

Contemporary Developments of the Urban Culture: From Underground to the Internet

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Abstract: *People's perception of culture has changed with Geert Hofstede's works of the 1990s, thus placing urban culture in the centre of everybody's interest. From the underground works by anonymous artists of the 1960s to the present-day developments of culture, largely assisted by high technology, we have learned to accept this new cultural player and welcome it in our lives. This essay proposes an overview of the developments which made possible the worldwide spreading of Internet culture today.*

Key words: *Urban Culture, Development, High Technology, Innovation*

CULTURE AND THE COMMUNITY FEELING

Some fifty years ago, urban culture was perceived as an unrefined kin of the achievement culture, having no chance whatsoever to outlive the works of a few enthusiasts on both sides of the Atlantic. But the concept of culture started to be understood from a deeper, more complex perspective with the works of sociologists such as Geert Hofstede; they put things into place and made us all understand that culture cannot be restricted to the élites. Hofstede notes that *culture* should be perceived from the point of view of social anthropology, thereby defining it as a "collective programming of the mind, distinguishing the members of a group or category of people from another."¹

These changes in the perception of modern culture made it possible to break with the traditional creative patterns and to include therein a wide range of cultural activities. Culture became more adaptable and more open to larger audiences. People slowly began to be more aware of mass cultural products and decadent neighbourhoods turned into a source of inspiration, as well as into the setting and support for various forms of cultural expression. Arts and culture ceased to be the embodiment of an essence, as conceived by an individual, but rather became the reflection of a collective spirit, in need of establishing communicative links.

From the point of view of mentality and general human interest, global relationships found themselves tributary to a whole range of dramatic changes, largely due to a renewed - for Europe - American influence in all areas of culture and human life. The concept of consumer society - along with its entire positive, as well as negative effects - played an important part in building up a new, more open, but nevertheless more interrelated type of cultural diversity. It was the right time to break with tradition; it was the right time to express class pride in experimental displays of words and colours.

America of the 1970s and 1980s was also the initiator of a new understanding of the *community feeling*. New generations of youngsters were discovering the world through television as well as emerging social networks, thus setting the pace for a deep change into values and mentalities alike. Their rise against the establishment, their courage to question official decisions placed a new emphasis on what gradually became a *collective cultural awareness*.

The search for a specific "generation mark" led to the development of a whole new type of counter-culture, arguably inspired from the example of their parents' Flower Power movement. But this new generation had the benefit of fast growing high technology, and the urban-industrial society so dear to their parents was on the brink of being replaced by a cyber-society in which the computer was to become a first class actor.

Therefore the culture of the elites was being replaced by the culture of, and for the masses. In some cases, it preserved its *anonymous character* yet earning the right for a collective identity, especially through art forms such as *graffiti*. In other cases, as is the so-called *underground movement*, groups of established intellectuals and visual artists expressed their protest against a politically unfavourable environment, thus contributing to

what Malraux had called an “imaginary museum” of mankind and its global culture. Music, fashion design, as well as social rules and human relationships were equally influenced by this subversive attitude, a trademark for those who aimed at asserting their independence from tradition.

UNDERGROUND CULTURE AND ITS IMPACT

In America, the underground movement started with the decade of the 1960, and emerged, according to some sources, as an anti-materialist, experimental and individualist cultural trend whose purpose was to stand up against a utopian mass-society governed by social tycoons. Europe responded in kind only some 20 years later, during the decade of the 1980s when protests started in some socialist countries, largely based on a general rejection of the communitarian society and culture. *Samizdat literature* and the *theatre of the absurd* became a symbol of a general protest against a repressive society. The *theatre of mixed means* (inspired by the American-born “happenings”, a suggestive name proposed by Allan Kaprow) used words, music and dance, along with some technological devices (recorded tape, radio or closed-circuit television) in order to emphasize the lack of purpose of modern society.

Underground actions were a trend of the cities. The urban society, in search of a new identity, meant to replace traditionalism, accepted the new proposals of a new type of culture which could be reached and understood by larger groups of people from all social ranks. In a way, it was the starting point for the creation of a rebellious counter-culture in its own right. The term was gradually adopted in music, theatre, visual arts and fashion.

In Europe, and especially in the Eastern socialist block, underground culture stood as a protest against dictatorship. Group identity, however, was never as strong as in the American underground movements, possibly due to the effects of the repressive system at play, which only made possible individual efforts of change. Prague, Berlin and Dusseldorf were among the established underground centers of this area.

Romania was also part of the underground movement, though bearing the mark of a very specific development. On the one hand, there were small groups of intellectuals gathering around a main figure – e.g. the young followers of Noica, the philosopher, or the literary circles organized by Nicolae Manolescu and Lucian Avramescu. On the other hand, there were the groups of underground artists – among which *Fluxus*, a group of young artists who organized a seminar for young art critics (called *Experiment*) in 1986. Critical debates about art always turned towards politics, and the participants were kept under close scrutiny by the Securitate.

In fact, both in Romania and in the other Eastern European countries at that time such examples of politically oriented, rebellious cultural activities were few and far between, and they involved only small groups of people. After the spectacular revolts which took place at the end of the 1980s cultural experiments could take place with no restraint, but the initial symbolic protest against the repressive establishment was lost. Cultural experiments still take place today, both in the area of literature and in arts, but they are largely regarded as mere imitations of trends long extinct in other countries.

GRAFFITI – FROM THE PUBLIC DISPLAY OF REBELLION TO ART

For many, Graffiti refers to the so-called naïve art of American slums² in the 1960s. It was a display of rebellion, of protest from various minority groups that did not find their place in the social context of that time. Anonymous authors of this combination between words, symbols and colours were making a statement and expecting feedback, not praise. There were too many social wounds to be healed, especially for minority groups of all kinds. What's more, the concept of a *multicultural* society was only emerging while the traditional segregation had not been completely outlawed. That is why, for a long while, as well as for a long list of protesters who had chosen art as their means of expression, the

anonymous character of rather impersonal works remained valid until the decade of the 1980s, when graffiti was finally acknowledged as a post-modernist trend.

In Eastern Europe graffiti was not part of the local culture, but only appeared in random artistic expressions. The only remarkable exceptions were the graffiti works on the Berlin Wall – nevertheless, only on its Western side, a sign of solidarity and anti-communist protest from artists living in free Europe.

Graffiti stands for words with a symbolic, as well as an artistic value, doubled by a social meaning. It is indeed very difficult to decide where the verbal symbol ends and art begins, especially as the latter is often a result of improvisation. The artistic process itself is meant to bring a touch of colour into a world of grey shades, representative for the life of anonymous artists. In America it began as a reflection of a “lost generation” which saw its future in the shape of broken fragments re-combined in search of a new meaning – hope.

Graffiti is another example of a cultural trend “for the many” – outcasts of a rigid society whose laws and cultural segregation was rejected by graffiti artists. For a long time, this trend was considered superficial and “lacking substance” [Archer, 1960: 149], or simply a reflection of the sub-culture belonging to uneducated neighbourhoods. However, after several years, people started paying attention and talking more about it; American critic Hal Foster described it as a “postmodernism of reaction” – a critical, often radical visual rendering where everything was possible and an infinite number of interpretations were to be expected.

What had begun as a set of individual artistic proposals with a cultural value grew into collective works in development: the initial leitmotif was usually continued and completed by other anonymous passers-by. The huge, public canvas of building walls slowly became an attraction, and new words, as well as new symbols were being added. It was an invitation for talented youngsters to state their message; what was important at that moment was to integrate each individual contribution into a harmonious whole, with a message so strong that it could eventually make a change at a social and cultural level.

Eastern Europe welcomed this cultural trademark much later, starting with the last decade of the 20th century. These vivid art forms did not reach art galleries – as they did in America in the 1990s – but they remained the simplest, yet most direct way of communicating feelings and attitudes in a time of social, as well as cultural transition. This time of revival in Europe coincided, however, with a relative setback of graffiti in America, where the social and political environment had changed deeply into a culture characterized by flexibility and openness towards “the other”.

In Romania, the turnover of the late 1980s led to a surprising late-century revival of graffiti in its initial form – a type of cultural and artistic expression emerging as a mature form of art, preserving the idea of a message belonging to a minority. In time, these examples of urban culture became an inspiration for advertisers. The development of new communication technologies then turned graffiti into a useful component of computer art.

URBAN CULTURE ON THE INTERNET

The internet has emerged as a technological support for social networks and quickly turned into the largest ground for social, political and cultural expression that the world has ever seen. However, as Stephen Biggs [2000: 31]³ points out “while on the surface the technology looks like it promotes social connection and interconnection, psychologists are finding the opposite to be true for a number of users.”

What started by a means of sharing information about one’s culture turned into the ground where cultures melt and interact. From the first messages sent to distant people living far away to today’s community sites (such as Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter) where groups of people gather according to common interests, the last 20 years or so have witnessed a deep change in the understanding, as well as in the development of urban culture. It is generally believed that, before the emergence of internet communities, Eastern (including Eastern European) countries tended to be more collectivistic in attitude,

while Western countries tend to be more individualistic – an opinion which is confirmed by Hofstede [4]. The social networks managed to change this perspective. Twenty years ago, John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene [5] were speaking about the development of technology and its role in re-refining urban culture, by making it “obsolete”. But in Naisbitt / Aburdene’s opinion the urban space should have regained its initial role of promoter for an elite culture; they failed to predict the overwhelming power of community sites. Such sites are not addressed only to the elites, but to all those who want to experience the feeling of participation, in various events which were once impossible to reach. The Internet, Biggs adds, “offers us the promise of a virtual experience without the clutter of offline life: Shop from home, travel from home, work from home, you can even see your therapist from home...”

But does this “virtual promise” really embody a new type of culture? Ellen Ullman, a specialist in the evaluation of new media, defines the culture of internet communities as “the ultimate suburbanization of existence”⁴ and emphasizes the dangers posed by such a uniformity of tastes and by the limited range of choices offered to the members of this world-wide community. Virtual cultural events are very different from real ones. While community members can witness various forms of culture – concerts, theatre plays or any other happenings – with the help of just one click, without moving from the couch at home, these cannot replace the real thing. Furthermore, this new, very sophisticated type of urban culture gradually replaces face to face communication with a more solitary participation, whereby reactions are recorded in real time, but the feedback comes with a delay.

An important effect of internet urban culture is represented by changes at a linguistic level. In international gatherings, English is preferred, but the need for fast communication has determined community members to use shortened words or even acronyms – all with the same value of a “code” unknown by outsiders, that was an important part of the urban culture of the 1960s or 1970s. This code was, and still is a trademark, giving members a sense of belonging and recognition. In groups where access is limited to members of the same country, the local language is preferred, but shortened English words or acronyms (e.g. OMG, LOL etc.) cover a large part of everyday communication.

The internet has indeed shaped a new type of urban life and culture. The modern urban citizen focuses on what Georg Simmel⁵ calls the “calculating exactness of practical life”. The urban environment he talks about – in which people live together though remain strangers to each other, and having completely different ideas and opinions about life – looks very much like any social cyber-community today.

CONCLUSIONS

A few decades ago, urban culture, its roots and development were a topic of interest for only a few scholars; today, we have to acknowledge the fact that, due to the remarkable development of modern communications and high technology, it influences us all and has made it possible to view culture from a new, more complex perspective.

The internet is now the best way of promoting one’s ideas, hopes and feelings. Not long ago, writing was the exclusive right of celebrated authors; today, young talents present their essays and novels on personal blogs or websites, thus gaining, in some cases, an impressive number of readers, far more than what any publishing house would even dream to attract.

The role of the city is also changing, shifting gradually towards the position of a super-technological, fast-growing, globally-oriented Babylon that has to adapt to the needs of its citizens. The post-modern mankind of the third millennium has left behind the age of underground ideals and has now rediscovered itself in the pages of social networks. People tend to ignore the solitude of cyber-communication and prefer to dive into this world of fantasy, where one can be easily connected to data about other cultures, about other people and ideas.

In the 1990s, pessimists predicted the end of civilization due to technology. Yet technology keeps inventing new methods of bringing people together and making distances seem insignificant. This is not the end of the road. And just as *underground culture* was replaced by *e-culture*, a few years from now we may witness the emergence of new technologies and of a new type of urban culture. Are we prepared for it?

Notes:

- ¹ Hofstede, Geert, and Hofstede Gert-Jan. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1991: 7. Revised editions in 2005 and 2007. More details about Hofstede's works and major concepts can be accessed at http://www.geert-hofstede.com/geert_hofstede_resources.shtml (retrieved on August 11, 2011)
- ² More details about graffiti as a form of protest art in *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, Fontana/Collins, 1997
- ³ See the complete article at http://www.media-ecology.org/publications/MEA_proceedings/v1/biggs01.pdf (retrieved on August 29, 2011)
- ⁴ Ullman, E. (2000, May). The museum of me. *Harper's Magazine*, 300, 30–33
- ⁵ Georg Simmel was a German sociologist who wrote about the effects of individual consciousness on man's ability to socialize.

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