

# Oporto Writers: the Auto-reflexive Dimension of Creative Writing

C. Vieira, NOVO and I. I. Santos

**Abstract**—This paper is centered in the analysis of the auto-reflexive dimension of creative writing, by means of gathering and analyzing testimonies that grant a patent of the creator's critic conscience about his own work and about the contemporaneous creation. The qualitative study of videodocumentaries where the authors reflect upon their own creation and upon the creations of other authors from their time could offer relevant information about what the creators consider to be the literariness principles and the most important characters that define the literary text.

**Keywords** - *Contemporary Literature, Oporto Writers, History of Literature, Videodocumentaries*

## I. INTRODUCTION

As the goal was to retrieve original data that could integrate a coherent analysis corpus, we proceeded creating video-documentaries of several Oporto authors, shot between 2010 and 2015, put together on a series named "Porto Escrito (Written Oporto)" available on-line, on YouTube. These documents provide data that is likely to constitute a uniform corpus, as they all have as basis the same interview script. With some variations, due to a certain degree of unpredictability in the dialog with the authors, the questions of this six structured interviews focused in the following topics: i) considerations about the Portuguese contemporary literature: vision, defining features; ii) thoughts about literature's role in current days; iii) listing of authors who compose their closest circle; iv) mentioning of readings that have eventually been determining; v) small retrospective on their bibliographic route, aiming to the identification of works which the author would like to highlight; vi) regards about the most relevant marks of their writing; vii) comparison between Oporto's cultural environment in the 50's and current times; viii) listing of places in Oporto that may have marked their literary imaginary.

With an exception in the last two points, the purpose of the documentaries was to study the auto-reflexive dimension in literary creation, or, in other words, the creator's critic conscience about his own work. The study of declarations where the author reflects upon his own creation and upon the

creations of other authors from his time could offer relevant information about what the creator considers to be the literariness principles, the most important characters that define the literary text, and, as a result, allows the investigation of current pertinent questions to the approach of the contemporary creation and Portuguese literary thinking evolution. At the same time, the author's perspective about his contemporary generations allows the profile tracing of a present and past literary city: meeting places, reactions to publications, involvement in periodical publications, gatherings, stories and interactions, everything that constructed the city's cultural life and that can't be ignored in the reconstitution of a literary history shaped by a generation. The last two questions underline this dimension and focus on the analysis of the city's fictional representations, allowing the gathering of a text corpus that represents the thoughts about Oporto's representation in the contemporary literature.

So, these testimonies integrate a form of the several "expressions of literary consciousness" considered by Michał Głowiński:

"[...] what are the materials which render possible the analysis of literary consciousness? Several answers come to mind, one of them more immediately than the others: namely, that literary consciousness can be studied from such directly relevant documents as literary criticism, manifestos, the writers' own statements of purpose, and theoretical reflections. We find ourselves here on the level of «metalanguage», or more exactly on the level of metaliterary statements concerning those literary rules which have received immediate elucidation. [1]

## II. CORPUS ANALYSIS

The methodology focus on the qualitative analysis using six video-documentaries. Each video-documentary contains an interview, with a duration of about 30 minutes. The enquired authors are all well-established within the literary institution, at a national level. With this we mean that they are creators who have already received various literary awards and are frequently studied by the academic critics. These authors have a recognized career, with several published works, many of them recommended to be learned in high school and in college.

All the authors live in Oporto, and, as they live away from the capital, they have been, in the last few decades, withdrawn from the best edition, distribution and promotion circuits, exercised by those which have a more aggressive literary marketing ( the most important publishers in Portugal, in the literary edition fields, are located in Lisbon; in the last years, almost every publisher located in Porto have gone out of

Vieira, Célia (Author)  
CITEI-CIAC / Instituto Universitário da Maia  
Portugal

Santos, Inês (Author)  
CITEI-CIAC / Instituto Universitário da Maia  
Portugal

business or are in a difficult economic situation, except the didactic books publishers).

This corpus doesn't allow a statistical treatment; our goal was, above all, to analyze the content of the interviews. In that extent, it's not the representative dimension of this sample that concerns, but an approach in depth, closer to the case studies. Anyway, these authors, as was said, are recognized by the academic institution and the number of authors with this statute that are still alive isn't very high. In that extent, their statements are valid through the authority that they have as producers and by the internal vision that they possess about the operating of the literary system. Judging by their dimensions as "historical unities" (Schmidt, 1997:8) and judging by their self-poetic capacity, we would like to consider the literary system enhancing the importance of this observers, their self and hetero observation in the problematics of literary texts comprehension and individual construction of meaning.

These are the authors and their creation domains: Albano Martins (1930-2018), poetry, essays; António Rebordão Navarro (1933-2015), novel, poetry, chronicles, literary criticism; Daniel Maia-Pinto Rodrigues (1960-), poetry, prose; Fernando Guimarães (1927-), poetry, essays; Luísa Dacosta (1927-2015), poetry, essays; Miguel Miranda (1956), novel, short stories.

This object of analysis isn't homogeneous. There's a group of writers born between the end of the twenties and beginning of the thirties, currently 80 years old, that are, from a generational point of view, an homogeneous group. Indeed, we noticed, in a first analysis, that the perspective of the younger authors was the total opposite from authors that witnessed all the events, ideologies, tendencies which marked the history of the 20th century since the end of the First World War, and whose literary career is so extensive that it allowed a further reflection about the literary phenomenon.

The same happens with the type of genres which are cultivated: in some cases, the way in which the author sees himself as a writer and as a literary essayist / critic justifies the expression of a more consciousness criticism about the literary synchrony and diachrony. The difference between prose and poetry also seems, as we'll see in the analysis, to justify the valorization of different criteria in literariness.

### III. RESULTS

#### *A. The author's perspective about literature's role in current days: changes in the circulation and consumption of literature*

These authors understand that literature "isn't a first priority necessity", and that "televisions, computers, dvd's (...) have turned the shelves into archaisms" [5], which means, that the consumption of literature has suffered a mutation, due to the lack of search. One of the reasons for this decrease is the absence of an active critic that fulfills its mission of creating interests. This situation comes from the nonexistence of divulgation spaces in the periodical press: newspapers don't reserve a space for literary reviews anymore [5]) and there are more literary and cultural magazines, as there once were.

Therefore, they see the reading and writing phenomenon as something outside of the technologies; for this authors, literature is still equivalent to the physical object of the book, which requires, from the reader, an isolation state conducive to reflection. For that reason, none of the interviewed authors writes his originals directly in the computer, even though some of them master basic tools of the information and communication technology (such as the e-mail, for example). But none of them dispenses the contact with the paper and the visual relation with the manuscript page in the creation phase; only in the review work do some of them copy their texts to the writing machine and only a very small number (two authors) does the text treatment in the computer. The question involving physical space may also be pertinent, since that almost the totality of these authors writes in their office, at his home, in an intimate space which they consider to be fundamental to the writing process.

Still regarding the alterations in the circulation of the literary book, they consider that there has been a turning point around the middle of the 20th century, in Portugal. In the fifties, the absence of editorial activity was compensated by the creation of magazines. This publications were born from the friendship and gathering of a group of writers that would launch their productions using that support. Literary books were often published by these magazines, or by the author. Therefore, they didn't become part of a proper commercial circuit, because the editor was the author, who would pay for the publication [6]. Progressively, the publishers started working books under a commercial manner: "the author is just a creator, so he doesn't intervene in the commercial circuit". For that reason, all of the interviewed authors (the older ones) have expressed some bitter over the way that the publishing market, in a general matter, would treat their activity: they frequently didn't receive the author's rights which they were entitled too; there were no exact dates for the publishing of already delivered manuscripts; they felt that their works were not "salable" and, therefore, weren't a priority; they would lament that the graphical component was less artistic (in the past, they could ask for determined format/size/ type of paper). At the same time, they recognize the existence of a "publishing inflation", "there are many books, but little literature" [5].

Only the two younger authors affirm that literature is in a favorable situation nowadays, claiming that its approximation to the public and to other forms of communication have brought benefits and made it more present in society.

These affirmations lead us to the analysis about the function that this form of communication possesses in society. For these authors, literature has a role in actuality, as a way to manifest the creating capacity of Men. To Albano Martins, literature

"Can be a way to interpret reality and, therefore, be a way of philosophy, because philosophy aims at the understanding of reality, the world in which we live. It can be a way of contestation and there are authors whose work is, above all, a way of contesting the real, contesting social living [...]. Literature can be a way to transmit questions, problems, anguishes, afflictions, to others." [7]

For that, the primordial function of literature in

contemporary society is, according to Luísa Dacosta, humanization:

“Literature keeps an humanization function, a link between people, between Men, showing that deep down we all have cravings, regrets, likes, etc., showing that we are all very similar, right? And very related...[...] It is really important for an humanization, because although life nowadays being very busy, we still have very restricted experiences and in order for us to understand the feeling of being in a death chamber, for example, we must read literature.” [8].

*B. The author's perspective about his contemporary generations and about what the creator considers to be the literariness principles*

The reflection about contemporary literary production implied, to most of this authors, the expression of a vision about evolution of literature.

One of the curious conclusions that we obtained concerns the notion of literary generation. Most of the interviewed authors belong, according to the critic's tradition, to the “Fifties Generation”. Although there is no homogeneity in the esthetical and cultural tendencies stated by romancers, poets, dramaturges, essayists and artists who were revealed during the 50's decade, there seem to exist some defining traces which led the critic into conceiving the notion of “50's generation”. The valorization of constructive processes and the consciousness of Modernity, beyond any dimensions committed to Art; the constitution of groups gathered around periodical publications; a mental atmosphere marked by the skepticism towards utopias and by the influence of the existentialism, among other aspects, are some of the elements that compete for the identification of this generation. [3]

Meanwhile, this authors, even if they recognize the existence of a chronological segment that corresponds to this decade, during which the production and reception of literary texts was dominantly characterized by a certain vocabulary, codes and metalanguage which configure what is meant as being a literary period, don't recognize any type of collective dimension in their activity. Even if they have participated in collective publications, as magazines that have marked, in a theoretical point of view, that period, they don't see their selves integrated in a group. And, even if they recognize that they had a close relationship with authors from the same decade, they affirm that their relation was affective, not literary, and that these authors haven't exercised any type of influence over their writing. Even in cases where there were critic studies which approached their work with the work of other contemporary authors, all have said to be unique, different, almost as if each one was an autonomous system.

On the other hand, the same authors (the ones born between the twenties and the thirties) declare the existence of a new generation to which they oppose to and with whom they do not identify themselves. In their opinion, this more recent generation has a different concept of literariness and doesn't share the same literary canon. This perspective reveals that the operation of the literary structure is a system where many sub-systems defined by opposition relations meet: innovator

systems vs conservative systems; canonic systems vs non canonic systems [2]

Albano Martins considers that his poetry “lies in values that are completely contradicted by the so called new generation”; in his opinion, the younger poetry “descends towards the prose. Uses a completely naked language [...]; is a poetry which looks for the prosaic, the real quotidian”. Opposing to that, what his poetry searches for “isn't the anecdotic, isn't the circumstantial [...], isn't the narrative, [...] therefore it's not the accessory, the circumstantial, the apparent”, what it searches for “is the essential”, “a poetry of essences [...] almost without referents.” And, in his opinion, the “current poetry written in Portugal is very narrative”. [7]

Another poetry and essayist, Fernando Guimarães, sees, in the opposition between actuality and past, a literary evolution that corresponds to a wider thinking mutation, the passage from Modernism to Postmodernism. In his opinion, contemporary poetry has suffered, since de seventies, a significant variation “linked to a kind of sensibility that started to define itself around that time in a somewhat nebulous and ambiguous manner. It's called postmodernism.” It is “a sensibility marked by a strongly subjective incline, very much connected to the immediate expression of emotions, a poetry very referenced to the concrete, day-to-day, quotidian, a poetry that somehow tends to deconstruct [...] that somehow contrasts, opposes to a poetry that has been defining itself since the Modernism times, since our modernism, especially since Fernando Pessoa” [6]. According to this author,

«While Modertiny's poetry bets on poetic construction, poetics which arise in the seventies and extend until this day bet on a poetic deconstruction marked by that subjectivity, by that emotionality which I have just mentioned. The modernity poetics is strong, because it will valorize language realities such as figures, image, metaphor, symbol, and, in the other hand, looks to find an organization for the poem, a structure, construction [...] which makes the poem not a mere floating description of emotions, of images from the quotidian reality, but the bridge for something that could make poetry approach a way of knowledge [...] That necessity for the truth, of having a vision of the world, a structured vision duly configured that features modernism poetry that comes from the Orpheu times, 1915, and prolongs itself until nowadays. So, when we speak about current poetry, we can't just say that theres is in it that tendency for the subjectivity, the quotidian, the emotional. No. Coexisting with that poetry, we verify the existence of poets that bet in a construction poetry, a poetry that reveals herself as being the knowledge about what is more real in the sense that Novalis gave to this expression.» [6].

This perspective coincides with the opinion expressed by these authors in other critic and essayists works. To Fernando Guimarães [4], in the Portuguese Modernism, the ways of constructiveness of a poem; of the dialectic relation between intellectualization and emotionalization capacity; of objectivity; of the confluence in the poetic language of diverse voices; of considering the significant possibilities of the distinguished, take particular importance. Anyway, the work from Fernando Pessoa is inescapable while establishing the

premises that guide the modernity's affirmation, namely by subordination of the literary creation to a faking process that, still according to Fernando Guimarães, "represents the subjectivity's fade which will lead to the dramatic heteronomous poetry, looking for the complexity known as the emotionalization of an idea and the intellectualization of an emotion, the admission of art's expressive essentiality " as well as to the "valorization of the literary realization structure itself" [6]

Also from the same generation, Luisa Dacosta regrets the today's existence of a generation of "authors that don't write literature, but that write in informative language":

«For me, that is a big loss because only literature is able to pass on life, to make us grow emotionally, because it transmits emotions, while the informative language isn't capable of transmitting emotions. This is easy to realize when someone reads, for example, news about a death. If we don't know deceased we are indifferent, but when we read Fernando Pessoa's "O Menino da Sua Mãe", we can't stay indifferent.» [8]

Through the affirmations of these authors we can assume that the language's work, through image, metaphor and symbol, drives literature away from the immediate communication, from subjectivity. Literature is a construction work which has in causing an emotion its goal, which is not the same thing as transmitting an emotion. In this paradigm, Fernando Pessoa's modernity heritage imposes a repudiation relative to the possibility of an overexposed subjective expression.

For the younger authors, it's evident that literature "isn't a newspaper column, is not a letter, a diary" [9], but they consider that the new literature is closer to the readers. As Miguel Miranda affirms, literature "is looser, has more resourcefulness, isn't so entangled; there's a literature which is a little hermetic, that doesn't have a lot to do with people, with reality. Even though there are consumers for everything (...) texts don't have to be all the same and there are many ways to write, various publics and many readers", in a generally, "there has been an advance and people are more interested in literature". [10]

#### IV. CONCLUSION

By the analysis of this videodocumentaries, it's possible to conclude that authors are involved in the literary process as "living beings, as historical units" (Schmidt, 1997:8). In this condition of human autopoietic systems, capable of self- and hetero-observation, their testimonies are essential documents for understanding the literary system and to reconstruct the evolution of literary thought.

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Born in 1970, in Porto, Portugal, Célia Vieira as a degree Modern Languages and Literatures from the University of Porto (1993), a Master's degree in Cultural History from the same University (1996) and a PhD in Comparative Literature also from the University of Porto (2004). She's a professor at the University Institute of Maia (Porto, Portugal) and a researcher at CIAC (Center for Research in Arts and Communication). She's specialized in the field of Comparative Literature, with the thesis *Theory of the Iberian naturalist novel and its French influence* (Faculty of Letters of Porto), and has several publications in the fields of comparative literature (Portuguese, French and Spanish), digital humanities and intermediality studies, including *Inter Media. Littérature, Cinéma, Intermédialité* (org) (Éditions L'Harmattan 2011) or *Dictionnaire des Naturalismes* (collaboration) (Honoré Champion éd. 2017). He is currently a member of the ITEM-CNRS project team «Projet Naturalisme-Monde».

Born in 1972, in Porto, Portugal, Isabel Rio Novo as a degree Modern Languages and Literatures from the University of Porto (1993), a Master's degree in Cultural History from the same University (1996) and a PhD in Comparative Literature also from the University of Porto (2004). She's a professor at the University Institute of Maia (Porto, Portugal) and a researcher at CLEPUL (Center for Lusophone and European Literatures and Cultures). She's specialized in the field of Comparative Literature, with the thesis *The Social Mission of Poetry. Romantic Theorisations in Portugal and their French Orientations (1850-1890)* (Faculty of Letters of Porto), and has several publications in the fields of comparative literature (Portuguese and French), digital humanities and intermediality studies, including *Inter Media. Littérature, Cinéma, Intermédialité* (org) (Éditions L'Harmattan 2011). She is also an award-winning fiction writer, having published several novels and short stories volumes.



Born in 1972, in Mirandela, Portugal, Inês Santos has a degree in International Relations from the University of Minho (1994), a Master's degree in Economic and Social Studies from the same University (1997) and a PhD from the University of Salamanca (2009). She is an Assistant Professor at the University Institute of Maia (ISMAI). She takes part in different Research Projects, at national and international level, in collaboration with several Research Centers as well as Public and Private Entities. She is a researcher at CITEI/CIAC. She has published several publications and organized several International Scientific Meetings. Her scientific research centers on the area of Communication Sciences. Their Research Project *Investigación, redes asistenciales y empoderamiento: respuestas sociales y científicas a las enfermedades raras en la Península Ibérica (1940- 2015)* was