

THE MEDIATING POSSIBILITIES OF ART: A CASE STUDY ON ARTISTIC EXPERIENCE AND THEATRE PARTICIPATION OF PEOPLE WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on the experience of implementing a project of inclusion through art — *A Meu Ver* (In My View) — by a professional artistic structure in theatre in the city of Coimbra: O Teatrão. It is a three-year theatre training and practice project for people with blindness or low vision, funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and La Caixa Foundation under the *Partis & Art for Change* programme. The project combines training and intervention in the cultural space of Coimbra. The aim was to analyse and rethink the possible roles of artistic education in cultural mediation, as an intervention model, between the entity O Teatrão and a group of disabled people, traditionally out of the artistic circuits. This research privileged a qualitative approach, conducting a case study of exploratory nature, which took place between October 2021 and August 2022. The data reported here were collected through four data collection techniques: participant observation, questionnaire survey, semi-structured interviews and focus group. By demonstrating the importance of the artistic creation experience in recomposing disabled people's identities, the project stimulates the deconstruction of disability conceptions based on the individual model and promotes a social concept of disability. In bringing together visually impaired people and Teatrão professionals, *A Meu Ver* demonstrates that the problems of disabled people do not derive from their impairments but from the dominant forms of social organisation and culture. This deconstruction made it possible to analyse the individual impacts of the project for its direct participants and to highlight possible cultural mediation formats for developing projects with this approach in the cultural sector.

KEYWORDS

cultural mediation, artistic practice, disability, cultural participation

AS POSSIBILIDADES MEDIADORAS DA ARTE: UM ESTUDO DE CASO SOBRE EXPERIÊNCIA ARTÍSTICA E PARTICIPAÇÃO TEATRAL DE PESSOAS COM DEFICIÊNCIA VISUAL

RESUMO

Este artigo tem por base a experiência de implementação de um projeto de inclusão pela arte — *A Meu Ver* — por uma estrutura artística profissional da área do teatro da cidade de Coimbra: O Teatrão. Trata-se de um projeto de formação e prática teatral de pessoas cegas ou com baixa visão, com uma duração de três anos, financiado pela Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian e pela Fundação La Caixa, no âmbito do programa *Partis & Art for Change*. Este projeto agrega uma vertente de formação a uma vertente de intervenção no espaço cultural da cidade de Coimbra. O objetivo foi analisar e reequacionar os possíveis papéis da educação artística na mediação cultural, entendida como modelo de intervenção, entre a entidade O Teatrão e um grupo de pessoas com deficiência, tradicionalmente mais afastadas dos circuitos artísticos. A presente investigação privilegiou uma abordagem qualitativa, realizando um estudo de caso, de carácter exploratório, que decorreu entre outubro de 2021 e agosto de 2022. Os dados aqui reportados foram coletados através de quatro técnicas de recolha de dados: observação participante, inquérito por questionário, entrevistas semiestruturadas e grupo focal. Ao visibilizar a importância da experiência de criação artística na recomposição identitária das pessoas com deficiência, o projeto estimula a desconstrução de concepções da deficiência alicerçadas no modelo individual e fomenta uma concepção social da deficiência. O *A Meu Ver*, ao juntar pessoas com deficiência visual e profissionais do Teatrão, demonstra que os problemas das pessoas com deficiência não derivam das suas incapacidades, mas sim das formas de organização social e da cultura dominantes. Esta desconstrução permitiu-nos analisar os impactos individuais do projeto para os seus participantes diretos e evidenciar formatos de mediação cultural possíveis para o desenvolvimento de projetos com esta abordagem no setor cultural.

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mediação cultural, prática artística, deficiência, participação cultural

1. INTRODUCTION

Our understanding of disability stems from the social and cultural dynamics established in each historical and geographical context. However, the different experiences of disability and the condition of being identified as a disabled person in each historical and geographical moment have a common feature: the oppression suffered by those identified as such in the societies where they live (Fontes, 2019). This oppression extends to the different spheres of their lives and is seen in multiple, manifold and interwoven ways where social, cultural, economic and environmental factors intertwine. One example is disabled people's exclusion from artistic experience and practice. Based on conceptions that belittle the abilities and rights of disabled people, the "world" of arts and culture has been closed to them by replicating cultural barriers or keeping physical barriers preventing their effective participation (Vlachou & Acesso Cultura, 2020). Until very recently, the artistic and cultural experience and practice of disabled people have been permeated by a medical understanding of disability that defines it not as a cultural right but as therapy.

The experience and practice of dance, music, theatre, and painting, among other art forms, emerge as a rehabilitating activity for the minds and bodies of the people thus considered.

As Howard Becker (1982) argues, regarding the need for opening up the “art worlds”, the principles of accessibility, participation, collaboration and art education take on particular relevance, to which we would add its openness to different types of groups and communities, including disabled people. The approval of the *Convenção sobre os Direitos das Pessoas com Deficiência* (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; 2006), ratified by Portugal in 2009, is a turning point, not only in how disability and the rights of disabled people are understood but also in the role assigned to disabled people in the world of arts and culture. Thus, Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) recognises the right of disabled people to participate in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport. Supporting the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the European *Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030* reaffirms the need for the different member states to ensure the full participation of disabled people in cultural activities, urging them to define integrating and inclusive national policies in other areas, including in the area of culture, and to develop inclusive services and promote access to culture. In Portugal, this aspiration is echoed in the *Estratégia Nacional para a Inclusão das Pessoas com Deficiência 2021-2025* (National Strategy for the Inclusion of People with Disabilities 2021-2025; Resolução do Conselho de Ministros n.º 119/2021, 2021 [Resolution of the Council of Ministers no. 119/2021, 2021]) which defines the culture, sport, tourism and leisure as one of its eight strategic axes, and in the *Estratégia de Promoção da Acessibilidade e da Inclusão dos Museus, Monumentos e Palácios na dependência da Direção-Geral do Património Cultural e das Direções Regionais de Cultura 2021-2025* (Strategy for the Promotion of Accessibility and Inclusion of Museums, Monuments and Palaces under the General Directorate of Cultural Heritage and the Regional Directorates of Culture 2021-2025; República Portuguesa, 2022 [Portuguese Republic, 2022]). Following these guiding documents, institutions and services are starting to rethink their spaces, their accessibility conditions and means of inclusion, their practices, their collections and their programming to include all people regardless of their situation or specific needs.

This article¹ draws on the experience of implementing a project for inclusion through artistic activity and promoting inclusive art — *A Meu Ver* — by a professional artistic structure in theatre in the city of Coimbra — *O Teatrão*. It is a three-year theatre training and practice project for people with blindness or low vision, funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and La Caixa Foundation under the *Partis & Art for Change* programme. This project combines artistic training with intervention in the cultural space of the city and region of Coimbra. Another component of *A Meu Ver* is related to the scientific monitoring of the project. It includes an evaluation of its impacts on the participants,

¹ The data presented here stemmed from monitoring work and impact assessment of the first year of the project's implementation. They were the basis for Susete Margarido's Master's thesis: “Disability and Artistic Practices: The Role of Theatre in the Identity of People with a Visual Impairment”, submitted to the Faculty of Economics of the University of Coimbra.

their families and wider communities. On the other hand, it is also expected to impact the municipality of Coimbra venues' policies of cultural accessibility. The coordination between artistic training and creation and the social sciences and humanities reinforces the multidisciplinary aspect of the project. The data provided here are the result of a follow-up work and impact assessment of the first year of implementation of the project *A Meu Ver*, which aimed to analyse and rethink the possible roles of artistic training in the mediation between the entity O Teatrão and a group of disabled people, traditionally excluded from the cultural circuits. At this point, it is worth presenting a possible definition of cultural mediation as an action which consists in making segments of public access to works and knowledge, aiming to generate an appropriation of the artistic and cultural universe by the people who make contact with it (Davallon, 2010).

Based on this experience, it will seek to provide an answer to the following questions:

- What is the role of art in the mediation between artistic entities and different types of communities?
- How to mediate new understandings, perceptions and interpretations that can connect artistic creation with communities at the fringes of artistic circuits?

This article intends to reflect on the mediating role of artistic activity in creating spaces of communication between artists, artistic and cultural institutions, researchers and communities that are usually far from the contexts of cultural offers and experiences using the specific case of the training and theatre practice of people with blindness or low vision. It divides into five parts. The first part provides the theoretical framework of the article. It aims to explore the link between artistic activity and disabled people in the context of the “Disability Arts” movement. The second part outlines the context of the case study and its empirical specificity. The third part shares the project's methodological approach; the fourth part discusses the relationship between art, mediation and the *A Meu Ver* project; finally, the final reflections aim to point out future paths based on the project's current development for a second phase.

2. CULTURE, ART AND DISABILITY

As we have seen, despite the diffusion of new perspectives on disability stemming from the Disabled People's movement and from the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which present disability as a form of social oppression or as a human rights issue, the hegemony of oppressive, fatalistic and individualising perspectives remains unshakable in many societies. This reality means that phenomena of poverty and social exclusion still constrain the lives of the vast majority of disabled people, and their rights and opportunities often remain a mirage. The prevalence in the dominant culture of diminishing and oppressive conceptions of disabled people translates in their representation as inferior, passive, useless and almost non-human (Barnes & Mercer, 2010). On the other hand, their exclusion in the production and consumption of this same culture, oppressive of their identity and needs, made disabled people in geographical contexts such as England and the United States of America (Barnes & Mercer,

2010; S. Brown, 1997; Davis, 1995) to develop an alternative culture, able to express, positively, their identities and experiences.

The development, affirmation and celebration of this positive identity of disabled people and of the pride in being who and how they are, what Swain and French (2000) call the “affirmation model”, was also translated at the level of the arts with the development of what we may generically call “disability arts”. “Disability arts” is thus an artistic and political movement developed by disabled people in different fields and cultural expressions — theatre, cinema, music, dance, sculpture, painting, performance, comedy, poetry, novels, and photography... — and their artistic creations, exploring and presenting the history, culture and experiences of disability and impairment from an individual and political standpoint, as well as the visions, perspectives and experiences of the world of disabled people. Barnes and Mercer (2010) emphasise this political dimension in defining the “disability arts” movement as the

development of shared cultural meanings and collective expression of the experience of disability and struggle. This entails using artistic activity to expose discrimination and prejudice disabled people face and to generate group consciousness. (p. 207)

These authors argue that the disability arts movement encompasses at least three interrelated dimensions: it argues for disabled people to have access to the mainstream of artistic consumption and production; explores the experience of living with an impairment; and offers a critical response to the experience of social exclusion and marginalisation (Barnes & Mercer, 2010, pp. 207–208). The existence of one or several alternative cultures of disability is, however, far from being agreed upon within the disabled people’s movement or even in the field of disability studies (Wendell, 1996). Nevertheless, this “disability arts” movement is undeniable with the emergence of different voices, initiatives and forms of expression of disabled people, which, in many cases, effectively produce a culture of resistance and celebration (Oliver & Barnes, 1998). The notion of culture emerges here in its double meaning, as a set of values, beliefs and norms shared by a given social group (Giddens, 1989) and as artistic creation produced, in this case, by disabled people.

As the history of disability and disabled people clearly shows, their participation in the arts and culture is seldom part of this artistic movement to produce an alternative, celebratory political culture for disabled people. It is, therefore, important to distinguish this movement from what we can only call “artists with disabilities”. That is, artists who, despite having an impairment, are not solely influenced by that circumstance (Austin & Brophy, 2015). Some names of disabled people who have stood out in the art world in the past, such as Van Gogh or Beethoven, are good examples. Nowadays, a new generation of artists in the field of “disability arts” is outlining new paths and new readings, where disability is no longer the focus of the political message they want to convey but where it emerges among others who form the diversity of disabled people. A recent project developed by the Australian organisation of disabled people dedicated to promoting the

accessibility of arts and culture — Arts Access Victoria — identifies some of the most prominent names today while emphasising this aspect of their creations. This organisation thus highlights the work of artists such as Yinka Shonibare from the United Kingdom, Chuck Close from the United States of America and Jane Trengove from Australia (Austin & Brophy, 2015). For this organisation, these names represent an example of professional disabled artists working in contemporary visual arts. Notwithstanding the clear Western reading of the field presented by this organisation, if we focus on the work of these artists, one of the unifying characteristics of their production is exactly such a widening of readings and messages, exploring issues such as cultural representation, gender, sexuality and political power, and not focusing solely on the topic of disability. As emphasised, although their work is not solely committed to and/or focused on disability, it can be directly influenced by the artist's experience, which sheds some light on their work's creative process and content. Therefore, these new artists' work should be analysed within a broader contemporary artistic context and not only within the scope of "disability arts". This need is based on the fact that their work does not reflect a direct relationship with disability, which is only visible in the nuanced connections between the artists' lived experience and their critical observations of the cultural and social place they occupy (Reeves, 1999, as cited in Austin & Brophy, 2015). Safeguarding the essence of "disability arts" now seems to have shifted to the freedom of cultural creation of disabled artists in self-controlled environments independent of dominant assessment models (Barnes & Mercer, 2010).

In Portugal, this "disability arts" movement has also flourished. It is visible in the emergence of artists and groups of disabled artists in different fields and expressions, ranging from theatre, dance, and plastic arts, to music and acting. One example is 5.^a Punkada, a musical band made up of Associação de Paralisia Cerebral de Coimbra (Coimbra Cerebral Palsy Association) users, created in 1994, which has already recorded an album — *Somos Punks ou Não?* (Are we Punks or Not?) — and has performed dozens of shows all over the country. In dance, individual names, such as Diana Niepce, and collectives, such as the group *Dançando com a Diferença*, are becoming popular. The first is a Portuguese dancer and choreographer who, due to her quadriplegia, has been experimenting and developing a new dance language based on her body, explored as a political element. The second, however, is a professional dance company based on a group with the same name created in the autonomous region of Madeira in 2001 and which explores the concept of inclusive dance, pairing disabled and non-disabled dancers. In theatre, there are numerous examples of initiatives all over the country. The Grupo Crinabel Teatro stands out for its longevity and dynamics. Created in 1986, this group has already trained dozens of artistic productions and artists. It has promoted several special theatre meetings and the diffusion of using theatre practice and language in similar national and foreign institutions.

The progress made regarding the participation of disabled people in the art world in Portugal is thus undeniable. However, their participation as professional artists and cultural production and programming agents remains scarce compared to non-disabled

people. Furthermore, art in and of disability in Portugal is almost always seen in its educational, therapeutic and, in specific cases, recreational aspects, being very rarely understood and appreciated in its cultural and artistic aspects. The affirmation of a “disability arts” movement thus remains embryonic, and the consolidation of one alternative culture of resistance and celebration of difference, as Oliver and Barnes (1998) advocated, remains a promise.

3. CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

3.1. A *MEU VER* AND THE TEATRÃO PEDAGOGICAL PROJECT

In Portugal, in addition to having obstacles in access to arts and culture, in its strict sense, disabled people also face a lack of opportunities to participate in the professional artistic world (Vlachou & Acesso Cultura, 2020). Based on the new vision of disabled people and their rights emanating from the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), we have been witnessing the emergence of a growing number of projects and programmes to support the creation and development of inclusive contexts and opportunities in the world of culture and arts. One example is the *PARTIS & Art for Change* programme, funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and La Caixa Foundation, which aims to fund artistic projects for social inclusion in Portugal. This programme, created in 2020, supports, through training and funding actions, organisations that develop and implement artistic practices that promote social inclusion. The project *A Meu Ver*, under analysis in this article, developed by Teatrão, is one of the projects funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and La Caixa Foundation under the *PARTIS & Art for Change* programme. Running for three years, *A Meu Ver* (2021-2024)² provides theatre training for a group of people with blindness and low-vision and creates and presents three theatre performances. The project is developed through a partnership between the professional theatre company Teatrão and the Coimbra Delegation of the Associação dos Cegos e Amblíopes de Portugal (Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired of Portugal - ACAPO), aimed at creating a hub of work dedicated to the practice of theatre. Therefore, a regular theatre workshop was designed, the Sala de Ensaios (Rehearsal Room), which, with the support of a professional and multidisciplinary artistic team, is responsible for the development of the project and from which emerged a first play, entitled *O Que É Invisível* (What is Invisible), premiered in March 2022. This article is based on the monitoring work of the first year of the *A Meu Ver* implementation, which sought to understand how the theatre practice contributes to the identity construction of people with visual impairment participating in the project.

² The *A Meu Ver* project officially started its activities in January 2021 and was due to end in January 2024. Due to the pandemic, the beginning of the project's trials was rescheduled for May 2021, so the project has already requested an extension until May 2024.

The *A Meu Ver* project is especially relevant to Teatrão's mission, given the extensive work that this professional theatre company has been developing, particularly since 2010, in implementing mediation projects with the community, which involve an aspect of social inclusion through artistic practices. As the company states, Teatrão (2023) takes on

the mission of bringing theatre art closer to the communities and territories, promoting equal access to its activities for all audiences, through inclusive practices, as a result of its political position on the role of art and culture in the development of individuals and communities. (para. 1)

Therefore, the company seeks to be part of the daily life of the communities where it operates and help make art recognised as an essential practice in society. Teatrão offers a wide range of activities, including plays for various types of audiences (offering audio description and translation services for Portuguese sign language), programming shows by other creators, training for all ages and community intervention. Since its creation, Teatrão has worked to make artistic activities more accessible to all, bringing it closer to the communities and the territory. After taking over the spaces of the Oficina Municipal de Teatro (Municipal Theatre Workshop) in 2008, the company has worked to make it a place of proximity, but also investing in a work of circulation of artistic productions in national and international circuits and continuing to invest in the pedagogical and artistic dimension (Baltazar, 2021). Several projects were created to accomplish the company's objectives, among them the pedagogical and intervention projects, which seek to make access to culture a right of citizens.

The pedagogical project is the link between the different dimensions of the company's activities, materialising the belief that access to culture is a right built through a regular practice of cultural habits (Baltazar, 2021). The pedagogical project includes six programs: "Links", "Turmas" (Classes), "Pastas" (Portfolios), "Explorações" (Explorations), "Prós Grandes" (For the Great) and "Prós Stôres" (For the Teachers). The "Links" program is where the public participates directly in the creative process, interacting with the artists through talks, workshops and guided tours. The "Turmas" programme runs throughout the year. It offers continuous training in theatre practices, led by guest artists, educators or residents, offering a training ground for future actors and actresses of the company. The "Pastas" programme includes a compilation of supporting materials produced by the educational service and research conducted in the company's projects. The "Explorações" programme operates through workshops, routes or guided tours, allowing the public to contemplate and experience other forms of occupation and coexistence in everyday urban life and to combine these experiences with the exploration of the language of theatre and performance. The "Prós Grandes" programme is developed in partnership with local support networks (day care centres and nursing homes) and is a theatre project aimed at the senior population. Finally, the "Pros Stôres" programme is aimed at teachers and educators and offers short and medium-length courses with the possibility of co-production.

The project *A Meu Ver* is part of the “Turmas” programme from Teatrão’s pedagogical project and follows other training and artistic creation programmes with different types of communities (young people from low-income neighbourhoods — 2010/2011; young children of emigrants — 2011/2012; young people in a situation or risk of dropping out of school — 2012/2013), which the company has been developing over the last decade. The experience shared in this article is set within this mediation element, opening new channels to think about artistic activity regarding its possibilities of mediation between different types of publics, exploring simultaneously the different levels that its formats of cultural participation can adopt. In the particular case of *A Meu Ver*, the development of this place for creation, training, and artistic expression opens new possibilities for thinking about the social inclusion of communities often made invisible by society at large, rethinking and reformulating the formats of cultural participation. This project involved a group of 11 people with visual impairment, five men and six women, between 32 and 72 years old, living in different civil parishes of the district of Coimbra and with a very heterogeneous level of education (two people with primary education; two people with lower secondary education; four people with secondary education and three people with higher education). This group is also quite heterogeneous regarding life circumstances. Of the 11 participants, six are married or living in a non-marital partnership, three are single, and two are divorced. Regarding employment status: five people retired for disability due to permanent inability to work, four were unemployed and looking for a job, one was employed, and one was doing social work required under the “Contrato Emprego - Inserção+” measure.

3.2. METHODOLOGY

This research privileged a qualitative approach, conducting a case study, exploratory in nature, between October 2021 and August 2022. The data reported here were collected through four data collection techniques: participant observation, questionnaire survey, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Participant observation was conducted in 24 rehearsals in the Sala de Ensaios of the Oficina Municipal de Teatro group of project *A Meu Ver* participants. Twenty-two interviews were conducted over two separate time frames. In the first moment, between December 2021 and January 2022, 11 semi-structured project interviews were conducted. Given the pandemic context of COVID-19, the interviews were conducted face-to-face or by telephone, according to the interviewee’s preference. These interviews aimed to get to know the participants; survey their expectations; identify the changes produced by the theatre practice in their daily lives; and describe their relationship with cultural and artistic practices. At this first moment and the beginning of the interview, a questionnaire was applied to collect the participants’ socio-demographic data. In the second moment, 11 interviews were conducted with the same target group in a face-to-face or telephone format, as before. This second moment of interviews was dynamised in April 2022, immediately after the presentation of the theatre play produced by the project — *O Que É Invisível* — and aimed to collect

the concerns, difficulties and challenges faced by project participants, identify and collect the overcoming strategies mobilised, assess their degree of satisfaction with the project and identify possible impacts of their participation. By the end of the first year, two focus groups were held: one with ACAPO professionals involved in the project and one with Teatrão professionals. In the first case, analysing the participation of ACAPO in the implementation of the project and the process of artistic creation, and in the second case, analysing the project's impact on Teatrão and its professionals. The focus group with ACAPO included three technicians from the institution (two orientation and mobility technicians and a social worker). The focus group with Teatrão had four people (two members of the management structure and directors of the company, the two trainers of the group, and the directors of the annual presentation). The interviews were audio recorded, later transcribed, and explored through thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing us to identify and analyse the dominant themes.

All interviewees were previously informed of the objectives of the interviews. The interviews were scheduled and conducted after the interviewee accepted the informed consent protocol. The interviewer verbally told and provided the written information contained in it and subsequently checked the acceptance of those involved in the study.

4. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The arts are an important tool for deconstructing, questioning and social criticism and for reconstructing and presenting new narratives of reality. In the case of disabled people, access to and participation in artistic and cultural practice and the construction of a language of their own to express their experiences have been gaining a prominent place and becoming a claim and a right. Among the different arts, the theatre has become a significant cultural practice within the processes of resistance to the extent that it highlights the capacities and potential of individuals (Muñoz-Bellerín & Cordero-Ramos, 2020). As a space that allows interactions and interpretations, as well as the use of the imaginary, theatre presents a high potential for the expression of new worlds and experiences and the affirmation of new languages and conceptions of reality (Muñoz-Bellerín & Cordero-Ramos, 2021). Thus, we may say that artistic activity may be seen as a space of mediation, that is, as a border space that allows communication and connection between different conceptions and experiences of reality, in this case, between a dominant culture and a new alternative culture, but also as a space for the affirmation of rights. These rights are embodied not only in access and participation in cultural activity and practice but also in the possibility of reconfiguring and presenting new citizenship rights through artistic training, access to culture as consumers, and developing a more critical and reflective view of society.

In *A Meu Ver* project, as we can see, enabling training, practice and consumption of theatre created spaces of mediation that allowed reaching audiences traditionally distant from this art, as is the case of disabled people, and creating a space for the “agency” of these same audiences, making them more active in constructing and reconstructing this

practice and, consequently, of their rights as citizens. As observed during the project implementation and later verified during the interviews, the artistic practice and experience also allowed for the incorporation, or greater emphasis, of theatre and the arts in the self-identification of disabled people participating in the project. On the other hand, making the experience of disability more collective has facilitated a greater awareness that most of the problems faced by disabled people do not stem directly from their impairments but from the barriers in the surrounding community.

4.1. ARTISTIC EXPERIENCE AND CULTURAL PARTICIPATION

These impacts of the project *A Meu Ver* are aligned with the objectives defined by Teatrão in its application, to make visible that the problems of disability are related to the forms of social organisation and not the body's functional capabilities. Making the experience of disability collective through artistic practice and identity embodiment allowed the project to contribute to the deconstruction of a medical concept of disability and the dissemination of a social understanding of disability. As we could witness through the different moments of observation, the fictional construction of other realities provided by the practice of artistic experience created, in this first phase of the project, a group consciousness in the people participating and in their primary support networks. On the other hand, the public presentation of a performance, which stemmed from a joint effort between all participants, brought into the public sphere a statement about the role artistic activity can play in the mediation between the Teatrão and a group of disabled people, traditionally excluded from the cultural circuits, seen as potential active and participatory audiences of cultural activity. The data from the participant observation and the interviews showed, precisely, the concern of the work's coordination team in preserving the different types of participation and contributions of the people involved, both in the writing process and in the construction of the play *O Que É Invisível*. During the play's writing and construction process, the participants actively contributed to this process by formulating opinions, suggestions and specific ideas, expressing their interests and their availability to take on certain roles in the show, and, in a later stage of the show's preparation, by making suggestions for changing parts of the text and adapting the scenic device to the specific individual needs of movement and spatial orientation. This active participation of disabled people in the construction of the script, in the definition, arrangement and even construction of the scenic elements is quite evident in the following testimonies taken from the interviews: "yes, yes. That first initial text, the one that was recorded, I made the first draft" (Interviewee 6, interview, April 14, 2022)

I did. I did. Before the first scene, before that scene was written, it was discussed with X [director] at the time, and he wrote that first scene according to what we had previously discussed. After the text, there was one or another thing that I also talked about with X [director] - even over the phone - that we made these small changes to the text. That was regarding the first scene. The second scene, (...) in the matter of the stage and costumes, yes.

The suggestion that we should dress, for example, in white or be dressed in white or a very light colour, was a suggestion that I made. The suggestion of the things on stage, except for one thing, was also made by me: the bathtub, things that were already old, reminiscent of ... things that were put aside and are no longer used because they're broken. (...) So, these suggestions were given, they were made, and that was the participation I had. Then the connection, the whole narration, was also presented, it was discussed — I always spoke with X [the director], who wrote it, to get my perception from there and also to understand what X's [director] perception was, and the perception was undoubtedly identical, and then that whole narration was built: allowing it to be that link, that connection between the various scenes. People being, eventually, not totally unsupported or disconnected in that sense. I participated. And the mask, including that plaster mask that was in the first scene, that mask was actually made — I was there at the Teatrão for about an hour and a half with plaster on my face to make the mould of that mask. Then it was worked on and put on. So, I was involved in several things. (Interviewee 10, interview, April 21, 2022)

During the second moment of interviews, which took place after the public presentation of the play, it was possible to observe that participation in the project enabled the participants to access the theatrical artistic practice as audience members. For some of these people, this experience meant opening doors to a new reality and cultural dynamics to which they had little or no access. For such, it is worth noting the investment of this theatre company in the acquisition of an audio description booth, as well as the availability of audio description and translation services into Portuguese sign language in all shows performed since the beginning of this project. This greater participation in shows is mentioned by several of our interviewees: “yes, maybe I've been to more shows at the Teatrão than I have in a long time. In the past, I was single and went to the cinema. I think I had never been to the theatre” (Interviewee, interview, April 19, 2022)”, “it changed a little because we were offered other events as well” (Interviewee 7, interview, April 14, 2022) and “the theatre thing allowed me, for example, to go to plays more often. I was already doing it before, but it was just very occasionally. Now, it has become a little more consistent” (Interviewee 10, interview, April 21, 2022).

It was also interesting to see how the activation of this cultural participation process of people with visual impairment, started by the project, enhanced their greater participation in the community and, consequently, contributed to their process of social inclusion. This process seems to have stemmed from a confluence of factors, among which we highlight: the interaction of the project's coordination with the municipality of Coimbra in the implementation and facilitation of mobility and transport options to and from the location of the project's rehearsals, the Oficina Municipal de Teatro; the investment, previously described, of Teatrão in removing barriers to access and experience of theatre practice; and, very important in the interviewees' accounts, the recognition and

valuing of their voices, opinions, experiences and readings. The importance given by the participants to the access to and participation in cultural practices was underlined by one of the ACAPO technicians responsible for this group whom we interviewed in a focus group:

it is mainly about the possibility of enjoying a right like any other citizen; access to culture has to be a right, not only for people with visual impairment but for any other person. And the fact of being able to access culture easily in the same way as another person with no disability, I think that turns out to be an added value, and these people feel it (...). Or I want to be part of it (...). In this case, it is to be part of it. (Technician from the Associação dos Cegos e Amblíopes de Portugal — Focus Group 1, July 18, 2022)

Our data thus demonstrate that the process of cultural mediation, in this specific case promoted by *A Meu Ver*, transforms the participants on an individual and social level, to which the artistic component included in the training dimension of the project must be added. Among the changes on an individual level, noticeable in some of the voices below, are increased concentration and motivation daily, greater self-esteem and sense of personal achievement, and greater decision-making ability, besides aspects of voice placement and body posture.

The change I feel is that I feel more motivated. Nothing else has changed significantly, but at least I feel more motivated, more fulfilled. It's still while I'm busy, when I fall into the void, things are not so simple. At least in that part, I have moments of feeling really good. Longer. (...) Yes, it brought me advantages. To make my decision easier, in the participations that may happen, I decide with more determination. (Interviewee 3, interview, April 13, 2022)

[Interviewer] Do you mean that this has brought you some changes, although few, that have benefited your life? [Interviewee] And I also notice, at this moment, more concentrated at work and in my daily life (Interviewee 5, interview, April 27, 2022).

“It has changed! Besides me being already positive in my life, in my problems, in my situation, it changed because I am sure (and I really am) that my energy, my self-esteem became much more, much higher” (Interviewee 9, interview, April 18, 2022).

Yes, more at ease. More at ease with people, more playful perhaps. More at ease in certain situations; in others, the theatre and not only - but now it is the theatre that we are talking about - worked the part of concentration, the part of memory, the part of the postural correction. It worked on various aspects. These aspects are then integrated into daily life, into everyday life; at various moments, they are integrated in a very normal and dynamic way, as things are supposed to be. So, there wasn't a radical

change, something... I was like that up to this point, and from then on, I was totally different - no, there was no such change; but there were small changes that were integrated over time and keep being integrated. (Interviewee 10, interview, April 21, 2022)

However, this process of individual and social transformation enhanced by the artistic and cultural practice lacks support from artistic and cultural entities. Although it is not possible to state that the project *A Meu Ver* produced a deep and lasting impact on the structure and professionals of this theatre company, the words of one of the directors of Teatrão, interviewed in a focus group context, show that there is an awareness of this need and right of disabled people. As well as some permeability to the emergence of new narratives and new theatre languages:

this notion of starting to promote more and more activities with the participation of people with disabilities will make the current aesthetics of art contemplate these people in the milieu as well. And also, sometimes, it is an exercise of our humility, of realising that, perhaps, there doesn't have to be a previous need among people with disabilities. That is, here it is about doing one thing at the same time. It is about making this symbiosis of presenting and doing, letting things contaminate. (Director and professional of Teatrão — Focus Group 2, August 8, 2022)

4.2. CULTURAL PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

Access to culture and artistic practice becomes essential to the realisation of the right to culture, to the affirmation of disability culture and to the construction of a culture where all people feel represented. The cultural practice provided to disabled people participating in the project *A Meu Ver* provided several impacts on their daily lives beyond this cultural dimension. As it was possible to verify during the first moment of interviews, the initial motivation for most participants to participate in the project was the need for an activity outside their daily life, as exemplified by the testimony of this participant: “it's more to get out of the house for a while, I'm always here during the day. On Thursdays when I go, I'm ready by this time. I catch the bus at two-thirty, at that bus stop there” (Interviewee 4, interview, December 18, 2021).

Considering this motivation, it is not surprising that the main changes reported by the participants at this stage are of a social and spatial nature. They are changes arising from the greater mobility of participants out of their family context and private sphere, produced by their participation in rehearsals and project activities. This change was facilitated by the orientation training given by ACAPO Coimbra to the project participants to increase their familiarity with the route to and from the Oficina Municipal de Teatro and the encouragement and diligence developed by Teatrão to promote the use of public

transport. Some of the testimonies collected show this transformation: “now in terms of transport, I started to use a bus which was not even familiar to me, I didn’t use it, which is the 24T. I had never used it before and I started using it in a more usual way” (Interviewee 10, April 21, 2022).

Knowing the routes to come autonomously. Because none of them knew how to come to the Teatrão, none. (...) Neither had ever come. (...). The recognition of routes, listing available transportation, all this training was done, and people are coming and going autonomously. (Technician from the Associação dos Cegos e Amblíopes de Portugal — Focus Group 1, July 18, 2022)

This impact is especially relevant since, as it has been reported, most disabled people still live in contexts of great social isolation arising from the lack of accessibility in the surrounding physical environment. It prevents them from leaving home and moving around in their area of residence, as well as of their remaining in residential structures far away from the community and the labour market, with clear prejudice for their involvement in networks of sociability and social participation. As the data from the last Portuguese population censuses revealed, the percentage of people aged five years or more with an impairment living in collective-type accommodation is much higher than that of people without any impairment (8% versus 1.5% respectively) and of the total number of people with motor impairment, 68.1% live in accommodations without accessibility for people in wheelchairs (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, I.P., 2022). Added to these physical barriers are the economic barriers to social participation. As the 2021 census also shows, of the total number of people with any impairment aged 15 or over, only 15.6% were active in the labour market, compared to 58.5% of people in the same age group without any impairment. In addition, 71.9% of people with impairments had a retirement or pension as a source of income (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, I.P., 2022). The relevance of the project to combat this social isolation is clear in the words of another ACAPO technician from Coimbra, also interviewed within the same focus group:

some people with (...) visual impairment would like to go and do not go due to the constraints they feel and the difficulties they experience before getting there. In terms of mobility, transport, even in terms of the show (...), not to mention the other challenges. (...) Many end up isolated. There are one or two that don’t live here in the city and are more isolated and in villages, small places... they don’t socialise as much. So, I think that this, for the isolation (...), I think it is very important. (Technician from the Associação dos Cegos e Amblíopes de Portugal — Focus Group 1, July 18, 2022)

In addition to the increased opportunities for social interaction provided by the project, there is also an opportunity to raise community awareness about disability issues

and systematic integration into the space and practice of theatre for everyone, regardless of whether they have or not some impairment. The same technician also highlights this normalisation and systematic integration of the difference:

because many people, besides suffering from the stigma of being blind or having low vision, also do not identify as such. Therefore, in everything they do in their daily life, they try to avoid anything unrelated to an Associação de Cegos e Amblíopes de Portugal. In other words, participating in Teatrão and being here at Teatrão makes things normal. Those who like to do theatre go to Teatrão, and anyone can go. (Technician from the Associação dos Cegos e Amblíopes de Portugal — Focus Group 1, July 18, 2022)

The awareness of and for theatre culture is, however, the most evident impact of this project. The facilitation and promotion of this artistic practice's consumption by the project and the company management allowed greater access to theatre performances, in some cases even initiation into the consumption of this practice, considering that some of these people had never had the opportunity to attend a theatre performance. Because of their specific needs to experience a play where visual and audio elements are often combined, people with any visual impairment have been excluded from the existing theatre productions available in most Portuguese cities. The project *A Meu Ver* has, thus, mediated the first contact and regular and frequent contact with theatre shows, contributing to the realisation of the right to culture and cultural consumption by this group specific group of disabled people who, for the reasons mentioned above, have been particularly distanced. This project is, however, an isolated embryo of what can and should be done to promote the right to culture in its different dimensions and levels of participation. The work is mostly still to be done, as one of Teatrão's directors points out:

We know how difficult it is. That's why mediation is so important for Teatrão because it is closely linked to the genesis of the company, to issues such as arts education and the advocacy that artistic activity should be part of public education, that schools should have access to and artistic practice in their curricula, I mean... this is part of our work philosophy. (...) There is also a need for cultural agents and teams, and the municipality itself or those who think the cultural policies should have specific training in this area. (Director and professional of Teatrão — Focus Group 2, August 8, 2022)

Nevertheless, social inclusion in and through culture is an open-ended process requiring constant investment, awareness, and monitoring by the parties involved.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis presented above highlights the importance of *A Meu Ver* as a cultural mediation project between an arts organisation and a social group traditionally distanced

from this artistic and cultural expression — people with blindness or low vision — developed by a professional theatre company. This project is part of a path developed by this company over the last 12 years, liaising with different types of communities through training and artistic intervention projects. This work has allowed a deeper understanding of artistic creation methodologies and methodological approaches from social sciences for developing cultural and artistic intervention projects in different communities. As these projects occur in multidisciplinary contexts, they enable new understandings, perceptions, and interpretations of artistic creation processes and point new paths to and formats of cultural participation as a strategy of cultural mediation. The cultural mediation processes are seen here as directly connected to cultural access and participation processes in multiple layers and formats. Cultural participation has undergone profound transformations in recent decades, in line with the change in cultural institutions and their artistic practices and productions (Ateca-Amestoy & Villarroya, 2017). Authors such as Novak-Leonard and Brown (2011) take multiple approaches to understanding arts participation considering different types of participation, such as attending performances and cultural activities, artistic engagement through media and artistic creation or performance. The extent of involvement and creative control of the individual in his/her/their cultural practice is the benchmark used by A. Brown (2004), thus classifying cultural participation into different layers and formats: inventive, participatory, interpretive, observational and artistic curation. In short, cultural participation has evolved towards more active formats, assuming dimensions of engaging different types of audiences (Tomka, 2013). The mediation process in this project's scope is based on the context and history of this theatre company, which believes that artistic-cultural activity should be accessible to different types of communities and groups and adopt different formats. Thus, artistic creation is less the prerogative of a small group of artists and becomes part of the identity construction processes of people and groups normally distanced from artistic universes, therefore being a process of artistic appropriation of the artistic and cultural universe by these groups.

The results, necessarily exploratory, presented here show the need for further studies on the impact of this type of artistic practice on groups distanced and/or excluded from cultural practices and experiences. In this particular project, it is also important to understand and analyse the changes in the family circle of the participants in the project *A Meu Ver* in how disability and impairment, or more specifically visual impairment, are perceived. Moreover, to examine, in the medium and long term, the impacts of the project activities on the individual and social level of the participants. On the other hand, it is also pertinent to collect testimonies from the audience of the performances held within the scope of this project, to assess possible changes in their conceptions of disability and of the abilities of disabled people, as well as in their evaluation of the theatre language and aesthetics developed.

The data collected and reported here demonstrate, on the one hand, the importance of the accessibility of spaces and performances and cultural creations to different

audiences to enforce the rights of disabled people and their participation and social inclusion. On the other hand, they highlight the importance of culture for the personal and collective development of the *A Meu Ver* project participants. The range of participatory artistic and cultural practices implemented by the project allowed us to identify and rethink the different levels of cultural participation and democratisation of culture. This democratisation requires, as we have seen, at least the consideration of four factors: the inclusion in culture and the community, the accessibility of the spaces and shows, rethinking them for different types of audiences and opening them up to the participation of different groups of people with specific characteristics and needs. In short, the *A Meu Ver* project has highlighted the new possibilities of cultural mediation and social inclusion that artistic activity offers.

Translation: Anabela Delgado

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