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Searching for a common identity: The folklore interpreted through illustration

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Abstract

This article aims to question relationship between illustration and folklore by discussing how today's illustration recovers and uses folklore as a language, suggesting a new paradigm which presents itself as a possibility of semantic innovation, one seeking to discover and promote a collective identity¹ through individual expression.

*Liquid modernity*² suffers, in Bauman's opinion, from a serious crisis of meaning: patterns or prescriptive rules of social behaviour become unstable; for Niethammer (1997), personal identity has become essential today, and collective identity a way to determine a new pattern. The tentative establishment of a commonly experienced reality is leading to an inevitable destabilization of meaning – and therefore of individual and collective identities.

The 'small worlds of life' (Berger and Luckmann 1997) constitute, as a whole, the modern conception of pluralism. Habits, which gradually embark and mingle with everyday life, are then

1. Several authors refer to the duality collective/individual as contributions to a sense of identity: Halbwachs 'assigns to memory

culturally assimilated. In this sense, today's society becomes a set of individual selves active in constructing their own identity; different selves that participate and promote social impulses with a sensible effect on a global level: the unit is now made of differences. Today's ambiguities, complexity and destabilized senses have brought to illustration a new role in visual communication and graphic design.

In this context we sustain that illustration acts as an *autopoietic*³ system in the scope of communication design as it coexists with the outside world but retains its own nature.

Using this approach, this article will seek to evidence that the influence of folklore in today's illustrations acts as the expression of this demand and as an attempt to revive common values that belong to a collective imaginary – a wish to bring to light the identity hidden in the meanders of modernity.

1. Today's complexity and the possible ways of being

Zygmunt Bauman (2000: 8) uses the metaphor of *liquidity* to refer to the 'character of the present stage of [the] modern era'. The fluidity of liquid, unlike solid elements (which maintain their forms unchanged), facilitates the mutation and provision for change: thus liquids are perennial, transient, only momentarily filling the space as they are in a permanent transfiguration. However, *liquid modernity* suffers, for Bauman, from a serious crisis of meaning: there are no longer established patterns or prescriptive rules of social behaviour or certainties about the place and role for each one in society. Berger and Luckmann argue that private life also finds itself questioned in its feelings and values, and even with regard to personal identity, 'hereditarily transmitted' and unquestioned, now belongs to the scope of work to be done and it is up to the players to accomplish it. Work, which was perpetuated through a 'job for life' and defined the space and the value of each person in social, family and identity terms, became precarious, sometimes even unnecessary. The void left by the absence of models involves a movement of self-searching, self-discovery and the demand for identity. When Lyotard referred to the discredit of the great narratives, and alluded to the plurality and a general crisis of meaning: the uncertainty implies questioning and daily reassessment about the meaning of existence and of life itself.⁴ The absence of shared values establishing a movement and a similar shared reality leads to an inevitable destabilization of meaning. This is the stigma of modern society: the 'presentation of its members as individuals' (Bauman 2000: 39), '[...] pluralism as a state in which, in the same society, coexist people living their lives in different ways' (Berger and Luckmann 1997: 59).

The pluralization implies that nothing should be taken as true, unique or unquestionable: the options multiply and therefore almost everything is allowed but no interpretation is closed, effective or appropriate. The world is no longer pre-defined and requires being reinvented. This is the vagueness in which

social structures, a collective identity and a subjective nature, regarding collective memory, group memory or nation memory, and defines these concepts as agents of community building around a specific past, which is immediately present [...]' (cited by Niethammer 1997: 129); Moisés de Lemos Martins argues that 'the symbolic systems of a community [...], their collective imaginary (religion, folk, language, myths, rites) are the incessant work, through which human communities constitute themselves and at the same time announce its existence' (Martins 2001: 92).

2. Bauman considers "'fluidity" as the leading metaphor for the present stage of the modern era. [...] Liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape. Fluids [...] neither fix space nor bind time' (Bauman 2000: 8).
3. Luhmann transposes into sociology the concept of 'autopoietic organization', created by biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela to refer to living beings as autonomous units:

‘Realize living beings as autonomous units can show how their autonomy [...] becomes explicit in stating that what defines them as units is its autopoietic organization, and that at the same time, they perform and specify themselves in it.’ (Maturana and Varela, 2007: 5)

To the question: ‘What remains invariant in the process of ontogenetic adaptation, and that allows us to identify an organism as a unit?’ Maturana and Varela respond, ‘this invariant is the living being autopoiesis’ (Cláudia Costa Oliveira in *Autopoiesis*: <http://www2.fcsh.unl.pt/edtl/verbetes/A/autopoiesis.htm>).

4. ‘Knowledge [*savoir*] in general cannot be reduced to science, nor even to learning [*connaissance*]. [...] But what is meant by the term knowledge is not only a set of denotative statements, far from it. It also includes notions of “knowhow”, “knowing how to live”, “how to listen” [*savoir-faire, savoir vivre, savoir-ecouter*], etc. Knowledge, then, is a question of competence that goes beyond the

the human being is: between a past established and secure, and a future to be defined. Thus, if on one hand there is greater openness and freedom, there is also, on the other, an agonizing uncertainty for those seeking incessantly for meaning and a place in society. But this pessimistic picture contains a glimmer of hope: ‘in all societies there are regeneration processes of meaning’ (Berger and Luckmann 1997: 108). If the problem of modern society is in its basic structures, these authors suggest the creation of ‘intermediate institutions’ which, despite not having the ability to suppress the causes, can contribute towards counteracting and resisting difficulties. It is under this principle that the ‘small worlds of life’ are installed (Berger and Luckmann 1997: 116); communities organized around common interests and senses: small worlds that constitute together modern pluralism. Due to the current fragmentation, Manuel Castells mentions the emergence of movements developing around a promise of stability:

In this world of confused and uncontrolled changes, people tend to regroup around primary identities: religious, ethnic, regional, national. [...] Increasingly, people organize their meaning not around what they do, but based on what they are or believe they are.

(Castells 1999: 23)

For its part, Boaventura de Sousa Santos denounces the current inability to look at the past foreseeing the future. In his opinion, ‘we cannot re-think social transformation and emancipation without reinventing the past’ (Santos 1997: 7). According to this author, in modernity, the social construction of identity and the transformation are based on an equation between *roots* and *options*: the *thought of roots* refers ‘to all that is profound, permanent, unique and singular, all that generates security and consistency’, while the *thought of options* concerns ‘what is variable, ephemeral, replaceable, possible and indeterminate from the roots’ (Santos 1997: 9). It is in a balanced relationship between the thought of roots (as a reference to the past) and the thought of options, that the future is projected. As Moisés de Lemos Martins (2001: 94) points out: ‘[...] the identity of a community is fertilized by two conditions: the static (the identity is institution) and the dynamics (and identity is movement and transformation)’. By this we can conclude that ‘the identity of human communities is made so much of tradition as foresight’ (Martins 2001: 95).

2. In the search for identity

On what concerns social actions, Castells (1996: 22) defines identity as ‘the process of constructing meaning based on a cultural attribute or a set of interrelated cultural attributes which prevail on other sources of meaning’. Identities thus created are then sources of meaning for their creators.

Contemporary design, as a cultural interface, is often interpreter and translator of the equation suggested by Sousa Santos – the search for the roots (a primary identity), for what is known and for

what structures our lives, is also present in design. Craft and popular culture offer, in this context, a heritage of excellence providing the raw material for reinterpretations based on the technology and iconography employed there. Moisés de Lemos Martins (2001: 92) argues, 'the symbolic systems of a community [...], their collective imaginary (religion, folklore, language, myths, rites) are the incessant work, through which human communities constitute themselves and at the same time announce its existence', and Castells (1996: 23) points out, this raw material is then processed by individuals that 'reorganize its meaning in terms of social trends and cultural projects [...]'.⁵

This is today an important issue in the design research agenda. The project 'Editoria, Design, Craft and Industry', assumes itself

[...] as a trial for a process of alterity that we envision as being humanist and able to valorize territorial identity through design, [...] suggest a reflection about the opportunity and the relevance of considering crafts, and especially 'craft skills', as a challenge to innovate through design. This exercise tries to lead us to a sort of broadening of the 'senses of places' as civilizational territories of the 21st century [...].

(Albino 2012)

Under this assumption, let us focus on illustration.

3. Back to handmade. Resisting a technological overdose

The increasing use of technological means (or the mere use of technology in the absence of a strategy or concept to assist a design project) has expanded in an industrialized world at all levels, resulting in a formal and consequently stylistic standardization. On the other hand, and along with the continuation and strengthening of technical developments, we are witnessing today an inverse movement towards the use of low-tech and symptoms of human presence. Being able *to do*, as a process that requires a special skill, returns the forgotten dignity. Appadurai suggests that imagination in a post-electronic world assumes a significant new role: freed from the restricted space of art, myth and ritual to integrate everyday life, it now takes part in 'the mental activity of everyday ordinary people of many societies. [...] People have started to show imagination in their everyday practices of life' (Appadurai 1996: 17).

Urban craft demonstrations, as well as a renewed taste for cuisine, sewing, tricot, crochet and embroidery, all emerge from these practices; the ability to accomplish, seen as a form of individual expression, is enhanced. Interestingly, it is this individuality that brings us together – perhaps because we recognize in these expressions something innate or natural that is able to rescue us from the status of mere operators of sophisticated machines and bring us back to the possibility of being just human.

simple determination and application of the criterion of truth, extending to the determination and application of criteria of efficiency (technical qualification), of justice and/or happiness (ethical wisdom), of the beauty of a sound or color (auditory and visual sensibility), etc.' (Lyotard 1984: 18).

5. Project developed under the ongoing Ph.D. thesis by Cláudia Albino, *The Sense of Place. Valorization of Territorial Identity Through Design*.

6. Sheena Clavert finds 'an interesting parallel to be made between the idea of roots and options, and Deleuze and Guattari's "Rhizomatic/Arboreal" structures of knowledge' (comments on this article). In fact, for these authors 'any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order. [...] On the contrary, not every trait in a rhizome is necessarily linked to a linguistic feature: semiotic chains of every nature are connected to very diverse modes of coding (biological, political, economic, etc.) that bring into play not only different regimes of signs but also states of things of differing status' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

Democratizing imagination promotes a new paradigm in design by which the process tolerates the participation of individuals – both in the unique expression of the author and in the consciousness of who will be the interpreter of the artefact. Facing an obvious monotony, design responds through a reinvigorated demand for expressiveness: using drawing to represent the singularities, the differences and the society idiosyncrasies. While Flusser warns of the risk of technical images substituting for experience, illustration appears as a way to escape and to create alternative worlds. The expression of individuality (as opposed to totality) finds in illustration an area of excellence to manifest itself due to the freedom allowed by a program with fewer constraints and closer proximity to the author.

The context for a change is created: responding to an ongoing globalization, people learn to feel again, enhancing experience and the expression of singularities. But in this rediscovery process there is also the inherent risk in being different: behaviours usually associated with art, which reject pattern and standards, are only marginally suited to design and illustration because their greatest goal is to communicate and to build bridges in order to reach others.

Illustration assumes, as such, the role of negotiator between the creation of a unique language by the illustrator and the confrontation with others: the unveiling of the identity in the presence of otherness; a search for affinities, for what is common and capable of establishing the necessary communications. Collective identity, presented under different formal aspects, is established with this search. The need to present illustration in terms of the originality of its differences – while still being able to communicate – requires searching for the invariable, for what remains beyond time and space.

4. Illustration, 'beyond the modern game of roots and options'⁶

In its genesis, the images produced by popular culture reflect spontaneous demonstrations, simple and with strong local characteristics; it brings people's way of life closer, imbued with their habits, customs and traditions. The illustrations created at present, for which these images are a point of departure or inspiration, refer to what Santos Silva calls 'creations and uses of symbolic nature that, during practical repetition and also due to the intensity that is assumed, turn into something more than what was originally there' (Silva 1994: 29). In this process, the author replaces the anonymous; spontaneity gives way to purpose, the expression of a people's voice fosters a new project, now imbued with intentionality, a reason that extends and enhances it symbolically. These illustrations are appropriations; images constructed with awareness of the need for communication links, elements of local identity that, when transported to a global context, are able to produce original senses. Illustration is accompanied by the wish to unveil the identity of today's design, assuming the double meaning that the word 'original' suggests: the 'origin' and the 'new'. Illustrations shedding a new perspective on popular culture emerge from this context; illustrations that integrate popular culture and present themselves as narratives bearing a new semantic (Figures 1, 2, 3). A common



Figure 1: Bicho de sete cabeças: 'Cabeçudos', <https://www.facebook.com/bichosetecabecas.pt>.



Figure 2: 'A traditional prop from the popular Portuguese festival, where you can be seen dancing to the sound of drums with an oversized papier mâché on your head. Now this "festa" can become a part of your home. Headstrong gains a new function: in the form of a lamp. Their materials and aesthetics are true to popular characters, this handcraft form gives a sense of charm and nostalgia', <http://fabrica-features-lisboa.blogspot.pt/2012/10/colecao-cabecas-no-ar-bicho-sete.html>.



Figure 3: Marias de Portugal. 'Regional identity design where each "Maria" tells stories of their region that reveal to the world the most authentic is in Portugal', <https://www.facebook.com/mariasportugal.pt/info>.

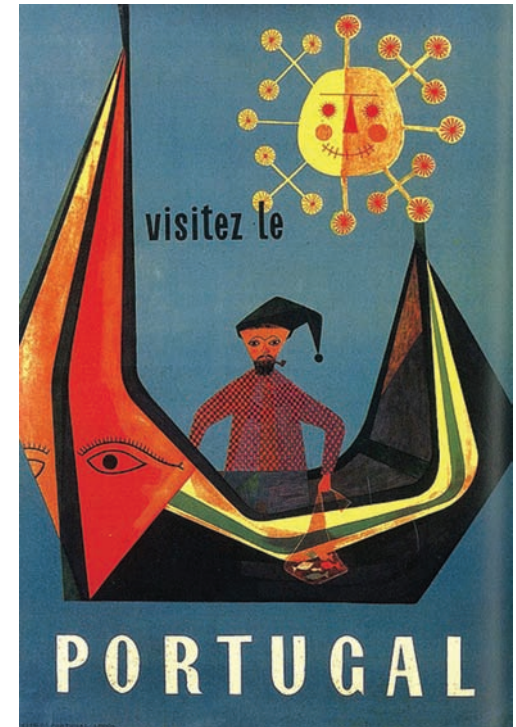
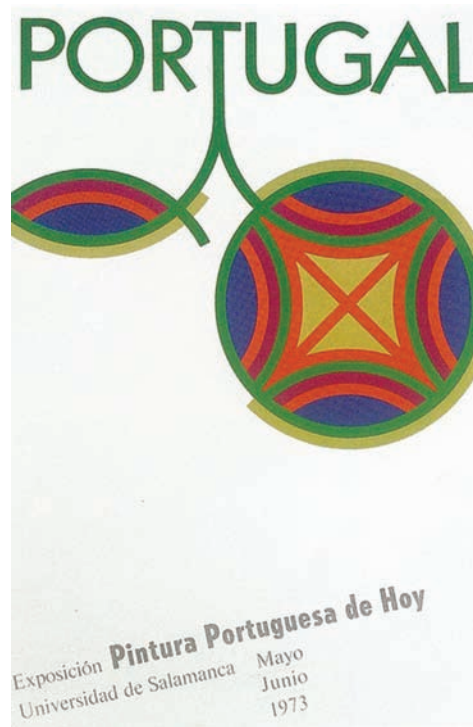
feedstock, inclusive and shared, that the self-reflective illustrator turns into demonstrations that put together collective and individual identities.

In this circumstance, the folklore assumes the form of a genetic heritage of people's know-how, as it connects what is traditional, distinctive and spontaneous with a practical and stabilized knowledge. The hypothesis we advocate is that illustration enhances the production of new meanings from the anchoring and interpretation of folklore, a process that probably results from a phenomenological and hermeneutical adjustment of each illustrator (as a 'self') to modernity. Contemporary illustration revisits folklore by discovering the DNA of a people; an innate, primitive and under construction way of knowing; a knowledge that is now reinterpreted but still keeps intact those signals that allow us to identify its origin.

The word 'folk' dates back to the twelfth century and its etymology refer to people, nation and race. The compound 'folk' + 'lore' appeared in the twentieth century, where 'lore' means the 'act of teaching, instruction, education and lesson'. Folklore indicates popular culture, 'the set of customs, legends, proverbs, artistic expressions in general, preserved through oral and visual tradition by a people or population group'. Folklore therefore includes what is common to us as a people and what is distinctive from the dominant majority. It brings a sense of identity, of belonging to a place, a way to be and to do which are essential nowadays. This identity is constituted during the process of relating to others. It evolves, but at the same time it retains the essential expression of diversity, which allows us to recognize the author. The space of representation gives rise to a semantic space: a space of communion, of encounter between the self and the other. We recognize a new intention in this reinterpretation: the literacy, present in 'lore', is symbolically valued; the iconic gives rise to the symbolic; representation to presentation; monosemy to polysemy. This is, according to Steiner, a process of *creative transposition*, in which those aspects originally fulfilling a function give rise to semantic values and to qualities whereby the new artefacts become aesthetic and culturally developed.

5. Conclusions. From similarity to difference: autopoiesis and contingency

In the mid-twentieth century, the Portuguese designer Sebastião Rodrigues became the forerunner of a purpose that design is still pursuing today: his projects feed on the imagery of popular culture as raw material but are capable of reshaping, with the backdrop of a new agenda. While a people were given a voice by the original images, Rodrigues's images revealed an appropriation, a process of projecting around an intention: the need to communicate something outside him. Ingenuity, as well as the simplicity of traditional knowledge and experience, coexists with awareness – a way of thinking that brings them close to the design project, using illustration as an expressive resource. We



Figures 4–6: Sebastião Rodrigues. <http://pinterest.com/pin/575123814884259020/>, <http://pinterest.com/pin/98657048058039194/>, <http://pinterest.com/pin/14988611230807747/>.



Figures 7 and 8: Alexander Guirard (1907–93). <http://www.design-museum.de/en/collection/restoration/archive-estates.html>, <http://grainedit.com/2007/11/10/alexander-girard-nativity-poster/>. The interest of Alexander Guirard in folklore is evident in the semantic repertoire of his illustrations.

recognize in the work of Sebastião Rodrigues the traits that make up our identity, but we are provided in addition a language for the future (Figures 4, 5, 6, 7, 8).

Today, Sanna Anukka, Kate Sutton, Janine Rewell, Julia Rotham, Madalena Matoso and Karoline Rerrie are illustrators who share a genuine interest for the folklore of their countries of origin. On the one hand, their illustrations have the ability to make us revisit an iconography that by being distant from our reality allows us to immediately feel an identification with the culture in which it arose; on the other hand, these images add a semantic and symbolic layer that project them beyond their initial visual and cultural frontiers.

Therefore, we consider illustrations designed this way an autopoietic system in the universe of visual communication. An autopoietic system as it coexists with the exterior but keeps its internal milieu invariant. It is a self-sustaining process because it results from adaptation to contingency, here understood in the sense of Luhmann: the ability to respond to needs and hazards resulting in decisions affected by subjective choices. It is a contingency because it is not absolutely necessary, so the answer is not impossible and could be either, depending on the person and the measures taken throughout the process.

For adaptation to happen (Luhmann calls it simplification), functional systems making it feasible need to be created: systems that establish boundaries of meaning and allow, in a first phase, the 'stabilization of a difference between inside and outside' (Luhmann, in Santos 2005: 80). This is the balance that humanity demands at the present time: the sedimentation of a shared knowledge and certitude of identity – which let us all face what is strange with more confidence. These self-organizing systems coexist with the complexity, but they are able to update their meaning to overcome unforeseen situations while maintaining consistency with their own rules.

From Luhmann's ideas we conclude that the world is one but made of a different set of autopoietic systems – organisms that are self-regulating and self-reproduce and that, being in contact with outside complexity, are capable by their own means of making choices and producing meaning. However, this does not create an unquestionable truth: the result of contingency, working as a contribution to the general sense of the world in which it participates, only offers a possible update from the existing virtual possibilities. Thus, autopoietic systems are to Luhmann dynamic principles for determining identities and consequently, illustrations having popular culture as a starting point behave as autopoietic systems, being able to contribute to and to define a collective identity through these artefacts – which also bring to light individual identities hidden in the complexity of modernity (Figures 9 to 20).



Figures 9 and 10: Kate Sutton. <http://www.katesutton.co.uk/news/>.



Figures 11 and 12: Janine Rewell. <http://www.booooooom.com/2009/02/04/janine-rewell/>.



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Figures 15 and 16: Julia Rothman. <http://www.littlepaperplanes.com/product/1806-julia-rothman-letterpress-print>, <http://www.juliarothman.com>.



Figures 17 and 18: Karoline Rerrie. Karoline says about these illustrations: '[...] last year I produced a new series of Folk Art inspired designs especially for the 'Contemporary Printmakers Exhibition' [...]. Over the summer I spent several weeks studying and sketching from examples of Polish Folk Art before beginning work.' <http://karolinemadethis.blogspot.com.au/2012/07/folk-art-inspired-screen-prints.html>.



Figure 19: Madalena Matoso. <http://www.planetatangerina.com>.



Figure 20: Madalena Matoso [illustration], "O que vês dessa janela?", Isabel Minhós Martins [text], Museu da Luz/Planeta Tangerina, 2011

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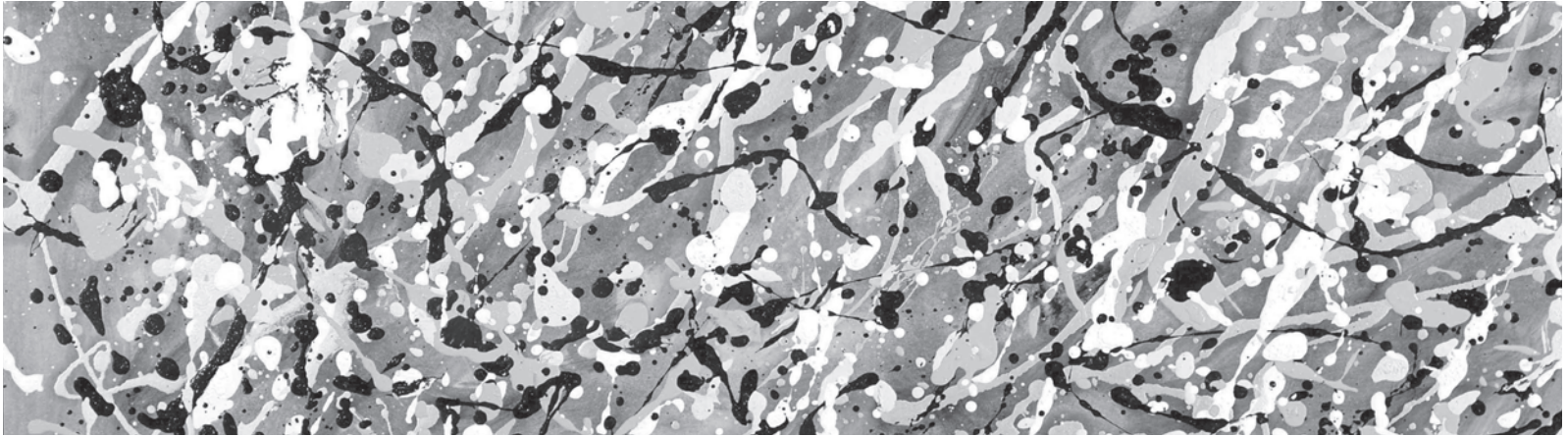
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The mission of *Visual Inquiry: Learning & Teaching Art* is to provide a forum for engaging the complex, rich and multi-faceted process of learning and teaching art. The journal highlights the process of creating art, teaching as an art form, engaging art submissions, scholarship in teaching artistry, and the rich traditions of art making and teaching. The call for papers is open to anyone concerned with issues related to learning and teaching art.

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