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Abstract:

This article focuses on the Euro monument in Frankfurt am Main as a tool to understand the production of subjectivities in the present capitalocentric era through data construction and its digital reproduction. It explores what kinds of desires are being formed by people that share photos and selfies with the monument in social media and concludes with a depiction of how our new system of values centred in the generation of Capital is forging a new kind of subject.

Keywords: Capitalocentrism, Selfie, Monument, Euro, Subjectificities, Identities

1 Introduction

The city of Frankfurt has, in its long history, unique characteristics. Since the first settlements as a strategic and central point in Europe, it was always characterised as a meeting point of different people. In some parts, this phenomena is even more evident. For example, in the fair pavilions, a tradition since the XIIth Century, or in its airport, the busiest in continental Europe. In the turn of the millennium, a new institution started to define the image of the city: The European Central Bank.

The Central Bank is a prominent symbol of the economic unification of the EU. The economic agreements and partnerships between European states, in the sense of the word *integration*, dated back to the 1950s and were, through multiple decades, gaining the form of a *unification* (Schulz-Forberg and Stråth, 2010). This gradual focus mutation, from integration to unification, formalised in the Maastricht agreement of 1992¹, implies the idea of a European political and cultural identity. However, above all, as history denounces, the EU is majorly an economic entity, especially when one considers that the union has no sovereign territory, but only citizenships. The foundation of the European Central Bank, in 1998, is a symbolic mark of this process.

To celebrate the creation of the single currency and its respective central bank, the Frankfurter Kultur Komitee commissioned the artist Ottmar Hoerl to create a monument (Figure 1). The komitee is a non-profit organisation whose goal is to “bring the Euro to the heart of the people” and encourage “corporate citizenship” (Frankfurter Kultur Komitee, 2019).



Fig. 1: The Euro Monument being photographed in Frankfurt am Main. Source: the authors, 2019.

The chosen site for the commissioned Monument is intriguing for two reasons. Firstly, the Euro Monument is located in front of the building that initially sheltered the headquarters of the Central Bank, almost like a supermarket sign. Secondly, it is installed in a linear park named Wallanlage, that is the result of the demolition of the wall that circumscribed the city until the beginning of the XIXth Century. There are dozens of sculptures and monuments after figures such as Beethoven, Schiller and Bismarck around trees and romantic paths. Some of the works there exhibited are by renowned artists like Sol Lewitt and Max Bill.

However, in this also culturally rich site, the most famous monument is not after a public figure that made an invaluable contribution to society or by someone part of the art star system. Fourteen meters high, a sign stands in two concrete columns. Made of steel and acrylic, during the night it emits light for the delight of the locals and the many tourists and visitors. For any individual under the influence of neoliberal capitalism, what is represented is crystal clear: the Euro sign, €, the symbol of the common currency of the European Union.

In a 2015 interview to the local newspaper, the artist that conceived the monument declares: “It is the most photographed and most published symbol of the city, the most widely published artwork and magnet for tourists” (Jaeger, 2019). This enigmatic statement motivates this essay. Although there is no information to confirm this statement, it is possible to observe the magnetism of this sculpture: There is an excess of photos and selfies of this monument disseminated on the Internet in a quantity that is significantly larger than other renown sculptures around it. What could this excess signify? We are facing a particular case of image construction that starts with the erection of the monument until its multiplication via digital media. In our hybrid reality, both physical and digital, the construction of information and the image of the city happens both on the urban space and in digitally enabled social media.

The design of the sign is not a work by Mr Hoerl, but the result of a competition realised in 1999. The artist decided to overlap the € sign with disordered stars, that represent the original countries that shared the currency. What is seen: the circle of the € is open, incomplete; the two horizontal lines remind us of the skyscrapers around it; some stars are inside it, most of them are outside it. No star was added after the

conclusion of the monument, besides new countries have joined the Eurozone since then. The sculpture was finished and installed in 2001, and the Euro only started to circulate as bills and coins in the next year. The Euro was brought to the heart of the people before it started to inhabit their pockets, to refer to the terminology utilised by the Komitee.

The monument used to have a younger sister, a 5 meters version of it that was installed in Frankfurt's airport. Symptomatically, after the Great Recession stemmed from the financial collapse of 2008, it was disassembled, and now it is in a storage area. The Euro Monument almost faced a similar faith. After years without maintenance, its state was critical. Some of the acrylic plates were broken, and a few of the light bulbs were not working anymore.

The year of 2015 was a pivotal year for the Currency, the city of Frankfurt and their monument. Facing its decline, the cost to recover the Monument was around 60.000€ (Buell, 2015). In the same, the Greek financial crisis reached its peak, when withdrawals from banks were limited to a small amount per day. The conflict was clear. There was also the option on the table to sell it for around 1.5 million €. This year also marked the opening of the new European Central Bank headquarters. The masterpiece, designed by Coop Himmelb(l)au, cost 1.4 billion € and its opening event, attracting the ministers of Finance and head of states from all the Eurozone nations, triggered riots in the streets of Frankfurt. A group of policemen and women was designated to protect the monument at all costs, while police cars were on fire in the banking district. The owner of the Monument, the Frankfurter Kultur Komitee, managed that year to fund the renewal of the sculpture, granting that it will continue being the focus of selfies for some more years.

The desire to protect the monument and to "bring the Euro to the heart of the people" states something about the Euro: It was necessary the implementation of an image of the unified Europe that did not exist. The rivalries and differences between the countries were already constituted for centuries, although now there are economic agreements for more than half a century. The EU was unifying countries whose population still included survivors of the world wars that strongly experienced the enmity between neighbours. Moreover, here lies the Euro Monument, heavy, literal, placed in Frankfurt, the centre of (banking) Europe.

The fact that the monument being, possibly, the most photographed object in Frankfurt confirms the success of this enterprise: the Euro is in the heart of the people, or at least most of them. The Euro, overlapping money and identity, the currency that unifies and pacifies. This monument is a privileged case to think about the subjectivities in the age of neoliberalism and digitisation.

2 Selfies and Social Media

Besides the repeated photographs that can be seen in websites like *TripAdvisor*, most of these photos around the monument are self-portraits of our era: Selfies. The social phenomena that became the word of the year of 2013 for the Oxford dictionary consist in a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website (Killingsworth, 2013). Alise Tifentale and Lev Manovich listed multiple descriptions of it, with a vast array of connotations:

"In popular media, the selfie was very soon labelled 'a symptom of social media-driven narcissism' (Pearlman 2013), a 'new way [...] of communicating with one another through images' (Rawlings, 2013), 'the masturbation of self-image' (Marche, 2013), a 'virtual "mini-me"' (Clark 2013) and so on. Other writers have proposed that the selfie, among other things, can function as a means of self-expression, a construction of a positive image, a tool of self-promotion, a cry for attention and love, and a way to express belonging to a certain community (Cep, 2013; Leary, 2013; Nelson-Field, 2013)." (Tifentale and Manovich, 2015, p.116).

This particular genre of photography has a specific goal to be shared on social media. The smartphone is an exceptional type of photographic camera because it also integrates the means of sharing and spreading of its content. If Villém Flusser was right and "there is no everyday activity which does not aspire to be photographed, filmed and videotaped"(Flusser, 2005), the selfie is the act of performing in social media on steroids.

For centuries, artists have been painting self-portraits, like Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (c. 1524), or posing for self-portraits, like Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977 - 80). According to Jill Walker Rettberg,

"Today's selfies are different that they are a true vernacular genre. They are rarely exhibited in art galleries; instead, they are shared with friends and followers on social media" (Rettberger, 2014, p.9).

It seems like taking selfies and sharing is what produces what is real. One has only been to Copenhagen if one took a selfie with the little mermaid in the harbour. One has only been to the Louvre if one took a selfie with Mona Lisa. One has only been to the Radiohead concert if one took a selfie during Creep. Reality can only be mediated or realised through pixels. One has only been to Frankfurt if one takes a selfie with the Euro sign.

This use of the artwork as an extension of the ego can be referred to Walter Benjamin's *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility* (1936):

"Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction." (Benjamin, 1936/1985, p.168, our translation).

For Benjamin, the reproducibility of the artwork implies the loss of its aura, that element that would make "a singular figure, composed of special and temporal elements: The unique apparition of a distant thing, even when it is closeby" (Benjamin, 1936/1985, p.170). So, here we face a crisis of authenticity since the monument itself was made without aura, from industrial material and with a form that already refers to digital aesthetics. If we observe the body of work of Ottmar Hoerl, the reproducibility of his sculptures is a trademark. The supposed democratic artwork open our eyes to the crisis of authenticity of the artwork and, indeed, of the subjects.

The installation of the significant monument opens wide to our view this new condition of the identities: *savoir-faire* – Lacanian term to designate the task of the subject facing Real (Lacan, 1975-1976) – with lack of aura, of the singularity of the objects and of the subject itself.

3 The \$ Subjects

To understand how we look at ourselves through social media's pixels, Lacan's analysis of the mirror is a possible tool. For him, the production of the ego involves an image of oneself that tries to be unified. However, it is never complete; it always leaves parts, or remains, outside it. The mirror is unable to be the ultimate answer for the self. It is an illusion, an alienation that is important in the process to unify the body: But the critical point is that this form situates the instance of the ego, since before its social destination, in the line of the fictional (Lacan, 1949, p.43). The importance of this unification is the following: The alienation is a fundamental process for the development of the speaking subject. In other words, it is not correctly the alienation of defines the subjectivity of digital capitalism.

If in the alienation of the image there is a loss, since not everything can fit there, not everything is reducible to imagetic organisation, the history of the subject will be the possible articulation in language, that is, in the social, of this significant loss. The language carries and articulates this loss, and make of it the column of the social contract and ties.

With the digitalisation of the identities that are mostly forged through images and almost without any narrative, we can start to look and stress the social contract. In *The Narrator* (1936), Benjamin opposes narrative and information to think the modern men condition and notes that, after the armistice, that the combatants were returning mute from the front, not richer but poorer in communicable experience" (Benjamin, 1936/1983, p.56).

The poverty of communicable experience, for Benjamin, had to do with barbarism. Communication, narrative, the transmission of knowledge between generations is the very fabric of the social pact, the one that articulates the fundamental lack of each one. On the other hand, information, where we insert the digitised images as part of the ego, has value only at the moment it is produced, such as newspaper news. It puts the subject in a state of social and even temporal alienation: it throws him at the moment without the resources of history and proposes to complete him, give him an identity, putting him in a state of loss.

The production of the European identity through the solid image of the Euro is a similar imagetic process: it tries to unify, in a single sign, multiple and incongruent identities. It is always leaving remains outside, which becomes more apparent when we face events like Brexit and the immigration crisis. It is an identity that cuts

the narrative experience. How to tell what happened in 1939? How to integrate grandparents' enmity towards neighbouring countries who stole their relatives and friends in the war? Family accounts are lost in a large, massive sculpture that states that there is now unification and peace.

We propose to read that this visual sign without history and aura found subjects who could no longer communicate due to the excess of information that buffered the incommunicable barbarism of the capitalist world.

Nevertheless, the Euro Monument has one more degree of perversity. It is the sign of money itself and visitors are celebrating it. Paul Preciado states that "Contemporary society

[...] is inhabited by [...] subjectivities defined by the substance (or substances) that supply their metabolism" and "desires that feed the subject's actions and through which they turn into agents. So we will speak of Prozac subjects, cannabis subjects, [...] Viagra subjects, \$ subjects..." (Preciado, 2013, p.35).

The final product of capitalism is the industrial production of subjectivities that are alienated in temporary identities that put the subject in a state of loss.

Since its few first unfolds, capitalism produced the increase of material quality of life in some parts of the world as a side effect of its accumulation. The increase in well-being was never its goal. The only finished product of the accumulation of Capital is the production of a particular kind of subjectivity without authenticity, alienated in digitised imagery that loses its value in minutes. Moreover, in the latest unfolding of it, with neoliberalism, capitalism is not able anymore to produce the quality of life as a side effect.

Every social organisation system or regime is composed of two layers: The macropolitics sphere, which consists in what we traditionally understand as politics, and the micropolitics sphere, where the production of subjectivity operates. According to Suely Rolnik, psychoanalyst, it is in the mode of subjectivation that a regime produces its existential consistency, without which it would not sustain itself. It is through the creative force that a regime can sustain itself (Rolink, 2018, p.35). It is here that we can understand which role the Euro Monument plays in our contemporary soap opera: It is silent, unified by non-authenticity, and this is interesting to neo-liberalism, as capital can circulate independently of the subjects' everyday experience.

Freud was already analysing the dangers of this alienation from the masses in 1921 in "Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego". In proposing to think about how it was possible for a group of distinct individuals with different stories, tastes, and oedipal solutions to submit to the manipulation of a single leader: one and the same object in place of their ego ideal and consequently identified with each other in their ego (Freud, 1921/2006, p.126). In the transitivity of the objects offered by neoliberal capitalism, we use Freud to point out the danger of the emergence of great leaders who occupy this idealised place because of their charisma and their promises of fulfilment. In the fragility of ties and experience, subjects can find in totalitarian mass movements a stable place to define who they are and where they are in the world.

4 Conclusion

There is a new kind of subjectivity: if, after the renaissance, the idea of the human was the centre and the measure of the universe, we are inaugurating a subject that centres the world around another construction: Capital. The popularity of the Euro Monument can be understood as the celebration of it. According to Donna Haraway, Capitalocentrism and its geological age, Capitalocene, have "their consequences, their materialities, already etched into the rocks, airs, waters and flesh of terrans, in nuclear and chemical signatures, in heat-trapping gasses, in hot acid seas." (Haraway, 2018, p.80).

Jean-François Lyotard (1979/2011), already considered the post-modern condition as the one where information is the currency in circulation. Any knowledge only has space if it can be translated as information: "Society does not exist and does not progress if the messages that circulate on it are not rich in information and easy to decode" (Lyotard, 1979/2011, p.6). This perspective allows us to conclude about the function of the Euro Monument in the unification of the European identity: A visual information that is easily decoded and communicated.

Looking at the crowds smiling and taking selfies in front of the Euro Monument, one can speculate if Mr Hoerl, the artist that conceived the Euro Monument, had it in mind: The Euro sign works as a background that produces the effect of people exposing their capitalocentric subjectivities, as if "Money itself became an

abstract, signifying psychotropic substance". (Preciado, 2013. p.39). The artist opened broad this functioning of the production of identities in the age of digital capitalism. He calls us to think what to do with the critical historical personalities carved beside him, how to convey what the city meant in the 1930s and the dead and wounded represented in each of those stars. None of this is in the picture, whose authenticity is worth in the first minutes of its exposure and leaves behind all this incommunicable wound.

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1 "In the mainstream market perspective of 1993, a stronger rigor in the monetary policies seemed indispensable" (Vignes, 1992, p.776).