

« Bright spots »

Gaps seem to get deeper and changes are tenuous: the trans-Mediterranean cultural cooperation moves within a political context, which we could qualify as «gloomy». The main international actors address themselves in terms of opposition and conflict rather than overcome them. The break line that sets off from Israel and Palestine keeps dividing the world according to political layouts which are often abstract when confronted with the actual situation of the local populations. The authoritarian regimes of the Maghreb and Middle East barely offer some scant signs of opening, while the political-religious divisions grow stronger within those same societies.

It would seem that the general political context needs to maintain a great part of the cultural exchanges between Europe and the Southern and Eastern regions of the Mediterranean at the level of rituals and events that only lead to superficial consequences.

However, by focusing closer on the particular field of contemporary creation, we can observe that for many years now there have been ferment, movements, transitions: "bright spots" to quote Laila Hourani's fine expression.

What's moving?

- First of all, the cultural operators and artists of North Africa and the Middle East. The initiatives of artists and cultural managers (who are often the same person!) have led in a few years to a burgeoning of independent artistic spaces, as well as of professional platforms and regional cultural networks. The artistic actors of the region participate much more frequently to international artistic events, and their European counterparts are turning to them with increasing interest.

For those who have to overcome many daily obstacles, face bureaucracies, take political risks and sometimes even physical ones, things obviously don't seem so easy. But the work of the artistic managers, of those who travel endlessly all around the Mediterranean, is bearing its fruit.

Quite often also thanks to the support of European and international colleagues, networks and financiers.

- As it is clear that, in these last years, European cultural operators, both private and public, have increasingly started to turn their attention towards the artistic scene of Arab countries and of Turkey.

The reason behind this opening is obviously not only due to an interest for art. The consequences of 9/11, international terrorism, the social tensions in Europe concerning immigrant communities, but also the solidarity and approach in terms of development, combine with a sort of "post-orientalism" and with the quest for new artistic inspirations. We could ask ourselves the reason for this "interest", but as it is, it results in exchanges, frees some resources and opens spaces for mutual knowledge (and recognition). European partners, it is true, arrive with their own agendas and programmes,

their desire for “intercultural dialogue”, and a frequent lack of knowledge of the grounds, however, they come.

- The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership – and notably its third pillar, the cultural and human one – has a scarce impact in the field of contemporary creation. Most of the criticism it receives is justified: a mainly bilateral orientation, a lack of adaptation to the needs of the actors of the civil society, its granting priority to heritage rather than to creation... But there is a framework and – though it remains an institutional instrument in the hands of institutional actors – it can and must be debated, invested and exploited as much as possible, and with some success, as prove it some positive repercussions like for example its programmes for youths.

The Anna Lindh Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures also illustrates this situation quite well. Within her institutional and inter-governmental philosophy, this Foundation is still seeking its identity, and the cultural actors of the trans-Mediterranean cooperation have not perceived the effects of its existence yet. However, some of the associated networks, as some of the projects they supported, offer as many possibilities of investment and expansion. It is a long-term task but it is also up to the civil actors to carry it out.

Which lines of work for European partners?

The think tank of the European Foundation for Culture decided to have an open discussion on the context of contemporary artistic creation. During these debates, several lines of work were drawn. I wish to recall three of these.

- **New geographies**

The Mediterranean must be crossed in all possible directions. The flow of exchanges is still largely dominated by the colonial lines of force, whereas the migratory movements and the frameworks are set in place by the European Union. If we don't venture beyond these routes, we run the risk of freezing ourselves in the same encounters, like prisoners of mental and political boundaries defined by past cartographies, consequently denying ourselves the creativity that new itineraries can offer.

A large part of the Balkans is also Mediterranean – we tend to forget that! – and the artists and cultural actors of this region have several elements of encounter with their Southern counterparts. Whether it be the State's role, the absence of a stable political framework for Culture, the survival of independent organisations, the difficult change of cultural institutions or even more the deep gap between local public and international recognition, the fields of mutual recognition and the potential artistic synergies between these regions are numerous though unexploited. They must be fostered and supported!

In addition, cultural cooperation from one side to the other of the Mediterranean is not only a subject matter for the residents at the shore of the Mediterranean: the participants to the debates have often expressed a lively interest in

developing exchanges, experiences and artistic projects with the entirety of their Central and Eastern European partners.

Lastly, as concerns the geography of exchanges, the time has come to encourage a greater mobility from North to South of the Mediterranean (see for example the trans-Mediterranean placement project) or, an often more difficult task, between Maghreb and Middle Eastern States.

- **Capacity building**

This powerful expression generally centres on developing the capacity of ... others!

However, cooperation entails a two-way work: it cannot be realised without developing the intercultural capacities **of both sides** starting from the project promoters but also from producers, art critics and, needless to say, financiers. These exchanges are realised within a context of political and economic inequality, and this mutual apprenticeship will turn useful only by taking into account the respective contexts, and by debating and negotiating on the differences, including aesthetical ones.

Capacity building requires training in the traditional sense. It also requires an informal apprenticeship. Time to prepare or assess each other's projects, non institutional spaces for debate, artist meetings, art critics, public and private actors of trans-Mediterranean cooperation: financiers should support these moments and spaces of intercultural apprenticeship. The proliferation of initiatives should certainly not be feared in this case! Though it could lead to some confusion at first, one can only wish for a multiplication of exchanges. However, under two conditions: that such meetings always open up to new voices and overcome the "gate keepers", and that the conditions for a truly open debate be sought beforehand.

- **Cultural Policies**

Cultural policies are seen as a taboo in the trans-Mediterranean dialogue. They are hardly ever mentioned, as if considered meaningless in the current political context, as if too risky to speak of. Not much is known about the cultural policies of Arabic countries; and there are some, though inadequate. Supporting the studies on these policies as well as on local cultural policies - which are often more accessible - could represent a first step. In addition, studies on the general creative situation and on the diffusion of culture could also be carried out: what do we know of a rapidly evolving contemporary art market or of the emerging cultural industries? What do we know of the impact of festivals and of the public they draw?

Gathering data is notoriously difficult, as is finding out if there is any. But the example of other European regions proves it: only by acquiring some instruments can cultural actors start to influence and debate on cultural policies on different levels. This requires a long term investment: financing and publishing researches, training young researchers, creating university modules... The European Union, the Arab and European foundations, including the Anna Lindh Foundation could give a good example of public/private partnership through this investment.

These are only a few lines of work. Our debates have led to many others, and still more are present in this lively cultural field. In his remarkable work *Glances at Arab*

*distress*¹, Samir Kassir sketched a rather gloomy scene of the situation of the Arab world, though including some encouraging perspectives, notably by the means of cultural cooperation: "Further to the prompting of a circulation of ideas and cultural goods in the Arab world, despite the persistency of significant obstacles, the effects of a practically concurrent event are added: the emergence of an integration of the Arab cultural field with the global mosaic".

All the actors of this mosaic should pursue and intensify this integration, also in consideration of the fact that it's in their own interest!

Odile Chenal

¹ Samir Kassir, *Considérations sur le malheur arabe*, Actes Sud, 2004.