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The reinforcement of narratives for social change: the power of art through the media

In a time when it is more imperative than ever to face the difference that exists among the peoples of the world, in a constructive way, aiming to build bridges and allow everyone to be part of a fluid, dynamic and collaborative mass which shall constitute a solid global community, we state the resurgent tendency of the growth of oppressive movements and narratives.

The counter-measures for that reality exist and are carried and manifested by an increasing number of people who are conscient of their role and potential as global citizens, voicing their ideals in a strong and consistent way which is then recognised by a part of the world media, amplifying their range and, subsequently, their influence.

This article aims to offer a transversal analysis of the importance of the consolidating inclusive approaches and norms, as well as to justify why the movements which sustain the looked-for change, with a primary focus on art, gain increased importance and potential when conveyed by the media.

A varied set of literature, from academics such as Cristina Bicchieri, aiming to evidence the interconnection between the fields related to the present topic will be used to articulate the argumentative structure of the article. The Eurovision song contest will be presented as the main illustrative item, focusing on its multifaceted artistic expression which often carries implicit political meaning and is able to represent symbols of fight and freedom - with the help of progressist approaches by media networks, empowering the message and its range.

Keywords: Art; Social change; Media; Music; Eurovision.

INTRODUCTION

The first section of this article aims to build an argumentative structure to illustrate how art can serve as a symbolic stage which may represent people and any implicit political stand, following a reflection on the pertinence and necessity of art for change in our lives. It will then be followed by a chapter focusing on the media and its role as a persuading tool, illustrating the influencing range of the Eurovision Song Contest by giving examples of the coverage of the event. The sequence of sections will end in the reflection on the probability and likelihood of finding real changes in society and its behaviours and accepted narratives.

ART AND ITS ROLE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Art, like other concepts that tend to have a wide pallet of meaning shadows, can be hard to define with a precision that would gather the agreement of everyone. For the purpose of this article, we will limit ourselves to the generic approach that would define art as being the “expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). Such definition catapults us to the understanding of how multifaceted art can be in the sense that it has a potential of wide adaptability to act upon the spheres of beauty and emotional power.

One of those ramifications - which, one would argue, would vastly depend on how well the power of its aesthetics and implicit rhetoric are moulded - is art with the particular intention of triggering or influencing change regarding some aspect of our society. Art for change is not a novelty when it comes to the role of art in our global society. As a matter of fact, that term was already conceptually pictured before by many people and institutions, such as the Tate Modern (2008) when they state that that purpose of art (for change) aims to promote “a form of political or social currency, actively addressing cultural power structures rather than representing them or simply describing them”.

That essential premise, which helps us understand the potential of purposeful art with a political shape, links itself to the democratic value of this form of expression. As Kilgore states, “[w]hen we consider art as an international language, we assume that it must have some kind of universal meaning for the people of most nations” (1954: 303), and that universality is, by definition, linked to a democratic sense of art. By stating that art is a democratic way of one

expressing oneself, I want to infer that the universal essence that defines art makes it universal not only regarding the transversality of its audience but also regarding everyone who might need a platform that would allow them to express themselves. The definition of art, which was initially presented, evidences the plasticity and wide spectrum of all forms of artistic expressions, which points to how accessible it is to anyone who wishes to express himself/herself through art, hence the full accessibility of art as a transversal platform for every person.

If the artistic expression in question embraces the notion of art for change and if it aims to politicise a certain topic for those matters, art can potentialise “critical thinking (...), guiding communities, and maintaining peace and order” (Demirel & Altintas, 2012: 448) which can allow democratisation to be also present as it would represent an active influence on the attempt to promote some form of equity or social justice.

Art is, then, capable of serving particular agendas which may include social justice aims; also, that referred potential is not limited to any particular person or group as it is reachable to virtually every member of society. Art, which “expands the worldview by serving to social areas like “social ethics”, “behave humane” and “freedom” (...) should enlighten the community by setting light to social, communal, economic and political realities or matters” (Demirel & Altintas, 2012: 448), being, therefore, of vested interest to use it for pro-social purposes by whomever wishes to zealously defend an equalitarian dynamics in our globalised society and represent people and any challenge they might face.

How pertinent and necessary might art for social change be?

One may wonder if the state of the world regarding social progression justifies such an approach. In general terms, and in contrast with other times, liberty and fairness seem much more evident than ever. The available data does confirm that apparent positive trend; as a matter of fact, in the Social Progress Index (2018), the developed countries are shown in the higher tiers that evidence said progress. The Index (ibid.) has six tiers and the first three, which encompass the list of the so-called developed countries, are the ones that suggest the more promising data. The spectrum of economic and social factors that determine the presented results subdivide themselves in order to include a very wide and complete set of variables. As such, one can get a notion of how the countries behave with respect to certain matters that express inclusiveness; in those matters, some of the relevant realities included are: acceptance

of gays and lesbians, discrimination and violence against minorities, equality of political power by gender, equality of political power by social group, among others (ibid.).

On a first instance, one could recognise the immediate benefit of protecting and promoting what is already strong and solidified, following the assumption that this trending data and the behaviours associated to it would tend to strengthen and spread across the rest of the world due to the globalisation dynamics, as a globalised world tends to impact favourably as “people largely favour more openness and interconnection between societies” (WCSDG 2004: 13). Nevertheless, and as a second instance, it is observable the rise of policies that defy or decrease the successes of an increasingly equalitarian society, which intensifies the need of manifestations that oppose and challenge them; as The Harvard Gazette states, “[r]arely have groups on the radical right advanced so far in recent decades” (2017), and art for change may present itself as a powerful multifaceted platform to go against those radical manifestations and their effects in the audiences that they might be encouraging.

THE MEDIA AS AN INFLUENCING TOOL

This section will provide an understanding of how art and the media can be linked in the context of potentialised art for change and its influence in societies behaviours and dynamics.

In a globalised world, some degree of confrontation between realities is inevitable in order for social harmony to be reached; due to that, there must be a higher focus on communication – more concretely, allowing discourses to have the power to be heard so that their existence and their aims are acknowledged and, eventually, understood by the masses. As Fairclough highlights:

[A]ny knowledge of a domain of social life is constituted as one discourse from among a number of co-existing or conceivable discourses (...) different discourses are associated with different perspectives on the domain concerned and different interests (...) discourses can work ideologically in social relations of power (...). (2011: 20)

The media, justified by the core of its nature, is a privileged platform to present and debate information. Irwin (2011: 109) defends the idea that the media has a crucial role in passing

information, related to all sorts of events or matters that might be relevant to the public and their lives and that, inevitably, there is a line of ideological processes that run in parallel with the informational line. The media, which then can be perceived as a platform with an advantageous margin of influence not only for information share but also for encouraging or influencing behaviours, can be perceived as ideal to voice art and its political aims to a wide spectrum of audiences.

Irwin (2011: 109) also highlights the idea that people's role when it comes to one's interaction with the media is not merely passive (as an audience member or as someone who might be portrayed in the stream of information displayed by the media): people have gained a more active presence as they are "increasingly involved in the production of news". Such leeway creates a certain permeability on the media, the information they present and the way they present it which can serve all sorts of narratives, including the ones which would contradict the purpose of the pro-social artistic manifestations referred before when analysing the potential of art for change.

Nevertheless, and following the logic which underlies beneath the correlation between the media coverage of specific subjects and the will of the people, the probabilities should pend in favour of the purpose for art defended in the present article as the progressive indicators which are part of the Social Progress Index (2018) mentioned during the previous section are promisingly in favour of a generalised notion of progressive values in the countries that may be of major influence for those who might mirror those same behaviours and ideological positions, partially or in total, in the future. The proliferation of varied and inclusive discourses leading to a transversally equalitarian reality should promote a cyclical effect of empowerment as people might be more familiarised with different narratives and, by reflexivity, should start including them in what they would expect to find in their society. As Fairclough defends:

Information - or knowledge-based late modern societies are characterised (...) by enhanced reflexivity – we are constantly reshaping our social practices on the basis of knowledge about those practices. This is true in the domain of (...) how people conduct their personal relationships (...). (2011: 20)

Eurovision as a political stage

In order to illustrate how art for change can be voiced by the media, as well as the varied discourses which can be portrayed in the scope of minorities empowerment narratives, some examples of media coverage will follow. Those examples shall encompass examples from different media networks to include a varied representation within the ideological spectrum that shapes the *modus operandi* of the media.

The Eurovision Song Contest, a very popular song contest that brings together the countries of the European Broadcasting Union, which defines itself as being a “a state-of-the-art, prime-time entertainment programme, world-class television production” and which “consists chiefly of successive live televised performances of songs by artists (...) entered by the Participating Broadcasters to represent their countries” precisely states in its rules that “[n]o lyrics, speeches, gestures of a political, commercial or similar nature shall be permitted” (Eurovision, 2018); nevertheless, it will become evident with the examples to follow that, throughout the years, a considerable number of acts have included many symbols, more or less explicit, which were charged with political meaning and an agenda – all of those examples also show a positive coverage by the media regarding different progressive symbols and messages. The Financial Times (2014), in the sequence of recognising that the Eurovision contest has been accused of politicising its acts, positively comments that “[i]f it can give peaceful vent to the continent’s tensions while promoting liberal attitudes, all well and good”.

Still, on the same article, some of the acts are commented in the context of their political approach; one of them was ‘Rise Like a Phoenix’, the song which took Conchita Wurst to victory in the contest of 2014. The Financial Times (2014), in an implicit and explicit recognition of the song’s potential to address the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community, reports that the Eurovision Song Contest of 2014 was “won by Conchita Wurst, a bearded transvestite from Austria, in a result seen by many as a riposte to President Vladimir Putin, whose government has passed increasingly strict anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender laws”.

Russia, which according to Reuters (2017) “was ranked Europe’s second least LGBT-friendly nation in 2016 by ILGA-Europe, a network of European LGBT groups” found its frequent and damaging discriminatory policies challenged by a message of empowerment (representing the promising potential of art for change) of the LGBTQ+ community, voiced and strengthened by the media.

Another act that followed the same line of minorities empowerment was the song that won the contest in 2018: 'Toy' by Netta Barzilai, which addresses issues beneath the gender power dynamics. The Politico Europe (2017) reported that the referred act was one of the preferred by the public, highlighting its political charge and its lyrics which evoke women's objectification by males and the representation of the need of personal emancipation by whoever might be feeling a victim of gender violence of any kind. It is, once more, a meaningful opposition to a transversal problem which can widen itself to encompass many demonstrations of violence; the fact that it "occurs across all socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and in many societies" (Khasakhala-Mwenesi, 2004: 239) shows the said transversality of the problem and tackling it via a series of movements, namely artistic ones, with the appropriate support of the media is an imperative.

Another example of an act which was very inclusive by representing many groups was 'A luta é alegria' (The fight is joy) by Homens da Luta, representing Portugal in 2011. The Portuguese revolution of the 25th of April of 1974 served as the main source of inspiration for the characterisation and the clear political stance was one which favoured the common people, their pragmatic struggles and their rights.

The Huffington Post, creating a clear picture of the symbolic representation and the practical aims of the people, published:

On stage they (...) dressed as a factory worker, a peasant woman, a soldier, a student, a revolutionary and an unemployed member of the public.(...) Over the next several weeks the song became an anthem of the street protests that engulfed Lisbon. As Prime Minister Jose Socrates attempted to push his austerity package through parliament the protesters sang louder. Lawmakers ultimately rejected the bill, and the Prime Minister resigned on March 23. The media attributed his failure to the demonstrations — and the music that fuelled them. (2011)

In this case, not only was the mediatic influence which spread the message capable of showing a representation of a struggle and its legitimacy but it also transformed itself into an embodiment of voices and wills, taken to the streets by the common people, the same people the act represented, who managed to impel concrete changes in their realities.

Although the examples which were mentioned are taken from a specific artistic context - the music context, more specifically the Eurovision Song Contest -, they intend to illustrate all artistic manifestations which are politically driven towards a fairer society. As such, the examples showed how the struggles that specific groups or minorities come across can have its effects propelled by the media which can now be reached by the public and, therefore, does not limit itself in offering information without it being influenced by the requests of the people. Still in the same line of thought, as the world is becoming more progressive, there has to be a progressive focus from the media too on how they deal with information. There should be, then, a cyclical effect as the debate that is generated by this strengthened media coverage of realities that could once be perceived by the masses as peripheral or inexistent will ideally solidify the notion and knowledge regarding multiple realities so that “people can come to question and look beyond existing discourses, or existing relations of dominance and marginalisation between discourses” (Fairclough, 2011: 20) and, with that, promote society’s evolution towards an empathetic and harmonious dynamics which recognises and incorporates the respect and acceptance for the inalienable rights of every individual.

It is prudent to highlight, too, that the implicit expectations that might have been growing regarding the political representation in each Eurovision performance might act as a filter for certain performances or performers that could be perceived as divisive and against a certain sense of political correctness. To illustrate that case, one could mention the case of the Ukrainian singer Maruv that, after having won in Ukraine, was withdrawn from the competition “after a row exposing tensions over Russia” as it was perceived by the Ukrainian TV authority that “[a] candidate could not be someone who performed in Russia, which annexed Crimea in 2014 and backed a separatist insurgency in the eastern Donbass region.” (Euronews, 2019), which, to many, could represent a certain restrictive nature due to the referred expectations.

PROMOTING INCLUSIVE AND POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR

After having covered the potential of art for social change and the way the media serves to voice certain narratives, which are having an emerged recognition in the world, by giving a positive reporting to the artistic manifestations and their political symbols, we will be questioning the likelihood of norms being able to be stimulated in order to fortify the already promising social progress in the world - in this case, the norms related with pro-society

behaviours which should encourage the masses to adopt an equalitarian set of attitudes in their lives.

By stating that “[d]iscourses are partial and positioned, and social difference is manifest in the diversity of discourses within particular social practices. (...) Critical awareness in this case is a matter of seeing the diversity of discourses and their positioned nature”, Fairclough (2011:22) highlights the importance of being aware of the varied world of perspectives and positionings that we live in; recognition should be a first and crucial step towards recognising other spheres of existences beyond what one may consider a single and only reality and the public, in general, should have the means to access different narratives, through art, via the media, as seen before.

Bicchieri (2006: xi) recognises that people may not be interested in following a particular set of “[p]ro-social norms of fairness, reciprocity, cooperation and the like” as they might not be able to identify why that meets his/her interests – in other words, people might not be able to recognise why one should behave in a way that benefits society. Bicchieri also affirms that “[s]ome people need incentives in the forms of the expectation of rewards and punishments to be induced to comply (...). Others instead obey a norm just because they recognise the legitimacy of other’s expectations that they will follow the norm” (ibid.). One can infer, then, that stimuli, in favour of a particular behaviour, in the shape of rewards or punishments - which include situations as simple as the approval or disapproval of one’s peers - can help to create social cohesion as people that do not immediately recognise the legitimacy of a certain pro-social norm or do not identify the benefit that he/she could obtain from it would still conform to it and, consequently, help to perpetuate it.

One could argue that ideally this mirror effect would embed a much more generalised conscious approach to whichever discourse we were to refer - nonetheless, on a first instance, the practical benefits of having behaviours which could endanger the liberty of, for instance, a specific minority, restrained is, *per se*, a sizable accomplishment. Likewise, if we take the Social Progress Index (2018) into consideration, the purpose within the developed countries - which, due to their relevance in the world dynamics have a major role in, consciously or unconsciously, influencing behaviours and trends - would be more a purpose of solidification of pro-social attitudes and not necessarily a complete change or building new ideological structures.

To reinforce the idea of the reflexivity and conformity regarding pro-social behaviour – which, again, may not be of the immediate interest of an individual – Bicchieri adds:

Focusing people on a social norm means that they know the situation is one to which the norm applies, expect a sufficiently large number of people to obey the norm, and also believe that a sizable number of other people expect and prefer them to obey the norm, and may even be prepared to sanction violations. Under these conditions most people would prefer to conform to the norm. (2006: 69)

By mirroring inclusiveness there would be the assertion that, after some time, the normalisation of it would start taking place, which should increase the number of people that follow pro-social norms because they recognise their value and legitimacy and not only because they want to avoid sanctions in the form of their peers rejection, for instance, or because they are seeking to gather approval granted by the social groups of relevance to them. It may, therefore, be “possible to structure the environment in a way that produces desirable behaviour” (ibid. 7).

CONCLUSION

To conclude this formulation, there must be a clear notion of how all these lines of thought are linked: art is a democratic platform by excellence as it allows everyone to access it; also, due to its plasticity, it opens a myriad of possibilities when it comes to ways of one expressing an idea, which can be politicised and aiming to change something to improve the equalitarian structure of society (art for change). Art, being therefore able to strengthen or challenge narratives, needs to be potentialised in range and, consequently, number of people who will access that artistic manifestation: that can be done via the media networks which are now more open to the public, which means that regular people have more power to influence the media which will then voice the messages accordingly. As these messages increasingly reach more people, namely those who might oppose the core idea of the narrative being spread, will challenge paradigms as they will tend to grow and be normalised. The Eurovision Song Contest, which was the example analysed in this article, has a spectrum of influence in a region of the globe which shows promising behaviour for inclusiveness, making it a fertile ground to the solidification and consequent normalisation of messages and norms that should arise expectations which would, ultimately, be recognised and followed by those who found them to be legitimate or followed by those who prefer to conform in order to avoid sanctions and/or get approval from people in society. That should grant, at least, a safer environment for groups and

people that, for some time, were perceived to belong to outcasted realities and now can get a fairer place in a much more global and diverse society and fight actively the growth of oppressive movements.

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