

# The European cultural stage

## A change of scene

**Odile Chenal** The Europe of culture is an open site. In the course of the past five years the changes in it have been particularly rapid and the cultural landscape has been profoundly altered. Odile Chenal presents a general state of the art in this first contribution in a series on aspects of cultural policy in Europe.

There are many causes for the changes in the European cultural landscape. Among the most important are not only the confrontation between cultures within European society and the opening up of Central and Eastern Europe, but also the gradual inclusion of culture in the concerns of the European Union. There are three elements to these current changes, all different in nature, which hold our attention because they affect the whole of the landscape:

- the multiplication of the actors, among whom may be counted the European Union whose role is becoming more and more dominant;
- the emergence of culture at a European level;
- the confusion of the cultural language.

### **Multiplication of the actors**

The multiplication of the actors is one of the most visible phenomena. There are currently four main types of actors jostling for position on the European stage: non-governmental

organizations, national governments, cities and regions and, last but not least, the Council of Europe and the European Union (two European intergovernmental organizations).

The proliferation of *non-governmental organizations* is undoubtedly one of the most striking alterations in the cultural landscape to have taken place over the past few years. It is impossible to count the number of agencies, networks, associations and foundations which are created daily in Europe. But why such growth? In the East associations and foundations represent the essence of civil society for those emerging from long decades of state bureaucracy. In the West, the prospect of community financial funding on the one hand, and, on the other, the necessity of providing structures that permit them to act on a European level, have provoked a sort of institutional explosion. From among all these structures the transnational networks constitute one of the most innovative

instruments in that they establish horizontal relationships between groups of professionals, across borders, without going through the national representation systems.

The stage is thus very congested and is teeming with initiatives, at times innovative and often competitive. This is evidence of the vitality, but also of the confusion, and in particular also explains why it may be difficult to find one's way through the jungle of programmes, information bulletins, databases and communication networks.

All of the European cultural meetings invariably end with a lamentation about the lack of information. Paradoxically this is not about a lack of information, rather it is about too much information and the difficulty of absorbing this information which is abundant, increasing and, as yet, not well-channelled.

*National governments* continue to direct their own international cultural policies, the perception of which has barely changed, in the sense that they remain determined by the framework and the idea of the nation. The changes that have occurred in Europe have led governments more in the direction of rethinking their means of action rather than the nature of their policies. Next to the usual instruments - bilateral agreements, diplomatic cultural services, cultural centres - the concerned West European ministries of culture are creating special funds and developing their own programmes of presentation, exchange, training. Especially in the East.

Cooperation between the foreign cultural centres based in the same cities is still very exceptional - in this regard what is happening in Amsterdam is a valuable example - and the installation of both French and German cultural centres in the same building in Warsaw is a major first!

The *cities and regions* are more and more frequently the originators of initiatives with a

European dimension and are therefore moving to the front of the stage. All self-respecting large cities, and even medium-sized cities, are not only home to European events, but also welcome European structures: artists' residencies, European network secretariats, or cultural training programmes. Cities and regions, some of which have their own offices in Brussels, are developing European cooperation policies all the more freely as they are not faced with the same constraints as states.

Two *European intergovernmental organizations* also have principal roles on the cultural stage. The Council of Europe was created more than forty years ago with, in addition to its role as regards human rights, a clear mission in the field of cultural cooperation and education. The Council of Europe covers Europe in its entirety: to date there are 39 members states and 44 countries have signed the Cultural Convention. The Council of Europe has often been, and still is, a breeding ground for ideas and initiatives in the cultural sector. Its lack of powers and of real resources do not allow it to play the role which it should: it remains an initiator rather than an operator and the cultural powers currently accorded to the European Union do not help in strengthening this role. The Council of Europe's pan-European dimension, however, does in fact make it one of the first stepping stones in gaining 'access to Europe' for the numerous East European countries.

As opposed to the Council of Europe, the European Union, whose primary role was that of economic cooperation, has budgets of an entirely different magnitude at its disposal. As a consequence of this it has become a dominating actor, and the directions taken by the European Union and the priorities that it establishes, have immediate repercussions in the cultural field. The famous Article 128 of the Maastricht Treaty, which grants cultural powers to the Union has made this role official,

albeit complex. (On the role of Article 128 of the Maastricht Treaty, see Sneška Quaadvlieg-Mihailovi elsewhere in this *Boekmancahier*.)

### **The European Union in cultural Europe**

How to articulate its current role? The European Union is, first and foremost, a catalyst in the cultural field. Directions taken in Brussels are reflected immediately in the behaviour and policies of cultural actors. A contemporary example: the European Union declares a priority - and thus a release of funds - with regard to the Mediterranean regions, and several organizations immediately discover an interest - and projects - in these regions.

It is, nevertheless, confronted with a certain difficulty in defining the content of its policy. Article 128 of the Maastricht Treaty does provide a general framework to the Union's cultural powers. Within this general framework, the room for manoeuvre is all the more difficult to establish as both education and culture are areas in which national reaction is most likely to come into play; the principle of subsidiarity may easily be invoked in order to slow down any initiatives. There is a very recent example of this with the rejection, by Great Britain in particular, of a European translation programme 'Ariane' in the name of subsidiarity, not to mention the blocking of two other large cultural programmes 'Kaleidoscope', an artistic creation programme, and 'Raphael', a heritage programme.

Taking decisions is all the more difficult as Article 128 demands unanimity in the decision-making process. It is for this very reason that the European Parliament and several cultural actors would like to have the principle of unanimity altered during the next revision of the Treaty and replaced by that of a qualified majority.

The cultural policy of the European Union also remains a handicapped policy. More than in

any other sector, Europe must be seen in its entirety in the cultural sector. Limiting the design and implementation of the programmes to the Member States of the Union is to deprive them of the greater part of their impact, their coherence and their genuinely European dimension. Even if some of these programmes are open to 'external' partners it is obvious that the European Union's cultural policy, which cannot include Eastern Europe in anything more than a marginal manner, is weakened by these geographical limitations.

The European Union's policy is equally characterised in the cultural sector, just as in any other, by its difficulty of access. Even if the information is available, it is not readily accessible to the cultural actors, and especially not the local actors. The latter depend on lobbyists, agencies, offices and other information sources based in Brussels. The impact of the European Union's policy, or more aptly its cultural measures, is thus also linked to the quality of these intermediaries.

However, it is evident that despite these weaknesses the Union is contributing to the evolution not only of cultural relations in Europe but also of the place of culture in European relations.

### **The emergence of culture at a European level**

What I would like to stress here are some tendencies which affect the status of culture, which is in fact to say the importance accorded to cultural measures at a European level in general, and within the European Union in particular. Some indicators effectively demonstrate that even if culture remains first and foremost a national affair, considerations of a cultural nature are being brought into the European political field, albeit still very cautiously.

This is evident as regards the formal scheme

since, as has been said, the Maastricht Treaty granted cultural powers to the European Union. The fact that they are difficult to define and implement is another issue; they are at least written into the texts. The next step is the re-negotiation of The Union Treaty in 1996; will culture be a stake in this as was the case in 1992 under the Dutch presidency? This is what all the cultural actors hope for, but governments appear rather unwilling for this to happen. And which attitude will the new Member States of the Union, particularly the Scandinavian countries, adopt on cultural questions?

Running parallel to this is the fact that culture has tended to become an economic stake in European planning. The means placed at the disposal of cultural programmes by the European Union and the cultural activities developed over the course of the past years by numerous private and public organizations are beginning to give rise to a certain economic dynamism. The outlook of the programmes is, as has been said, to have the effect of stimulating the creation of structures and thus employment, often unstable, just as they stimulated untrammelled mobility across Europe. In addition, the European Union is beginning to interest itself in the creation of employment in the cultural third sector, i.e. non-profit. The large European cities are also encouraging European cultural organizations - even modest ones - to settle not only for the prestige but even more for the demands for services and international movement that they generate. As was the case at national level during the 1970s and 1980s, culture is beginning to be seen as a factor in economic dynamism at a European level.

Another recent development: various European policy makers are beginning to call on cultural instruments in an attempt to respond to political and social problems. Within the Union one of the indicators of this is the

inclusion of cultural aspects in political or economic programmes. By way of an example: the preparation of European programmes in the fight against social exclusion provide for measures of an artistic nature, such as the relations between Western Europe and the Central and Eastern regions of Europe, where the aid offered by the European bodies may have been almost exclusively economic at first but is now beginning to incorporate cultural elements.

Such movements, tenuous as they are, should be approached with caution; neither art nor artists should be considered as instruments of social policy! It is evident, however, that from the moment the question of how to bring Europe closer to its citizens is posed, culture begins to come into the European policy-makers' line of sight. This is a development which will be interesting to follow in the years to come.

### **Culture and Europe: a tower of Babel**

The developments emphasised so far are predominantly of an institutional nature. But what does culture mean in Europe? Is it possible to detect major cultural themes? Is there a dominant cultural language? No, obviously not. The economic and political situations in the various European regions differ too greatly for that. Having said that, without analyzing the language in depth, but by observing as far as is possible the flow of publications, colloquia and declarations which flourish in the four corners of Europe, I am led to make two statements.

First of all the cultural vocabulary, just as has the landscape, has developed very rapidly in the course of the past few years. However, that language has become rather trite. If there is no real dominating cultural language, there are words, expressions used throughout Europe, as if they were a sort of code, cultural passwords. Through this development a sort of vague

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consensus has developed around these words and not around the ideas or the policies, a consensus which is all the more vague as these words refer to different and not explicit realities.

I could offer many examples. There are, however, two terms which recur with particular frequency, which may be considered as being revealing of the confusion that reigns behind the words. Two mirror image words; identity on the one hand and diversity, or cultural pluralism, on the other. These are two terms which are dialectical poles for European societies caught between the wish to protect their particularisms, their specific nature, and the need to be open to and to integrate new forms of cultural expression.

The term identity is without doubt one of the most tainted in contemporary European cultural prose. How many titles of colloquia, articles, declarations of all kinds are not devoted to the issues of cultural identity, whether it be European, national or regional? This term, used since the time of the West European regionalist claims in the seventies, has become progressively a pan-European slogan. In a Europe of uncertain borders where the dominant cultural references are becoming indistinct, claims to an identity are to be found at all levels. Even if this raises legitimate questions, even if this is a reflection of a real disarray, a certain feeling of unease cannot be avoided, provoked by the confusion which reigns around this word.

This is primarily because it is most often used in defensive terms; the 'defence of identity': against whom? It is as if identity is above all something to be preserved in opposition to others. It is also because identity is referred to as if it were a state and not a process of evolution - a homogenous fact, absolute and not relative. But surely national groupings have several levels of reference in their identity that are not necessarily mutually

exclusive: language, religion, social structure, history? Is not the identity of an individual exactly that point of connection between these various layers of belonging; the bridge between the past and the draft of the future?

Finally, this term is often used abstracted from any context, neglecting the extent to which it has a stake in and implications for a given political situation. Now it is evident that the questions raised by the effect of globalization being borne along by the cultural industries, by national reactions to the establishment of supranational organizations, or by the distress of populations displaced or deprived of their own modes of expressions have all raised questions of identity, but these are not of the same order. Today's map of Europe, both eastern and western, demonstrates this; the question of identity can also lead to desperate acts or collective violence.

The search for an identity; a symptom, a sign of the times, a necessary quest, but it may also be a reaction of withdrawal, of exclusion. The word is heavily weighted in various senses which its trivialisation tends to obscure. The cultural actors should be careful not misjudge this matter.

Cultural pluralism is one of the varieties of this expression which is declined in several forms, each with its own subtly differentiated connotations: multicultural society, cultural diversity, cultural pluriformity, interculturality.

There are several ways of interpreting this equally trivialised term - a compulsory term of reference in all cultural debates. Firstly it must be said that these terms are representative of an important development in the ways of thinking. They have largely contributed to the shattering, towards the end of the 1980s, of the monolithic vision of a European culture, under combined pressure from minorities and immigrants. At

present no-one, or at least almost no-one, dares to talk of *the* European culture.

But, first and foremost, what exactly does 'cultural pluralism' mean?

Once again this is a global term which refers to very different situations - economic migrants, political refugees, second generations, linguistic and religious minorities - and is used to describe a society to which they all subscribe. The inconvenience of this term is that it provides an image of a social mosaic, a compartmentalised society, a static society. This is even though it obviously refers to complex situations of interdependence within societies which are constantly shifting. Following on from this, an analysis of the debate demonstrates that pluralism is most often presented as 'the fact of others', of those who do not belong within the confines of the dominant cultural model. One may also understand the irritation of certain thinkers and artists whom this compartmentalisation places in the role of being 'eternally other'. (Anil Ramdas. 'De overbodigheid van een culturele identiteit'. In: *NRC Handelsblad*, 9 September 1995).

We should also ask what is it that explains the success of these terms in the present situation. After all, Europe has always been a relatively open continent, with innumerable movements of populations. Without a doubt, the reason for this success is to be found in the current combination of diverse phenomena; the consequences of decolonisation, the effects of large scale economic migration, the re-emergence of minorities in Central and Eastern Europe, the rapid decay of some mechanisms of integration (and thus of exclusion!) within traditional European society, especially in terms of religion.

Identity, pluralism; between these two poles, between the need to define our own

characteristics and the vital necessity of being open, here is where Europe is balancing, is seeking itself. The cultural debate is especially revealing of this confusion, the balancing act between a withdrawal into identity and the search for new modes of expression and social integration.

**By way of conclusion**

The movements observed on the European stage do indeed indicate several major developments. There is, first of all, a redefinition of roles taking place; between local, national and international actors, between the public and the private sectors. This redefinition will, in the long run, also have an effect of the contents of policies. And then we have the change of scenery: the stage is growing, the views are changing. Here, the challenge is a double one:

- to succeed in rendering sustainable the work on 'establishing cultural relations' between the different regions of Europe, especially between East and West, whilst preventing the economic imbalances from being translated into new forms of cultural domination;
- to succeed in creating within European societies modes of integration which do not only respect cultural diversity but also transform it into a force for social development.

In effect, as may be seen, it is more than a change of scenery. We have to write a new act. And in order to do so, Europe is still in search of the language.

Translation from the French: Poppy Eveling

**Bibliografische gegevens**

Chenal, O. (1996) 'The European cultural stage: a change of scene'. In: *Boekmancahier*, jrg. 8, nr. 28, 208-213.