

Introduction to the Human Terroir: Arts, Authorship and Technology as References for Intercultural Relationships

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Abstract

Since 1996 the ‘*Identidades* [Identities]—intercultural movement’ has promoted relationship spaces for cultural interchanges between Mozambique, Cape Verde, Brazil, and Portugal—countries with different paths crossing in the past and sharing a common language. The movement includes students, researchers, and professors of the Fine Arts School of the University of Porto (FBAUP), joined by other people, schools, communities, and institutions. This movement arranges art, culture, and technology gatherings. These gatherings provoke conflicts and are constantly in tension, as they dislocate the members from their own culture to unknown spaces. I find, on the one hand, communities fighting for the recognition of their culture, for better living conditions, and whose activities are rooted in resistance and in the struggle for their identity. On the other hand, I find *artists-researchers* discontented with their own *art* and society of the post-colonial world which interferes with the communities in a colonial manner; the same world that promotes globalisation, resigning these communities to oblivion. In this movement Art and authorship play a fundamental role in the intercultural dialogue. It is through these experiences that we can seek a new dimension for these concepts. It is in this sense that I approach the theme of the ‘Death of the Author,’ as developed by Barthes, Foucault, and Agamben. At the same time, I try to understand how technology has obfuscated this issue. I explore the relationships that exist between an author and a community, in its processes of emancipation, and how they become unique. What do the author and the community share when both pass the margins of what is established? How do author and community learn about themselves when they seek to know and develop in the unknown? This chapter focuses on this dimension of the dialogue about art, culture, and technology, where relationships of fellowship and confidence are established that allow us to see beyond the borders of confidence of the discourse itself.

Key Words: Communities, art, authorship, culture, emancipation, identities, *terroir*, intercultural, post-colonialism, ICT (Information and Communication Technologies).

1. Playing with Death

This essay stems from work that I decided to call the ‘(re)rooting of technology in culture,’ the main objective of which is to investigate the impact of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) on the emancipation of info-excluded

communities. During this research I realised how current ICT, with its long lines of code, regulate and impede the communities' emancipation, to the extent that it closes the spaces of linguistic experimentation of these communities. The *linguistic being* becomes crucial in the approach to this issue. In this regard, I am also interested in Agamben's approach to experience:

Traditional experience (in the sense with which Montaigne is concerned) remains faithful to this separation of experience and science, human knowledge and divine knowledge. It is in fact the experience of the boundary between these two spheres. This boundary is death. [...] In its search for certainty, modern science abolishes this separation and makes experience the locus—the 'method'; that is, the pathway—of knowledge.¹

The perspective of modern science, with its Cartesian cause-effect logic, 'destroyed' the traditional experience by making the experience itself its place. Experience became the domain of science and the known, separating it from the unknown. The boundary separating the known from the unknown is no longer death. At this point at which knowledge and experience are juxtaposed, the Simulacra² have also emerged. We currently live in the third-order simulacra, in which the map already precedes the territory³ and where the law of the code rules.⁴

The audacity to approach the unknown through experience separate from science—approaching the limit of death—is the reserve of Art and of non-Western cultures. It is in this sense that Art and the culture of certain communities can share this audacity. It is also on this plane that I approach the theme of 'Death of the Author,' seeking survival clues in the conflict with the devices, means, and technologies, like language. At the same time I seek to interrupt this theme with the experiences lived in cultures, where the territory still precedes the map, where ICT is dead or was never born.

Maybe these clues bring us closer to the problem of the life and the death of culture in a Cartesian world. A world in which *the prophets of science* and technology, imbued with the myth of objectivity, continue to have a merely operative view of these problems. If experience cannot be separated from science in this world, then what is promoted is only the exclusion of the human from its own world. This is the feeling I have when I reflect on the work of Kevin Kelly, who, under the Californian Ideology,⁵ has a purely operative vision of technology and of the concept of the author.

To Kelly, technology is an autonomous body, provided with life in a quasi-mathematical and nonspiritual sense.⁶ It's like an organism that is evolving and gaining its independence he calls the Technium.⁷ Within this idea of an evolution that follows the strands of biological evolution associated with technology, one of the most controversial aspects relates to the inevitability of its structural evolution.

Despite his lack of rigour, Kelly brings together a series of examples that, according to him, were discovered at the same time by different people and within different contexts, such as the very theory of *natural selection* by Darwin, also discovered by Alfred Russel Wallace, which was inspired in both cases by Thomas Malthus's study of population growth; photography, invented by Nicephore Niepce, Louis Daguerre, and William Henry Fox Talbot; and Edison's light bulb, which had 23 inventors prior to him.⁸

This led me to the question: What is an author? The same question occupied Michel Foucault in 1969, a year after Barthes' declaration of the death of the author. Barthes advanced that the text must *live* in the reader and free itself from a culture 'tyrannically centred on the author.' For Barthes, language must assume the position of the protagonist in relation to the author as, in fact, it is 'language that speaks.' He gives us the example of writing as 'the destruction of every voice' and explains the range of this phenomenon in our society.⁹

Although the text of Foucault's *What is an author?* does not explicitly refer to Barthes, there is a background that unites them, a time, the late sixties, in which the intimacy between author and authority, power relations, and the social implication obliged them to question criticism based on the author. Foucault focuses on the analysis of the author-function and its relation to the text, separating it from the real individual, and uses the *death of the author* as the synthesis of this writing phenomenon in which 'the writing subject endlessly disappears.'¹⁰

According to Barthes and Foucault, the author does not precede the work, and the concern of Foucault to separate the real individual from the author-function also moves towards uncovering the 'processes that are peculiar to an experience in which the subject and the object 'are formed and transformed' in relation to and in terms of one another.'¹¹ This notion comes close to that of Barthes when he says that 'the modern *scriptor* is born simultaneously with the text' and does not express, but rather inscribes himself in language.¹² The *inscription in language* which emerges from the relationship of mutual transformation between author and work, subject and object, *scriptor* and language, is the first concept that I want to make salient in this chapter.

The second concept has to do with the *initiators of discursive practices*, which is present in Barthes' work through the relation of the author and the mechanisms of power related to the literary criticism, and developed subsequently in the socio-cultural plane by Foucault. To the latter the author-function is 'to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society.'¹³ In his endless search for the margins of the discourse, Foucault raises the questions: Where does the work begin and end? Where does the author begin and end? He introduces us to the various characteristics of the author-function, taking the author as the work's discursive unit. Finally, he demonstrates its trans-discursive function of how the author transposes and exceeds the author's own work and becomes an *initiator of discursive practices* as exemplified in Marx and Freud.¹⁴ From this

Giorgio Agamben advances how the ‘living individual’ is also captured and inscribed in the mechanisms of power.¹⁵

Agamben’s focus is on the gesture with which the author and the living being ‘played out’ [jouées], or ‘put into play,’ with their lives in the work in which they are inscribed. It is in the range of language and the multiple sense of the word ‘jouées’ [played out] and the staging that he sums up for us: ‘the history of human beings is perhaps nothing other than the hand-to-hand confrontation with apparatuses they have produced—above all with language.’¹⁶ Agamben opens the other gravitational centre of the issue, at the point where the apparatuses and mechanisms of power capture the presence of the author and the living being and put it into play.

Thus, transcending literature and the Art, the author inscribed himself in technology, the apparatuses and mechanisms of power of technology captured the author and his life in a game of presence-absence. Assuming that a similar game is established between a rural community and technology, we face a problem: The current ICT is developed according to the Californian Ideology, which advocates technological determinism. It is not for nothing that Kevin Kelly devalues the role of authors in the face of the structural inevitability of technology. Whether or not we agree with his idea, it dominates the minds of ICT developers. In any event, it is the ‘authors’ themselves who give way to the determinism of the code, ‘through a profound faith in the emancipatory potential of the new information technologies.’¹⁷ In this way the Technium in which the code dominates the creation triumphs, relegating the human to the second level. From a culture ‘tyrannically centered on the author,’ we pass to a *culture tyrannically centred on the code*. How can a rural community inscribe itself in the language of ICT?

There is a cultural convergence moulded by technology that is expanded throughout the planet in its own globalisation organism. This organism consumes its own culture, leaving little room for those who question this mechanism and, fundamentally, those who live more from what is *born* than from what is *made*.

I find these issues particularly compelling when I am out of my postmodern habitat, this problem arises when ICT and authorship are absent, in trips to other cultures where the laboratory for these issues is assembled, where we can test and experience the author’s death and the death of technology.

2. Interruption for Experience

All my research departs from experiences in the *Identidades* movement and it is to this experience that I will bring the concepts of technology and authorship. I apologise to the authors of these concepts for any abuse to their concepts, but these authors are, after all, founders of discursivity from whom I steal the concepts to liberate them for more meanings. I carry these problems on trips with a group of artists of the intercultural movement *Identidades* [Identities].¹⁸ This movement travels through Mozambique, Cape Verde, Portugal, and Brazil and shares

activities centred on artistic practices and technologies ranging from areas such as painting, pottery, photography, video, and web publishing. The practices could be workshops in communities and schools, as well as interventions in public spaces.

In the Identidades' movement, artists go to places where the word *Art* and *Author* says little or nothing and are very far from their contemporary meanings. We belong to the Western world that forgets these communities in the globalisation it promotes and we are also from a country that carries the history of colonisation, still very present in the marks, divisions, and borders of these communities. It is quite reasonable to say that we are often the foreigners invited to these communities while we are only visitors.¹⁹ In other words, at the beginning we were not welcome. Still, we built, on the basis of trust, a rapport in the activities of the Identidades' movement that allows us today to generate knowledge about our activities.

The processes and methods emanate from actions, for example technology workshops, in which we follow our own methodology, which we call the TCK (trust, complicity, and knowledge). Without the word 'trust' we cannot enter into a reciprocal relationship in which we also suggest problems and proposals. We know that we are at the service of the desires of the communities, for example, in *Conceição das Crioulas* in Brazil, where the community wanted to master the technology of video to make their own documentaries of themselves.²⁰ Being Portuguese means our history creates friction, our past has set up a play that is hard to escape, a play that continues in the post-colonial scenario. In spite of successful work in the area of technology, with returns for the community, the word 'trust' was not spoken until 5 years passed: Although 'trust' was used by the workshops' participants among one other, it was, however, only used by the community leaders in relation to the Identidades group 5 years after the first contacts. What was created in the meantime that changed this reality and allowed the establishment of that trust? Our activity follows the principle of autonomy and continuity, the primary aim of the workshops being to ensure that the necessary resources of the community do not depend on us. Our dispensability as regards the community undoes models, recipes, and the *initiators of discursive practices*, allows new paths for technologies and new authorships, simultaneously ensuring that what unites us and keeps this attachment is this unknown detachment in which we wanted to indulge. An ignorance that is provoked by empty spaces and voids between cultures so different... We started as strangers and are becoming friends but, little by little, we are learning a little of others and about ourselves, the feelings are the first bonds that keeps us connected.

To avoid the initiators of discursive practice in technology, we return to Foucault when he says:

[T]he work of these initiators is not situated in relation to a science or in the space it defines; rather, it is science or

discursive practice that relate to their works as the primary points of reference.²¹

The same happens with ICT and its initiators of discursive practices. Any technology as known and presented since its discovery and after having been captured by the mechanisms of power is only a primary point of reference for certain discursivity. In this intercultural laboratory we seek other possibilities, as yet uncaptured by science or discursive practices, which we can find only in other places and cultures. Our greatest exercise is the suspension of our discourses, our science, the simulacrum that is our culture. Experimenting with video in an oral, rural community is to distance ourselves from all the grammar provided by the history of cinema.

Belonging to a literate culture accustomed to fragment, isolate, and shatter everything that appears in the name of progress (evolution) and science, I found in these communities oral cultures that do not separate their bodies from the *land*. They live in this symbiosis and wish to acquire technological knowledge without breaking it. It was in Conceição das Crioulas that I began to wonder about this aspect when inevitably I fell into the *establishment of discourse* about video and ICT with references to my Western world, many times ignoring the references that the land of Conceição was giving me, without realising that this could lead me to a new perspective on technology. The fact of being with a Cape Verdean, talking constantly of the similarities between his country and the dry and arid land of Conceição das Crioulas in Sertão, Northeast Pernambuco, sharpened my senses and the odd thing is that there are more differences than similarities between the dry Conceição land and the volcanic rock of Cape Verde. However, although in both cases the lands are dry and hostile to agriculture, neither has become a noman's land, people live in these spaces, transforming them into places by building. We might find more similarities between the people than between the lands. If the communities emerge from a relationship in such hostile lands, maybe it is necessary to understand this telluric relationship for the use of ICT. And just like plants had to create roots in the rocks and arid land, ICT can be rooted in the culture of those communities.

In Lagedos, on the island of Santo Antão on Cape Verde, in the middle of volcanic rock, we encountered a true oasis built by the local community. Having asked how it was possible, we received a surprising answer: 'We look at the rock the same way that the artist looks at the blank page, it just took inspiration, tools, and the desire to create.'²² In Conceição the oasis is the people born of the *land*, who stoically face the climate and the elements of their own place and, fundamentally, the struggle for territory. If the word *terroir* exists to characterise the endogenous products of limited and specific areas and climates, there should be a word for production in which, in a reverse direction, the land and climate are the main enemies, and the *people* are the main *product* of this conflict. Going further,

the *land* of these products is more in the *hands* of these people than under their feet. There is a human *terroir*, a strength, and a *way of doing*, characteristic of a people, delimited by their culture. We know that the word ‘culture’ embraces this concept and many others, but this idea of a *human terroir* carries the voice of the *land* through the people. In this sense, culture does not delimit anything.

In Conceição das Crioulas, there is a desire for emancipation at various levels. Concerning technology the community managed to generate their identity, show their struggle and share the atrocities they constantly face. This force comes from its ancestral past, of a culture that was taken from Africa, passed through slavery, to a place where it is reborn in Brazil. A dislocation caused by colonialism keeps the community attentive to their extensions in the current globalisation. In the case of ICT, the devices now transform and unify us in a convergent force that, rather than a new colonisation, seems more like *clonisation*.

In this regard, resistance is in the conflict created between distinct cultures that are concerned about putting technology in the axis of their identity and maintaining the difference. This is another of the unknowns in which we indulge and that keeps us connected. The principal problem remains: how can a community so bound to the land inscribe itself in ICT? Could these long lines of code be negating the space of these communities’ linguistic experimentation?

There is a theatre we build where our lives are *put into play*. The unknown which they play can change the theatre itself. The *land* is a staging that overlaps the theatre technology, the *land* is co-author, culture inscribes itself in this game. This force requires the technology to be redefined, rediscovered, (re)rooted. The epistemological fields are re-oriented. The Art and disinterested interest²³ of the artists let one experience the various plasticities in this laboratory, from the authorship and technologies diluted in the collective creative process. The needs of the communities and their culture present new functions and challenges, never before anticipated for these so objective technologies from a Cartesian and mathematical, perhaps alien, world. The *land*, our *land*, becomes the scenario that provokes the resistance necessary to shape the technology.

Sharing also the discourse with the *land* and adding it to the *scriptor/language* dialectic is to anew form this triangle where all technology is born and that allows us to (re)root. Art, people, and places are the laboratory, or staging, for this *jouées*.

Notes

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993), 19.

² Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage Publication, 1993), 50.

³ ‘The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory’ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation (The Body in Theory: Histories of Cultural Materialism)*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.

⁴ ‘[T]he passage from the form-commodity to the form-sign, from the abstraction of the exchange of material products under the law of general equivalence to the operationalization of all exchanges under the law of the code.’ Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975), 121.

⁵ Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, *The Californian Ideology* (The Hypermedia Research Centre, University of Westminster, 1995), Viewed 11 October 2011, <http://www.hrc.wmin.ac.uk/theory-californianideology-main.html>.

⁶ ‘I take the view that life is a nonspiritual, almost mathematical property that can emerge from networklike arrangements of matter.’ Kevin Kelly, *Out of Control* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 97.

⁷ Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants* (New York: Viking Books, 2010), 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 131-155.

⁹ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1978), 142-143.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’, *Writing 73* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 301.

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 64.

¹² Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 145-146.

¹³ Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’, 305.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 305-314. See also, Agamben, *Profanations*, 62-63.

¹⁵ ‘The subject as a living individual is present in his research only through the objective processes of subjectivation that constitute this subject and the apparatuses that inscribe and capture it in the mechanisms of power.’ Agamben, *Profanations*, 63-64.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁷ Barbrook, *The Californian Ideology*.

¹⁸ ‘Identidades’, Viewed 9 October 2011, <http://identidades.eu>.

¹⁹ Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (California: Stanford University Press, 2000).

²⁰ Tiago Assis, ‘Crioulas Media: Technology, Language and Identity in a Quilombola Community in Brazil’, *Multiculturalism: Critical and Inter-Disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Kerry Gallagher (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2011), 149-155, Viewed 11 October 2011, <https://www.interdisciplinarypress.net/online-store/ebooks/persons-community/multiculturalism-critical-and-inter-disciplinary-perspectives>.

²¹ Foucault, 'What is an Author?', 311.

²² António, community member in informal talk.

²³ Cf. Immanuel Kant, 'First Book: Analytic of the Beautiful', *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952) 41-89.

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