

LIGHT SIGNS

The Work of Teófilo Rego for Neolux

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Abstract

The subject of our paper is the work carried out by the Portuguese photographer Teófilo Rego (1913/1993), between the 1950s and the 1960s, for the manufacturing company of neon signs Neolux. Among the universes of the professional commission and the themes that, on his own initiative, explores in his personal work, the text addresses the images that may be considered as catalogue photography, reportage and architectural photography, and that remember us a time when, all over the world, the neon advertising was part of the urban landscape – from New York to Paris, Madrid, Lisbon and, in this case, Oporto. The article analyses the history, the type and the goals of the different advertising and light signage, the effect produced by their presence in city, and discusses the many images suggested and reminded by these photographs.

Keywords: Teófilo Rego, Neolux, Neon, Oporto, Architecture and Photography.

Throughout a whole life dedicated to photography, Teófilo Rego (1913-1993) will maintain two parallel working lines crossing each other often.

The first concerns the commercial activity and the exercise of the profession at the service of the private or institutional client (individuals, companies and public entities), requiring his adaptation to the more diverse situations and photographic types including the portrait, the reportage, advertising and catalogue photography, and also architectural photography.

In this case, during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, when asked to document the conclusion or the beginning of a work still in scale model, he collaborated with several architects who had graduated at the Escola de Belas Artes do Porto, such as Marques da Silva, Rogério de Azevedo, Viana de Lima or the group ARS. Reference be made, in particular, to his close relationship with João Andresen (1920/1967) reflected in a batch of images that, due to the quantity and the diversity of photographic material comprised, accuses a unparalleled regular and continued collaboration.

Without the constraints put by a professional commission, Teófilo Rego develops in parallel a personal, free and uncompromised work revealing a particular interest for rural ethnography, culture and traditions, but also for urban life and landscape, in particular, of Oporto, the city where he lived and studied, and that he photographed exhaustively, depicting its peoples, its more emblematic buildings and monuments, and the more iconographical places –Avenida dos Aliados, Torre dos Clérigos, Ponte D. Luís I. A part of this work, displayed at different exhibitions, is already organized in the collection of photography books including the fascicles of *O Douro*, *A Ribeira e A Arquitectura do Porto por Teófilo Rego*, published by Fundação Manuel Leão respectively in 2005 and in 2008.

Some of the photographs and images we would like to discuss challenge the separation between Teófilo Rego's commercial activity and the more "artistic" personal register and can be considered in simultaneous as product's photography, postcard and architecture.

These photographs were made between the 1950s and the 1960s for the company producer of neon signs NEOLUX, for which Teófilo Rego acted as photographer for all services and ceremonies, such as even the reportage of the firm's Christmas parties. Having in mind the creation of a register and a catalogue of examples that could be shown to potential clients, his main task was, however, to document the various neon signs produced by the firm that were spread in the whole city of Oporto, where Neolux had its main delegation.

As is known, the history of neon dates back to the early 20th century, when the French engineer Georges Claude invented and presented neon tube lighting in essentially its modern form at the Paris Motor Show of 1910. Claude and one of his associates, Jacques Fonsèque, realized from the beginning the potential use of neon as signage and advertising: neon tubes could be fabricated in curving artistic shapes, to form letters or pictures; could also be fabricated in a range of different colours by using other gases (argon, xenon, helium); finally, "the new tubes seemed much easier on the eye than the round and blinding incandescent light bulbs that earlier advertising had used".

These advantages explain the popularity and the quick proliferation of neon lighting that became a phenomenon on a global scale with an epicentre in the United States from the 1930s. Here, the tubes became an integral part of a vibrant popular culture – neon signs were seen as signs of sophistication, glitz and glamor. In New York, Broadway and Times Square transformed into one of the most spectacular and recognizable neon assemblages in history that helped to promote this technology as an advertising medium internationally.



Figure 1. “Horta”, Oporto. Archive Teófilo Rego, Museu Casa da Imagem - Fundação Manuel Leão

The advertising in neon took by storm the cities throughout the world. In Europe are known the cases of the gigantic sign of CITROEN occupying the Eiffel Tower in Paris between 1925 and 1934, the neon signs of GUINNESS, SCHWEPPEES and BOVRIL that invaded Piccadilly Circus in London, and in Madrid the sign of “TÍO PEPE, Sol de Andalucía embotellado”, installed from 1935 at the Puerta del Sol resisted to the passage of time and converted into a landmark and a symbol of the city, declared municipal historical heritage in 2009.

Portugal isn't an exception to the generalized adoption of neon advertising, knowing here its golden age later in the 1950s and 1960s. During this time it is

possible to identify, at least, three firms specialized in the production of neon signs: the Electro Reclamo Limitada (from Lisbon), Ferma (from Oporto) and NEOLUX (with offices at the two cities). The first and eldest firm, founded in 1926, will be in charge of some of the more elaborated and impressive neon signs we can find in the country's capital, such as the neon signs of VAQUEIRO, SINGER, TRIUNFO, OVOMALTINE, OMEGA, CONSTANTINO and also the ostentatious GAZCIDLA signs.

Also in Lisbon, Teófilo Rego photographed for NEOLUX a neon sign of HOOVER at Rossio. The firm's work seems to be, however, concentrated in the North, where the firm maintains almost a monopoly of the advertising spread throughout Oporto.

Here, the neon signs documented by Teófilo Rego are generically of two types: the first signalize and decorate the façade of all sorts of trade and businesses we find in the city: coffees, restaurants, clothing stores, optics stores, stationery shops, cinemas, a. s. o. These placards put by norm on the shop's façades, or in "banners" and "bands" projected on the sidewalks, try to call the attention of passers-by through the adoption of different styles, calligraphies and, sometimes, a symbolic image of the traded services or products.

In this category, the more spectacular neon signs are, undoubtedly, the ones (such as the neon signs of the music shop VADECA and of the Farmácia do Padrão) that cover and enlighten at night completely the building in which they are installed, changing our perception of its architecture. A building otherwise indistinct and common, similar to many other we find in the city, gains hereby a new life and another visibility, however, at the expense of being reduced to an immense outdoor. Architecture and advertising are, in this case, the one and same thing.



Figure 2. "Sacor", Figueira da Foz. Archive Teófilo Rego, Museu Casa da Imagem - Fundação Manuel Leão

By contrast, the illumination of the Cinema Coliseu, in Oporto, or of the service station of SACOR, in Figueira da Foz, emphasizes the architecture of each building, proportionating thereby some of the most interesting photographs made by Teófilo Rego. In the first example neon produces a dramatic and theatrical effect evidencing the Art Déco style of the concert hall designed by Cassiano Branco in 1939. In the second example the lights produce an impression of dynamism and fluidity enhancing the modernity and the functionality of a construction drawn in function of the car. In both cases architecture is sublimated and raised to a recognizable and memorable iconographic condition.

The second type of neon signs photographed by Teófilo Rego promote the more diverse products and brands: household appliances brands (SIEMENS, BOSCH, HILLMAN), tyres brands (MABOR, FIRESTONE), fuels brands (SACOR), wine and beer brands (SANDEMAN, DIEZ, CRISTAL), banks (BPA, BNU), insurance companies (FIDELIDADE, MUTUALIDADE, OURIQUE), airline companies (TAP, SWISSAIR, AIR FRANCE), a. s. o. These neon signs adopt graphically the corporate image of those companies and are constructed on a scale and in a position to be seen from afar, by car and on foot. This advertising concentrated

in central and strategic places of the city – in particular, at Avenida dos Aliados and at Praça D. João I – parasites at the building's façades and roofs where – asleep during the day – gains life and colour at dusk.

Among the photographs of these neon signs, the ones of SACOR, MUTUALIDADE and MABOR GENERAL (installed over the Teatro Rivoli) call our attention by showing the exaggerated and disproportionate size reached by some of them. The more fascinating photographs, however, show how around the two main city's squares neon lighting seduces and attracts the gaze, provoking, in simultaneous, the feeling of a certain disorientation. Therefore, it constitutes no surprise the necessity felt by Teófilo Rego, when photographing the Praça da Liberdade, to find at the statue of D. Pedro IV and at the steed's sculptures at the Praça D. João I a reference and orientation point helping to frame and contextualise the images of neon signs such as BOSCH or DUPONT.



Figure 3. Praça D. João I, Oporto. Archive Teófilo Rego, Museu Casa da Imagem - Fundação Manuel Leão

As a whole, Teófilo Rego's work for NEOLUX recalls a not very distant past when, on a larger or smaller scale, the cities had transformed in a hypnotic, confused and chaotic "neonscape" full of messages, information, of light and of bright

colours, something we can only really understand when observing the few coloured images of the time.



Figure 4. D. Pedro IV, Praça da Liberdade, Oporto. Archive Teófilo Rego, Museu Casa da Imagem - Fundação Manuel Leão

A “neonscape” as the one of New York photographed by Fritz Lang in 1924 that inspired the scenarios of *Metropolis* (1927); that, in turn, influenced the dystopian vision of Los Angeles in *Blade Runner* directed Ridley Scott (1982); that, in turn, brings us to the images of Hong Kong from 1980 and 1990, when the neon experienced its apogee; that, in turn, bring us back to *Learning From Las Vegas* by Robert Venturi e Denise Scott Brown (1972) that describes the victory of architecture as symbol-in-space rather than form-in-space.

In spite of the fact that, as shown by Teófilo Rego’s photographs, neon is used almost exclusively by advertising, from the 1950s and 1960s, we assist to its progressive appropriation by both fine arts and visual arts, either as subject – as we can see in the hyper-realist paintings by Robert Cottingham or in the recent photographic work by Martin Stavars (*City of Neon Lights Studies*, 2013) – or as expression and communication tool.

In this field, Lucio Fontana pioneered the use of neon as a sculptural medium in artistic practice with *Spatial Light, Structure in Neon* (1951) for the 9th Milan Triennial. "The piece was a classic representation of what Fontana called a «spatial environment» and «spatial concept» – what he saw as overcoming the divisions in architecture, painting and sculpture to reach a synthesis in which colour, movement and space converged".

With this work – speaking of we must come back to the images of the Coliseu do Porto, and, in particular to the station service at Figueira da Foz – Fontana paved the way for the artistic utilization of neon explored in the work by Dan Flavin, Bruce Nauman, Keith Sonnier, Joseph Kosuth (all artists coming from the USA, where neon achieves its highest expression) and by the members of a younger generation, such as Tracey Emin e Massimo Uberti (whose installations simulate spaces and architecture with neon lighting).

After rescuing the photographs made for NEOLUX, photographs that, by association, suggest and recall other images, other times, other places and other subjects different from advertising, what remains is the sensation and impression of some nostalgia, for different reasons and motives.

The nostalgia for the disappearance of a demanding technology from the viewpoint of manual and handmade work, progressively substituted by fluorescent lightboxes produced industrially, and, more recently, by LED signboards.

The nostalgia for an age (however) innocent of advertisement to which we are no longer able to escape from as the short black and white film *Kapitaal* (Studio Smack, 2006) attempts to explain, giving us a clear impression of the amount of visual stimuli and audiovisual pollution that plague our everyday life. In certain cases, the advertising we are able to find our days at Times Square, Piccadilly Circus (that we have mentioned before) and at Shibuya, Tokyo, permits us to speak even of a "spectacular exhaustion of urban space" prophesied by Guy Debord e Paul Virilio, but that we imagined it could only be possible in science fiction films.



Figure 5. Praça D. João I, Oporto. Archive Teófilo Rego, Museu Casa da Imagem - Fundação Manuel Leão

After all, what remains is the nostalgia raised by the images and by the issue photographed by Teófilo Rego, for whom the work commissioned by NEOLUX represented, to a great extent, an opportunity to photograph Oporto and its architecture seen from new angle and perspective. At the end, the images he produced have nothing of the neon glamorous brightness, as they seem, on the contrary, to bear the same melancholy of the photographs he made on his own. A melancholy and a nostalgia characteristic of the city and which even the advertising lights were unable to switch off.

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