

Josep Ramoneda

Barcelona, open city

H16 Retxat (H16 Striated), Miquel Barceló (2009)
Ceramic, 49 x 32 x 32 cm

What is the secret that could allow culture in Barcelona to obtain a maximum international projection? In my view there is a central one: to know how to identify ourselves with the international cultural debates and participate in them without reserve. From this point everything will go smoothly. At least this is what I have tried to carry out at CCCB [Barcelona Contemporary Culture Centre]. But if this is the synthesis of my reasoning, things are more complicated than this mere sentence.

A BRIEF REMINDER

Claude Lévi-Strauss holds that the incest taboo constitutes the fundamental fact that marks the step from nature to culture, which is to say the key is in exogamy. Culture begins with opening up to others. Opening up to others is culture's distinctive way of finding its niche in the world.

A culture opens up to the world in two ways. It develops its capacity for connecting with the concerns, problems and sensibilities that are spread throughout the planet and is also able to tune into consolidated trends and models as well as emerging creations. Again, it is permeable to everything that comes from without. This is how the cosmopolitan mentality acquires sense: it is the mindset that starts out from the principle that there is only one culture—that of humanity—and that all the others, the cultures, the ones that come with adjectives or delimited by ethnic, geographical, political or disciplinary components, are no more than dispositions of a universal culture.

However, it is useful to distinguish between a broad concept of culture, such as that codified by Hegel—culture as a way of speaking, working and desiring a certain kind of society—and a restricted concept of culture in the sense of knowledge and symbol production. In other words, on the one hand we have the great patterns that shape a social space, these being marked by tradition, shared beliefs, the geographic and political framework, demographic evolution and the traces left by the different peoples who

have dwelled in the territory. These paradigms gradually evolve in keeping with social, demographic, technological and ideological changes and express, at any point, the way of being in the world of a particular country. On the other hand, we have the creation of culture, in the strict sense, the ability to generate ideas and works of art, which is to say singular objects conveying emotions and experience, in the widest array of disciplines. It is this second dimension, which ranges from philosophy and the sciences through to literature, cinema, the plastic arts and all the registers of creativity, that one mainly thinks about when it comes to reflecting on Barcelona's outward projection.

THE PLURICULTURAL CITY

Pessimistic discourse about the culture of Barcelona abounds. Curiously, frequently from opposite standpoints, a similar diagnosis is reached. Cultural pauperdom.

From the standpoint of a certain elitism —often hailing from the Castilian tradition— people are adamant that Barcelona is no longer what it was. That it has lost its presence in recent years. That the ideological hegemony of nationalism has made it culturally provincial and mediocre. This analysis tends to arise from three factors: a certain aristocratic rejection of the democratisation of culture; a melancholic mythologising of Barcelona's cultural life in the closing years of the Franco regime; and a certain discomfort over Catalonia's bilingual reality (in this case from the Spanish perspective).

However, a conclusion looking like mediocrity and pointing the way to perdition is often reached by way of another approach, this time from those who see an overly-contaminated Barcelona culture, threatened not only by Spanish economic and political power but also by the changes in the country's demographic composition. These are the people who speak of the "denaturalisation" of Catalonia. There are too many foreigners,

Culture expands on the basis of a strong culture industry, but culture must not fall into the cultural industry's follow-the-leader trap

say some who are still basking in the impossible dream of homogeneous societies, the eternal fear of real cultural diversity.

Fear of the democratisation of a culture and fear of losing the homesteader's privileges are what lie behind these two critiques. Neither of them does anything to help situate Barcelona in the real world. Neither of them does justice to

the reality of Barcelona's culture. Leaving multiculturalist discourse behind and moving on to a pluricultural city is one of the keys to Barcelona.

Barcelona has a significant network of groups engaged in culture creation. It is certainly disperse, irregular with regard to its levels of quality and not always able to break through the barriers separating it from the mass media, which impart conspicuousness and existence. Once these groups were isolated and not connected. Now they can

turn to a web —Internet— to create links and their own spheres of influence. Moreover, the considerable structure of cultural facilities with which both Catalonia and Barcelona have been endowed in the past few years has had positive effects in the consolidation of such groups. Nonetheless, many artists and groups engaged in cultural creation and production remain invisible and only emerge from time to time. Yet they form a critical mass that is materialising in ever more displays of talent.

AGAINST MULTICULTURALISM (A DIGRESSION)

A city is, more than anything else, the people that comprise it at any point. Naturally, this point is the result of centuries of relations, of presences and history, over which is woven the ever-changing form and spirit of a city, this “place of a particular sort of humanity” of which Marc Bloch spoke. Thus, it is only from the most radical multiculturalism that one can allege that these features —the roots to which religions and the different kinds of identity discourse appeal— have a primordial character that totally determines belonging and bestows privilege on those it has inscribed in its prospectus, to the detriment of others. I believe that each group, the old inhabitants and the new arrivals —and we have all been newcomers at some point— should consider this idea of Dipesh Chakrabarty when he says that we need to be thinking more about residence than roots. Residence is a notion by means of which we humans recognise that we always live in places that have previously been inhabited by others. This applies both to the person who comes from somewhere else, who has to respect what he or she finds here (and no culturally-based argument can exempt anyone from complying with the rules of the game established by those of us who were already in residence), and to those who are already here because length of abode does not give us the right to refuse proper recognition to the person who arrives.

Multiculturalism is folly when it comes to coexistence. The origin or assertion of a predominant identity —generally of the religious ilk, as with the concept of civilisations— must not be a subterfuge for justifying abuse of power. The cultural argument (“we’ve always done it like this in our culture”) does not justify crime or breach of the law. However, rejection of multiculturalism does not go in one direction alone. Others are not to be denied the principle of ethnic or religious primordality as the basis of a closed community if we do not then apply the same veto to ourselves. Rights entail obligations. However, identities and baggage are not obligatory and neither can they be imposed. The same holds for our own. The principle must be recognition: recognising others means endowing them with the right to recognise us as well.

POLIS AND BIO

There are spheres in which Barcelona has found a place in the world. These are essentially two, which we might call the *polis function* and the *bio function*.

By *polis function* I refer to everything that pertains to thinking, making and experiencing the city. Ever since Frédéric Edelman used the expression “the Barcelona model” in *Le Monde*, this city has been a reference in urban planning and architecture, despite the fact that, in the transition years [after the dictatorship], the effects of the crisis of social

consensus on the project of the city (culminating in the fiasco of the Universal Forum of Cultures 2004) have had negative repercussions on Barcelona's urban planning image and its international projection. The challenge of the change of scale —metropolitan Barcelona— should have been an opportunity for making up lost ground. Urban *savoir faire* has tradition in Catalonia. The status of being capital of a nation without a state has made of Barcelona what might be called a civically pure, only slightly contaminated city. From medieval architecture we went almost seamlessly to what could be dubbed civil, bourgeois architecture. Barcelona, with its Roman and medieval backdrop is above all a city of the 19th and 20th centuries. Ildefons Cerdà, who gave shape to modern Barcelona, is the founder of modern urban planning. Ever since then, the urban question has not just been a matter for the mavens but it has also taken into account civil society and its intermediary institutions. All this is what has given Barcelona a voice in the field of urban planning: a capacity for thinking and proposing, but also for optimising and for living.

In the field of international research, it is the bio function that puts Barcelona in the front line. I understand by *bio function* everything that is related with biological research and medical practice, by which I mean research and application. Barcelona is recognised in this domain, too, and this is nothing new. There is tradition. There is innovation. There is internationalisation.

The publishing world is particularly important in projecting Barcelona's image. A lot of things depend on publishers' ability to pack a punch or, in other words, to have some impact in the universal literature markets. Barcelona is a power to be reckoned with in publishing Spanish-language literature although it has not always smoothed the way, as would be desirable, for literature in Catalan. A good part of Barcelona's cultural projection abroad depends, and will depend, on how well publishers manage to situate themselves in the new global technological world.

Although on a smaller scale, Barcelona theatre has also carved out a niche in the world because of its flair for experimentation in set design. More complex would seem to be the discussion about design *per se*, the icon of a certain Barcelona-style modernness that has not always had the recognition abroad that people here like to imagine.

In other spheres, everything is more a function of singular personalities and individual success. The critical mass is taking shape only gradually. Nevertheless, there are phenomena that have had great importance in the past, for example operatic voices and the plastic arts, although now is not their high point. There are others that might soon leap ahead, for example cinema or popular music (in the non-ethnological sense of the word).

However, as I have already noted, the main feature of Barcelona culture is its plurality. It is on this basis that its power needs to be constructed. I refer to linguistic pluralism, which is no longer just a question of Catalan-Spanish bilingualism because we are starting to have a significant number of writers in other languages here, and also to plurality of traditions, of cultural baggage of different origins that the inhabitants of the city —and its metropolitan surroundings— have now incorporated. Knowing how to mobilise this capital could be decisive in gaining a foothold in the world for the culture of Barcelona.

THE INTERNAL FRONT

In order to give momentum to this potential, what should to be done from within?

- a) High quality standards. This is very easy to say and very difficult to do, among other reasons because rigid mechanisms are useless. Worse, they can hamper creativity and freedom of expression. This does not mean introducing quality controls but that the social demand should be exigent, that the mechanisms of self-control in the republic of creativity should work well. Yet here we run the risk that Kundera describes as being a feature of small cultures: that bringing a lot of people into the picture in order to achieve critical mass makes it so oblong that the outstanding heads are chopped off.
- b) Avoid the risks of endogamy. The propensity to speak for and about ourselves is a risk for all cultures, and still more so in a culture that has to defend a language against all kinds of impediments and pitfalls. However, in order to figure in the world, one must be in the world. This means problems, trends and channels. Problems: knowing how to interpret the questions that are of interest to the world and trying to come up with our own response. Trends: seeking forms of empathy with different cultural and artistic sensibilities and of mutual insemination in an increasingly mixed and diminishingly ethnic universal culture. Channels: constructing the necessary mechanisms, both public and private, to convey Barcelona's cultural production to the world and to connect up with the loci of world production and distribution.
- c) In this regard, clarity of ideas pertaining to the relationship between culture and industry is very important. It is true that culture only expands on the basis of a strong culture industry. Nonetheless, culture must not fall into the cultural industry's follow-the-leader trap. This is the best way to end up losing creative power. Hence, public cultural institutions and private patronage in which there is cultural interest that goes beyond the bounds of strict business interest are essential. The relationship between culture and culture industry must always be somewhat conflictive.
- d) Proper use of the new technologies is all-important. I say "proper" for two reasons. First, this should always happen because the creative process requires it and not because it is fashionable or because it seems that, nowadays, anything that is not technological is old hat. Second, for a culture with a deficit of instruments, the new technologies —and the Internet first of all— can be very helpful as long as they are used in a non-silly way.
- e) Optimisation of Barcelona's cultural plurality. Barcelona is the gateway to Europe. As immigration consolidates, the cultural creativity of these thousands of new Barcelona dwellers is beginning to emerge. All this must be turned into capital. This should not be seen as a threat but as buttressing. The cultural industries need

Without critical reason,
without a constant
questioning of received
ideas, there is no thought.
Without emotion
there is no art

to attend to this capital. The political institutions too. The great error of Catalan culture would be the armour-plating strategy, or not being permeable to everything that is circulating here without trying to contaminate it. Both defensive positions are condemned to failure. Mutual recognition is the strength of any pluricultural society.

- f) Naturally, the creative level of a country has a great deal to do with education. Hence it is necessary to combat the drift towards educational policies that are increasingly geared towards adapting to the job market. Teaching fulfils an essential function in the transmission of knowledge, and not only practical knowledge. A society that doesn't know literature —and not just its own— and art —and not just its own— will be hard put to make progress in cultural creativity.
- g) One must shed fear of changes in the world, but without snobbishness. It is possible that today's creators might have to go looking in a Microsoft department or in the room of some young netsurfer. But let us not lose the world of vision in order to look modern. Thinking and creating will always require a slow time that does not fit with technological frenzy.
- h) Culture is reasoning and creativity. Hence the cultural framework dries up if the pillars of culture are not kept alive: critical reason and emotion. Without critical reason —without a constant questioning of received ideas— there is no thought. Without emotion there is no art. Let us not be deceived by people who would make a creative virtue of frigidity. They are castrators of art.

THE EXTERNAL FRONT

Looking outwards, there is only one secret: multiplying the ways of relationship. But this is not to be done any old how, as if it were some exercise in public relations. It is a very good thing to engage in (costly) operations of international cultural policy by investing in participation in events of worldwide significance, whether it is in Frankfurt or Venice, but, in the long term, it is much more efficacious to consolidate relations between institutions, between creators, between cultural enterprises and between different kinds of initiatives with specific projects, making a network that never stops growing. It is very painstaking, requires hard work, takes years to achieve and perhaps it will not have spectacular media results but, in the end, it is the most effective course to take, and it has a lot more continuity. In particular, it raises the city's cultural status because it is demanding: it means having projects to present, ideas to uphold, ambitions to unfold. Most of all it means being in the world. This is exactly what the culture of Barcelona needs if the city is to have a place in the globalised world. Cosmopolitan Barcelona. Cultural space open to everyone. City of free, open culture ||