevitably, the grand space where the other spaces can coexist, in the video is the flaneur of itself, the imagery tide of a complex and random place urging to let the viewer watch parts of the space where he or she lives. The space plays successions of metaphors of itself.

“I just do not know what to do with myself”, White Stripes (2003)

Another classical music video of the 00’s is White Stripes’ “I just do not know what to do with myself” (2003). Directed by Sophia Coppola (Lost in Translation, 2003), this black-and-white video traces the dance movements of a young woman around a striptease pole. The sexual and sensual topics on the video lead us to understand the body of a woman, of a sexualized woman, as a geographical magnet of a particular discourse. Not only can the libido be projected, but mostly the body as a project of condensing feelings and desires. Unachievable desires, a utopia of the sensualised body. Putting the body at stake, this one emerges as free, fluid and circulating. In this sense, the body can be a way to accumulate more symbolic power in order to succeed in the everyday life. But the sensual and erotic body also resembles a connection with the lyrics of the song. Does not knowing what to do with oneself posits the body as an escape from that crossroad. Does not knowing what to do with oneself posits the body as an object to be worked on, like a physical and carnal resource to be enhanced in its attributes in order to shape an identity, an appealing formation of the self. Over its own space-the personal body-and others space-their bodies.

“Boulevard of Broken Dreams”, Green Day (2004)

In the following year, Green Day upsurged as the anti-George W. Bush band with their album “American Idiot”.

One of their greatest hits was “Boulevard of Broken Dreams”. Its video won several international prizes of the mainstream media, including best video in the MTV Video Music Awards 2005 in the examples studied in this paper, “Boulevard of Broken Dreams”

consubstantiate a return to the linear and direct path of the artist in the streets. However, in this case the centre of the scenario is not the artist standing (looking and confronting) directly, eyes in the eyes, the (televised) audience, but, on the opposite, the band is watched laterally by the viewer. This turn on the object focused by the camera translates a symbolical shift on the message, although the structural triangle flaneurie/narrativization of the self/performativity remains intact. The delusion portrayed by the collapsed and curved posture of the artists does not deny the presence of purposed goal to describe a narrative. In short, a narrative of a disappointed self conducting to a performance of disappointment over the world. A sense of loss “I walk alone on these empty streets⁷” is paralleled with a sense of crumbled spirits within urban boundaries in an age of terrorism, wars, social despair and economic crisis.

“When the sun goes down”, Arctic Monkeys (2007)

Finally, after a certain predominance of American artists in the first half of the decade, British pop-rock came back with some bands such as Arctic Monkeys, Bloc Party or Franz Ferdinand. “When the sun goes down” (2007), from Arctic Monkeys, became a pop-rock anthem in the United Kingdom that year. The video documents a hallucinatory voyage through the suburbs of Sheffield. In a naturalistic-style, “When the sun goes down” revolves the bas-fonds, the deep peripheries of big cities as powerful factors to block the outburst of one’s performativity. Clearly speaking, the main character of the video a young woman representing a prostitute in the hands of a pimp, in which he uses psychological intimidation, manipulation and physical force to control the woman he sends out to work cannot achieve a regular life of performativity in the sense that, she is oppressed and dominated. In the way that the young woman is sturdily constrained, the possibilities to operate a performative role are absent. “When the sun goes down” documents and narrates a realistic/naturalistic perspective, tempered with a sense of humour, illustrating the other side of the impossibilities to attain and manage performative dispositions (Bourdieu, 2004). More than the street as a physical territory conditioning determinate phenomena, we have here a set of social conditionings over the individual, over a possible performative behaviour.

CONCLUSION

Whether the videos approach a patchy vision (The

⁷ The streets have been a recurrent theme on Green Day’s videos. Since “When I come around” (1994) or “Walking Contradiction” (1995), this American band staged many of their videos in the streets. See also “Time of your life” (1998) or “Warning” (2000).

Strokes), a linear and straightforward movement of the actor/singer in the video (Coldplay and The Verve), a self-reflexive posture in order to detonate action (and performativity) (REM) or a set of social negations of a possible (and desirable) performativity (Arctic Monkeys) they all have in common a net of concepts imputed to them: narrativization of self, performativity and strolling as relevant social and cultural dynamics present there. As referred before, music videos are not pure neutral or aseptic objects but incorporate in their symbolical core determinate social and cultural dynamics. Part of an increasingly individualistic culture, the dynamics and social processes traced in the above-analysed videos reinforces and shapes a reinvigorated conception of the self as a singular and strictly individual cultural formation.

These modes of individualization (Savage, 2000) relate with a middle classes’ perspective of the self (Day, 2001), and at the same time, designate a relevant cultural and symbolical matrix in order to shape a performative (and enterprising, not to say entrepreneur⁸) self in nowadays capitalism. In this sense, the social and cultural consequences of the dynamics of aestheticized flaneurie, performativity and narrativization resume significant features of an expected self in capitalism of last decades. The development of practices and discourses of entrepreneurship, empowerment, commitment with company’s or major corporations’ goals, and creativity applied to the development of new products and services does equates with the development of a performative self, both in the labour market⁹ (Menger, 2002) and in the consumption field. In spite of being an extension (or a possible extension) of the subject matter of this paper, it seemed pertinent to point out this feasible path of research for contemporary Social Sciences.

⁸ Being enterprising is the ability of individuals, groups and businesses to respond to change, take risks, to innovate and to generate and implement new ideas and new ways of doing things. Put simply, enterprise is having ideas and making them happen (Enterprise UK 2009). In this sentence highlighted in Enterprise UK website – an organization founded in 2004 by the British Chamber of Commerce, the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors and the Federation of Small Businesses – it is easily contemplated a conception of the individual as a singular and self-sufficient agency to design new social products, putting the emphasis on the performative action and less on the material production of commodities and financial profitability, as if this was not, anymore, the goals of any enterprise. To sum up, cultural and symbolical dispositions, on the one hand, develop competitive competences among employees and, on the other hand, it is a way of capital capturing what was previously beyond commodification (Skeggs, 2005), human subjectivity.

⁹ «The acquisition of an image becomes a singularly important element in the presentation of self in labour markets and, by extension becomes integral to the quest for individual identity, self-realization, and meaning» (Harvey 1990 288).

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