 

**PROJECT IN COOPERATION (CLUSTER)**

**POPULAR EDUCATION**

**RE\_ACTUALIZATIONS / ARTS EDUCATION / SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

Brasilia Working Group / São Paulo: Political-imaginary   
dimensions of public performance

The research we propose to carry out –although it relates to investigation on cultural mediation, particularly arts and education– is somehow into what Museology has called Visitor Studies. In this field, audiences have been invariably identified as supporters of institutional actions, from which supposedly they would get some benefit. This means that they exist for the institution, under established categories and action spaces (inclusion, participation, etc.), based on what the institution grants (or denies.) Institutions assimilate for self-affirmation with that *habitus* (metanarrative) that informs on institutional discourses and practices. This implies a will to self-preservation and self-reproduction, which institutions in general have difficulty resting importance or questioning (or they deliberately do not want to.) At the same time, audiences in this field have been considered as *a priori* (people, students, families, etc.), beyond their relationship with the institution. However, this idea, which is also implicit in many institutional discourses, is indicative of contradictions that have not been addressed yet.

Certainly, such contradictions (somewhat dialectical) have been useful for the self-preservation of institutions. Audiences should be envisaged as *a priori*, independent from institutions, to keep their supposedly self-determined actions mixed with what the institutions postulates or projects. To have more supporters, institutions could not simply assert their particular interests because, in many cases, they are substantially subsidized with public resources. In this way, particular interests should blend with public or social interests. More than that, institutions must advocate for those interests. Yet, this does not necessarily mean transforming their own interests into public interests; institutions just need to present them as their own. This is what companies clearly do when they claim to generate jobs, without clarifying the relationships of exploitation that this implies. Audiences, therefore, from the point of view of the institution, occupy a decisive place in this operation. Audiences thus become the burden of public credibility of institutions. That being so, this contradiction cannot be made explicit. The difference between a preconceived audience and an empirical audience should be minimized. Likewise, this does not necessarily mean broadening the conceptions of the public and expanding the segments of the population that will be reduced to previously determined conceptions of the public. In other words, certain reciprocity (fake) between these instances must prevail. In the end, it is from this reciprocity that institutions obtain their (false) legitimacy.

Such a contradiction ignores the ability of the audience to organize itself, its heterogeneous alterity, its irreducibility to previous (institutional) categories, etc. However, there might be a more complex problem: Why do not institutions seek to represent decisively public interests? Is it possible to conceive (and share) other ambitions as well as a will to power? Before that, what are the public interests? Certainly, the answers to these questions, "above group interests", are less and less cohesive. This situation is related to at least two other phenomena: the multiplication of the counter-narratives (Giroux et al., 1996) and the breaking of the social fabric - phenomena that, in political terms, initially oppose each other, but at the same time they reinforce each other. In this context, minorities and pluralism gain space, as well as xenophobia and conservatism. At this point, problems concerning cultural institutions seem to us analogous to the problems of political institutions, in their crisis of representativeness. Particularly in Brazil, it is evident at this moment the self-preservation commitment of a retrograde political system that casts doubt and disbelief on people.[[1]](#footnote-1) The democratic breakdown that we experienced[[2]](#footnote-2) with a parliamentary coup that ended up prosecuting the mandate of an elected president –forging politically the crimes of responsibility inflicted on her– does not derive from an extra-institutional uprising. On the contrary, in that context, popular participation and social demands are increasingly being persecuted.[[3]](#footnote-3)

However, what happens in cultural institutions is, perhaps, less evident. In recent years, some Brazilian institutions such as Itaú Cultural, linked to one of the largest private banks in the country, and Sesc São Paulo, linked to business entrepreneurs, have shown a growing interest in Audience Studies, through publications, seminars and research on the subject. Surveys, in general, declare an interest in delineating the profile of new cultural consumers; understand their use of free time; their habits, behaviors and practices. However, they refer their productions to traditional categories of art and culture (cinema, exhibitions, literature, music, theater, etc.), ignoring a variety of expressive manifestations: *escraches, gifs, hashtags, memes, occupations, rolezinhos, saraus*, gender transitions, *vlogs*, etc., which may be more significant than emerging cultural dynamics. According to Bourdieu (2002), the problems imposed on opinion research are "deeply linked to the situation and dominated by a certain type of social demand." What would be the demand this time?

Our hypothesis should be better investigated. The interest of such studies to identify the consumers profile; anticipate their behavior; and, on another level, make information available to their clients, so “[…] they can make strategic and safe decisions and well-informed on the areas in which they are investing” (Leiva, 2014), does not seem directed towards negotiating with their extra-institutional actions, possibly counter-public. In this context, Audience Studies are committed to reaffirming the institutions credibility, giving them a new hegemony amid the cultural dynamics that seem to challenge them. But, why are cultural institutions, unlike political institutions, not regarded as the place where public interests are negotiated in a concrete and experimental way? These dynamics must be perceived as a consequence of the popularization of the means of digital production and communication, but also of the process of social mobility experienced in the last 15 years, which - at least for a while - allowed a new social position, perhaps a new "self-confidence" to no less than 30 million Brazilians (Souza, 2012). Certainly, it is now necessary to consider the impact, in these same dynamics, of the economic crisis in which the country immersed itself from 2015, justifying the elimination of innumerable social programs and public policies.

Of course, one should not reject the fact that, to some extent, the audience exists for institutional actions, considering that this conception goes through the very meaning of the word "public", understood as an audience. In this way, spectators exist for the spectacle, as well as the spectacle - because it hopes to draw attention - exists for the spectator. However, a more nuanced sense of the word is found in the book *Publics and Counterpublics*, originally published in 2002, by Michael Warner. In it, the public does not refer to a group of people sharing a same time and space - as in the case of "audience", "crowd", etc. - much less a type of social totality - as in the case of "people," "nation," etc. - but to an audience that "is only configured in relation to the texts and their circulation" (Warner, 2010: 66). It refers to a discursive public (*a text public*), whose operations (material and imaginary) are not easily presumed. The author considers that there are seven premises that define the modern idea of the public: (1) a public is an instance that organizes itself; (2) a public is a relationship between strangers; (3) the recipient of a public discourse is both personal and impersonal; (4) a public consists merely of attention; (5) a public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse; (6) audiences act historically according to the temporality of their circulation; (7) a public is the fabric of a poetic world.

A first observation from these premises refers to the fact that audiences do not coincide with people. That is, the publics are not made up of people, as we are led to think by the bourgeois notion of public sphere. Also, as we are led to think by the conceptions of public held generally by cultural institutions - which is very noticeable in the frequent totalization of the public according to the categories of "programmed public" and "spontaneous public." According to Warner (2010: 67), however, a public is a discursive space, organized only by the discourse itself. "It exists by virtue of being directed." Therefore, it does not exist *a priori*, since it needs to be directed by a discourse. Neither does it exist in a way exclusively determined by the institution, since the discourse refers to an imaginary instance of reception that is strange to it. Therefore, it exists in certain circularity, in a circulation space of references that are concatenated, or better, that interact with each other. But, contrary to this contradiction, which maintains the existence of such instances (public *a priori* and public *a posteriori*) under a semblance of reciprocity, that public, according to Warner, is marked by an activity itself, in relation to the institution. It is a performative instance, constituted not by the correspondence between what is projected by a discourse and its empirical reception, not by any previous identity, but by the activity that is its own, in relation to the discourse addressed to it.

Furthermore, that to which one belongs to, when one belongs to an audience, does not configure any community or social group in the strict sense. That is because, when addressing me, a public discourse is also addressed to others I do not know, an undetermined recipient. More than that, addressing me, is not directed to my concrete identity, but to my identification / dis-identification with what the speech is directed; To my identification with what does not identify me. When recognizing it as such, I participate in a place where I do not recognize myself. In other words, in which I recognize myself as strange to myself. I assume an availability to participate in what is not mine. Hence the private nature of the meta-narratives, in their unavailability for the strange, for such strangeness. In other words, although they often merge in the name of the public, institutions disappear with the public.

In the field of Public Studies, an inescapable reference is the book *Love for Art*, originally published in 1966-69 by Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, on the public of art museums in Europe (Spain, France, Greece, Holland and Poland), more particularly on the sociocultural conditions of museum assistance, the factors that determine or favor it, as well as the genesis and structure of the disposition towards cultural practices. Research, as we know, ends up proving that general access to museums is not enough, if the "cultural necessity" of art (i.e. the propensity to consume art objects) is not distributed. Consequently, it shows that such a "need" is socio-culturally constructed, especially by educational processes (school and family, institutionalized or not) - instead of being an innate taste, facility or natural privilege -, being conditioned mainly by the level of education of visitors and, second, by social class, profession, level of income, family education, tourism, visiting occasions, age group, etc. In this way, the research provokes a displacement, regarding the matter of the assistance to the museums, of the policies of cultural diffusion towards the conditions of access to the culture. Without questioning such conditions, therefore, "cultural necessity" is limited to the *ethos* of a specific social class (cultured and rich), as something that belongs to it by privilege. In the same way, it may seem that the popular classes are voluntarily excluded; that the distribution of "cultural needs" is naturally unequal.

The positions of Bourdieu and Darbel are indispensable, as long as the arguments persist that art is not taught[[4]](#footnote-4), for example, or that diffusionist policies should be undertaken exclusively, as if supply could generate demand, as if love for art sprout spontaneously. However, there prevails the conception that the public are *visitors*, that they exist exclusively for art. Indeed, their positions seem limited by an information theory, which conditions the "readability of art" to a "difference between the *level of emission* […] and the *level of reception*" (Bourdieu & Darbel, 2007: 77). This distinction ends up establishing a hierarchy between a complex emitter, full of "intrinsic subtleties", and a receiver devoid of that language. Hence some prejudices emerge: the attribution of a "barbaric taste" to the popular classes (p.77); from a position of "adaptation" or even "reverence" to the less educated classes, in relation to a "legitimate practice" (pages 70 and 83), to the absence of "knowledge of style" as a kind of condemnation (pp. 80 and 82). In a way, this pretends to denounce that the museums are temples destined to the educated public. But this also ignores the fact that audiences can also reject art (Heinich, 2010) and that this, more than a confession of ignorance or inferiority, can be thought of as a kind of answer. It must be admitted, however, that at some point the authors recognize certain *performances* of the visitors, particularly the visitors of the popular classes: they can enter the museum to simply "hang out" (p.50); "they touch everything, they sit on the couches, they lift the cushions of the *canapes*, they go down to look under the tables" (p.85-86), "they are well positioned to know that love for art is born of a long treatment and not a sudden blow "(p.90).

Curiously, it is precisely the term "visitor" that allows us to recognize actions apparently alien to institutional discourse. In her doctoral thesis, concluded in 2005 and entitled "The public in public", Ligia Dabul intends to investigate the practices and interactions made by the public in the exhibitions, transcending the idea of ​​"forms of reception" (p.29). This includes what the public does and experiences in the time and space of the exhibitions (p.37); the way in which visitors direct their attention, or fail to direct it, to exposed works and, more than that, to the variations in the vector that updates their attention (p. 61); how individuals interact with each other, and not, each of them, with the works (p. 113). In this way, it focuses on social actors who are not authors or transmitters or "responsible" for the text or speech produced (165-166). For Dabul, the negative conception of "reception" masks the true process of reappropriation and recreation present, somehow, in the discussions about the different experiences of "reception" (p. 66). In this way, the visitors become conceived as artisans of their interactions and of the way of observing the works on display (p. 70). In other words, as active producers of meanings with regard to exposures they frequent (pp. 99-100).

Dabul observes innumerable reappropriations of these spaces by the visitors: jokes (p. 163); fuss (p. 51); the sway in the bus (p. 202); bad words and obscene drawings, carefully covered with *liquid paper* (p. 76); distance from monitors (p. 173); dispersion and distraction, not as a vacuum of activity, but as a change of focus (p.141-156); conversations that transfer the attention of the visitors from the works to their own interaction (pp. 211 and 216), etc. All these can be seen as semic acts not directed exclusively at the reception of works (p.90). These are provisions for communication and interpretation that are not summed up to the exhibits, or to the legitimate texts and speeches provoked by them (p.183). Undoubtedly, such an approach assumes a shift from sociology to ethnography. At the same time, it may be thought that some of these reappropriations manifest themselves precisely in the popular classes (or working classes) who, perhaps, no longer see the museum with reverence, being absent from them a desire for social distinction (Souza, 2012: 55). In this sense, the research we propose to undertake is committed to a political-imaginary dimension of the performance of the popular, peripheral or marginal classes in these spaces. Another aspect to consider is the consequences of such displacement towards cultural mediation, in its educational aspect. If, in its educational impetus, mediation ends by closing its eyes for the reappropriations of visitors, perhaps the bet would be not to "study the public" to educate them, but to "learn from the public" to transform their own institutions and the way we recognize ourselves through them.

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1. According to research published in 2016 <http://bit.ly/2bsOBr1>, Brazilians are the people that least rely on their politicians, among the great economies of the world. In 2015, a survey carried out in Brazil showed a dizzying drop, compared to previous years, of confidence in political institutions <http://bit.ly/2bZz0fe>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It would be necessary to review a relatively lengthy debate to clarify the different positions that are reinforced or questioned on the subject. We register here only one such position: <http://bit.ly/2c6nTEv>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, the intimidation of high school students who participated in the public school occupation movement in 2015-16 <http://bit.ly/2bINz9b>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See the article by Sheila Leirner, published on 08/23/16, in O Estado de São Paulo <http://bit.ly/2btqKmd>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)