

Norval Baitello Junior: from iconophagy to the ecology of communication – images and the body in communication and culture

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Interview with NORVAL BAITELLO JUNIOR^a
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PROFESSOR NORVAL BAITELLO JUNIOR, Ph.D. from the Free University of Berlin, has been a reference in Communication Sciences, Cultural Sciences, and Media Theories for more than three decades, focusing on topics such as the image and the body in communication. The reflections, concepts, and theoretical propositions derived from his studies can be considered theories that provide a necessary airing for the area of communication. Such airing is not only due to the dedicated work of thinking about these two themes and innovatively relating them but also promoting true archeology of concepts, reviving them to meet the demand for understanding contemporary communication and its effects. Therefore, the professor has turned with emphasis on the ecology of communication.

We can also consider that, since the beginning of his career as a scholar and theorist, Baitello has contributed to the studies of communication in Brazil, presenting authors little studied here, having created frequent dialogues with many of them in centers such as Berlin, Vienna, and Japão. He has been promoting events and courses providing direct access in Brazil to influential theorists of Communication Sciences, Cultural Sciences, or Image Anthropology, such as Harry Pross, Ivan Bystrina, Hans Belting, Gunter Gebauer, Christoph Wulf, Dietmar Kamper, Ryuta Imafuku, among others. We cannot fail to emphasize, evidenced

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in his conversation with **MATRIZes**, that Norval Baitello Junior continually brings out projects such as those by Aby Warburg and Vilém Flusser, revealing the importance of keeping them in the sights of studies on communication.

The professor received us for this interview with the same generosity he showed when creating spaces and structures at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP) to share knowledge with the entire academic community. For example, the Interdisciplinary Center for Semiotics of Culture and Media (CISC), in 1992, the courses in Communication and Body Arts and Communication, and Multimedia, created in 1999 when he was director of the School of Communication and Letters at PUC-SP, and the Vilém Flusser São Paulo Archive, opened in 2016.

MATRIZes: Your book *A era da iconofagia* (2014), also published in Spain, brought a new approach to the debate on the media. How does the iconophagy concept dialogue with the body theme you bring to the reflection of communication?

Norval Baitello Junior: Iconophagy means: bodies devour images. We live in a time of rampant proliferation and, consequently, significant consumption of images. The numbers of this production are now astronomical, thanks to the new technologies of production and distribution of images (mainly visual, but not only). Just look at the number of posts of pictures and messages on social networks and in the deposits of images on devices and in gigantic memories called “clouds.” Of course, this upward trend did not begin in the 20th century, but during the Renaissance and the emergence of techniques for the mechanical reproduction of words and images. But today, it reaches unimaginable proportions. This directly interferes with our perception of ourselves, who we are, how we are, and how we act. To consume means to incorporate. If we consume images (and we have been doing it since CroMagnon in infinitely smaller proportions), we develop a new type of metabolism that interferes with our existence, a cultural metabolism. And with it also a dependency.

From then on, iconophagy becomes reversed: the images devour people. They dictate patterns of bodies, shape, weight, facial features, height, posture, and skin color. They exert enormous coercion on life, even generating serious health problems studied today in the medical field as “body image disorders.” That is why it is important to understand more deeply the impact of images on life today.

Therefore, the theme of the body is fundamental to the communication sciences. It is our point of departure and arrival. It is not a means or a medium; it is the beginning and end of all sociability.

MATRIZES: This is a contribution you have been making for more than three decades. What are the roots of this thinking?

NBJ: The main root is the Media Theory inaugurated in the early 1970s in Berlin by Harry Pross, journalist, political scientist, and psychologist. Pross was a student of Alfred Weber in the area of Sociology of Culture and of the physician Viktor von Weizsäcker, who proposed the principles of Psychosomatics. By bringing such a legacy to the communication sciences, he announces some of the principles of Media Theory. As a foundation: “All communication begins in the body and ends in the body.” Based on this, he defines three degrees of mediation: primary means (which do not require resources other than the body itself for communication); secondary means (which require the use of a carrier to transmit messages between two bodies); tertiary means (which need transmission and reception apparatus to create mediations between bodies).

From this base, I have been trying to deepen some concepts, starting with Jakob von Uexküll, who brought the concept of *Umwelt* (environment) to biology. Then, the contribution of Ethology, by Konrad Lorenz, and Human Ethology, with Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt. They are authors who have never been studied within the area of communication and, however, researched the fundamentals of communication. Today, there are notable examples within primatology, with the research of Diane Fossey and Jane Goodall and, more recently, Frans De Waal. The great apes teach us about the archeology of the social environments of communication there in its most remote origin.

Based on these researches, I have been seeking to study the phylogenesis of human communication, on the one hand, establishing parallels between other species, their sociability, and their more hedonic or agonistic relationships, and human communication as an equally agonistic or hedonic tension field. The manifestations of aggression must be considered, also the pacification of conflicts and the construction of peace, empathy, and the other's perception. And on the other hand, there is also a need to better understand human communication ontogenesis, the developments of sociability from birth to life's end. The communication of a newborn or an older person with Alzheimer's, the communication of young slum dwellers on the fringes of urban sumptuousness, is there a possible communication with patients in a coma? Such objects have been challenging our young science of communication and obviously require interdisciplinary and collective work. The Interdisciplinary Center for Research in Semiotics of Culture and Media (CISC) was the stage for many of these researches. Founded 30 years ago, it has provided the space for many national and international events, with the support of numerous cultural institutions, stimulating the development of a wide range of research mentioned above.



MATRIZES: Regarding this expansion of the field of research and the area of communication, how do you see the acceptance of these studies, in the major communication forums or by area, as an academic organization?

NBJ: The development of science is also made of resistances. At first, there was greater resistance to themes such as body communication; and this resistance has been overcome by the facts. There is already a lot of work being done all over the world, especially in some centers in Europe and Asia, with this more anthropological and ecological focus on not only communication but cultural sciences in general. Communication sciences are not only Social Sciences; they are also Cultural Sciences, as we deal with the imaginary, with the *second nature of man*, according to Edgar Morin's expression, or *second reality*, according to the Czech Ivan Bystřina. So there is always resistance, just as there was resistance to the Theory of Relativity itself, the principle of indeterminacy, and Darwin's discoveries.

The tendency is that science has to expand and is expanding as well as Communication Science. Many of these themes were brought up by master's and doctorate students with real problems to solve in their practical and professional lives. Many of the innovations arise (this was my experience over nine years in the Area Coordination of Fapesp) even from undergraduate research projects, which surprise us with their courage to look at new facts and from previously unthinkable angles.

MATRIZES: Is the science of communication more open today than ever before? Is there also a critical look at the knowledge produced in the past to reassess forgotten contributions?

NBJ: It's more open today than ever before and will open up even more. For example, accepting Aby Warburg as a necessary reference within the Science of Communication does not meet with resistance, and Aby Warburg (1866-1929) was a pioneer. He developed a library of the Science of Culture based on his very peculiar Theory of Culture, which was forgotten for half a century. Warburg was an image researcher; he understood, like no one else, that an image is not just a timeless and defenseless aesthetic object. It has historical ballast and the potential to generate environments, create impacts, to awaken "passions" (he said that an image is a formula for "pathos"). This offers us an important clue for studies of the deluge of images that constitutes tertiary media (the one requiring the use of electrical or electronic devices at both ends) in its most current manifestations (social networks, web, applications, etc.), but it already helps us to study other image environments such as cinema, television, and photography.

MATRIZES: In many moments, you address specific questions about images when it comes to communication or media. How do you relate Communication Theory and Image Theory? Do you separate them as strands or treat them as a combination when developing your own approach?

NBJ: Image Theory is a part of Media Theory. We deal all the time with tactile images, olfactory images, proprioceptive, gustatory images, auditory images, and visual images. And so, an image theory will work with all these images, seeking to understand the dynamics of the environments created by these images. There are tactile images for the blind, for example. The theses and research on hearing and visually impaired communication have developed significantly. However, it is undeniable that the visual image is hegemonic in our world civilization. For a straightforward reason: we are primates whose main sense of alertness is vision. It is through the eyes that the first fear that is at a distance enters. So let's consider sight a phobic sense, on principle.

On the other hand, we are aware that we live today in an age of media, which has succeeded the age of art (since the Renaissance) and has followed the age of worship (Middle Ages). They are great environments of western human culture. The media age has brought an explosion of images that have become ubiquitous everywhere, public or private, in our homes, clothes, pockets, and skin. The media age created an environment of universal capillarity for visual images. And it is important to say that many other thinkers contributed to the current Media Theory: Dietmar Kamper, Hans Belting, Vilém Flusser, and Vicente Romano. All of them help us to understand the media (and images) as co-determinants of planetary ecology.

MATRIZES: A resource of media communication is to explore fear. What is the role of fear? How to deal with images like “the fear of communism,” “the fear of the Jews,” etc.?

NBJ: Fear is constitutive of life. I remember Federico Fellini's phrase that said, “Sai Uomo senza paura mi sembra che sai uno stupido,” “a man without fear seems to me to be stupid.” So, fear, of course, is a defense of life itself, of animal life; every animal is afraid, and fear is a survival strategy. But it is not just our age that plays on this fear to propel and present images, words, ideas, and belief systems. Warburg wrote about the spread of threatening astrological and monster images in Luther's time as a propagandistic strategy for and against the Reformation. What we see today is no different: putting fear on the loudspeaker is a resource for mobilizing the other. Orson Welles himself, with a radio program based on the novel *The War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells, showed this power by putting a city in panic. This continues to

be used today, and it should be the role of the enlightened media to dismantle these mechanisms. It is important, the role of communication, of a Science of Communication, also to teach to dismantle these mechanisms of fanciful fear.

MATRIZES: Have you also been dedicated to studying environments of intense cultural and political polarization that Warburg analyzed in his famous essay on “Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther,” published in 1920? Did something similar happen in the First World War, your time? Are we now living in a similar moment?

NBJ: It's scary and breathtaking to see how we humans repeat archaic, sometimes even primitive, cultural patterns. At that moment of the Protestant Reformation and the Renaissance, it is said that there was a great revolution in Western thought, an advance of what we usually call rationality. Warburg studied this subject a lot and pointed out that, alongside this rationality, there was also an ingrained irrationality. In his analysis of the images and words used in pamphlets for and against the Reformation, he reconstructs this struggle that used falsified data to spread terror in the population. He creates a word to designate rational discernment: *Denkraum* (environment of thought or space of thought). And he verifies that there is an advance in the thought space that collides with the space of belief, superstition, and general human irrationality. This also happened in his lifetime; during the First World War, scientific rationality was not enough to stop the irrationality of a war that killed an absurd number of human beings and their main auxiliaries, horses. There is research and data on this subject that the horse was a factor of production, like agricultural production, necessary to feed the population and that twelve million horses were used in war, six million of which died. This was also addressed by a Warburgian, Ulrich Raulff, in the beautiful work *Farewell to the Horse* (2018). Warburg not only studied but also collected photos and newspaper clippings about this irrationality and possibly fell ill due to that toxic historical moment.

What we see today is similar: a clash between the space of rationality (the space of thought, the *Denkraum*) and the growth of irrationality, today spread even by electronic media, generating phenomena like Brexit, like Trump, like setbacks in US legislation on issues such as abortion and gun licensing. The same irrationality has also manifested itself in Brazil in recent years in the dismantling of investment in science and education, destruction of forest heritage, the deadly attack against the heritage of ethnic and cultural diversity, liberalization of the use of pesticides and poisons, falsification of the news, in the propagation of unfounded fears.

MATRIZES: Speaking of poison, you were recently at the Warburg Institute in London, researching a particular aspect of Warburg's work, his "poison cabinet," an unprecedented topic in Warburgian research. How did you get there? And what results did you get?

NBJ: Warburg had a section in his library that he called "the poison cabinet" (*Giftschrank*). It was a section of books and thinkers that he considered poisonous, i.e., spreaders of irrationalities, beliefs, theories, and harmful proposals. When the library moved to London in 1933, this explicit rubric was not kept (or probably there was not even such a rubric, and it only presented "here is my poison cabinet"). Only the written testimony of a young student, Carl Georg Heise, who received informal guidance from the master, testifies emphatically to the existence of such a sector of toxic works. No one else studied or mentioned it; there is no geographically delimited region in the library. Not even Ernst Gombrich, who wrote Warburg's biography, mentioned it.

Only the most recent biography, an excellent work by Marie-Anne Lescourret (2015), dedicates a few lines to the subject, supported by Carl Georg Heise (2005) in his *Persönliche Erinnerungen an Aby Warburg*. With the support of Fapesp and CNPq, I searched the incredible files (*Zettelkästen*) gathered by Warburg throughout his life, in his correspondence and the library itself, finding reliable references that, in fact, there was such a section. I am now preparing a book, *Os venenos de Warburg*, with reflections, discoveries, and some hypotheses about what a toxic cultural environment would be for Warburg. As we are living today in a time of very toxic environments in the world, I think that what Warburg built with his little "poison cabinet" could be an exciting contribution.

MATRIZES: Did you get to know any specific content of the poisons contained therein?

NBJ: Perhaps the most eloquent poison that was there was the work of Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau. Coincidentally, Gobineau had been the French ambassador to Brazil, under Dom Pedro II, for a year. In this condition, he became a friend of the Emperor and tried to convince him that Brazil would never succeed until it whitened its population. He corresponded until the end of his life with Pedro II. And when he returned to France, he published his *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, which had significant repercussions in Germany in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Gobineau was there on the poison cabinet. But there were other explicit poisons that I am expounding better in the book.

MATRIZES: Let's talk a little about the Flusser Archive and your most recent research on this author's thinking.

NBJ: I received an invitation from the widow, Edith Flusser, to bring the archive to Brazil. With the support of Fapesp and the Goethe Institute, in 2012-2013, we digitized the entire collection, with documents that were at risk of being lost in Germany, comprising 35,000 pages. We built a mirror archive in partnership with the University of the Arts in Berlin. Everything there is also here and vice versa, including new finds and material that may be collected.

The printed documents are now at PUC of Ipiranga but are already entirely online. The Vilém Flusser São Paulo Archive brings many surprises, and the research carried out today by many master's and doctorate students, based mainly on his correspondence, has shown us a much more complex thinker than the one who wrote about photography. Although the *Towards a Philosophy of Photograph* itself – or here *Filosofia da Caixa Preta* (2018) – already deals with environments (in anticipation of the ecology of culture), we see something even politically much more complex in his correspondence than what was disclosed about Flusser until today. There is research still to be done, for example, on the courses he taught here in São Paulo. All lessons were typed and carefully preserved. They are all still unpublished. This is an incredible material, but his voluminous correspondence with everyone, including his correspondence with Harry Pross, is what brings the most surprises.

All this is a precious contribution to the constitution of a Brazilian science of communication, a heritage of Brazilian science. Although he never quoted anyone, Flusser interacted with the greatest European thinkers in communication: Harry Pross, Vicente Romano, Dietmar Kamper, Hans Belting, Abraham Moles, Lev Kopelev, Ivan Bystrina, and many others.

MATRIZES: How does Flusser's thought dialogue with the theme of iconophagy? He wrote a lot about images and technical images. People are consuming images on a large scale, devouring recycled, repeated, and sustained images. Is this the generation of a detritus of excremental images? Or can image inflation block the view of the world?

NBJ: Here, we have several crossed lines that produce a beautiful plurality of dialogues, practicing something that for Flusser was very valuable, the construction of intersubjectivity.

In 2007, in Germany, I published one of the volumes of the *International Flusser Lectures* entitled *Flussers Völlerei* (Flusser's Gluttony). There I present elements of Brazilian anthropophagic thought in some Flusserian concepts.

And he wrote in an article on Brazilian philosophy in the 1970s that Oswald de Andrade was the greatest Brazilian philosopher of all time.

The issue of “excremental images” he touched on indirectly. In his concept of the third realm, the garbage realm arises alongside the nature and culture realms. Implicit here is the idea that humanity is producing, in addition to material waste, immaterial waste, and waste from non-things. This is a very important theme that brings him closer to Dietmar Kamper’s reflections. And the issue of blocking the world by images, Flusser mentions in some essays the idea that images can become screens instead of windows; they can hide instead of showing the world.

MATRIZes: Continuing with the themes of devouring and detritus, we see that you have recently released the book: *A fotografia e o verme* (2021). Is there a Flusserian inspiration there?

NBJ: Without a doubt, the text was originally published in German and English in the exhibition catalog *Something Other Than Photography* (2013) at the German museum Edith-Russ-Haus für Medienkunst, organized by Claudia Giannetti. Upon receiving the invitation to publish it in Brazil, I proposed to do it together with twelve photography artists in a dialogue between the text and the photos. I expanded and updated the text, adding a post scriptum about the worm and the virus. It is the development of a metaphor used by Flusser, who compares the human devouring rage with worms. The theme of devouring (and iconophagy) is central to the worm (and the human). The theme of detritus and garbage production also appears there.

MATRIZes: Let’s talk a little about your writing. Your text takes great care of the word, searches for etymologies, maintains the rigor and depth of the concepts, but also seems to us to be somewhat imagistic and poetic. Could you also tell us a little bit about this way of treating your academic writing?

NBJ: A word is an image. The holy scriptures say, “Christ is image and word. Images and words are one; the two were crucified.” Who cited this was the chief Dadaist of Zurich, Hugo Ball. Responding directly to his question, Vilém Flusser was one of the first to say that the word was born from the image, that it is an image torn into strips to build a line. In a certain sense, it shows a continuity of environments: the word is more ideogrammatic in the East, more image, and it is more abstract in the Middle East, where alphabetic writing was born, and in Egypt, where it represents a sound, but the word represents the sound which is also an image, and the image is acoustic, it is the image of the breath.

So, in this sense, taking care of the word as an image means not trivializing it because it has a history and a density of imagery layers, which is why the etymology resource ends up being important. I seek aesthetic and imagery writing, but not coded and impenetrable. The word must seduce by being an image and breath at the same time. Two of my recent books, *O pensamento sentado* (2012) and *Existências penduradas* (2019), are written intentionally for young readers, with short and diverse chapters or segments for readers used to reading small texts on small screens. I tried to practice miniaturizing the text without giving up depth and poetry.

MATRIZES: Doesn't the text's density and the concepts' depth require greater participation from the reader?

NBJ: Greater involvement, no doubt. That is why we must add imagery and sound layers to writing. This type of writing was also practiced by Dietmar Kamper. A colleague told his undergraduate students to read *Estrutura temporal das imagens* (2002) with the instruction: "It's no use reading Kamper's text once; you have to read it twenty times, once here, another time you read it to your dog, another time you read in the mirror, another time you read on the beach, another time under the bed, etc." In the next class, a student brought the result: "Professor, I read the text and didn't understand anything, twenty times, and I didn't understand anything, I kept reading, and suddenly I started crying." Kamper is not meant to be read with the head; it is meant to be read with the body.

MATRIZES: The themes of the ecology of images and culture as an ecosystem have been increasingly present in your courses and lectures. Have you ever thought about an Amerindian cultural ecology in a dialogue with Viveiros de Castro?

NBJ: I am very interested in the question of an Amerindian cultural ecosystem, as presented by Viveiros de Castro. Ecology of culture must think and try to understand cultural diversity as a human heritage to be preserved. In this sense, I have also studied the Japanese thinker Tetsuro Watsuji (2017), who talks about the anthropology of the landscape. Tetsuro presents us with three great environments that generate three great cultural ecosystems or patterns of culture: the monsoon environment, the desert environment, and the rural environment.

In the monsoon environment, man is part of nature; in the desert environment, man fights nature, or nature fights man, and he has to fight to survive. In the rural environment, man is allied with the predictability of

nature. Each environment creates deities of a specific type and directs human action differently. His work, called *FuDo* (earth and wind), written in 1929, offers instigating themes to understand the ecology of culture.

In the end, at the suggestion of Professor Norval, we included among the cited references one of the works by Harry Pross (1989), which was published in Spanish, the Spanish version of the book by Tetsuro Watsuji (2016), and one of the books by Dietmar Kamper (2016) available in Portuguese. ■

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Article received on August 14, 2022 and approved on August 22, 2022.