

# MATRIZes

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## DOSSIER:

*New Perspectives on  
Communication Theories*

Winfried Nöth

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Amparo Marroquín Parducci

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Eduardo Duarte Gomes da Silva

## INTERVIEW:

Carlos Vogt





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## Communication and multiple interpretive lenses

AS USUAL, THIS issue of *MATRIZES* brings together a set of thought-provoking themes, original arguments, empirical and theoretical research reports, an interview with figures from the area, and a book review that offers us alternatives and horizons to surround the vastness of communication problems. This is part of its mission as a scientific journal of Communication, since 2007. In this trajectory, we have published contributions supported by several theoretical traditions and different methodologies, which is consistent with the characteristics of the field to which it intends to contribute. In turn, readers recognize the importance of this journal and its role in the consolidation and institutionalization of this area in the national context: proof of this is that the journal reached H17 in Google Scholar Metrics, the highest score among national scientific journals in the area. Therefore, in each issue, we persist in the hard work of providing studies with adherence to different parameters of scientificity, which necessarily includes the critique of concepts and procedures of empirical and theoretical investigation, supported by specific knowledge that account for problem objects relevant to Communication.

This dossier is headed by a provocative article, due to its arguments, and challenging, as it requires an informed reading. On the one hand, the questions raised about the “improbability of communication,” as thought by Niklas Luhmann, force us to pay the utmost attention to the intertwined arguments. On the other hand, the journey by a variety of classic philosophical references, from Thomas Hobbes to Jacques Derrida, shows the theoretical strength of Winfried Nöth’s writing in “The semiotic paradox of the improbability of communication.” Without requiring an endorsement of the thesis defended, the article mainly presents the theoretical-methodological diversity in the field of communication.

Next, Felipe Trotta encourages us to think about everyday musical experiences in “Musical taste, morals, and discomforts,” using an approach that articulates empiricism and theory. Based on the analysis of a set of interviews conducted over six years with people from different social classes, age groups, and geographical locations, the author discusses issues of musical taste and its implications for moral judgments. Trotta tells us that to like or dislike a piece of music is to interact with a tangle of ideas, thoughts, and moralities that move from real life to the effects of meanings inscribed in these pieces, making either a positive or a negative judgment about them. However, he also warns us to understand that these two poles are neither mutually exclusive nor definitive and can change over time.

Returning to the theoretical reflection, the third article, “Thinking the popular from an *other* place: Jesús Martín-Barbero’s proposal and contribution to the theoretical debate on popular culture,” by Amparo Marroquín Parducci, recalls Jesús Martín-Barbero’s contributions to popular culture and its shift from the ancestral and original to its relationship with the mass media. This is a topic of undeniable relevance, not only within Latin American communication research, but also beyond these geographical and disciplinary boundaries. Furthermore, a recent movement of renewal and expansion of such reflections can be observed, motivated by the incorporation of discussions about “the popular” combined to the problematic of algorithms and digital culture.

Next, Eliza Bachega Casadei offers us an analysis of Instagram profiles that, through humor, deal with finances. In “Affects mobilizations in finance: Humor, failure and neoliberal discourse in *Faria Lima Elevator* and *Investidor da Depressão*,” these two cases are seen as belonging to the logic of spectacle and entertainment, concomitantly with the sharing of self-help and financial education discourses, which reinforce of neoliberal thought.

Finally, the *Dossier* is closed by Eduardo Duarte, who, from a set of science fiction films, including Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, raises a discussion on futuristic urban imaginaries, using Walter Benjamin’s idea of *flânerie* as a methodological tool. The article “*Flânerie* through the cities of the future” is one of the results of the research project “Human Futures: the imaginary perception of urban environments and landscapes of the future in contemporary cinema.”

The *Interview* found on this issue was given to Germana Fernandes Barata by Carlos Vogt. The linguist, one of the pioneers of Scientific Dissemination in Brazil, worked in the administration of numerous national institutions including, among others, Fapesp. The focus of the interview, conducted in early 2023, is on his model of science communication, called the Spiral of Scientific Culture. Although Vogt has taken up the concept of this model to think about the

new connections established between science and society with the covid-19 pandemic, it is up to the reader to bring it closer to the heated debate that the book *Que bobagem! Pseudociência e outros absurdos que não devem ser levados a sério*, by Natália Pasternak and journalist Carlos Orsi, is currently provoking.

In the section *Agenda*, we have gathered yet another series of articles by a diverse set of authors from different nationalities, which deal with different objects of study, approached by a range of theoretical frameworks, living up to the idea of the validity of different theoretical and methodological approaches in Communication. At first, we have four articles bearing strong contemporary political nature, even if very different in the objects and perspectives chosen. In the first, “Refused States: The Effect of Culturalism on Nations with a colonization history,” Ricardo Zocca and Moisés Martins discuss two particular phrases—one by Brazil’s former president, Jair Bolsonaro, and the other by Alberto Fernandez, Argentina’s president—in which they present themselves closer to a Europeanized elite than to their respective local populations, regarded by them as ignorant and impure. Such a feeling of refusal, the authors say, is ingrained in the local elites who, in turn, see themselves as distant from the populations of their own country, for a spiraling and feedback movement.

In the second article, “The LGBTQIA+ journalist community and the effort of affirmative action in a conservative Brazil,” Francisco de Assis highlights three initiatives, dated between 2017 and 2018, aimed at safeguarding the work of journalists in relation to gender agendas, in times of a moral crusade against the recognition of the diversity gender and sexuality. Although such actions have been important, the conclusion is that they move too slowly, mainly because of the multiple obstacles imposed by the great offensive of conservative forces—in fact, in our understanding, forces very well established, especially in educational institutions.

The third article, “Media resistance and digital disconnection in Western literature” consists of a meta-analysis of literature published in scientific journals on two themes: digital disconnection and resistance. As a result, Rita Figueiras, Maria José Brites and Kim Schröder identify two trends: a media-centric approach and a context-centric approach. As a highlight, the authors note and suggest that the future research agenda on the same themes should assign greater attention to practices in vulnerable contexts of both the North and the Global South since, at the moment, the focus is on privileged individuals from the North.

And the fourth article, of political appeal, “Listening beyond the Anthropocene: Poetry as an echological survival,” by João Pedro Amorim and Luís Teixeira, takes the immersive installation of sound and light by Nuno da Luz, which brings to an art gallery the environment of Foz do Douro as a provocation to think about



how we are unilaterally impacting ecosystems. Therefore, sound art is approached for its political potential and as an element of rupture and reconnection with the planet, stressing an original communicational aspect.

The *Agenda* section is made complete by three more articles. One of them is “Eduardo Kac’s “Inimagens” and experimental photography in Brazil,” by Victa de Carvalho and Nina Velasco e Cruz, about the history of Brazilian experimental photography. More specifically, it deals with the analysis of a photographic series, dated 1983, by Eduardo Kac, a visual artist, poet and essayist, born in Rio de Janeiro in 1962. To this end, it recovers the prolific trajectory of Kac and his connection with other artists of the time, raising discussions about the series of images from reflections of Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault and Georges Didi-Huberman.

Right after, we have “Mapping the communicative relations in journalistic awards,” by Ricardo Uhry and Kati Caetano. This article uses a map, constructed by Uhry from connections between the mediations of Jesús Martín-Barbero and the semiotic regimes proposed by Eric Landowski, as the starting point and its application in the analysis of 41 international journalistic awards. In general, it was found that the winning projects have experimental characteristics and signal a trend of news reconfiguration due to the impacts of digital media on journalism.

The section is closed by the article “The thermographic narrative in *Incoming* and *There Will be no More Night*,” by Rafael Tassi Teixeira. On the one hand, the author focuses on Richard Mosse’s video installation, composed exclusively of images, without any narration or dialogue, of two of the most usual routes of the migrating populations—the Turkish route that ends in the refugee camp, installed in the former Tempelhof airport in Berlin; and the African route used by migrants from Black Africa to Libya, who often travel in precarious and overcrowded inflatable boats, to cross the Mediterranean and, more commonly, reach Italy. The author also appropriates the film *There Will Be No More Night* (2020), by French filmmaker Éléonore Weber, which uses videos recorded by helicopter pilots and fighter planes in regions of NATO military actions. For the author, the two works are immersive aesthetic experiences, made possible by the multiscreens, which allow the observation of the gamefication of contemporary war.

This issue is closed by the *Review* section, with a timely piece by Magaly Parreira do Prado about the book *A superindústria do imaginário – Como o capital transformou o olhar em trabalho e se apropriou de tudo que é visível*, by Eugenio Bucci, a professor of the very School of Communications and Arts of the University of São Paulo and of the graduate program and Communication Sciences. Using specific and diverse knowledge—from psychoanalysis to political

economy, for example—the almost 500 pages of the book deal with the datification of today's society, an inescapable theme of the present: the power of big techs and algorithms. This is thus a required reading in a time of necessary discussions in the national scenario, on the regulation of *big techs* and the implications originated from their incorporation in everyday life.

Finally, one of the motivations of *MATRIZes* is to interrogate and critically question our conceptual toolbox if we want to understand the multiplicity and complexity of the objects-problems of research in Communication, always contextualized to particular realities. Moreover, it is part of our mission to provide space and collaborate for the visibility of different and varied lenses of interpretation, thus offering a broad panorama of scientific production in Communication. Hence the set of texts at hand: conceptually multifaceted, as well as diverse in terms of objects of study. Enjoy your reading!

*Ana Carolina Damboriarena Escosteguy*

*Roseli Figaro*

# DOSSIER

*News Perspectives on Communication Theories*



# The semiotic paradox of the improbability of communication

## *O paradoxo semiótico da improbabilidade da comunicação*

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### ABSTRACT

The paper interprets Niklas Luhmann's theorem of the "improbability of communication" as an argument against the ideal of a perfect congruence between communicating minds, whose more moderate precursors are: (1) Thomas Hobbes theory of deceitful communication, (2) implications of exclusion in the etymology of the word communication, (3) J. Lotman's code theoretical objections against the idea of communication on the basis of a common code, (4) cognitive theories concerning impediments in communication based on the assumption that minds are black boxes, (5) Charles S. Peirce's communication theory, and (6) poststructuralist and deconstructivist views concerning the impossibility of congruence in communication (Foucault, Derrida).

**Keywords:** communication (impossibility of), congruence in communication, Niklas Luhmann, code theory, poststructuralism, Charles S. Peirce.

### RESUMO

O artigo interpreta o teorema da "improbabilidade da comunicação" de Niklas Luhmann como um argumento contra o ideal de uma congruência perfeita entre as mentes comunicantes, cujos precursores mais moderados são: (1) a teoria de Thomas Hobbes da comunicação enganosa, (2) as implicações da exclusão na etimologia da palavra comunicação, (3) as objeções da teoria do código de J. Lotman contra a ideia de comunicação com base em um código comum, (4) teorias cognitivas sobre os impedimentos à comunicação baseadas na suposição de que as mentes são caixas-pretas, (5) a teoria da comunicação de C. S. Peirce e (6) as visões pós-estruturalistas e desconstrutivistas sobre a impossibilidade de congruência na comunicação (Foucault, Derrida).

**Palavras-chave:** comunicação (impossibilidade de), congruência comunicativa, Niklas Luhmann, teoria do código, pós-estruturalismo, Charles S. Peirce

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THE QUESTION WHETHER communication is a reality of social life or a mere fiction is not an issue with which classical communication theory since Shannon and Weaver (1949) had been concerned. Communication was its object of study, and theorists in communication studies had no doubt about the fundamental ubiquity of communication in human life. Those who did not communicate, the autistics, for example, were a case for psychiatric studies of communication, such as that of Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1973). Communication philosopher Augusto Ponzio even postulates that “communicating is being” (Ponzio 1999: 7), and together with Susan Petrilli, he answers the question, “Can we *be* without communicating”, in the negative: “Communication is being. To communicate is to persist in one’s own being. It is self-preservation. [...] Communication coincides with being” (Petrilli & Ponzio 2005: 522). From a biosemiotics perspective, the authors even extend this ontological premise to animal life in general: “An organism is communication [...], a communicating being, in itself, on its own account, as an organism. An organism is a device for self-communication or self-preservation, and therefore capable of persisting in its own being” (Petrilli & Ponzio, 2005, p. 522).

Despite such seemingly obvious ubiquity of communication, social systems theorist Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998), in a 1981 article widely cited and translated in 1992 under the title “The Improbability of Communication”, has questioned whether communication actually happens, aiming with this argument to “lay aside the routine expectations and certainties of everyday life” (19192, p. 122) about how communication processes happen. The author took up the same theme in §7 of chapter 4, “Communication and Action”, of his book *Social Systems* (1995, pp. 157-163). Luhmann’s paradox of communicating the improbability of communication and several variants of such doubts are the subject of this paper, but Luhmann’s theorem is only the point of departure of this study since it also deals with related communication theoretical premises proposed before Luhmann and again in the wake of post-structuralism.

Paradoxically, the paper in which Luhmann first expressed his fundamental doubts concerning the likelihood of communication begins with a premise quite similar to Ponzio’s: “Without communication there can be no human relations, indeed no human life” (1981, p. 122).

In its radicalness, Luhmann’s thesis of the improbability of communication has found not much support among researchers in communication studies. It is even likely that Luhmann himself formulated his radical theorem primarily for the rhetorical purpose of arguing for the more moderate thesis that the ideal of perfect communication is rarely achieved, for had he taken his premise

seriously, he would have recognized that it leads to the conclusion that his own ideas could not be communicated to anyone.

However, if Luhmann's theorem of the improbability of communication is interpreted in the less radical sense that there are fundamental obstacles to perfectly successful communication, a greater number of communication theorists would embrace it. It is also worth remembering that the aporia of the impossibility of communicating the incommunicable has been a rhetorical figure known since Homer. Ernst Robert Curtius defined it as the *Unsagbarkeitstopos*, the aporia of wanting to express the inexpressible or speaking the unspeakable (1948).

### LUHMANN'S THREE DOUBTS ABOUT THE PROBABILITY OF COMMUNICATION

The premises of the Luhmannian theorem can be found in his systems theoretical approach to communication (Schneider, 1994, pp. 149-190). The mutual exchange of ideas is not likely, according to this theory, because minds are closed self-referential systems, and this makes the mutual access between two or more minds impossible. In more detail, Luhmann distinguishes three mutually reinforcing obstacles that make communication unlikely:

1. The addressee of a message is unlikely to understand what the addresser means because the minds involved in the communicative process are structured differently and therefore they interpret the same message in different ways. Luhmann argues, "The first improbability is, that given the separateness and individuality of human consciousness, one person can understand what another means. Meaning can be understood only in context, and context for each individual consists primarily of what his own memory supplies" (1981, p. 123).
2. The more time passes and distance between the addresser and the addressee increases, the more it becomes unlikely that addressees will accept or even be interested in the message addressed to them. As the distance between one and the other increases, the likelihood that the receiver will understand what the sender meant decreases: "The problem is one of extension in space and time. The system of interaction [...] collapses if a desire not to communicate is perceptibly communicated. Beyond the limits of this interactional system [...], the rules obtaining in that context can no longer be imposed. Hence, even if the communication finds means of conveyance that are mobile and constant over time, it is improbable that it will command attention. In other situations, people have other things to do" (1992, pp. 123-124).



3. The third and last improbability is the “improbability of success” (1992, p. 124). It is unlikely that addressers can make their addressees accept and assimilate their own ideas. However, that this should be so is not so surprising since Luhmann’s target for success in communication is most ambitious: “By success I mean that the recipients of the communication accepts the selective content of the communication (the information) as a premise of their own behavior” (1992, p. 124). An addressee who accepts a message according this definition would be one who acts “in accordance with corresponding directives” or processes “experiences, thoughts and other perceptions on the assumption that a certain piece of information is correct” (ibid.). The scenario of communication in this sense is one that allows only total agreement; it leaves no space for disagreement or even dispute.

In view of this conception of communication as ideal mutual understanding, Luhmann expectations concerning the improbability of communication are pessimistic. Doomed to failure, communicators become discouraged and eventually abstain from communicating because all “these improbabilities are not only obstacles preventing a communication from reaching its target; they also function as thresholds of discouragement and lead to abstention from communication if the prospects for it are thought to be inauspicious” (1992, p. 124).

### **HOBBS AS A PHILOSOPHICAL PRECURSOR TO LUHMANN’S THEOREM**

Despite his radicalism, Luhmann claimed no novelty for his theorem of the improbability of communication. As one of its precursors, he invoked Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) (Luhmann 1992, p. 122), but only in his *Social Systems*, does he give a hint at why the author of the *Leviathan* should have argued that communication is a problem among humans. Hobbes, as Luhmann (1995, p. 115) read him, “maintained that every human being fears all others and is thereby induced to preventive hostility, which all the more compels the other, who has been calculated into this equation, to try to get a jump on him”. However, Hobbes’s theory of communication cannot be reconstructed from passages in his work in which he deals with communication literally because the concept of communication was not part of his vocabulary. What he understood by communication must be reconstructed from passages in which he dealt with *understanding* and *signification*. The latter concept had a different meaning than today because only by “signifying something to someone” did Hobbes mean “communicating something to someone” (Hungerland & Vick, 1973).

Hobbes distinguished two stages of human evolution. The first is the archaic period in which humans lived in a primitive state, which Hobbes defined as the state of nature. At that time, humans did not yet have laws to distinguish moral values. Instead, decisions about good or evil were made by individuals on their own. The second stage, by contrast, was an advanced period of human culture. In it, the welfare of all humans is based on a social contract established and executed by a sovereign, who established and determined the laws, justice, social order, and moral value distinctions necessary for the welfare of all. Thus, Luhmann's reference to Hobbes cannot relate to this second phase of human evolution, for in this advanced phase of evolution, only those citizens who regressed to the archaic phase of the state of nature could be the cause of problems of communication.

The failures of human communication that Luhmann attributed to Hobbes's political philosophy could only be failures characteristic of the archaic phase of human evolution and failures caused by humans in civilized societies regressed to the state of nature. As an example of the latter kind, Hobbes enumerated the following four abuses of verbal language that result in obstacles of communication:

(1) When men register their thoughts wrongly through inconstancy in the meanings of their words, leading them to register for their conceptions something that they never conceived, thus deceiving themselves. (2) When they use words metaphorically, that is, in senses other than the ones they are ordained to have, thereby deceiving others. (3) When by words they declare something to be what they want which isn't what they want. (4) When they use words to injure one another; for seeing that nature has enabled living creatures to injure their enemies. (Hobbes, 1651/2004, p. 12)

According to Hobbes, when a consensus on moral values is missing or when such consensus, once established, is neglected, communication must fail. Without a code of ethical values valid and accepted by all, communication must fail. It may even end in war, for

“Good” and “evil” or “bad” are names that signify our desires and aversions, which are different in men who differ in their characters, customs, and beliefs. And men can differ not only in their judgments of the senses—concerning what is pleasant or unpleasant to the taste, smell, hearing, touch, and sight—but also judgments concerning what conforms to or disagrees with reason in the actions of common life. Indeed, one man at different times differs from himself, at one time praising (calling ‘good’) something that at another time he dispraises (calling it ‘bad’), from which arise disputes, controversies, and at last war. (Hobbes, 1651/2004, p. 73)

This is the Hobbesian scenario of a society without moral laws, for which Luhmann claims the ancestry of his theorem of the improbability of communication. However, Luhmann's argument that his theorem of the improbability of communication applies to humans in the Hobbesian state of nature without ethical rules neglects the fact that these humans needed at least to communicate among themselves for the purpose of dispute. Dispute and disagreement is not possible without communication. How can there be disagreement without communication and interpretation about the signs that convey the value in dispute?

### ETYMOLOGICAL AMBIGUITIES: INCLUSION OR EXCLUSION

Doubts about the nature of communication also present themselves in the etymology of the word *communication*. As Casalegno (2004, p. 319) observed, the root of this word raises doubts as to whether communication pertains to the logic of inclusion, presupposed for communicative processes, or to that of exclusion, which would mean a fundamental problem of communication. Pokorny's etymological dictionary of Proto-Indo-European reports that the noun *communication*, the adjective *common* and the verb *communicate* derive from the Proto-Indo-European root *mei-* (1959, p. 709-10). This root has six homonymous forms with different meanings, of which two suggest a fundamental etymological antinomy in the concept of *communication*. The principal meaning is the one of *mei-2*, which means 'to exchange' or 'to swap'. This meaning is indeed compatible with the modern concepts of *commonality* and *communication*. Another root is *mei-1*, 'to fortify'. This root is the etymological precursor of the Latin word *moenia*, 'defensive walls', 'ramparts', 'bulwarks' or 'city walls'. Descendants of this root can be found in modern English words like *munitio* or *municipality*.

Hence, the root *mei-* comprises two meaning that go in opposite directions. One implies the logic of inclusion, and the other the logic of exclusion. The logic of inclusion is expressed in the etymon *mei-2*, which pertains to the semantic field of exchange and reciprocity, and can be found in the roots of the modern English word *mutual*, too. The logic of exclusion, by contrast, presents itself in the root *mei-1*, whose closest descendant is the Latin verb *communire*, which means 'to fortify on all sides'. Of course, the strange semantic incompatibility between the roots *mei-1* and *mei-2* has its explanation in the fact that archaic communities needed fortifications. The logic of municipal walls not only implies inclusion, the idea of a space of mutual exchange, but also exclusion, which means the impossibility

of communication with those outside this space. The ambiguity between inclusion and exclusion remains a reality in the encounter with foreigners speaking an unknown language. Communication in one's own language means the inclusion of those who speak the same language but the exclusion of those who speak the unknown idiom.

The paradox of opposite roots has other counterparts in the semantic field of words related to communication, for example in the concept of information. To inform someone, also implies both 'having' and of 'not having knowledge', namely the one before and the other after the act of communication it. It implies both a 'having' and a 'not having of knowledge *in common*'. The state of information that is not yet common is a state of exclusion, whereas shared information means a state of inclusion.

Communication, as a 'making common', thus also implies the transition from a state of privacy to one of commonality. Notice that the etymological root of the word *private*, which characterizes the state in which ideas have not yet been communicated, also implies a sense that pertains to the logic of exclusion since the verb *privare*, from which *private* is the derivation, means 'to bereave', 'to make single or apart'. Keeping knowledge private without communicating it thus connotes etymologically depriving others of knowledge. By contrast, communication as making knowledge common, as *sharing* ideas or information, connotes the logic of inclusion.

Here lies the fundamental difference between communicative exchange and economic exchange. Communication cannot be conceived according to a "postal package model", as Ponzio (1990, pp. 146-147) has pointed out. The postal sender/receiver scenario implies that senders have to give up their messages, which implies a state of exclusion. Instead, communication follows the logic of conjunction and hence inclusion, since the senders keep the object of exchange when they share their ideas with the receivers. Economic exchange, by contrast, follows the logic of disjunction, since sellers have to give up their goods and buyers need to part from whatever they give in exchange. What the exchange of goods and the exchange of ideas have in common is that neither of them implies "equal exchange", as Ponzio teaches (1990, pp. 185-196).

### THREE OTHER DOUBTS CONCERNING THE PROBABILITY OF SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION

Variants of the claim of the improbability of communication can also be found in twentieth-century communication theory. Three of them that will be discussed in the following are the code theoretical claim, the claim that minds

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are black boxes between which no exchange is possible, and the post-structuralists and deconstructivist claim.

### Doubts founded on code theories

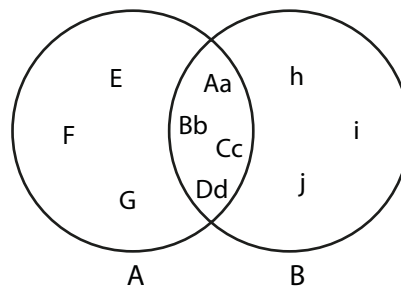
The code theoretical models of communication of the 1960s conceived codes as repertoires of signs and knowledge horizons that differ with each participant in communication. These differences were interpreted as the source of misunderstandings between the senders and receivers of messages (cf. Nöth, 2023). Shannon and Weaver's (1949) model still postulated a single common code with which the sender encodes and the receiver decodes the message. Ponzio criticized this model

according to which messages are formulated and exchanged on the basis of a code (which has been defined and fixed antecedently with respect to the actual use of signs so that, requiring only decodification, it does not present the risk involved in interpretation), of a two-way correspondence between *signifiant* and *signifié*. (Ponzio 1990: 275-277)

A theory based on the assumption that communication always involves at least two codes that never coincide so that communication can never be entirely felicitous was proposed by Juri Lotman (cf. Nöth, 2022). His communication model represents the codes of the sender and the receiver of a message in the form of the Venn diagram shown in Figure 1. The two sign repertoires are represented by upper, resp. lower case letters.

**Figure 1**

*Lotman's diagram of the relation between the sign repertoires of an addresser (circle A) and an addressee (circle B).*



*Note.* Lotman, 2009, p. 5.



Only the signs Aa, Bb, Cc and Dd in the area of the overlap between A and B represent the sign repertoire shared by both addresser and addressee. Only they make communication possible, whereas communication is doomed to fail when the signs excluded from the area of overlap (E, F, G, h, i, j) are used. Based on this diagram, Lotman (2009, p. 17) puts forward a twofold claim of the impossibility of communication: “Communication appears to be *impossible*” in the two sections of A and B which do *not* overlap, “whilst a full intersection (where A and B are deemed identical) renders communication insipid” (and hence impossible in another sense).

Lotman’s solution to this apparent paradox of the impossibility of communication is that communication can only be conceived as a process of translating the untranslatable:

The more difficult and inadequate the translation of one nonintersecting part of the space into the language of the other, the more valuable [...] this paradoxical communication becomes. You could say that the translation of the untranslatable may in turn become the carrier of information of the highest degree. (Lotman 2009: 5-6)

### **The mind-as-a-black-box argument**

The *black-box* argument does not literally state that communication is impossible, but it states that it is impossible to know whether communication is possible and whether it really takes place because the addresser has no access to addressee’s mind (alias black box). Decades before the behaviorists created the myth of the black box, Peirce formulated this epistemological dilemma as follows:

The utterer has no ideas but his own ideas, he lives no life but his own life. Let him try to specify a place in the interpreter’s panorama, and he can only look over his own panorama, where he can find nothing but his own ideas. (MS 318, p. 194 [Prag. 25], 1907)

Peirce’s solution to this dilemma of the impossibility of knowing what the receiver of a message understands can be found in his theory of the interpretant, the effect of the signs on its interpreters. Unlike Luhmann, Peirce argues that such effects are not inaccessible for two reasons. First, the effects of the addresser’s signs on the addressee are accessible to the addresser through the verbal and nonverbal signs with which the addressees react, for example, when the latter express their understanding or misunderstanding, agreement or disagreement, verbally or nonverbally. Second, the addressers have knowledge of how signs

operate in their own minds, so that they have “no difficulty in finding the life of the interpreter” in their “ideas about it” (ibid., p. 194). In other words, although the senders cannot read the receivers’ thoughts, they can read signs that give evidence of those thoughts and know from their own semiotic experience whether or how a mind understands the message or not. Without being able to enter the receivers’ minds, the senders can nevertheless form rather adequate hypotheses about how those understand the message.

The black-box argument is associated with the notable cognitive paradox recognized by Wittgenstein according to which no-one can ever know what is going on in their own brains. Wittgenstein’s argument is, “But if you say: ‘How am I to know what he means when I see nothing but the signs he gives?’ then I say: ‘How is *he* to know what he means, when he has nothing but the signs either?’” (1953, § 504, p. 188).

#### **Poststructuralist and deconstructivist arguments**

Other variants of the argument of the impossibility of felicitous communication can be found in post-structuralist and deconstructivist discourse theories. From a social science perspective, the general tenor of poststructuralist communication theory is probably best epitomized in Michel Foucault’s thesis that the ideal of the “universal communication of knowledge, the indefinite and free exchange of discourses” is “one of the great myths of European culture” (Foucault, 1981, p. 62). Free exchange of ideas has become impossible because the messages circulating in public are subject to control, prohibition, and exclusion. The reason is that “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events” (Foucault 1981: 52). The impossibility of communication is thus the impossibility of *free* communication.

In various versions, the topos of the impossibility of communication became a *leitmotif* of poststructuralist writings. Roland Barthes stigmatizes the presupposition of the “purity of communication” to show that communication is “corrupted” by the plurality of discursive connotations creating a multiplicity of meanings. Communication thus always goes in step with “counter-communication” (1974: 9), and the message ultimately turns out to be a Shannon-Weaverian *noise*, as Nelson (1985: 9) has pointed out. “Noise is not outside the message, nor is it an internal supplement to the truth of the message. Noise is the semiotic process that constitutes messages; it is their substance; it is irreducible.” As Barthes concluded, “Semiology would consequently be the labor which collects the

impurity of language, the waste of linguistics, the immediate corruption of the message” (1982: 470).

Julia Kristeva provided a Lacanian psychoanalytic poststructuralist perspective on the impossibility of communication. Instead of communication, she can only discern *self-communication*: “Each speaking subject is both the addresser and the addressee of his own message [...]. The message intended for the other is, in a sense, first intended for the one who is speaking: whence it follows that to speak is to speak to oneself” (1989: 10).

Perhaps the climax of poststructuralist anticommunicational theories is Baudrillard’s theory of the *impossibility of exchange* in general: communication is impossible because words have become empty “and signs no longer have any force of meaning” (2001: 5). What Baudrillard does not say is what the meaning of those signs was once, when they were not yet empty (cf. Nöth 2003).

The reasons why Derrida claims that communication is impossible are well elucidated in Chang’s *Deconstruction Communication* (1996). It is impossible to reach any consensus on whatever a message means, because its meanings are always *deferred* in the course of its reading, so that they necessarily escape any possible “definition”. An “implosion” of the idea of communicability has occurred because “Derrida redescribes communication as an unbridled play of differences, substitutions, and displacements taking place at the limit of signification”. He teaches us that “our sense of uncertainty comes naturally and inevitably from the very nature of our linguistic being, that we are always and already at the mercy of peripatetic signs” (Chang 1996: 187).

## THE PERFORMATIVE PARADOX AND ITS SOLUTION

Skeptics of the theorem of the improbability of communication can certainly be excused for never having been concerned with the question whether communication is probable or not, for asking whether one *can* communicate means creating a *performative paradox*. To ask the question whether communication is possible is to perform a speech act, but speech acts presuppose speakers who communicate. This is even so if the addresser and the addressee are the same person, since communication includes also “self-communication”, as Peirce, Lotman, as well as Ponzio (1999, p. 8) teach. Now, if asking a question is communicating, then asking in addition whether we communicate or not constitutes a paradox. However, why has this question been raised in so many variants?

The question whether communication is probable or can only be a rhetorical question, formulated to substantiate the argument that we do not communicate

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## The semiotic paradox of the improbability of communication

in the sense in which the term *communication* is conceived according to some theories of communication.

With this in mind, we can also find some arguments in Ponzio's writings supporting the provocative thesis that communication is unlikely. For example, Ponzio argues that we cannot communicate in the sense in which information theory and the classical code theory of communication have defined communication. He has also argued against the assumption that communication means *equal exchange* (1990, pp. 185-188). The ordinary belief that speakers communicate a message A to listeners who also interpret it as A, Ponzio argues that communication is a process of *unequal exchange*, in which message A is transformed into a message B and B into C, in an endless chain of semiotic growth.

The impossibility of reading the thoughts of other mind is, in fact, the very origin of communication, because if the addresser could read the thoughts of the addressee, communication would be unnecessary. ■

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# Musical taste, morals, and discomforts<sup>a</sup>

## *Gosto musical, moral e incômodos*

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### ABSTRACT

Music is a form of action and thought in the world. Participating in a musical experience is interacting with ideas, values, and belongings that sometimes are far away from our preferences, but are sometimes closer. Musical taste is an important axis of debates about everyday music experiences. Based on research on musical discomforts, I propose a reflection on taste based on rejecting tastes, rather than on sharing them. A survey was done with about 70 persons from different social classes, ages, and places who were asked to talk about situations in which music had bothered them. When someone defines a piece of music as annoying, the issue revolves around complex elaborations about morals, deepening interpretations about ethical and behavioral codes that depart from sound judgment and expand into broader judgments about individuals and values recognized in the then called annoying music.

**Keywords** Music, musical taste, moral, annoyance

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### RESUMO

A música é uma forma de ação e pensamento no mundo. Participar de uma experiência musical é interagir com ideias, valores e pertencimentos que por vezes se afastam de nossas predileções, outras vezes se aproximam. O gosto musical é um eixo importante de debates sobre as experiências musicais cotidianas. A partir de uma pesquisa sobre incômodos musicais, proponho aqui uma reflexão sobre o gosto não a partir de movimentos de adesão, mas de rechaço. Foram realizadas mais de 70 entrevistas com indivíduos de distintas faixas etárias, classes sociais e regiões do planeta, nas quais indagamos sobre situações em que a música agiu como elemento de incômodo. Ao classificar uma música como incômoda ou desagradável, as pessoas elaboram códigos morais, aprofundando interpretações sobre ética e comportamentos que partem do julgamento sonoro e se ampliam em um julgamento mais amplo sobre os indivíduos e os valores reconhecidos nas músicas.

**Palavras-chave:** Música, gosto musical, moral, incômodo

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DEBATES ABOUT MUSICAL taste in Communication studies have functioned as a kind of background for discussions about the circulation of music through mass media and “post-massive media” (Lemos, 2007). Whether with an emphasis on processes and strategies for classifying the musical universe (Janotti Jr., 2020; Pereira de Sá, 2021), on recommendation systems (Pereira de Sá, 2009; DeMarchi, 2016; Rabelo Luccas, 2022), on groups of fans and anti-fans (Amaral, 2014; Pereira de Sá & Cunha, 2017) or on the social hierarchies crossed by music consumption (Trotta & Roxo, 2014; Herschmann, 2005; Soares, 2021), the movements of affective adherence to certain genres, styles and musical scenes are constantly activated as constitutive axes of the musical experience.

I propose here to think about musical taste in the opposite direction. Not just as an element that aggregates sensibilities (such as “fans” or “haters”), but as a guiding context for movements of rejection of certain musical experiences that work as potential nuisance. This reflection on taste stems from a six-year survey on annoying music, in which around 70 people were interviewed and invited to describe situations in which music worked in their lives as an element of disturbance, anguish, or anger. The interviews were carried out in Rio de Janeiro and Edinburgh (Scotland), during a stay as a visiting researcher. The results of this research were published in the book *Annoying Music in Everyday Life* (Trotta, 2020) and awakened intriguing nuances about the role of musical taste in musical experiences classified as uncomfortable.

When invited to talk about annoying music, people cannot escape from describing their personal tastes. Taste is the starting point for most conversations about being affected or irritated by music in everyday life. As Simon Frith states, “part of the pleasure of popular culture is talking about it; part of its meaning is this talk; talk which is run through value judgement” (1996, p. 8). As such, the interviews done for this book started with general questions about music preferences, answered with abstract references to music genres. Sentences such as “I like jazz” or “I don’t like pop” were the most frequent entrance to the domain of value judgement. This was not a surprise. In our daily lives, arguments about music are always framed by generic umbrella genre classifications, that function as a key organization of the music universe. Thirty-two-year-old Nahya is from India and works as producer in an environmental NGO in Edinburgh, Scotland. She provides a very detailed description of this process, highlighting her uses of each music in her life:

*Nayha* - I think I’ve got a quite eclectic taste in music. Most often, when I’m working, I need to listen to music to concentrate but I cannot listen to music with lyrics.

So, often I will listen to Techno music, like Chicago, electronic music. Something about the beat really helps me to focus. When I walk in places, depending on my mood, I'll listen to folk music sometimes. When I'm feeling a little bit down, and I want to be cheered up then I will listen to funk and soul, but if I'm feeling tense, unhappy in that mood, then it will be Joan Baez.

*Q - Is there any music you don't like?*

*Nayha* - I guess... really pop music! Generics, one of the run-of-the-mill girl band, boy band pop irritates me a bit, especially when the lyrics are very much obviously rhyming, or contradict, don't make much sense. And Jazz music! But I get less frustrated by that when I'm not trying to understand it and I can just kind of think about the feeling. I think the problem is, for example, in Edinburgh you go to somewhere like the jazz bar and you are trying to dance along to some music and just when you feel you got to, the rhythm completely changes. I don't know but maybe culturally there's a little vagueness in jazz, either you get it or you don't. Sometimes you feel like an outsider with jazz.

Nayha's report resounds several examples presented in Tia DeNora's *Music in Everyday Life* (2000). Music works for her as a tool that she activates to modulate her mood and emotions. What is interesting is how she is aware of a whole intimate system that links feelings and sounds. For her, music is something that works similar to medicine, taken according to some perceived symptoms to improve her health. This, of course, is in cases where she controls the sound. If not, negative adjectives are attached to music genres felt by her as uncomfortable music experiences, like 'nonsense pop music' or 'undanceable jazz', somehow detached from her expectations and desires. Washburne and Derko, in the very beginning of their edited volume about "bad music" define it as music that is "somehow unwanted", "forced upon us in all kinds of possible and impossible situations" (2004, p. 1). "Bad" is a value judgement that irrupts as a result of very complicated taste and adequacy interpretations, helping the listener to define a "positioning gesture" about the music s/he listens to (Washburne & Derko, 2004, p. 2). In other words, "taste is not a stable and inner experience of the subject", but it is the result of "*affective relations*, be it with others who share same preferences or with works or artists that *affect* us" (Janotti Jr. and Pereira de Sá, 2018, p. 10).

What is important to highlight is that value judgments play a key role in the definition of pleasure and displeasure associated with music experience. Hardly will one talk about annoying music without considering personal

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tastes together with a very particular evaluation of adequacy. I would like to argue here that this judgement deals with complex thoughts about life in society, identities, individual emotions and values, as well as with shared social codes considered to be 'good' or 'positive'. Therefore, aesthetic judgements are inseparable from moral judgements, defined as a set of accepted rules that one is inclined to follow as a result of both some social constraints and individual desires tied to a usually contradictory interpretation of "right-and-wrong" definitions.

### **MORAL ISSUES**

Stating that music taste is entangled with moral judgement doesn't mean one can assume a direct relation between them. Instead, this entanglement is experienced in multiple ways, according to multiple sets of conditions and contexts in which the music is heard and experienced. As pointed out by the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), taste is not detached from social belongings, education and family background. Even considering that our taste is much more unstable than Bourdieusian interpretation suggests and that it usually incorporates elements that seem to be "dissonant" with the expected taste of our group belonging (Lahire 2007), its construction is closely connected to our life experiences, shared values and culture.

Hence, taste in music has to do with knowledge, memories and belongings, activating an important role in the acts of recognition and interpretation. Moreover, taste is dynamic and changeable. As such, it needs to be performed, reinforced, talked about and socially exhibited. The performance is materialized in acts such as listening to recordings, attending to shows and concerts, buying products from your preferred artists, and discussing the value of songs, albums, shows, and so on (Hennion 2001). The shaping and reshaping of our tastes are elaborated daily not only towards music repertoires we like but also, and mostly, against songs, artists and sounds we reject.

Defining a music experience as annoying is the final movement of a corporal and intellectual activity of interpreting ideas about the music heard, which is, in turn, socialized in taste performances that are done to express and elaborate on these interpretations. Final? Perhaps not. The definition of annoyance in music is part of a continuous process of interpretations and judgments about music, developed individually and socially, bodily and mentally. Obviously, this interpretation is not only aesthetically or socially constructed, but also is framed through moral and ethical beliefs and, consequently, is strongly affected



by them. The moral realm is the realm of social rules and conventions, a pivotal set of thoughts over which our daily life is experienced. It is a moving terrain constantly challenged and reshaped according to several changing conditions and contexts throughout our lives. Music has an important role in sharing moral thoughts and defying them.

For instance, a song that states “let’s kill the cop” or something similar is judged according to ideas about life and death, murder, violence and power. This judgement is also mixed with shared ideas about the coercive police power, its oppressing attitude and its role as a repressive force of the state. At first, most people would agree that killing anyone is wrong, but this wrongness can be shifted according to social conditions; which is the contradictory activity of moral judgment. Furthermore, music may have a dramatizing function, staging an act that is acknowledged to be obviously wrong as a means of exposing it, criticizing it and preventing it. “Let’s kill the cop” is a sentence that may refer to a resistance position, or even to an act that should be put aside. This dramatizing effect depends on other elements of the music experience – which, as we all know, cannot be restricted to the lyrics – involving the arrangement, the music genre, the voicing, the broader position and behaviour of the artist, the social and physical place where it is played and several other aspects that are part of the semiosis of music experience and can frame it in one direction or another. Depending on all these variable elements, singing a chorus that stimulates the killing of a cop may also be understood as a joke, a humorous text which whose interpretation can lead to the extreme opposite side, resulting in a sentence that highlights that it is wrong to kill any person. All these possible ideas are, then, the raw material to be interpreted and ethically judged as people experience the music playing, making up part of the resulting feeling of pleasure or rejection of this semiosis.

In short, the interpretation of the meaning of a song results from an evaluation of the matching or mismatching between the moral expectancies of the listener and what s/he interprets as being the moral message of the song. Yet this process is cognitive and rational, it has a strong emotional and corporal component, and usually, it is not verbalized. As such, although the majority of the people interviewed were very confident to point out music genres and artists they like very much or strongly dislike, most of them were unable to elaborate verbally *why* they like or don’t like certain kind of music. When they do, most of them pointed to moral issues to justify their dislike, though this elaboration was often fragmentary, brief and undeveloped. Mike is an exception, and he did elaborate a detailed interpretation about the reasons why he doesn’t like pop music.

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The first thing [I dislike] is pop music that kids listen to. They may or may not be aware of the context of the music, but it is generally about sex. And these kids of 7, 8, 9 years old, they are listening to something for the beat, perhaps. They did not think about [the lyrics]: girl goes into a guy, guy goes into a girl, but it's something that is too basic, and it's not appropriate. I could be too conservative, but it just seems not necessary. The point is the groove, but when they do become aware of the lyrics, eventually, a message is being sent. The girls singing those kinds of things, you know? That's frustrating. I find that sending that message to kids of that age is inadequate. And the more music they listen to, as they get older, as teenagers, they are going into this rap, hip hop, R&B: it's too sensual. It sends the wrong message about relationship. When you have a child in your home, you want him to grow up respecting each other not to see each other as sexual objects. And it is repeated, played over and over and over.

His description is illuminating. The aesthetic disapproval about pop music is due to his moral judgement. Although he mentioned the repetition as an (aesthetic) element of his rejection of pop, the main problem for him is the way the music deals with sexuality. His concern about the “message” being sent to kids through the music is pointed towards the lyrics. Of course, it is important to be aware that the sexual message is not only in the lyrics. Sex in pop songs is a constituent element of the genre, highlighted in verses and chorus but emphatically reinforced in the corporal movements of singers, in the intonation of the singing, in choreographies, clothes (or their absence) and in the very experience of pop music concerts, where interpersonal relations are highly mediated through sexual appeal, dancing, gazing and seducing. However, it is undeniable that the verbal component of pop songs operates as a kind of guide to narratives, stories and moral aspects of music experience. Popular songs are usually songs about love, seduction and sex. The desire to be close to a beloved one and the regrets for a split are the most common themes found in the lyrics of such songs. Of course, this is not exclusive to the popular music market. The whole commercial world is informed and processed according to love-and-sex metaphors and suggestions. Sex sells. From cars to cosmetics, from soaps to songs, the sex appeal in advertisements seems to be unavoidable. Moral concerns and restrictions towards sexuality are, hence, the most important part of public debate as it represents a key aspect of the social life, ranging from personal desires to socially accepted rules, widely spread in cultural narratives about love, marriage and family. Music is an artefact that is activated by social groups and individuals to perform, think and elaborate on ideas about sex and love. Ideas about what is wrong and right about sex and love.

If this is true for almost all commercial music, it is undoubtedly more intense in the mainstream pop realm, where it assumes a guiding role, framing the moral interpretation of aesthetic experience. It is precisely this guiding role that perturbs Mike as he associates the pair listening/singing to pop with being inadequate to young children. Even though he assumes that kids may not understand what exactly is meant by the lyrics they sing, he is worried about the way the ideas are kept circulating in children's mind, structuring their behaviour and even their future relations.

The problem of the lyrics is also pointed by Luane, 17-year-old student from Rio de Janeiro. Despite being a teenager, and thus generally expected to like pop and danceable music genres, Luane is concerned about the contents and the message spread by the lyrics. In her words:

But I am also concerned with the lyrics. You can't listen to the beat and put the lyrics aside. And certain lyrics are impossible, you just can't follow them. Funk lyrics are very repetitive. Nowadays, teenagers are drawn to successful hitmakers. Like an MC who gets all the girls and so on, extravagance. Children, too, because that's trendy. Mass culture listen to funk, *pagode*. In the old days, people listened to MPB a lot. I like MPB very much. Legião Urbana. Legião's lyrics are very present-day; back then, homosexuality was being discussed by the first time. Before, there was too much repression of everything and people wanted to speak, expose themselves, and people felt repressed. Today, people repress themselves.

It is very interesting the way she defines music connected with moral structures of society across time. She identifies in the lyrics by some artists and songs of the past elements of desired social debate, which is compared with today's lyrics that she can't listen to. Her example of the Brazilian rock group Legião Urbana is symptomatic. It was a very successful group in the 1980s, led by gay singer Renato Russo, who was also the composer of many songs launched by the group. His songs addressed same-sex love in narratives and stories that, in Luane's perception, helped people to accept homosexuality in a time it was strongly repressed. Seventeen-year-old Luane was born after the Renato Russo's death (1960-1996) but listening to his songs allows her to interpret moral aspects of society in previous decades, and even to observe the relevance of past ideas in present-day society. All this is directed by her to the lyrics. She reinforces it as she describes her preferences in music towards genres that presumably have more complex lyrics (aesthetic criteria), with messages that help challenging moral prejudices. By doing so, she organizes the musical universe comparing genres according to her taste.

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The mentioned “MPB” she mentioned refers to the term “Música Popular Brasileira” (which means “Brazilian popular music” in Portuguese) defined as a category in the Brazilian music market in which songwriters of high prestige are usually located, artists such as Chico Buarque, Caetano Veloso and Tom Jobim, who developed a complex set of procedures in their compositions and, therefore, are acknowledged by cultural critics as “good”. “MPB” and classic Brazilian rock are genres Luane associates with a mythical past of Brazilian popular music history, when, according to her, people used to listen to “better” music. In her interpretations, today’s lyrics are led by fashion, by the repetition of direct sexual messages that circulate around “boys taking girls” and “ostentation”. In her thoughts, mass culture is responsible for these repeated messages to teenagers and children, but she did not develop, like Mike, the possible moral miseducation related to the shared fashionable taste. What is worth noting is that both of them are overconcerned with the lyrics, dismissing other elements of the music experience. This is not unusual. People are often very attentive to the lyrics in their talks about music and their value judgement. Lyrics are the guide. An even more radical emphasis in the lyrics is provided by Messias, who makes a distinction between gospel music and electronic beat.

I like gospel music, I only listen to gospel music. My wife is not so keen on gospel. She says the preachers yell. What I really love is His word. I also love romantic songs. Lyrics say a lot. They make you go back to the past and become a more romantic man, something that doesn’t exist today. Romance makes the man better. Women believe in love. I like old *brega*, I like Fábio Jr., Roberto, Jr. Roberto, Chitãozinho and Xororó, Leandro and Leonardo. I play the guitar because of romanticism. Electronic music is noisier than melodies. I can’t stand it. Only here, when they play it in the square. They always do it on the weekends, I can’t stand it anymore. It is a very unbearable noise, it has no lyrics at all. It’s like funk and the music from Bahia, but these are easier to understand. Contrarily, electronic music is more noise than music itself. In my point of view, that is not music. It is music, but I think it’s not. It annoys me in this sense.

Messias is 43 years old and work as doorman and driver in Rio de Janeiro. His taste is totally framed by the lyrics as he, being an evangelical, is worried about the “message”, the “word” of God. Interestingly, in his way of thinking, the lyrics are the element that something as “music”, in opposition to “noise”. Being able to “understand” is the path he admits using for his highly personal definition of what is or is not “music”. When referring to

electronic music, Messias mixes the lyrics with the sound, rejecting it as “non-music”. Even though he admits his classification as not consensual, he seeks in the definition of “music” a path to elaborate aesthetically and morally on the value of his unpleasant experience. Again, this distinction about what is “music” is part of a broader process of judging the value of the sonic experience, which, in his case, is strongly dependent of the message sent by the lyrics. The power of romantic lyrics is, hence, a moral power, that makes people better in their existence.

Both Mike, Luane and Messias all point to the role of music in spreading and framing ideas about life. Our subjective experience with music is framed within social rules and constraints that shape our way of thinking and our behaviour. It is activated through memories and thoughts that splits what is considered right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable, good or bad. Once music is “a form of thought and action in the world” (Blacking 1995), the experience with music is not passive, but rather an activity through which people elaborate on lifestyles and behaviours. Music experience may be challenging as it defies settled ideas constructed through our life, which may be disturbing and uncomfortable. Mike’s concerns about sexual education of kids are the result of a mismatch between moral behaviours and discourses that he considers as adequate to children and the set of ideas he finds in pop music. Similarly, Luane’s interpretation that some lyrics from the 1980s were “better” than nowadays songs results from her particular perception that MPB and classic rock songs were able to elaborate on social prejudices towards the construction of an egalitarian world. Messias also frames his taste and values around the religious aspect, searching in the lyrics, for an adequate message according to the writings of the Bible. Sexual, humanistic or religious values are put forward by them as elements of the aesthetic and ethic judgment of songs, shaping the way they listen to the music. Inadequate behaviours described in the lyrics are, then, considered to be offensive and disturbing, in a movement that ends up classifying unwanted music as annoying.

Moreover, regardless of the overtly accepted idea that music experience must be taken as a whole, encompassing the sound, the dance, the context, the resonance, the sociability and so on, their moral complaints about unwanted music are directed towards the lyrics. The problem of the lyrics can be taken in two overlapping dimensions. First, it is addressed towards specific songs that may be considered offensive and disturbing. In these cases, it is the experience that provides the situation for people to judge the music through the interpretation of the verbal message. Of course, this can only happen when the auditor is able to understand the language used in the song.



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If not, the disturbing aspect of the experience may be hidden or only suggested in visual and sounded fragments. The second dimension I'd like to address in depth is that the moral problems that come mostly through the lyrics that are considered to be a defining feature of certain music genres. In this case, it is not the experience itself that produces the repulsion to challenging lyrics, but an accumulated knowledge about a set of songs and artists. This process is far more complex because it activates a set of preconceived ideas about right or wrong together with the homogenization of a vast repertoire into a pejorative classification. Again, genres are taken as a kind of reservoir of "bad lyrics", becoming target of rejections and prejudices.

### **MUSIC GENRES AND HIERARCHIES**

The music universe is separated into units of classification that help listeners and fans to identify and select their tastes and preferences. The most effective term to assign these separations is the idea of "genre", a biological metaphor borrowed to the cultural realm by other artistic languages such literature, visual arts and cinema, and transported to music classification both as a market share strategy and as a social divide (Negus 1999). It is not my objective here to develop a broad theory of music genres (which has already been done by several brilliant works) but to highlight that this separation works as a shortcut to verbalizing music rejections and segregating people. As Fabian Holt argues, "genre is a fundamental structuring force in musical life" (Holt, 2007, p. 2), and "discourse plays a major role in genre making" (Holt, 2007, p. 3). In his approach, the author suggests not searching for definitions of genres, but an understanding of them (Holt, 2007, p. 8), which is done in his book through ethnographic work. Similarly, my point here is not to define what people mean when they mention a genre as annoying, but to explore the very fact that people use genre classification to talk about likes and dislikes. Genres provide sets of ideas, expectations and moods that are recognized as desirable and pleasurable for some people and as boring or irritating for others. As such, the music nuisance is associated with people's discourse on music genres. Despite the largely accepted agreement in cultural studies that genre classifications are usually blurred, the narratives of most interviewees pointed to a division of the music universe into blocks of music practises defined through genre names. Moreover, some narratives about these blocks suggest that people use genre classification to understand, map and to bother other people. The case reported by Isabel is interesting.

I hate *sertanejo* music. This has something to do with when I was a teenager and my dad liked *sertanejo* while I wanted to be totally different. Teasing your father, all that teenager thing, and my dad said we didn't know how to pick good music. Because, for my dad, rock music is the pits, all the more when it is foreign. We listened to rock music, and to protest. I mocked the music he liked. I think that was the reason why, and also because our friends thought *sertanejo* sucked and one wants to belong to the tribe. We bashed it and this is something that has been engraved in me. Right, I am not open. I can't like *sertanejo* because, where I grew up, cool people don't like it.

The opposition between rock and *sertanejo*<sup>1</sup> (Brazilian country music) is described as a distinction between her generation and her father's, as well as a tool for being part of her friends' group. For Isabel, labelling *sertanejo* as the kind of music her father liked produces a double process of attaching a set of ideas and behaviours to him and his lifestyle and putting her away from him. Value judgments in music are acts that help people to establish a place in the world and a source of self-recognition (Frith, 1996. p. 72). Her identity as a young girl both as an individual and as part of a group would be filled partially by her proximity to rock music and distance from *sertanejo*. Interestingly, after more than two decades, 42-year-old Isabel still feels blocked from *sertanejo* and associates this dislike with her teenage time. Of course, we cannot deny that music genres carry ideas and stereotypes that may explain in part her rejection of the style. After living in several cities in the country, Isabel moved to Rio de Janeiro and reported being well adapted in the most famous and cosmopolitan city of Brazil. In this sense, her set of shared codes and values are nowadays far away from the idea of a wealthy countryside described in *sertanejo* lyrics. Hence, her refusal about the genre is due to a more complex process than simply the memories of a teenage girl trying to irritate her father. Genre classification is also a cultural classification, which works as a shortcut to (un)shared sounds, ideas and codes.

But there is another layer in genre division within the music market. Classifying means producing hierarchy. The low evaluation Isabel applies to *sertanejo* is not a personal decision constructed exclusively through her background experience and current cultural affiliations. In Brazil, despite its leading role in the music market, *sertanejo* is acknowledged by powerful intellectual social strata of urban population as bad quality music. This is due mostly to its commercial element, being merged with global pop music in several ways. For some critics, *sertanejo* is a worse version of authentic

<sup>1</sup> The world *sertanejo* refers to a very successful music genre in Brazil that resulted from a merge between rural country music from the first half of twentieth century with pop styles inspired largely by Nashville American country groups. It is the mainstream pop music genre in Brazil since the 1980s, in a long-term hegemony in the country's charts. Not surprisingly, most arguments about "pop music" in Brazil are redirected to *sertanejo* with very similar connotations – artificiality, market-driven sound, repetition, and so on.

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country music – labelled as “*caipira*” – which have abandoned its rural heritage to embrace the global pop market (Alonso, 2015, p. 23). In doing so, the artists classified as *sertanejo* have lost their authenticity and, hence, their aesthetic and moral value. Not surprisingly, *sertanejo*, as well as “pop”, was among the most cited genres associated with annoying music.

Expanding the case of *sertanejo* to a wider music universe, it is possible to state that hierarchies in the cultural field are not constructed in a desert. Instead, the struggles to affirm the cultural (hence, social, aesthetic, and moral) value of music genres operate within the limits of social stratification and the relative that power social groups have in it. Intellectuals, journalists, critics, conservatories, music schools, skilled musicians and recognized artists are more likely to have their taste and value criteria accepted and shared than minor artists, low-educated audience or unskilled amateur musicians (Araújo 2002). Therefore, the criteria applied to judge a piece of music as “good”, despite being possibly contested, has a few general rules overtly accepted. Without denying the huge universe of conflicts that involves the aesthetic judgement of every music genre separately and wholly, the force of the narrative that positions classical music as well as jazz, *bossa nova*, and classic rock – just to mention a few – in a high-value hierarchy within the music genres is highly consensual. Similarly, the disqualification of genres such as rap, hip hop, and “pop” is widely shared worldwide. Not surprisingly, “pop music” was mentioned in several interviews, both in Brazil (with local fusion between pop and other local genres, like *funk* and *sertanejo* itself) and in Scotland. The description of Alec goes in this direction:

Pop. There are many things that I don't like in pop. It is related to consumerism. I feel that pop music is meant either for teenagers or extremely consumerist people and I am neither of those. I understand teenagers liking pop but when it is an adult liking pop I find a bit disturbing. I definitely think it is age-oriented. It seems to be done in order to make money exclusively.

The artificiality Alec finds in pop music is a key issue in cultural judgement about annoying music. Part of alleged nuisance caused by unwanted music is described as related to its lack of authenticity. Beyond the context, the disturbing element in music is usually associated with a low value attributed to consumerist behaviour or adolescent fashion. “Pop” is an umbrella term that joins several of these disqualifications. According to Thiago Soares, debates about pop music are usually organized on two axes:

the idea of “pop culture” and what he calls the “aesthetic of entertainment” (Soares, 2015, p. 22). Ideas of superficiality, leisure, and joy constitute the shared semantic of pop, together with the culture industry agency in formatting, producing and distributing its products. In pop music, the artistic element circulates as a commodity, and for some people, in doing so, it loses its value, bringing the economic engine to the foreground. Fabian Holt reports being reluctant to define pop music as a genre “in the strict sense”, yet he assumes it works as a category that refers to mainstream production of several genres and, sometimes, it may function as a genre in its capacity for complex and moving labelling activity (Holt, 2007, pp. 17-18). For the purpose of our discussion, the attachment of the category in a genre classification is not very important, once we agree it works as a term that defines a general value distinction and is associated with ideas and behaviour that can be judged as positive or negative. Jason Lee Oakes argues that “the boundaries of pop music are absurdly far-reaching, extending to include from Cole Porter to the Carpenters to Christina Aguilera” (Oakes, 2004, p. 54). And all these artists and songs are touched with a kind of “madness” (idem). What I am trying to develop here is that this set of ideas that supports the classification of pop as something bad is a moral judgement that results from a broader understanding about life in society, which, by its turn, is interpreted by the listener as part of the aesthetic evaluation of the music experience. This moral framing dismisses both the lack of authenticity and the commodification heard in pop music. While interpreting the struggle between jazz and rock in specialized magazines, Matt Brennan observes that, despite their alleged differences, both genres shared a “common underlying ideology” of being “authentic musical cultures contrasted against mass-produced, manufactured commercial ‘pop’, actively turning a blind eye to their own obvious participation in music as a form of commercial production” (Brennan, 2017, p. 14). The point is that people judge music sometimes considering a kind of continuum that links two opposite realms: the authentic and the commercial. Although it is a controversial criterion to evaluate music, the two-poles system frequently appears in talks that try to elaborate on value. Authenticity is usually associated with positive ethics in daily life, being the artistic expression of genuine people or individuals, and therefore, highly valued. Inversely, commerciality is acknowledged as a cold, materialistic and artistically irrelevant taste of individualistic individuals, associated with evil capitalism, with selfishness and social carelessness. Every music practice nowadays is located in an

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intermediate space between the two poles and part of the judgement is to evaluate to what extent authenticity plays an important role in the aesthetic experience. Of course, not everyone shares this opposition in that way and, besides, even if we agree with the logic of the two-poles classification of quality (which I personally am not sure about), it is not possible to verify precisely where an artist or music genre is situated. What I would like to highlight is that the “accusation” of commercialism is a frequent argument to disqualify a music genre, involved with clear moral depreciation of those who like and listen to it.

When Alec dismisses “pop” for its consumerism and exclusive money-making aim, he is using his taste to interpret how people relate to each other and how they behave in the world. This process gets clearer when he admits taste for pop being understandable for younger people but not for elder ones. For him, it is part of teenage sociability and helps youngsters to identify themselves in the world and to be accepted in their social groups, in a movement very similar to the one Isabel reported about the construction of her teenage taste towards rock. As Thiago Soares states in his fascinating book about the uses of pop music in Cuba, “the idea of being part of a global, cosmopolitan and hegemonic world strongly feeds the construction of pop imaginary. Hence, generation appears as a key to understand the particular forms of values that emerge in specific contexts” (Soares, 2017, p. 122). The author discusses the case of “Martí”, a young Cuban travesty who adopted anglophone pop music as a means to construct his sexual identity as well as his generational belonging. Through the performative practise of being fan of Lady Gaga and Madonna, Martí challenged the masculine military stereotype of the Cuban revolution, emphasizing his attachment to newer generations, aspiring for changes on the island without necessarily being politically against the goals of the revolution (Soares, 2018: 120-124). The case reported by Soares reinforces the importance of pop music as a device in teenagers’ identity construction through consumption. However, it is precisely this strong connection between youngsters and pop culture that nurture its disqualification. As Alec pointed out in his quote, it is accepted that young people use the pop as such, but it is expected that, as they grow older, their taste changes towards possibly more elaborated or complex music practises. In the same movement, teenage and pop are undervalued in the hierarchical system of social and aesthetic classification, which means that growing up should be a path towards putting pop at a distance.

The issue of age as related to music appears again in the interview given by 36-year-old Nelson. He has an administrative job at a public health

foundation in Rio de Janeiro and reports listening to music every day. In his interview, he describes an intense disagreement with his wife about music. After mentioning several times during the interview that he hates funk, especially the pop-funk performed by mainstream Brazilian artist Anitta, he explains his musical taste. In his words:

I don't like funk at all, especially the *proibidão*. In my time, funk had rap in it, a rap montage. Today you don't get montage. It is always the same pornography thing, which is highly accentuated in funk. I consider it extremely distasteful, I can't, I don't enjoy it, I don't like it. Obviously, it is played in parties and you're a bit cheerful, happy and sometimes you even dance. The rhythm is very nice, I even think the beat is nice. But it is impossible. You see this new generation contaminated by funk, Anitta. She is horrible, but is a success. That's sad! For someone used to listening to Elton John, Beatles, Bee Gees, and not to mention Guns And Roses, Aerosmith, Bon Jovi (...) My wife loves Anitta. I feel as though I have married a teenager. Today I am used to it, I don't care so much anymore. But it took me a while, because it is shit. And it is bad because she is part funk, and everyone keeps dancing, tilting their butts, I find that weird. Actually, it is democratic. She listens to funk, Anitta, on Multishow channel, when she is watching to that horrible show of hers. And she doesn't like rock. So she only hears it when I listen to rock with earplugs. She doesn't use earplugs. Really. Tolerance, right? Marriage. She can't stand it, she says it is very bad. I can't stand it.

Nelson mixes several arguments that appeared in other interviews. First, the moral issue. The main reason for his strong rejection of funk is the high sexuality of it. Although he declares ambiguously that he himself can dance at a party if it is played, assuming that "the rhythm is cool", he refuses the "pornographic" lyrics and the strange shaking butts on the dance floor. The slight contradiction between himself dancing the cool rhythm and the strangeness of the others' dance can be surpassed in his discourse, once he is worried about the lyrics. Again, the verbal interpretation of the music is the most important report element in lowering the value of a whole genre.

Second, the genre classification is done by Nelson via representative artists who are defined as "good", compared with Anitta, who is assigned the worst adjectives. He declared to liking "rock", and in the list he provides of supposedly "good" artists, several styles of pop and rock are represented, going from The Beatles to Aerosmith and to the Bee Gees. Nelson seems to operate a value hierarchy very common in some identity groups in Brazil in which some Brazilian music genres are opposed to Anglophone rock-like music.

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His preference for Anglo-American rock and pop highlights a filiation to a set of ideas related to cosmopolitanism, modernity and technology. As Regev puts it, pop-rock music developed a set of sonic techniques derived from the electric manipulation of timbres and tones provided by electric and electronic instruments and devices (2013, pp. 166-168). Hence, after a long-term process of “pop-rockification”, the atmosphere of pop-rock music became the sound of modernity, an “aesthetic cosmopolitanism” (Regev, 2013, p. 30). Although Regev doesn’t classify pop-rock as a genre, but as a “cultural convention”, Nelson seems to apply to the term “rock” a broader idea that can encompass Anglo-American pop-rock artists and groups, using this classification to put them away from the music performed by Anitta. This way of thinking allows him to split “good” (Anglophone pop-rock) and “bad” (Brazilian funk-pop) music.

The third aspect of Nelson’s narrative resounds the age-related issue. Nelson thinks it is unacceptable that his wife (presumably in her thirties like him) likes Anitta. Anitta and the pop-funk she represented should only be directed towards teenagers and her taste for it would be a sign of immaturity or underdevelopment in terms of music and, perhaps, in other realms. It is possible to speculate – although it is important to highlight that it is speculation – that part of his distaste of pop-funk artists such as Anitta has to do with this domestic disagreement, and possibly this musical conflict is surrounded by others in their partnership. Music is an element of intense home conflicts, sometimes highly disturbing ones (Trotta, 2020). The personal dimension of music taste is taken as a significant feature in the evaluation of the relationship itself, which in his case, seems to be rather disturbing for him. As Frith argues, “the point is not that we want friends and lovers like us; but we do need to know that conversation, argument, is possible” (Frith, 1996, p. 5). It is unclear if Nelson feels unable to have this taste conversation with his wife, once he disqualifies her taste as adolescent and denies any respect to the artist she admires. The issue of personal relations is entangled with negotiations of taste, which leads us to another layer in these classifications, sliding from the genres to the people who produce and like them.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to highlight that the music Brazilian people refer to as “funk” is not the 1970s African North American style known as “funk” but a variety of hip hop, notably the Miami bass style, reprocessed in Rio de Janeiro during the 1980s to become a different genre with the same name (Palombini, 2010, p. 99). Hence, the term “funk” used here is always referring to the Brazilian genre.

### THE CASE OF ‘FUNK’

If genres provide a categorization of the musical universe that helps people to define likes and dislikes, some of them are more likely to be mentioned in association with “annoying music”. In interviews done in Brazil, funk<sup>2</sup> was often cited as agent of disturbance or irritation. I cannot say that this was a total surprise, since it is widely known that funk is usually taken in Brazilian



popular music as an (almost) uncontested example of “bad music”. According to musicologist Carlos Palombini, one of the most important funk researchers in Brazil, funk is “among the most cited genres in lists of musical abominations” (Palombini, 2014, p. 320).

Brazilian funk was created in subaltern parties in the suburbs and *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro in the late 1970s, where North American soul music was played (Oliveira 2017). In a creative process of mixing and editing mostly inspired by the sound of Miami bass, young DJs elaborated remixes that changed the sound of these parties, renaming the music as “funk” and the parties themselves as *bailes funk*. Pereira de Sá (2009) points to funk in Rio as the first original electronic music created in Brazil, in the late 1980s. The parties (*bailes*) were attended by black poor youngsters and became very popular in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, since then, funk has been portrayed by media coverage since the 1990s as a music practice associated with “gangs or criminal organizations, imputations of anonymous sexual intercourse in parties, alienation, bad taste, and sexist dances, slang, and lyrics” (Freire Filho and Herschmann, 2011, p. 225). At the same time, this negative media coverage raised curiosity in other social groups, in a paradoxical movement of demonization of funk, which came together with an unintentional glamorization of the genre (Herschmann, 2005). What is interesting in this process is that, despite being acknowledged as creative and good danceable music by attendants of the *bailes*, funk has been facing a strong prejudice, being entangled with ideas about poverty, blackness, violence and explicit sexuality. Similar to the definition of social hierarchies regarding *cumbia villera* in Argentina discussed by Pablo Vila and Pablo Semán, funk is largely acknowledged as “music made by poor people and aesthetically poor” (Semán and Vila, 2011, p. 13). The entanglement between a social prejudice with aesthetic disqualification is the ground of several complaints and disagreements that surrounds funk music and the *bailes*. Moreover, attached to the strong racial prejudice that is part of daily life in Brazil, we could add that funk is recognized as “black music, made by black people”. The racialization of social segregations (Alabarces and Silba, 2018) mixing class and racial prejudices is the starting point for most depreciation of funk as music and as social movement. The significant “black” taken as a background of funk (bad) evaluation reinforces the long-time depreciation of blackness as a heritage that comes from the slavery time and is still unfortunately very present in Brazil nowadays.

The high number of interviewees who cited funk as an example while talking about “annoying music” is a symptom of this disadvantaged position

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of the genre in Brazilian shared music imagination. However, the background prejudices that feed this imaginary is not addressed in the foreground of these talks. Instead, the argument is usually directed to ethics portrayed by the lyrics, or to the dance, or at the (high) loudness funk is usually played. 68-year-old psychologist Ernani, who lives in Rio de Janeiro, mixes funk with other Brazilian genres to describe his discomfort with “today’s” music.

There was going to be the Feast of Saint John celebration in the square. But, when we got there, it was playing electronic *forró*, *pagode*, and funk. I wanted to listen to one thing and there was another, an offensive, outrageous context. Funk, for instance, and *pagode*, I consider outrageous. Both disseminate despicable human values in my opinion. In the old days, the mainstream media (40 years ago) tried to bring quality musical and cultural productions to the great masses. Humanistic values. Nowadays the mainstream media takes advantage of pretty low-quality stuff which are already successful, like *pagode*, funk, etc. and promotes that. This deeply annoys me.

The way he associates the music with several ideas about human values, mass media and violence is rather complex. The expectancy of finding specific music in a traditional popular celebration at a public space was frustrated by genres he associates with “low level” music. Although he did not develop what would be these “awful human values”, the judgement is clearly constructed over his personal ethics references. In this sense, funk is an example of this aggressive and low-quality music that media promotes. Using funk as an example of music that somehow hurts the diffuse “humanistic values” is a common development of the conversation about irritating and annoying music. Sometimes, it is described more directly as a music genre that has strong and undesirable sexism. Messias, the evangelic quoted previously, is very explicit in describing this discomfort.

Funk is 99% offensive toward women. This makes you dislike funk more because it doesn’t respect women. Funk from the favelas communities is 90% very degrading for women. And they attend the balls and even like it. For me, women attending these balls have no value at all. They follow the rhythm and the drinking. To like something that degrades you. That’s complicated!

The way he gets upset with the “demoralization” of women is slightly contradictory with his own judgment about the women that go and enjoy funk.

He sees no value in them, yet he regrets the lyrics that are putting them down. The issue here is not only the low quality of the funk music in itself, but a moral judgement about the lifestyle that is perceived as being praised by the lyrics. The stigmatization operates in a double process that homogenizes the whole genre and its audience and incorporates the prejudice that associates funk with inadequate behaviour, criminals and violence.

Funk is so widely spread in the Brazilian music market that there are several styles of funk, defined not only according to sound differences but also to the lyrics. A style known as *proibidão* (forbidden funk), for instance, presents the most aggressive and sexist lyrics. Not rarely, the narratives performed in its lyrics are descriptions of violence enacted by drug dealers in their confrontations with the police, speaking overtly about killings and fightings. Palombini and Facina define *proibidão* as “that part of funk music in which the thematic deals with life in the inferior strata of illicit substance commerce, or to the *life in the crime*” (2017, p. 349). As such, a whole explicit vocabulary of violence is applied in a rough way, emphasizing the violent lifestyle of those poor people surrounded by and involved with drug traffic and the police murdering “operations”. The moral limits are intentionally surpassed in these lyrics, which, to a great extent, collaborates to feed the stigmatization of funk as criminals’ music, lower, confrontational, dangerous. Even though these lyrics do not correspond to the totality of funk, *proibidão* is always mentioned as an example of bad quality and unbearable music experience. Some people unify all funk styles as simple variations of *proibidão*, in a simplification of the genre diversity. Notwithstanding, there are people who mentioned funk in a more nuanced way, trying to balance their distaste with and identifying differences in artists, songs, and through time. Marise is one of these interviewees who tries to separate funk in moments, where older songs were more enjoyable than present-time examples.

I like, and even enjoy funk from the beginning of the nineties, like Claudinho and Buchecha. If it is being played at a party I will dance because I like it. But nowadays funk is very offensive, mainly treating women as something unreal, as objects to be used in a pleasant way... When there are no swear words, every song sounds implicitly offensive, about using women, women have twerked, have been already used. It is very primitive in the negative sense of the word “primitive”, which is a setback. It is a cultural setback because funk didn’t begin like that. Today it has a pejorative trend especially in the matter of sex and the female position in the relationship.

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Three things are worth mentioning in her talk. First, the issue of violence. Although she seems to be aware that different styles of funk have different approaches and forms, she only recognizes songs from the past as those she could dance to and have pleasure in. It is as if older funk was not aggressive and time passing has made all artists and songs violent. Time changes our tastes and evaluations about songs, artists and genres. At the same time, past repertoires can function as a kind of archive of memories that filled our life history, our feelings and shared moments. It is easier to find interesting or enjoyable a song that has been part of a distant time, even though it could have been rather disturbing at that time. Possibly, the selective narrative Marise develop about old-time funk is an example of this distance time provides.

The second issue is related to gender. In fact, most funk lyrics are constructed on a kind of role separation between genders that puts girls and women as objects to be caught and seduced. This is a quite common masculine narrative about sex, which is conceived like a kind of hunt, where sexual intercourse with women is an achievement more than a pleasurable experience. Therefore, funk lyrics (as many mainstream pop songs) describe women frequently as an inanimate object, ready to be taken by a virile male. Marise, obviously, refuses this imaginary and rejects current funk songs. Sexism in music is a complex issue, that is usually interpreted superficially. The surface of the immediate meaning of the lyrics is often the material people use to condemn songs that have accordingly trespassed an ethic limit. While it is obvious that some lyrics really apply ideas and descriptions that are unacceptably offensive and violent against women, it is necessary to deepen the analysis incorporating the sound, the dance and the music experience as a whole in order to get a more complex picture of the way people deal with sexist lyrics. This is beyond the limits of this book. What I would like to highlight here is that people do feel offended by lyrics and when they do so, they reject the song, the artist and eventually the genre as a whole, many times reinforcing prejudices and segregations.

The last thing I would like to point out in her talk is the issue of primitivism. Sexism and violence are understood by her as elements of non-civilized code of behaviour, defined negatively as primitive, and retrograde. The issue of civilization as an adequate lifestyle opposed to animalistic acts that ought to be controlled both individually and socially is a permanent concern in daily life, arising often in music experiences. It could be said here that Marise is making a direct association between the whole package the funk brings to the surface – entangling racial, social, generational and moral issues –

and the primitivism, in another layer of prejudice against funk and its fans. Although I think this would not be totally wrong, it would be preferable to interpret her feelings towards funk as an elaboration that merges moral and ethical concerns with embodied attraction and repulsion to funk as pleasurable dance music. Funk has become a symbol of bad evaluation, as well as a hub of prejudices. In this sense, a very interesting analysis on Facebook comments about the genre is provided by Pereira de Sá and Cunha (2017, p. 162), who found that arguments against funk could be grouped into four thematic axes: “(1) racial prejudice; (2) socio-territorial prejudice; (3) aesthetic critique and despise for funk as a cultural manifestation; and (4) popularization of funk as a ‘threat’ to the country’s progress”. In their research, they highlight how people attack funk as a way to dismiss the social group it represents, mixing social and racial prejudice with aesthetic disqualification.

What is important to our debate about annoying music is how people use musical taste to build social borders and to lower other people. Nelson’s complaints about Anitta, in a sense, put together both the set of commercial stereotypes of the artificiality of pop music and the poor quality of funk as bad quality music produced by “lower people”. As Julio Mendivil (2016, p. 37) puts it, “if music transmits effectively group or cultural values, ranting against a type of music, ridiculing it or aesthetically disavowing is a very productive way of belittling those who produce it and those who listen to it”. In other words, music taste struggles between individuals or social groups are ways of dealing with broader disagreements, conflicts, and disengagements. When music annoys, something does not work well in interhuman interaction.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Based on questions arising from conversations about “annoying music”, it became clear that the dimension of taste is configured as a guiding axis of the musical experience. Likes and dislikes are ways of socially performing one’s individuality, evaluating the pertinence of the music one listens to, morally judging the lyrics and listeners of certain songs, and recognizing oneself as an integral or dissonant part of certain ideas and social groups. People use music to share thoughts and values, ideas and actions. But also to elaborate on such thoughts and codes of conduct. Liking a song is much more than emotionally identifying with that set of sounds and sung words, it is interacting with a complex entanglement of ideas, thoughts and moralities inscribed in such codes, critically elaborating a positive judgment about them. And disliking is also all this with an inverted sign.

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It is also important to highlight that liking or not liking are not exclusive and rigid poles that result from a consistent, coherent and finalized evaluation. They are elements of a process that often take surprising positions, that dissolve, are relativized and change over time. This “time” can be measured in years and decades of life, but also in the short duration of a recording performed in a certain context. Recovering the curious description of Nelson, who seems to be on the verge of separating from his wife for not being able to accept her liking for the singer Anitta but who at the same time considers the funk rhythm “cool to dance to”, the elaborations of musical taste can assume contradictory contours and be subject to many relativizations. In these clashes, we process ideas and transform our lives. Talking about musical taste is talking about ways of thinking, reinforcing, tensioning, problematizing and modifying ideas about life. ■

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# Thinking the popular from an *other* place: Jesús Martín-Barbero's proposal and contribution to the theoretical debate on popular culture

*Pensar lo popular desde un lugar otro:  
La propuesta de Jesús Martín-Barbero y su  
aporte al debate teórico sobre la cultura popular*

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## ABSTRACT

Jesús Martín-Barbero is a Latin American reference for communication and culture studies. His work enabled introducing in the debate a historical perspective and a conceptual *map* of the references and disputes around the popular. The hypothesis of this text is that Martín-Barbero managed—and this was his greatest contribution—to shift the place of the popular from the ancestral/native to a place that is more plebeian, more bastard, more suspicious, and more grounded in the Latin American reality of his time: he placed the popular close to the world of the masses. This text revisits elements discussed in the doctoral thesis and, thus, recovers two main reflections on popular culture in Martín-Barbero's thought: the historical-genealogical view of the popular, which this author addresses in *De los medios a las mediaciones*, and its shift to the place of the masses and its implications, also addressed in this work, from which some conclusions are drawn.

**Keywords:** popular culture, mass culture, Jesús Martín-Barbero

## RESUMO

Jesús Martín-Barbero ha sido un referente latinoamericano en los estudios de comunicación y cultura. Su trabajo permitió colocar en el debate una mirada histórica y un *mapa* conceptual de los referentes y disputas en torno a lo popular. La hipótesis de este trabajo es que Martín-Barbero consiguió, y ese fue su mayor aporte, desplazar el lugar de lo popular desde lo ancestral/originario hasta un lugar más plebeyo, más bastardo, más sospechoso y más anclado con la realidad latinoamericana de su momento: colocó lo popular cerca del mundo masivo. El presente texto retoma elementos elaborados en la tesis doctoral y, a partir de ello, recupera dos reflexiones centrales sobre la cultura popular en el pensamiento de Martín-Barbero: la mirada histórica y genealógica sobre lo popular, que este autor trabajó en su libro *De los medios a las mediaciones*, y su desplazamiento hacia el lugar de lo masivo y las implicaciones que esto tiene, que también se desarrolla con extensión en la misma publicación, a partir de lo cual se ofrecen algunas conclusiones.

**Palabras clave:** cultura popular, cultura masiva, Jesús Martín-Barbero

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We believed we knew the meaning of popular, communication, culture, miscegenation, but then we were reminded that these concepts are historical. That the concepts we had as premises suddenly stopped “being concepts to become problems.”

*William Fernando Torres (1998, our translation)*

**T**HIS ARTICLE IS part of a long dialogue with the Colombian-Spanish author Jesús Martín-Barbero (1937, Spain, 2021, Colombia). In 1987, the publisher Gustavo Gili decided to publish his book *De los medios a las mediaciones* [Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations, SAGE Publications, London, 1993] in a collection directed by Miquel de Moragas, which increased the references to Martín-Barbero’s thought. Latin American academic discussion was already focused on the role of culture, mediations and hegemony, but the publication of Martín-Barbero’s book was a crucial to set aside agendas related to the nature, specificity, and technology of the media, and again raised questions about certain borders that previously seemed clearly defined, as pointed out by William Fernando Torres (1998). The first version of this text was published in 2019, in the journal *Encuentros Latinoamericanos*.

Martín-Barbero’s dialogue during the 1980s and 1990s was very fruitful to give rise to a historical view and recover a conceptual *map* of the references and disputes around the popular, but my hypothesis is that Martín-Barbero managed—and this was his greatest contribution—to shift the place of the popular from the ancestral/native to a place that is more plebeian, more bastard, more suspicious and more grounded in the Latin American reality of his time: he shifted the popular close to the world of the masses, “made of clay and cane, but with television transistors and antennas” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. xiii, our translation).

This text revisits elements from my doctoral thesis (Marroquín, 2015) and, thus, recovers two main reflections on popular culture in Martín-Barbero’s thought: first, the historical-genealogical view of the popular, which this author addresses in his book *De los medios a las mediaciones*, and, second, its shift to the place of the masses and its implications, also addressed in this work, from which some conclusions are drawn. Thus, I am going to address the first.

## THE HISTORICAL SHIFT: THE POPULAR INTRODUCED IN GENEALOGY

*The expression “living fossils” could be adopted, but mainly understood, by those dedicated to studying folklore. Because, just as pits conserve an archaic fauna, very important for understanding primitive zoomorphic groups, popular memory*

*similarly preserves primitive mental forms that left no mark on history, precisely because they could not be expressed in durable forms (documents, monuments, writings, etc.). Even today, we can find, in folklore, forms that belong to different eras, forms that represent archaic mental stages. Close to a legend with a relatively recent historical substratum or a popular song with contemporary inspiration, we can find medieval, pre-Christian or even prehistoric forms. Obviously, folklorists know these facts. Nevertheless, I dare say that few understand them.*

Mircea Eliade (our translation)

As Eliade points out, the universe of the popular and folklore is a sort of living fossil. It has ancestral elements that refuse to disappear and that are alive in various gestures, in music, in religious rituals, in forms of entertainment; they are rituals of resistance to cultural impositions, but also of complicity with the hegemonic forms of culture. According to Jesús Martín-Barbero, archaic pre-modernity, modernity and its utopias, and cynical and disillusioned post-modernity survive at the same time in popular culture. These reflections were analyzed during the 1970s and became part of the academic debate when *De los medios a las mediaciones* was published.

This book was published in 1987 by the publisher Gustavo Gili, in Mexico, as part of the *Mass Media* collection that is dedicated to addressing communication themes and was directed by the Catalan professor Miquel de Moragas.

The reception of the book exceeded all expectations. Colombian researcher William Fernando Torres recalls this work as “a time bomb” that “circulated among the most experienced readers and among unprepared ones, also among the most competitive colleagues. A few days later and with the efficiency of clandestinity, a pirated edition appeared in the hands of the traveling booksellers of the universities” (Torres, 1998, p. 60, our translation).

*De los medios a las mediaciones* was divided into three parts. The first, entitled “People and masses in culture: the landmarks of the debate,” deals with the review of certain categories and how different schools of thought placed it.

In the genealogical process developed in the first part of his book, Martín-Barbero also divided his reflection into three times: first, the people, in which he reflects on *the popular* based on the theoretical categories that had already been discussed in the Latin American academe; second, something that in my opinion constitutes his contribution in relation to thinking about the popular, that this category cannot be thought from outside of the masses and of the theoretical functionalism that was often discarded too quickly. In this time, the author reviews the constitution of mass society and *mass* phenomena and, finally, the historical construction of a *massive popular* cultural matrix. In a Benjaminian exercise that

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ends up constituting the popular in a constellation, he goes through history in the opposite direction to find, with Walter Benjamin, that “hope was given to us by the desperate” (1996, p. 102, our translation) or to discover “the popular forms of hope,” as he himself will say, referring to the words of the Brazilian theologian Hugo Assman (1975, p. 263-268, our translation). In this first part of the text, I seek to recover his genealogy on the terms *people* and *popular*.

In María Moliner’s *Diccionario de uso del español*, popular is an adjective with five definitions: “of the people (social class); what is within the reach of people with less economic resources; the person who has many supporters, admirers or sympathizers among the people; by extension also those who are in all social classes or in a certain circle of people; applied to things, very widespread among the people” (Moliner, 2007, p. 2553, our translation) and, finally, it refers to the Popular Party in Spain. But, then, how did we come to constitute the popular as an adjective that has all these definitions? Martín-Barbero presents the debate from the 16th century:

In its “origin,” the debate was configured by two major movements: one that contradictorily sets in motion the myth of the people in politics (Enlightenment) and culture (Romantics); and one that, merging politics and culture, affirms the modern validity of the popular (anarchists) or denies it by its “overcoming” in the proletariat (Marxists) (1998, p. 3, our translation).

The map is constructed based on the recovery of these dialogues in which enlightenment and romanticism are opposed; on the intellectual proposal of anarchists and Marxists; and, finally, on the more contemporary analysis of historians and academics of the twentieth century, who direct their gaze to the cultural processes of the Middle Ages and propose a new reading of the popular from there.

The genealogical journey begins in the search for an origin that, in fact, is not origin. Martín-Barbero suggests that the first debate that built the current notion of people is found in the discussion between the Enlightened and the Romantics. Three thinkers begin the debate on the concepts of people and popular: Machiavelli (1469-1527), Hobbes (1578-1679), and Rousseau (1712-1778). In them, the people “matter as a general will,” but what is produced is a device of “abstract inclusion and concrete exclusion” (1998, p. 7, our translation). The bourgeoisie uses the people as a category that legitimizes a power different from that of the sovereigns. If they were chosen by God, the new rulers will be elected by the *people*. However, the people will not be defined by what they are, but by what they lack, by what they do not have: wealth, political office and education. The view of the popular and the people begins its construction in a negative manner.

According to Martín-Barbero, a slightly less pessimistic conception of the people can be found in the Romantic movement of the eighteenth century. Somehow, the Romantics try to undo this negative view of the popular. In genealogical terms, the Romantics will consider the popular as something immoral or aesthetically despicable<sup>1</sup>. The terms *folklore* and *volkskunde* are constituted at this time to allude to a scope in which academic reflection deals with these discussions. The author shows that the Romantics recover from the popular that which comes from its originality, its purity, its non-contamination, and then “by denying cultural circulation, what is actually denied is the historical process of creation of the popular and the social meaning of cultural differences” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 11, our translation), that is, the Romantics, by idealizing the popular and transforming it into an archive, past, heritage, folklore that is only in museums, end up also denying the living, real, quotidian *popular* and in this operation that relegates the people to the ancestral past, the Romantics end up approaching the Enlightened.

While writing his reflection, this philosopher was aware that a deeply Althusserian view of Marxism was being strengthened in certain countries and academic proposals, that of reducing the processes of mass communication to *ideological apparatuses of the State*. Martín-Barbero recovers another view of the popular: that of the anarchists. Particularly the proposal of the Spanish anarchists of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century<sup>2</sup>. Of them, he will say that they are capable of standing between romantic affirmation and Marxist denial. According to Bakunin, for example, the people are not the proletariat, but, rather, this mass of the disinherited, in which alienation and utopia coexist at the same time: “The people are the healthy part of society, that which in the midst of misery knew how to keep intact the demand for justice and the capacity for struggle” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 14-15, our translation). This enabled anarchists to have a more complex view of the popular, not only as a space for manipulation, but also for conflict.

Before the anarchist proposal, Martín-Barbero reviews how “orthodox Marxism will deny both the theoretical and political validity [of the people]” (1998, p. 19, our translation). The analysis of all of them indicates that Marxism contributes an element to the analysis: it transforms the people into a concept associated with social class<sup>3</sup>, but this in itself is reductionist, to that extent, the strategy of struggle is placed on a single plane, the economic, and the anarchist proposal related to culture is forgotten.

The people appear alienated, as a non-subject that allowed itself to be ideologized throughout history. What are the consequences of this operation? For the analysis, what emerges is *the unrepresented popular*, that is, that which does not fit in the working class: women, young people, retirees, invalids and indigenous people. This denial of the cultural brings to light

<sup>1</sup> Jesús Martín-Barbero continues the historization conducted by Raymond Williams in *Culture and society, 1780-1950. From Coleridge to Orwell*, and recovers Herder's 1784 text, in which he suggests that it is necessary to “accept the existence of a plurality of cultures.”

<sup>2</sup> In Martín-Barbero's biography, the Spanish Civil War has a particular importance. Although anarchism has existed in Spain since long before, since the First Republic (1873-1874), soon after the discussions that occurred in the First International (1864). Spanish anarchism is strongly influenced by Bakunin. Faced with the vision of history governed by the laws of historical materialism and class struggle, he proclaimed the freedom of the subject, capable of changing the forces of history. I want to highlight two elements of Spanish anarchism: the first, the cultural movement that the anarchists developed in Spain, whose aim was to spread not only their political ideals, but also education and culture in the working popular classes. The cultural works of anarchism were supported by intellectuals such as Pío Baroja, Azorín, Ramón del Valle-Inclán and Blasco Ibáñez; anarchists held competitions in literature, philosophy, poetry and theater, and established Barcelona as the center of this cultural effervescence. The second element was the importance of spreading anarchist ideals through (mass) media, such as the use of schools, theaters and athenaeums to disseminate their newspapers, but they also used serialized novels, being very successful among the workers. (Litvak, 2001).

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<sup>3</sup> Although Martín-Barbero does not specify the Marxist schools, through this research it is possible to affirm that, in this case, his criticism of the Marxist notion of the popular refers essentially to Althusserian Marxism, in vogue during those years. On the one hand, he himself prepared his teaching degree program thesis on Althusser and Karel Kosik to be able to enter Leuven. On the other hand, Althusser's interpretation defended the recovery of a scientific Marxism, and at some point in his approaches, he distanced himself from the readings made by intellectuals such as Gramsci and Lukács and questioned concepts such as alienation, subject and history, which are much closer to cultural reflection than what Martín-Barbero poses in *Dos meios às mediações*.

<sup>4</sup> For his work, Martín-Barbero uses the French version of the text: J. Le Goff. *Les Marginaux et les exclus dans l'histoire* (Paris: UGE, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Even though Martín-Barbero only revisits to some elements of this historian's research, in my opinion he highlights a common element in this scholar's itinerary and proposal. The main books in which Le Goff addresses these themes are, in my opinion: *Mercadores e banqueiros da Idade Média*, (Madri: Alianza, 2010); *Os intelectuais na Idade Média* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2001); *A bolsa e a vida. Economia e religião na Idade Média* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 1986); *Homens e mulheres da Idade Média* (México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2013); *As Raízes Medievais da Europa* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2003) and the work written in partnership with Nicolás Truong, *Uma história do corpo na Idade Média* (Barcelona: Paidós Ibérica, 2005).

an inability to assume the symbolic thickness of culture and think about difference, otherness.

In the 1980s, slowly but forcefully, a discussion that sought to overcome the dichotomies between structures and agents was at the center of the debate in social sciences. Disciplines such as history “had begun to distance themselves from the analytical principles on which they had consolidated their supremacy, at least intellectually, that is, the preference for mass sources, their quantitative treatment and the constitution of series, to benefit other approaches, which favored collective representations over objective classifications, singular appropriations over statistical distributions, and conscious strategies over determinations unknown by the individual” (Chartier, 2011, p. 7-17, our translation).

There is also a central approach: in order to understand how the social sciences and, especially, history established the category of the popular, Martín-Barbero approaches the time “when, for the West, the popular constitutes culture: the Middle Ages.” And, to this end, he is based on the French historian Jacques Le Goff, whose text *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*<sup>4</sup> had been published in Spanish by Taurus in 1983 (Le Goff, 1983).

Le Goff approaches the Middle Ages from a new perspective. It is no longer that time questioned by its delay, of silences, of inquisition, but a time that, beyond the history of the winners, narrates the profound richness of a quotidian life full of exchanges and inventions. An era very close to that “lost modernity” of which Latin America is part, and in this operation that implies, according to Le Goff, making *cultural history* lies “the opposition between erudite culture and popular culture” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 85, our translation).

The French historian uses two movements for his analysis: confrontation and exchange. In the Middle Ages studied by Le Goff, *the popular* is constituted through conflict and dialogue<sup>5</sup>.

Two more scholars are mentioned. One of them is the Russian Mikhail Bakhtin, with *Popular culture in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance. The context of François Rabelais* (1987) addresses what is strange about popular culture, “what is parallel to the official, what is other” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 87, our translation). From Bakhtin, Martín-Barbero recovers his way of placing the popular as a cultural plane opposed to the official one. Bakhtin places a particular *space*, that of the public square, which is the place where the people have the main voice. The square is the open space where everyone fits: speeches, trading, theater, everyday life. He adds to his analysis the category of *a time*, that of carnival as a reaffirmation of the people's body and its moods. Carnival is the most important time in the square, it is a time of exception; after working time and harvesting, carnival



is that brief moment when dancing and pleasure are allowed. Two devices appear in the text: laughter and the mask.

While in Bakhtin's oeuvre popular culture is placed as different, other, strange, in the work of the Italian Carlo Ginzburg we find the resistances of the popular culture and the capacities that were constituted through that to assume the conflict in an active and intuitive way.

The genealogy that Martín-Barbero proposes considers the contributions of other social scientists: Michel de Certeau, who pointed to the danger of making think that the only intelligibility in practices is given by the processes of reproduction, and two representatives of British cultural studies, Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, and a French, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. These authors will lead him to affirm that popular life is familial, in group, community, vicinal, with a mixed morality: contestant cynicism, elementary religiosity, living one day at a time, improvisation and meaning of pleasure.

Based on these authors, illuminating the itinerary that Martín-Barbero builds, is the Italian Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937)<sup>6</sup>. According to his reading, in proposing the concept of hegemony, Gramsci places the superstructure at the center of the discussion, that is, the sphere of the cultural dimension and, in some way, of the class dimension of popular culture.

The concept of *hegemony* [makes it] possible to think the process of social domination not as an imposition from an *outside* and without *subjects*, but as a process in which the class becomes hegemonic to the extent that it represents interests that also recognize the subaltern classes in some way as their own. And "to the extent" means here that hegemony does not *exist*; in fact, it is permanently made and unmade and remade in a "lived process," made not only of strength but also of meaning, of appropriation of the meaning of power, of seduction and complicity. This implies a defunctionalization of ideology (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 99-100, our translation).

Ideology is not something that is outside and that is imposed by coercion, but something that is within the popular, perhaps that is why Gramsci says that "the unorganizable part of public opinion (especially women, where the female vote exists) is so large that it always makes possible the booms and electoral coups where the sensationalist press and the radio are widely disseminated" (Gramsci, 1981, p. 38, our translation). Martín-Barbero points out that if Gramsci left any heritage, it was the need to pay attention to the weave, that is, to create the popular "as a use and not as an origin, as a fact and not as an essence, as a relational position and not as a substance" (Cirese apud Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 100, our translation). However, this is not possible;

<sup>6</sup> A Marxist theorist, politician and journalist, Gramsci was arrested in November 1926 and imprisoned until 1934, when he was freed with a probation order because of his illnesses. He died in 1937, and his texts were published ten years later, starting in 1948, in editions that began to circulate until in the 1970s they became a fundamental point of the discussions of the academic left (Rosengarten, n.d.).

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therefore, I try to review the other concept based on which the category I deal with is built: *the massive*.

### THE STRUCTURAL SHIFT: FROM THE CULTURAL ADJECTIVE POPULAR TO THE SUBSTANTIVE OF MASSIVE POPULAR

Perhaps the main boldness of the Spanish-Colombian thinker was to insist that the popular, through the constitution of the cultural industry, shifted its fossil *life*—to use Eliade’s term—to this ambiguous and bastard place of the market, to the mass media.

At the end of the nineteenth century, dazzling new technologies of reproduction are within the reach of Western societies. The first of these is photography. Even though Louis Daguerre (1787-1851) considers that it was invented in 1839, the mass diffusion of this medium will only take place from 1888, amid the industrial era, when George Eastman invents the Kodak camera and begins the manufacture of film rolls that put photography within the reach of many. A few years later, in 1895, brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière surprised the world with a new proposal: cinema. The faceless publics, the large crowds and the masses began to emerge, seduced by the proposal of new consumptions that would end up supporting fascist political movements or exuberant multitudinous movements that were difficult to control. It is not by chance—as pointed out by intellectuals such as Eduardo Gruner—that the rise of cinema coincides with the rise of Marxism and psychoanalysis (Pinto, 2007).

It was precisely at this time that the terms “of the masses” and “mass culture” see their greatest dissemination. In order to understand this concept, the traditional dictionary is of little use, because it refers more to the physical magnitude associated with the matter or to the mixture of flour with water and yeast than to the crowd, which it mentions briefly. However, I want to return to the *mainstream* concept that is available on *Wikipedia*:

**Masses:** In Political Sciences, Sociology and Constitutional Law, masses or the masses refer to a collective subject in certain manifestations of social behavior, mainly to describe forms of gregarious behavior, as opposed to individual behavior. It is often used in the plural form (the masses), and in opposition to the concept of elites. Usually, it is not used neutrally, but with a different semantic value according to the ideological intention with which the term is used: both derogatory and laudatory. It is closely related with other concepts, such as people, crowd, plebs, rabble or scum; and with the Greek expression *hoi polloi* (οἱ πολλοί — “the many” or “the majority” —, the basis of democracy or power of the people — with *demos* translated as people) as opposed

to *hoi olligoi* (οἱ ὀλίγοι — “the few” or “the minority” —, the basis of oligarchy), both coming from Pericles’ funeral speech and, the first, widely used as an elitist topic in Anglo-Saxon culture since the early nineteenth century (“Massas”, 2013).

In an entry linked to the previous one, *Wikipedia* states that the concept of “mass society” was born with the advent of industrial society (“Sociedade de massa”, 2013), and refers to groups of individuals equal to one another, one of the ideals of the new societies that opposed the Ancien Régime. However, this expression came to mean the concern of the elites with these crowds lacking in culture and very difficult to control; and as pointed out in *Wikipedia*, it is not usual to use this term neutrally.

Another dictionary that presents a very widespread definition is the *Online Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, which presents the following about “mass culture”:

**Mass culture:** A set of cultural values and ideas that arise from common exposure of a population to the same cultural activities, communications media, music and art, etc. Mass culture becomes possible only with modern communications and electronic media. A mass culture is transmitted to individuals, rather than arising from people’s daily interactions, and therefore lacks the distinctive content of cultures rooted in community and region. Mass culture tends to reproduce the liberal value of individualism and to foster a view of the citizen as consumer (Drislane & Parkinson, 2002).<sup>7</sup>

Mass culture, in this definition, is produced exclusively through the “modern” means of communication, electronic communications, and the fact that it is pointed out as an opposite or substitute for people’s daily lives. Martín-Barbero’s genealogy enable us to establish the concept of masses and the massive in a dimension that encompasses the contradictions and complexities of the term.<sup>8</sup>

The idea of mass society is much older than manuals for communication scholars usually inform. In order to make technology the necessary and sufficient cause of the new society, most of these manuals situate the advent of the theory of mass society between the 1930s and 1940s, ignoring the historical, social and political matrices of a concept that, in 1930, was already almost a century old. Perhaps an image is adequate: the development of the theory of mass society during the nineteenth century is that of a movement that goes from fear to disappointment and from there to pessimism, but preserving disgust (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 27, our translation).

Following this statement, it is observed that the concept of *mass society* is born with modernity, with serial reproduction, with industrialization, in addition

<sup>7</sup>“Mass culture: a set of cultural ideas and values that arise from the common exposure of a population to the same type of cultural activities, media, music, art, etc. Mass culture is only possible through electronic media and modern communications. Mass culture is transmitted to people to replace everyday interactions and, therefore, lacks the content of cultures rooted in a community or region. Mass culture tends to reproduce the liberal value of individualism and to stimulate a view of the citizen as a consumer.” [our translation].

<sup>8</sup>Later works analyze other genealogies. Some fundamental ones are: the British reading developed by Francis Mulhern in English cultural studies. In the text *Culture/Metaculture*, Mulhern establishes the concept of the creation of the *kulturkritik*, which comes mainly from German academia, and also includes important thinkers from other countries such as Ortega and Gasset, Julien Benda and Virginia Woolf. The most philosophical approach is found in Peter Sloterdijk’s *Die Verachtung der Massen* [Contempt for the masses]. *Essay on cultural struggles in modern society* (2001). Two quite political approaches are those of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in the work *Empire* (2005), initially published in English in 2000, with the proposal and analysis of the category of *crowd*, a concept to think about a global order permeated by networks of communication, control and migrations of different types; and the work *A razão populista* (2005), by the great Argentine theorist, Ernesto Laclau, who makes his own review of the defamation of the concept of *masses* and of the construction of the category of *people* to think about populism as a political practice. All texts are subsequent to Martín-Barbero’s initial genealogy and deserve a comprehensive review of the novelties they propose.

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to arising from fear, disappointment, pessimism and disgust, from the urgency to think how the new bourgeoisie will understand the hegemonic processes to control any revolution that occurs after the one it started. If, as Deleuze points out, “genealogy not only interprets, but also values” (Deleuze, 2016, p. 14, our translation), this dismantling of origins enables Martín-Barbero to show the fears of an academy formed from the scale of values of the elites and the reasons that prevent discovering in the masses gestures of goodness, intelligence and taste.

Martín-Barbero divides his review on “the masses” into five times. First, the more sociological approach that enables, with Alexis de Tocqueville, the discovery of the crowd as a central place for a policy that establishes a certain type of democratic regime, such as that of the United States; second, the time linked to crowd psychology, greatly influenced by the predecessors and theorists of psychoanalysis, in which authors such as Tarde or Freud review a certain type of feeling associated with the masses, their hysteria, their feelings, the possible manipulation and distrust of the elites; third, the most philosophical time in which some thinkers such as Ortega and Gasset articulate a metaphysics of the man of the masses and name the malaise that with their visibility was installed in modern society; fourth, a review based on the new functionalist theories of communication enables Martín-Barbero to carry out a risky but original operation, which consists in tracing a route of union between some massive gestures and the survival of the popular; fifth, he dedicates an entire chapter to thinking about one of the most important theories linked to the mass, that of the Frankfurt School, especially Adorno and Benjamin, but also based on four later thinkers: Edgar Morin, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard and Jürgen Habermas.

Therefore, the originality of this author’s thought lies in this intersection, in this Benjaminian constellation that enables him to reflect on the popular by adding to this concept, indissolubly, a category that had previously been considered opposite: the massive. The constellation is the model that Benjamin proposes for the study of human phenomena, especially history. What he intends is for scholars to approach the phenomena, the facts, and through them, without forgetting them, without diluting them in a system, show a configuration, a mosaic. The important point here is that the phenomenon maintains its independence, that it is very clear that it is not in continuity with others, that it does not end up distorted by the whole. What Benjamin called the “salvation” or “redemption” of the consistent phenomenon is to show it in a whole that does not go over it and that can even do without it. Benjamin insists that the phenomenon be saved, that it remain recognizable, that it not end up lost in the tide of what is, because if it happens, we will have betrayed the process of knowledge. This is the path that runs through history in the opposite direction, reflects on

the erasure, on this erasure that has been the intellectuals' condemnation in relation to mass communication as the destroyer of popular culture and, based on that, reviews what we have become.

As a method, genealogy shows the knowledge/power based on which the categories we use to name the world are constructed. In the case of the *massive popular*, its historical construction obeyed political interests and made possible many of the cultural confusions and interventions. The popular and the massive were conceived through dichotomies that were hard to see; we lacked the view of a genealogist who would make us reflect on the internal struggles that constituted these immutable meanings with which we have worked for years.

We think within certain traditions that think us: we cannot escape them. Therefore, Martín-Barbero's contribution consists in not distancing from the philosophical tradition, nor staying only in this tradition, but, rather, circulating in some other places and assuming the various schools of thought, situating them in dialogue, thinking negatively, committing the heresy of uniting the *non-unifiable* and introducing the operation of miscegenation to explode the traditional categories. Thus, it is possible to contribute with a new and delimited point of view of the current reality.

### INITIAL CONCLUSIONS: THE DIALOGICAL SHIFT

Currently, the massive popular is a category that has already separated from its author to contribute to a social thought that reflects on contemporary cultural movements and the influence of mass phenomena as a sphere that constitutes the popular. In addition, the massive popular begins to have several parents who credit themselves with having created the term, but, as I have shown, they are all subsequent to the initial approach made by Martín-Barbero. The influence of this category of research is remarkable in the fields of cultural studies, communication and begins to contribute to philosophy, mainly linked to aesthetic thinking.

Latin American academe had an intense discussion about the popular in the 1990s. Two years after the publication of *De los medios a las mediaciones*, in 1989, anthropologist Néstor García Canclini published a new book, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. The approaches of this analysis of the forms of modernity in Mexico, Argentina and Brazil contributed to the debate on the massive popular.

This work tried not only to describe the cultural diversity increasingly evident in Latin America, but also to advance in the explanatory field and in the hermeneutic capacity, that is, to become useful to understand the meaning

of this cultural diversity that was found. According to Martín-Barbero, García Canclini's book "undoubtedly marks a point of arrival in this journey and a milestone in Latin American cultural studies. And it is mainly because it helps us to think the difference not on the sidelines, but through debate with modernity, transforming this debate into an occasion and a way to access the most radical issues and our crises" (Martín-Barbero, 1991, our translation).

In the mid-1990s, the American journalist and sociologist James Lull used Martín-Barbero's proposal to analyze what he called "popular cultural capital: black gold," in which he addressed the transnational construction of racial stereotypes associated with black culture (1997, p. 115). There is one more element in these reflections: melodrama as a semiotic device of the popular, as a device that configures and evokes.

The first decade of the twenty-first century (from the beginning of the century, when he was in Guadalajara, until 2010, when he was already in Colombia) can be called a period of balance in Martín-Barbero's thought. On the one hand, we already have a tradition in the field of communication and, on the other, an author who begins to be revisited by other researchers and analyzed through a joint review. Javeriana University's journal *Signo y pensamiento* issue 41, 2002, had the title "De los medios a las mediaciones? Viejos itinerarios, nuevas discusiones" [From the media to mediations? Old itineraries, new discussions]. In the introduction to the monograph, the editors pointed out that there were issues that had a particular persistence and that "today they keep all their burden and keep the itineraries of reflection in place, in an era of media modernity [...] in this context of changes, frustrations and validities we wanted the issue to ask if, given the current media and technological hegemony, what remains for us to do is the opposite of what Martín-Barbero has been proposing" ("Para nossos leitores", 2002, p. 5, our translation). The answers, in addition to being contradictory to the original proposals, are the continuation of a dialogue that remains in place.

This conception was also worked on in the Argentine academy by the team of researchers led by sociologist Pablo Alabarces, who pointed out in a 2008 work the following:

The reception of Barbero's book [sic] was painful: quickly relieved of the critical impetus of the sixties and seventies, our Latin American academy seemed to favor a more obvious reading, which was on the sidelines of Barbero and with ill will: the popular was in the masses... and there it was well guarded. When Canclinian hybridity reconciled all the fragments of our neoconservative postmodernity, the nineties became definitively neo-populist, in a paradoxical celebration:

the nineties were – could be – neo-populist because the people no longer existed (Alabarces, 2008, p. 18, our translation).

The concern of this Argentine thinker to recover the complexity of the thought about the people and the popular insists on the necessity to shun any simplification. To this end, he proposes two concepts to guide his work: mediations and resistances. The first will work on the contribution of Martín-Barbero<sup>9</sup>. Although Alabarces insisted on the need to think the popular, he also recovered the demand that, since Gramsci, has become clear: to suspect automatic attributions of meaning and easy reductionisms related to the popular.

The concept of mediations as a basis for discussions through anthropology and communication was also recovered in the work of Lluís Duch and Albert Chillón, who reviewed the discussion on mediation through cinema and art, to philosophy. In the text, the authors showed Martín-Barbero's contribution to the discussion of mediations through the media (Duch & Chillón, 2012).

In June 2008, *Revista Latinoamericana de Comunicación, Chasqui*, from Ecuador, dedicated a monograph to Martín-Barbero; in its editorial, he was pointed out as “one of the most active and prolific Latin American thinkers, from time to time he gives us new studies and advances in his thought in the form of articles, books and lectures. We have seen that even after more than three decades of communicative research, their first proposals have not been exhausted; in fact, they have adjusted and adapted to social transformations” (“Carta para nossos leitores”, 2008, p. 1, our translation). In 2008, the journal *Anthropos*, from Barcelona, also dedicated a monograph, in which they pointed out that Martín-Barbero “moves from philosophy—from its themes and authors—to the social and communication sciences according to the peculiar conception of Latin America [...] and in this coming and going from darkness to light, intellectual and communicative clarity happens. There is the discovery of an original contribution from Latin America: a new theory of communication and the process of liberation as awareness raising” (“Editora”, 2008, p. 5, our translation).

Much of his thought was systematized in fourteen books, eight coordinations, about two hundred articles in academic journals, more than one hundred and fifty lectures around the world. In 2022, due to his death, discussions, congresses and seminars multiplied, which shows how his discussions are still current.

Although Martín-Barbero did not mention the word “reification” in his reflections on popular culture, it is possible to argue that this concept is at the bottom of his reflection, mainly because of his insistence on showing these *forgetfulnesses* that made us understand the cultural sphere as something that separates what should be united: that is, a methodological means to *historicize*

<sup>9</sup>“The notion of *mediations* refers us to the field defined by Jesús Martín-Barbero twenty years ago, in 1987, it seems impossible to address Latin American studies on popular culture and mass culture without this reference. However, the notion has lost nothing of its original inaccuracy, on the contrary, it has only increased it: we count eighteen definitions of mediation in Martín-Barbero's original text, and any post-Barberian literature review only adds inaccuracies and metaphors. In this last instance, the Barberian concept of mediation is another fold in the series that tries to define the relations between structure and superstructure avoiding the *determination in the last instance* and, with it, *reflex temptation*” (Alabarces, 2008, p. 23-24, our translation).



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<sup>10</sup>Here again appears an insistence that is not named, but which is associated with the concerns of other philosophers, Nietzsche with genealogy, Foucault with archaeology, Zea with the history of ideas or Ellacuría with historization as a method.

the constitution of the popular<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, his work, at various times, argued against the dualistic reason that “inevitably transforms the massive into processes of cultural degradation” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. xxix, our translation) and that makes homogeneous that which, in fact, has many different aspects, such as the conceptions about culture, people and mass. This is the shift: from adjective to noun. From communication to philosophy, to understand the reifications that live in the popular by naming it, but also by facing the voracious capitalism into which we were cast, as Heidegger would say.

In March 2014, a group of academics from El Salvador and Colombia proposed to nominate Jesús Martín-Barbero as a candidate for the Prince of Asturias award in the area of communication and human sciences. Today the award is called *Princess of Asturias*, and has been awarded, since 1981, to the person, group of people or institution whose creative or research work represents a relevant contribution to universal culture in these fields. The first winner was the Spanish philosopher María Zambrano.

After deliberation, the jury awarded the prize to Joaquín Lavado, known as Quino, an Argentine cartoonist known worldwide for his character Mafalda, the rebellious girl who has combined political analysis and existential discourse since the 1970s. Beyond the anecdote, I would like to point out that, as part of the support for the candidate, the commission managed to obtain, in less than a month, 57 letters of support that came from more than fifty institutions including universities, intellectuals, and communication and journalism organizations in Ibero-America. Among the countries that supported the candidate are Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Spain, the United States, El Salvador, Guatemala, Ecuador, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Peru, Puerto Rico and Venezuela. The institutions and researchers expressed in these letters the centrality of the work *De los medios a las mediaciones* in the epistemic debate in the field of communication and its contribution to cultural studies through the thought about *mass popular* culture. At the same time, I believe that giving the award to Quino and therefore to Mafalda—this character from massive, popular culture, but also a critical character—is a good tribute to Martín-Barbero’s reflection.

The academia cannot be understood without the conflicts and power struggles that each epistemic field produces and struggles. Martín-Barbero went through three of these fields and used interdisciplinarity to question old certainties and review their permanence over time. ■

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# Pensar lo popular desde un lugar otro: La propuesta de Jesús Martín-Barbero y su aporte al debate teórico sobre la cultura popular

## *Pensar o popular a partir de um lugar outro: a proposta de Jesús Martín-Barbero e sua contribuição ao debate teórico sobre cultura popular*

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### RESUMEN

Jesús Martín-Barbero ha sido un referente latinoamericano en los estudios de comunicación y cultura. Su trabajo permitió colocar en el debate una mirada histórica y un *mapa* conceptual de los referentes y disputas en torno a lo popular. La hipótesis de este trabajo es que Martín-Barbero consiguió, y ese fue su mayor aporte, desplazar el lugar de lo popular desde lo ancestral/originario hasta un lugar más plebeyo, más bastardo, más sospechoso y más anclado con la realidad latinoamericana de su momento: colocó lo popular cerca del mundo masivo. El presente texto retoma elementos elaborados en la tesis doctoral y, a partir de ello, recupera dos reflexiones centrales sobre la cultura popular en el pensamiento de Martín-Barbero: la mirada histórica y genealógica sobre lo popular, que este autor trabajó en su libro *De los medios a las mediaciones*, y su desplazamiento hacia el lugar de lo masivo y las implicaciones que esto tiene, que también se desarrolla con extensión en la misma publicación, a partir de lo cual se ofrecen algunas conclusiones.

**Palabras clave:** cultura popular, cultura masiva, Jesús Martín-Barbero

### RESUMO

Jesús Martín-Barbero é uma referência latino-americana para os estudos de comunicação e cultura. Seu trabalho permitiu colocar no debate um olhar histórico e um *mapa* conceitual das referências e disputas em torno do popular. A hipótese deste texto é que Martín-Barbero conseguiu, e esta foi sua maior contribuição, deslocar o lugar do popular desde o ancestral/nativo para um lugar mais plebeu, mais bastardo, mais desconfiado e mais ancorado na realidade latino-americana de seu tempo: colocou o popular próximo ao mundo das massas. Este texto retoma elementos discutidos na tese de doutorado e, a partir daí, recupera duas reflexões principais sobre a cultura popular no pensamento de Martín-Barbero: a visão histórico-genealógica do popular, que este autor aborda em *Dos meios às mediações*, e seu deslocamento para o lugar das massas e suas implicações, também abordadas nessa obra, a partir do qual são realizadas algumas conclusões.

**Palavras-chave:** cultura popular, cultura de massas, Jesús Martín-Barbero

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Creíamos que ya teníamos claro para siempre qué era lo popular, la comunicación, la cultura, el mestizaje, y aquí se nos recordaba que estos conceptos eran históricos. Que los conceptos de los que partíamos, dejaban repentinamente “de ser conceptos para convertirse en problemas”.

*William Fernando Torres (1998)*

EL PRESENTE ARTÍCULO hace parte de un largo diálogo con el colombiano-español Jesús Martín-Barbero (1937, España, 2021, Colombia). En 1987, la editorial Gustavo Gili se decidió a publicar su libro *De los medios a las mediaciones* en una colección dirigida por Miquel de Moragas, y multiplicó las referencias al pensamiento de Martín-Barbero. La discusión académica latinoamericana ya se encontraba centrada en el rol de la cultura, de las mediaciones y la hegemonía, pero la publicación del libro de Martín-Barbero fue clave para dejar de lado agendas vinculadas con la naturaleza, especificidad y tecnología de los medios, y colocó de nuevo la pregunta por ciertas fronteras que parecía que se tenían ya claramente definidas, como señala William Fernando Torres (1998). Una primera versión de este trabajo fue publicada en 2019, en la revista *Encuentros Latinoamericanos*.

El diálogo que Martín-Barbero llevó a cabo durante las décadas de 1980 y 1990 fue muy provechoso para lanzar una mirada histórica y recuperar un *mapa* conceptual de los referentes y disputas en torno a lo popular, pero mi hipótesis es que Martín-Barbero consiguió, y ese fue su mayor aporte, desplazar el lugar de lo popular desde lo ancestral/originario hasta un lugar más plebeyo, más bastardo, más sospechosa y más anclado con la realidad latinoamericana de su momento: colocó lo popular cerca del mundo masivo, “hecho de barro y cañas, pero con transistores y antenas de televisión” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. xiii).

El presente texto retoma elementos de mi tesis doctoral (Marroquín, 2015) y, a partir de ello, recupera dos reflexiones centrales sobre la cultura popular en el pensamiento de Martín-Barbero: Primero, la mirada histórica-genealógica sobre lo popular que este autor trabajó en su libro *De los medios a las mediaciones* y, segundo, su desplazamiento hacia lo masivo y las implicaciones que esto tiene, que también se desarrolla con extensión en la misma publicación, a partir de lo cual se ofrecen algunas conclusiones. Voy entonces al primer momento.

## EL DESPLAZAMIENTO HISTÓRICO: LO POPULAR PUESTO EN GENEALOGÍA

*La expresión 'fósiles vivientes' podría ser adoptada, pero sobre todo, entendida, por todos los que se dedican al estudio del folklore. Porque, así como las cuevas conservan una fauna arcaica, muy importante para la comprensión de los grupos zoomórficos primitivos, de la misma forma la memoria popular conserva formas mentales primitivas que no han dejado huella en la historia, precisamente porque no podían expresarse bajo formas duraderas (documentos, monumentos, grafías, etc.). Todavía hoy podemos encontrar en el folklore formas pertenecientes a distintas eras, formas que representan etapas mentales arcaicas. Al lado de una leyenda con un sustrato histórico relativamente reciente o una canción popular de inspiración contemporánea, podemos encontrar formas medievales, precristianas o incluso prehistóricas. Por supuesto los folkloristas no desconocen estos hechos. Pero me atrevo a decir que muy pocos los comprenden.*

Mircea Eliade

Tal y como señala Eliade, el universo de lo popular y del folklore es una especie de fósil viviente. Tiene elementos ancestrales que se resisten a desaparecer y que se encuentran vivos en varios gestos, en la música, en los rituales religiosos, en las formas de diversión; son rituales de resistencia hacia las imposiciones culturales, pero también de complicidad con las formas hegemónicas de cultura. Para Jesús Martín-Barbero, en la cultura popular perviven a un tiempo la premodernidad arcaica, la modernidad y sus utopías, y la postmodernidad cínica y desilusionada. Estas reflexiones fueron ensayadas durante la década de 1970 y se volvieron parte del debate académico con la publicación *De los medios a las mediaciones*.

Este libro fue publicado en 1987 por la editorial Gustavo Gili, en México, como parte de la colección *Mass Media* dedicada al abordaje de la comunicación y dirigida por el profesor catalán Miquel de Moragas.

La recepción del libro superó cualquier expectativa. El investigador colombiano, William Fernando Torres, recuerda este trabajo como “una bomba de tiempo” que “circuló entre los lectores más avisados y desprevenidos, también entre los colegas más competitivos. Pocos días más tarde y con las eficacias de la clandestinidad, apareció una edición pirata en manos de los libreros ambulantes de las universidades” (Torres, 1998, p. 60).

*De los medios a las mediaciones* fue dividido en tres partes. La primera, titulada “Pueblo y masa en la cultura: los hitos del debate”, se ocupa de la revisión de ciertas categorías y la manera como distintas escuelas de pensamiento la han situado.

En este proceso genealógico que se desarrolla en la primera parte de su libro, Martín-Barbero también dividió su reflexión en tres momentos: primero,

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el pueblo, en que reflexiona sobre *lo popular* desde las categorías teóricas que ya se habían discutido en la academia latinoamericana; segundo, algo que a mi parecer configura su aporte en relación al pensamiento de lo popular, que esta categoría no puede ser pensada por fuera de las masas y del funcionalismo teórico que muchas veces ha sido descartado con demasiada rapidez. En este momento, el autor revisa la constitución de la sociedad de masas y los fenómenos *masivos* y, finalmente, la construcción histórica de una matriz cultural *popular-masiva*. En un ejercicio benjaminiano que termina por constituir lo popular en una constelación, cepilla la historia a contrapelo para encontrar, con Walter Benjamin, que “la esperanza solo nos ha sido dada por los desesperados” (1996, p. 102) o para descubrir “las formas populares de la esperanza”, como él mismo dirá, aludiendo a las palabras del teólogo brasileño Hugo Assman (1975, p. 263-268). En esta primera parte del texto me ocupo de recuperar su genealogía sobre los términos *pueblo* y *popular*.

En el *Diccionario de uso del español*, de María Moliner, lo popular es un adjetivo con cinco definiciones: “del pueblo (clase social); lo que está al alcance de las personas con menos recursos económicos; la persona que tiene muchos partidarios, admiradores o simpatizantes entre el pueblo; por extensión también los que tiene en todas las clases sociales o en cierto círculo de personas; aplicado a cosas, muy extendido entre la gente” (Moliner, 2007, p. 2553) y, finalmente, hace referencia al Partido Popular en España. Ahora bien, ¿cómo es que llegamos a constituir lo popular como un adjetivo que implica todas estas definiciones? Martín-Barbero coloca el debate a partir del siglo XVI:

En su “origen” el debate se halla configurado por dos grandes movimientos: el que contradictoriamente pone en marcha el mito del pueblo en la política (ilustrados) y en la cultura (románticos); y el que fundiendo política y cultura afirma la vigencia moderna de lo popular (anarquistas) o la niega por su “superación” en el proletariado (marxistas) (1998, p. 3).

El mapa se construye de la recuperación de estos diálogos en que se contraponen ilustración y romanticismo, de la propuesta intelectual de los anarquistas y marxistas, y finalmente, del análisis más contemporáneo de historiadores y académicos del siglo XX, que vuelven su mirada hacia los procesos culturales de la Edad Media y proponen una nueva lectura de lo popular desde ahí.

El recorrido genealógico inicia en la búsqueda de un origen que en realidad no lo es. Martín-Barbero señala que el primer debate que construyó la noción actual de pueblo se encuentra en la discusión entre los ilustrados y los románticos. Tres pensadores inician el debate de los conceptos de pueblo y de lo popular:



Maquiavelo (1469-1527), Hobbes (1578-1679) y Rousseau (1712-1778). En ellos, el pueblo “importa en tanto que voluntad general”, pero lo que se produce es un dispositivo de “inclusión abstracta y exclusión concreta” (1998, p. 7). La burguesía ocupa al pueblo como esa categoría que legitima un poder distinto al de los soberanos. Si estos eran elegidos por Dios, los nuevos gobernantes serán electos por *el pueblo*. Sin embargo, el pueblo será definido no por lo que es, sino por lo que le falta, por lo que no tiene: riqueza, oficio político y educación. La visión de lo popular y del pueblo inicia su construcción de forma negativa.

A juicio de Martín-Barbero, una concepción un poco menos pesimista sobre el pueblo se encuentra en el movimiento romántico del siglo XVIII. De alguna manera, los románticos intentan romper con la visión negativa sobre lo popular. Para decirlo en términos genealógicos, los románticos situarán lo popular como algo que no es moral o estéticamente despreciable<sup>1</sup>. Es en este momento que se constituyen los términos de *folklore* y de *volkskunde* para hacer alusión a un ámbito en el que la reflexión académica se ocupa de estas discusiones. El autor muestra que los románticos rescatan de lo popular aquello que viene de su originalidad, de su pureza, de su no contaminación, y entonces “al negar la circulación cultural lo de veras negado es el proceso histórico de formación de lo popular y el sentido social de las diferencias culturales” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 11), es decir, los románticos al idealizar lo popular y volverlo archivo, pasado, patrimonio, folklore que habita solo en los museos, terminan también negando *lo popular* vivo, real, cotidiano y en esa operación que relega el pueblo al pasado ancestral, los románticos terminan acercándose a los ilustrados.

Mientras escribió su reflexión, este filósofo fue consciente de que una visión de marxismo profundamente althusseriano se afianzaba en ciertos países y propuestas académicas, la de reducir los procesos de comunicación masiva a *aparatos ideológicos del Estado*. Martín-Barbero rescata otra visión de lo popular: la de los anarquistas. Particularmente la propuesta de los anarquistas españoles de finales del siglo XIX y principios del XX<sup>2</sup>. De ellos, dirá que son capaces de situarse entre la afirmación romántica y la negación marxista. Para Bakunin, por ejemplo, el pueblo no es el proletariado, sino esa masa de desheredados, en la cual conviven al mismo tiempo la alienación y la utopía: “El pueblo es la parte sana de la sociedad, la que en medio de la miseria ha sabido conservar intacta la exigencia de justicia y la capacidad de lucha” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 14-15). Esto permitió a los anarquistas tener una visión más compleja de lo popular, no solo como espacio de manipulación, sino también de conflicto.

Frente a la propuesta anarquista, Martín-Barbero revisa cómo “el marxismo ortodoxo negará la validez [del pueblo] tanto teórica como política” (1998, p. 19). El análisis de todos ellos señala que el marxismo aporta un elemento para

<sup>1</sup> Jesús Martín-Barbero sigue aquí la historización hecha por Raymond Williams en *Cultura y sociedad, 1780-1950. De Coleridge a Orwell*, y rescata el texto de 1784 de Herder en el cual se señala que es necesario “aceptar la existencia de una pluralidad de culturas”.

<sup>2</sup> En la biografía de Martín-Barbero, la Guerra Civil española tiene particular importancia. Aunque el anarquismo existe en España desde mucho antes, desde la Primera República (1873-1874), justo después de las discusiones que se llevaron a cabo en la Primera Internacional (1864). El anarquismo español tiene una fuerte influencia de Bakunin. Frente a la visión de la historia regida por las leyes del materialismo histórico y la lucha de clases, proclamó la libertad del sujeto, capaz de cambiar las fuerzas de la historia. Me interesa destacar dos elementos del anarquismo español: El primero, el movimiento cultural que los anarquistas desarrollaron en España, cuya apuesta era difundir no solo sus ideales políticos, sino también la instrucción y la cultura en las clases populares obreras. Las labores culturales del anarquismo fueron apoyadas por intelectuales como Pío Baroja, Azorín, Ramón del Valle-Inclán y Blasco Ibáñez; Los anarquistas realizaron certámenes de literatura, filosofía, poesía y teatro, y situaron Barcelona como el centro de esa efervescencia cultural. El segundo elemento fue la importancia de la difusión de los ideales anarquistas a través de medios (masivos), como el uso de escuelas, teatros y ateneos para difundir sus periódicos, pero también la novela folletín, que tuvo mucho éxito entre el público obrero. (Litvak, 2001).

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<sup>3</sup> Si bien Martín-Barbero no precisa entre las escuelas marxistas, a partir de esta investigación es posible afirmar que en este caso su crítica a la noción marxista de lo popular se refiere en esencia al marxismo althusseriano, en boga durante esos años. Por un lado, él mismo realizó su tesis de acreditación sobre Althusser y Karel Kosik para poder ingresar a Lovaina. Por otro, la interpretación de Althusser posicionaba el rescate de un marxismo científico, y en algún momento de sus planteamientos, se distanció de las lecturas hechas por intelectuales como Gramsci y Lukács y cuestionó conceptos como alienación, sujeto e historia, que son mucho más cercanos a la reflexión cultural que Martín-Barbero sitúa en *De los medios a las mediaciones*.

<sup>4</sup> Martín-Barbero utiliza para su trabajo la versión francesa del texto: J. Le Goff. *Les Marginaux et les exclus dans l'histoire* (Paris: UGE, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Si bien Martín-Barbero retoma solo algunos elementos de las investigaciones de este historiador, me parece que lo que hace es resaltar un elemento común en el itinerario y la apuesta de este académico. Los principales libros en los que Le Goff trabaja estos temas son, en mi opinión: *Mercaderes y banqueros en la Edad Media* (Madrid: Alianza, 2010); *Los intelectuales en la Edad Media* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2001); *La bolsa o la vida. Economía y religión en la Edad Media* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 1986); *Hombres y mujeres en la Edad Media* (México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2013); *¿Nació Europa en la Edad Media?* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2003) y el trabajo escrito en conjunto con Nicolás Truong, *Una historia del cuerpo en la Edad Media* (Barcelona: Paidós Ibérica, 2005).

el análisis: transforma al pueblo en un concepto vinculado a la clase social<sup>3</sup>, pero esto mismo es reduccionista, en esta medida, se sitúa la estrategia de lucha en un solo plano, el económico, y se olvida de la propuesta anarquista aquello vinculado a la cultura.

El pueblo se presenta alienado, como un no-sujeto que en la historia se ha dejado ideologizar. ¿Qué consecuencias tiene esta operación? Para el análisis lo que emerge es *lo popular no representado*, esto es, lo que no cabe en la clase obrera: mujeres, jóvenes, jubilados, inválidos e indígenas. Esta negación de lo cultural pone al descubierto una incapacidad para asumir el espesor simbólico de la cultura y pensar la diferencia, la alteridad.

En los años 1980, de manera lenta pero contundente, una discusión que intentaba superar las dicotomías entre estructuras y agentes se encontraba en el centro del debate de las ciencias sociales. Disciplinas como la historia “habían comenzado a alejarse de los principios analíticos en los que habían cimentado su supremacía, al menos intelectual, a saber, la preferencia por las fuentes masivas, el trato cuantitativo de estas y la constitución de series, en beneficio de otros planteamientos, que privilegiaban las representaciones colectivas por encima de las clasificaciones objetivas, las apropiaciones singulares por encima de las distribuciones estadísticas, y las estrategias conscientes por encima de las determinaciones desconocidas por el individuo” (Chartier, 2011, p. 7-17).

Hay una aproximación más que es central: Para poder entender la manera como las ciencias sociales y, en especial, la historia situaban la categoría de lo popular, Martín-Barbero se aproxima al momento “en que, para Occidente, lo popular se constituye cultura: la Edad Media”. Y para ello se apoya en el historiador francés Jacques Le Goff cuyo texto *Tiempo, trabajo y cultura en el occidente medieval*<sup>4</sup> había sido publicado en español por Taurus en 1983 (Le Goff, 1983).

Le Goff plantea la Edad Media desde una nueva perspectiva. Ya no es ese tiempo cuestionado por su retraso, de silencios, de inquisición, sino como un tiempo que, más allá de la historia de los vencedores, narra la profunda riqueza de una vida cotidiana llena de intercambios e invenciones. Una época que resulta muy cercana a esa “modernidad extraviada” de la cual América Latina es parte, y en esa operación que implica para Le Goff hacer *historia cultural*, se encuentra entonces “la oposición entre cultura erudita y cultura popular” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 85).

El historiador francés utiliza dos movimientos para su análisis: el enfrentamiento y el intercambio. En la Edad Media que Le Goff estudia, *lo popular* es constituido desde el conflicto y desde el diálogo<sup>5</sup>.

Se menciona a dos estudiosos más. Uno de ellos es el ruso Mijaíl Bajtín, quien en *La cultura popular en la Edad Media y el Renacimiento. El contexto de François*

*Rabelais* (1987) trabaja lo que la cultura popular tiene de extraño, “de paralelo a la oficial, de otro” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 87). De Bajtín, Martín-Barbero rescata la manera cómo coloca lo popular como un plano cultural opuesto a lo oficial. Bajtín sitúa *un espacio* particular, el de la plaza pública, que es el sitio donde el pueblo lleva la voz principal. La plaza es el espacio abierto donde todos caben: las proclamas, los pregones, el teatro, la vida cotidiana. Añade a su análisis la categoría de *un tiempo*, el del carnaval como reafirmación del cuerpo-pueblo y sus humores. El carnaval es el tiempo más importante de la plaza, es un tiempo de excepción; después del tiempo de trabajo y la cosecha, el carnaval es ese breve momento en que está permitido el baile y el goce. Dos dispositivos aparecen en el texto: la risa y la máscara.

Si en los trabajos de Bajtín se pone el acento en la cultura popular como distinta, otra, extraña, en el trabajo del italiano Carlo Ginzburg se encuentra las resistencias de la cultura popular y las capacidades que desde ahí se han constituido para asumir el conflicto activa e intuitivamente.

La genealogía propuesta por Martín-Barbero considera los aportes de otros científicos sociales: Michel de Certeau que señaló el peligro de hacer pensar que la única inteligibilidad en las prácticas venga dada por procesos de reproducción, y dos representantes de los estudios culturales británicos, Richard Hoggart y Raymond Williams, y un francés, el sociólogo Pierre Bourdieu. Son estos autores los que lo llevarán a afirmar que la vida popular es familiar, grupal, comunitaria, vecinal, con una moral mixta: cinismo contestatario, religiosidad elemental, vivir al día, improvisación y sentido del goce.

A la base de estos autores, iluminando el itinerario que el mismo Martín-Barbero construye, se encuentra el italiano Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937)<sup>6</sup>. De acuerdo a su lectura, al proponer el concepto de hegemonía, Gramsci coloca en el centro de la discusión a la superestructura, es decir, la esfera de lo cultural y de alguna manera, de la dimensión de clase de la cultura popular.

El concepto de *hegemonía* [hace] posible pensar el proceso de dominación social ya no como imposición desde un *exterior* y sin *sujetos*, sino como un proceso en el que una clase hegemoniza en la medida en que representa intereses que también reconocen de alguna manera como suyos las clases subalternas. Y “en la medida” significa aquí que no *hay* hegemonía, sino que ella se hace y se deshace, se rehace permanentemente en un “proceso vivido”, hecho no solo de fuerza sino también de sentido, de apropiación del sentido por el poder, de seducción y de complicidad. Lo cual implica una desfuncionalización de la ideología (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 99-100).

La ideología no es algo que está fuera y que se impone por coerción, sino algo que se encuentra en el interior mismo de lo popular, quizá es por ello que Gramsci

<sup>6</sup>Teórico marxista, político y periodista, Gramsci fue arrestado en noviembre de 1926 y permaneció en prisión hasta 1934, cuando salió con una orden de libertad condicional, debido a sus enfermedades. Murió en 1937, y sus textos fueron publicados diez años después, a partir de 1948, en ediciones que empezaron a circular hasta que en la década de 1970 se convirtieron en un punto fundamental de las discusiones de la izquierda académica (Rosengarten, s. d.).

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llega a afirmar que “la parte inorganizable de la opinión pública (especialmente las mujeres, donde existe el voto para la mujer) es tan grande que hace siempre posibles los booms y los golpes de mano electorales donde la prensa amarillista y la radio están muy difundidas” (Gramsci, 1981, p. 38). Martín-Barbero señala que si algo ha dejado Gramsci como herencia es la necesidad de prestar atención a la trama, esto es, concebir lo popular “como un uso y no como un origen, como un hecho y no como una esencia, como posición relacional y no como sustancia” (Cirese apud Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 100). Pero esto no es posible a ello me ocupo de revisar el otro concepto con el que se construye la categoría que me ocupa: *lo masivo*.

### EL DESPLAZAMIENTO ESTRUCTURAL: DEL ADJETIVO CULTURA POPULAR AL SUSTANTIVO DE LO POPULAR-MASIVO

Quizá la principal osadía del pensador español-colombiano fue insistir en que lo popular, a partir de la constitución de la industria cultural, desplazó su *vida-fósil* –para usar el término de Eliade– a ese lugar ambiguo y bastardo del mercado, a los medios masivos de comunicación.

A finales del siglo XIX, nuevas y deslumbrantes tecnologías de reproducción se encuentran al alcance de las sociedades occidentales. La primera de ellas es la fotografía. Si bien se considera 1839 como el año de su invención por Louis Daguerre (1787-1851), la difusión masiva de este medio se dará a partir de 1888, en plena época industrial, cuando George Eastman inventa la cámara Kodak y se inicia la fabricación de carretes de película enrollable que colocan la fotografía al alcance de muchos. Unos pocos años después, en 1895, los hermanos Auguste y Louis Lumière sorprenden al mundo con una nueva propuesta: el cine. Los públicos sin rostro, las grandes multitudes y las masas empezaron a surgir, seducidas por la propuesta de nuevos consumos que terminarían en el apoyo a movimientos políticos fascistas o en desbordantes movimientos multitudinarios difíciles de controlar. No es casual, apuntarán intelectuales como Eduardo Gruner, que el surgimiento del cine coincida con el del marxismo y el psicoanálisis (Pinto, 2007).

Fue justo en esta época que los términos de “las masas” y la “cultura de masas” encontraran su mayor difusión. Para entender este concepto, el diccionario tradicional sirve de poco, pues hace mayor referencia a la magnitud física vinculada a la materia o a la mezcla de harina con agua y levadura que a la muchedumbre, a la que menciona de manera puntual. Sin embargo, me interesa retomar el concepto *mainstream* que es divulgado en *Wikipedia*:

**Masas:** En Ciencias Políticas, Sociología y Derecho Constitucional masas o las masas hace referencia a un sujeto colectivo en ciertas manifestaciones del

comportamiento social, especialmente para describir formas de comportamiento gregario, en oposición al comportamiento individual. Se utiliza muy frecuentemente en plural (las masas), y en oposición al concepto de las élites. Es habitual emplearlo no en forma neutra sino con distinta valoración semántica según la intención ideológica del que usa el término: tanto despectiva como admirativa. Guarda estrecha relación con otros conceptos como pueblo, muchedumbre, multitud, plebe, vulgo o chusma; y con la expresión griega *hoi polloi* (οἱ πολλοί –“los muchos” o “la mayoría”–, el fundamento de la democracia o poder del pueblo –siendo *demos* traducible por pueblo–) en oposición a *hoi oligoi* (οἱ ὀλιγοί –“los pocos” o “la minoría”–, el fundamento de la oligarquía), ambas procedentes del discurso fúnebre de Pericles y muy utilizada la primera de ellas como un tópico elitista en la cultura anglosajona desde principios del siglo XIX (“Masas”, 2013).

En una entrada vinculada a la anterior, *Wikipedia* ubica el nacimiento del concepto de “sociedad de masas” con la llegada de la sociedad industrial (“Sociedad de masas”, 2013) y se hace referencia a grupos de individuos que son iguales entre sí, uno de los ideales de las nuevas sociedades opuestas al Antiguo Régimen. Sin embargo, esta expresión pasó a significar la preocupación de las élites por esas muchedumbres faltas de cultura y muy difíciles de controlar; y como se señala en *Wikipedia*, es inusual utilizar este término en forma neutra.

Otro diccionario que presenta una definición muy difundida es el *Online Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, que señala lo siguiente en su entrada sobre “cultura de masas”:

**Mass culture:** A set of cultural values and ideas that arise from common exposure of a population to the same cultural activities, communications media, music and art, etc. Mass culture becomes possible only with modern communications and electronic media. A mass culture is transmitted to individuals, rather than arising from people’s daily interactions, and therefore lacks the distinctive content of cultures rooted in community and region. Mass culture tends to reproduce the liberal value of individualism and to foster a view of the citizen as consumer (Drislane & Parkinson, 2002)<sup>7</sup>.

La cultura de masas, en esta definición, es producida únicamente a partir de los medios de comunicación “modernos”, mediante las comunicaciones electrónicas, y el hecho de que se la señale opuesta o sustitutiva de la vida cotidiana de las personas. La genealogía de Martín-Barbero permite situar el concepto de las masas y lo masivo en una dimensión que abarque las contradicciones y complejidades del término<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup>“Cultura de masas: un conjunto de ideas y valores culturales que surgen a partir de la exposición común de una población al mismo tipo de actividades culturales, medios de comunicación, la música y el arte, etc. La cultura de masas es posible solo a partir de los medios electrónicos y las comunicaciones modernas. La cultura de masas es transmitida a las personas sustituyendo las interacciones diarias y, por lo tanto, carece del contenido propio de las culturas arraigadas en una comunidad o región. La cultura de masas tiende a reproducir el valor liberal del individualismo y a fomentar una visión del ciudadano como consumidor”. [La traducción es mía].

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<sup>8</sup>Trabajos posteriores ensayan otras genealogías. Para mencionar algunos fundamentales: la lectura británica desarrollada por Francis Mulhern desde los estudios culturales ingleses. En su texto *Culture/Metaculture*, Mulhern sitúa el concepto de la generación de la *kulturkritik*, que proviene sobre todo de la academia alemana, e incluye además importantes pensadores de otros países como Ortega y Gasset, Julien Benda y Virginia Woolf. La aproximación más filosófica se encuentra en Peter Sloterdijk, *El desprecio de las masas. Ensayo sobre las luchas culturales de la sociedad moderna* (2001). Dos aproximaciones que son más bien políticas son las de Michael Hardt y Antonio Negri en la obra *Imperio* (2005), inicialmente publicada en inglés en el año 2000, en que se propone y analiza la categoría de *multitud*, un concepto para pensar un orden global atravesado por redes de comunicación, control y migraciones de muy diversa índole; y la obra *La razón populista* (2005), del gran teórico argentino, Ernesto Laclau, quien hace su propia revisión de la denigración del concepto de *masas* y la construcción de la categoría de *pueblo* para pensar el populismo como práctica política. Todos estos textos son posteriores a la genealogía inicial de Martín-Barbero y bien valen un trabajo de revisión exhaustiva de las novedades que proponen.

La idea de la sociedad de masas es bastante más vieja de lo que suelen contar los manuales para estudiosos de la comunicación. Obstinados en hacer de la tecnología la causa necesaria y suficiente de la nueva sociedad, la mayoría de estos manuales coloca el surgimiento de la teoría de la sociedad de masas entre los años treinta-cuarenta, desconociendo las matrices históricas, sociales y políticas de un concepto que en 1930 tenía ya casi un siglo de vida. Quizá sea buena una imagen: la puesta en marcha durante el siglo XIX de la teoría de la sociedad-masa es la de un movimiento que va del miedo a la decepción y de allí al pesimismo, pero conservando el asco (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. 27).

Siguiendo esta afirmación, se constata que el concepto de *sociedad de masas* nace con la modernidad, con la reproducción en serie, con la industrialización, además surge del miedo, la decepción, el pesimismo y el asco, de la urgencia por pensar cómo la nueva burguesía debe entender los procesos hegemónicos para controlar cualquier revolución que venga después de la que ella inició. Si, como señala Deleuze, “la genealogía no solo interpreta, también valora” (Deleuze, 2016, p. 14), este desmontaje de los orígenes permite a Martín-Barbero mostrar los temores de una academia formada desde la escala de valores de las élites y las razones que impiden descubrir en las masas gestos de bondad, inteligencia y gusto.

Martín-Barbero divide su revisión sobre “la masa” en cinco momentos. Primero, el enfoque más sociológico que permite, con Alexis de Tocqueville, el descubrimiento de la multitud como lugar central para una política que instaura cierto tipo de régimen democrático, como el de los Estados Unidos de América; Segundo, el vinculado a la psicología de las muchedumbres, muy influido por los predecesores y teóricos del psicoanálisis, en que autores como Tarde o Freud revisan cierto tipo de emocionalidad vinculada a las masas, su histeria, sus sentimientos, la manipulación posible y la desconfianza de las élites; Tercero, el momento más filosófico en que algunos pensadores como Ortega y Gasset enuncian una metafísica del hombre-masa y nombran el malestar que con su visibilidad se ha instalado en la sociedad moderna; Cuarto, una revisión desde las nuevas teorías funcionalistas de la comunicación permiten a Martín-Barbero una operación arriesgada pero original, la de trazar una ruta de unión entre algunos gestos masivos y la pervivencia de lo popular; Quinto, dedicará un capítulo entero a pensar una de las teorizaciones más importantes vinculadas a la masa, la de la Escuela de Frankfurt, en especial Adorno y Benjamin, pero también a partir de cuatro pensadores posteriores: Edgar Morin, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard y Jürgen Habermas.

La originalidad del pensamiento de este autor se encuentra, entonces, en ese cruce, en esa constelación benjaminiana que le permite reflexionar sobre lo popular añadiendo a este concepto de manera indisoluble una categoría que



más bien se había pensado opuesta: lo masivo. La constelación es el modelo que Benjamin propone para el estudio de los fenómenos humanos, especialmente la historia. Lo que pretende es que el estudioso se acerque a los fenómenos, a los hechos, y que a partir de ellos, sin olvidarlos, sin diluirlos en un sistema, muestre una configuración, un mosaico. Lo importante aquí es que el fenómeno mantenga su independencia, que se vea bien claro que no está en continuidad con otros, que no quede desvirtuado por el todo. Eso que Benjamin llamó “salvación” o “redención” del fenómeno consistente es mostrarlo en un todo que no le pase por encima y que pueda incluso prescindir de él. Benjamin insiste en que se salve el fenómeno, que siga siendo reconocible, que no quede perdido en la marea de lo que es, ya que, si así sucede, habremos traicionado el proceso de conocimiento. Este es el camino que cepilla la historia a contrapelo, piensa sobre la borradura, sobre esa tachadura que ha sido la condena de los intelectuales hacia la comunicación masiva como la destructora de la cultura popular y, desde ahí, revisa en qué nos hemos transformado.

La genealogía como método evidencia el saber/poder desde el cual se construyen las categorías con las que nombramos el mundo. En el caso de *lo popular-masivo*, su construcción histórica ha obedecido a intereses políticos y ha posibilitado muchas de las confusiones e intervenciones culturales. Lo popular y lo masivo han sido concebidos mediante dicotomías que eran difíciles de ver; hizo falta la mirada de un genealogista para ponernos a pensar en las luchas internas que constituyeron esos significados inamovibles con los que hemos trabajado por años.

Pensamos dentro de ciertas tradiciones que nos piensan, no podemos escapar a ellas. Por ello, el aporte de Martín-Barbero radica en no apartarse de su tradición filosófica, ni quedarse solo en esa tradición, sino transitar hacia unos lugares-otros y asumir las muchas escuelas de pensamiento, colocándolas en diálogo, pensando en negativo, cometiendo la herejía de juntar lo *no-juntable* y colocar la operación de mestizaje para estallar las categorías tradicionales. Entonces se vuelve posible aportar un punto de vista nuevo y acotado de la realidad actual.

### CONCLUSIONES INICIALES: EL DESPLAZAMIENTO DIALÓGICO

En la actualidad, lo popular-masivo es una categoría que se ha separado ya de su autor para aportar a un pensamiento social que reflexiona sobre los movimientos culturales contemporáneos y la influencia de los fenómenos de masas como un ámbito constitutivo de lo popular. Lo popular-masivo empieza además a tener varios padres que se arrojan el haber acuñado el término, pero como he mostrado todos ellos son posteriores al planteamiento inicial que hizo



Martín-Barbero. La influencia de esta categoría de investigación es notable en los campos de los estudios culturales, la comunicación y empieza a constituir un aporte a la filosofía, vinculado sobre todo al pensamiento de la estética.

La academia de América Latina mantuvo una intensa discusión sobre lo popular en la década de 1990. Pasados dos años de la publicación *De los medios a las mediaciones*, en 1989, se publicó un nuevo libro del antropólogo Néstor García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas. Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*. Los planteamientos de este análisis de las formas de modernidad en México, Argentina y Brasil contribuyeron al debate sobre lo popular-masivo.

Ese trabajo intentó no solo describir las mezclas culturales que eran cada vez más evidentes en América Latina, sino también avanzar en el terreno explicativo y en la capacidad hermenéutica, esto es, volverse útil para entender el sentido de esas mezclas culturales que se constataban. Para Martín-Barbero, el libro de García Canclini “marca sin duda un punto de llegada en ese recorrido y un hito en los estudios culturales de América Latina. Y lo es ante todo por ayudarnos a pensar la diferencia no al margen sino desde el debate con la modernidad, haciendo de ese debate una ocasión y un modo de acceso a las cuestiones más radicales y las crisis más nuestras” (Martín-Barbero, 1991).

A mediados de la década de 1990, el periodista y sociólogo estadounidense James Lull utilizó la propuesta de Martín-Barbero al hacer un análisis de lo que denominó “el capital cultural popular: el oro negro”, en la cual planteó la construcción transnacional de estereotipos raciales vinculados a la cultura negra (1997, p. 115). Hay en esas reflexiones un elemento más: el melodrama como dispositivo semiótico de lo popular, como dispositivo que configura y convoca.

La primera década del siglo XXI (desde los inicios del siglo, cuando se encontraba en Guadalajara, hasta 2010, ya en Colombia) puede denominarse un período de balance en el pensamiento de Martín-Barbero. Por un lado, tenemos ya una tradición constituida en el campo de la comunicación y, por el otro, un autor que empieza a ser revisitado por otros investigadores y analizado desde una revisión de conjunto. El número 41 de la revista *Signo y pensamiento* de la Universidad Javeriana en 2002 fue titulado “¿De las mediaciones a los medios? Viejos itinerarios, nuevas discusiones”. En la presentación del monográfico, los editores señalaron que había preguntas que tenían una particular persistencia y que “hoy conservan toda su carga y mantienen vigentes los itinerarios de la reflexión, en una época de la modernidad mediática [...] en este contexto de cambios, frustraciones y vigencias hemos querido que el número se preguntara si ante la actual hegemonía mediática y tecnológica, o que nos queda por hacer es el tránsito contrario de lo que Martín-Barbero ha venido proponiendo”

(“A nuestros lectores”, 2002, p. 5). Las respuestas, más que entrar en contradicción con las propuestas originarias, son prolongación de un diálogo que sigue vigente.

Esta concepción fue también trabajada desde la academia argentina por el equipo de investigadores liderado por el sociólogo Pablo Alabarces, quien en un trabajo de 2008 señaló que:

La recepción del libro de Barbero [sic] fue penosa: rápidamente aligerada del ímpetu crítico de los sesenta y setenta, nuestra academia latinoamericana pareció privilegiar una lectura más obvia, que estaba en los márgenes de Barbero y con mala voluntad: lo popular estaba en lo masivo... y allí estaba bien guardado. Cuando el hibridismo cancliniiano reconcilió todos los fragmentos de nuestra posmodernidad neoconservadora, los noventa se volvieron decididamente neopopulistas, en una celebración paradójica: los noventa fueron –pudieron ser– neopopulistas porque el pueblo ya no existía (Alabarces, 2008, p. 18).

La preocupación de este pensador argentino por rescatar la complejidad del pensamiento sobre el pueblo y lo popular insiste en la necesidad de huir de toda simplificación. Para ello propone dos conceptos como la guía de su trabajo: el de mediaciones y el de resistencias. El primero de estos conceptos lo trabajará desde el aporte de Martín-Barbero<sup>9</sup>. Aunque Alabarces insistió en la necesidad de pensar lo popular, también recuperó la exigencia que desde Gramsci se ha vuelto evidente: sospechar las asignaciones automáticas de sentido y los reduccionismos fáciles en relación con lo popular.

El concepto de mediaciones como base para la discusión desde la antropología y la comunicación fue también recuperado en el trabajo de Lluís Duch y Albert Chillón, que revisó la discusión sobre de la mediación desde el cine y el arte, hasta la filosofía. En el texto, los autores hicieron ver el aporte de Martín-Barbero a la discusión de las mediaciones desde los medios de comunicación (Duch & Chillón, 2012).

En junio de 2008, la *Revista Latinoamericana de Comunicación, Chasqui*, de Ecuador, dedicó un monográfico a Martín-Barbero; en su editorial se señaló que fue “uno de los pensadores latinoamericanos más activos y prolíficos, periódicamente nos entrega nuevos estudios y avances de su pensamiento en artículos, libros y conferencias. Hemos visto que después de más de tres décadas de investigación comunicativa, sus primeras propuestas no se han agotado; es más, se han configurado y adaptado a las transformaciones sociales” (“Carta a nuestros lectores”, 2008, p. 1). En 2008, la revista *Anthropos* de Barcelona dedicó también un monográfico, en el que señalaron que Martín-Barbero “viaja desde la filosofía –de sus temas y autores– hasta las ciencias sociales y de

<sup>9</sup>“La noción de *mediaciones* nos remite al campo definido por Jesús Martín-Barbero hace veinte años, en 1987, parece imposible encarar estudios latinoamericanos sobre cultura popular y cultura de masas prescindiendo de esa referencia. Sin embargo, la noción no ha perdido nada de su vaguedad original, y más bien la ha acrecentado: hemos contado dieciocho definiciones de mediación en el texto original de Martín-Barbero, y cualquier revisión de la literatura post-barberiana solo agrega imprecisiones y más metáforas. En esta última instancia, el concepto de mediación barberiano es otro pliegue en la serie que intenta definir las relaciones entre estructura y superestructura esquivando la *determinación en última instancia* y con ella la tentación *reflejista*” (Alabarces, 2008, p. 23-24).

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la comunicación de acuerdo con una concepción peculiar de América Latina [...] y en ese ir y venir de las tinieblas al alumbramiento acontece la claridad intelectual y comunicativa. Descubre una original aportación de América Latina: una nueva teoría de la comunicación y el proceso de liberación como concientización” (“Editorial”, 2008, p. 5).

Buena parte de su pensamiento fue sistematizado en catorce libros, ocho coordinaciones, cerca de doscientos artículos en revistas académicas, más de ciento cincuenta conferencias alrededor del mundo. En 2022, a raíz de su muerte, las discusiones, los congresos y los seminarios se multiplicaron, mostrando la actualidad de sus discusiones.

Si bien Martín-Barbero no mencionó la palabra “reificación” en sus reflexiones sobre la cultura popular, es posible argumentar que este concepto está en el fondo de su reflexión, sobre todo por su insistencia en evidenciar esos *olvidos* que nos han llevado a un entendimiento del ámbito de lo cultural que separa lo que debería estar unido: esto es, una apuesta metodológica por *historizar* la constitución de lo popular<sup>10</sup>. Por ello, su trabajo argumentó en muchos momentos contra la razón dualista que “convierte inevitablemente lo masivo en procesos de degradación cultural” (Martín-Barbero, 1998, p. xxix) y que vuelve homogéneo aquello que más bien tiene muchas aristas, como las concepciones sobre cultura, pueblo y masa. Este es el desplazamiento: de un adjetivo a un sustantivo. De la comunicación a la filosofía, para entender las reificaciones que habitan lo popular al nombrarlo, pero también al enfrentarse al capitalismo tan voraz al que hemos sido arrojados como diría Heidegger.

En marzo de 2014 un grupo de académicos de El Salvador y Colombia nos propusimos nominar a Jesús Martín-Barbero como candidato para el premio Príncipe de Asturias en la rama de comunicación y humanidades. El premio, que ya hoy se denomina *Princesa de Asturias*, se otorga, desde 1981, a la persona, grupo de personas o institución cuya labor creadora o de investigación represente una aportación relevante a la cultura universal en esos campos. La primera galardonada fue la filósofa española María Zambrano.

Después de la deliberación el jurado otorgó el premio a Joaquín Lavado, conocido como Quino, un dibujante argentino que es mundialmente conocido por su personaje de Mafalda, la rebelde niña que mezcla análisis político y discurso existencial desde la década de 1970. Más allá de la anécdota, me interesa destacar que, como parte del apoyo para la candidatura, la comisión consiguió en menos de un mes 57 cartas de apoyo que provenían de más de cincuenta instituciones entre universidades, intelectuales y organizaciones de la comunicación y el periodismo en Iberoamérica. Entre los países que apoyaron la candidatura se encuentra México, Colombia, Brasil, España, México, Estados Unidos,

<sup>10</sup>De nuevo aparece acá una insistencia que no se nombra, pero que se vincula con las preocupaciones de otros filósofos, Nietzsche con la genealogía, Foucault con la arqueología, Zea con la historia de las ideas o Ellacuría con la historización como método.

El Salvador, Guatemala, Ecuador, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Perú, Puerto Rico y Venezuela. Las instituciones y los investigadores dejaban constancia en esas cartas la centralidad de la obra *De los medios a las mediaciones* en el debate epistémico del campo de la comunicación y su contribución a los estudios culturales a partir del pensamiento sobre la cultura *popular-masiva*. Al mismo tiempo creo que premiar a Quino, y por tanto a Mafalda, ese personaje de la cultura popular, masiva, pero también crítica, es un buen homenaje a la reflexión de Martín-Barbero.

La academia no puede entenderse sin los conflictos y las luchas de poder que cada campo epistémico produce y pelea. Martín-Barbero transitó tres de estos campos y utilizó la interdisciplinariedad para interrogar viejas certezas y revisar su permanencia en el tiempo. **M**

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# Affects mobilizations in finance: humor, failure and neoliberal discourse in Faria Lima Elevator and Investidor da Depressão

## *A mobilização de afetos nas finanças: humor, fracasso e discurso neoliberal nas páginas Faria Lima Elevator e Investidor da Depressão*

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### ABSTRACT

Since financialization imperatives demand that individuals affectively engage with financial products, this study aims to analyze media calls for consumption operated by finance Instagram profiles that appeal to humor. As our analysis method, we use French Discourse Analysis to study intersections between discourses in these media calls. Although its contents seem to mock commonplaces in the financial self-help literature, they mobilize a discursive apparatus that legitimizes the norm by contradicting it. These humor-based productions validate certain types of behavior toward finance and build, by discourse, a specific consumer type by naturalizing practices and legitimizing behaviors linked to the financialization of economic relations based on communication.

**Keywords:** Communication, consumption, humor, financialization, discourse

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### RESUMO

Posto que os imperativos da financeirização demandam engajamento afetivo dos indivíduos aos produtos, o objetivo deste artigo é analisar as convocações midiáticas ao consumo operacionalizadas por perfis de Instagram de finanças que apelam ao humor. Recorremos ao método da Análise de Discurso de linha francesa para estudar alguns cruzamentos entre discursos nessas convocações midiáticas. Embora seus conteúdos pareçam caçoar de alguns lugares comuns da literatura de autoajuda financeira, há um aparato discursivo que legitima a norma ao contradizê-la. Trata-se de produções que, a partir do humor, validam certos tipos de comportamento em relação às finanças e constroem, através do discurso, um tipo de consumidor específico, ao naturalizar práticas e legitimar comportamentos vinculados à financeirização das relações econômicas a partir da comunicação.

**Palavras-chave:** Comunicação, consumo, humor, financeirização, discurso

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THE CURRENT STAGE of capitalism, for Maman and Rosenhek (2022), requires individuals to increasingly engage with financial products – in discourses that correlate them with guarantees of security and well-being. The emergence of a series of communicational products of financial education that mobilize affects warped into discourses about what it means to be a self-responsible autonomous subject appears as a symptom. Such communicational actions thus value individuals who adopt certain practices to manage their personal finances (and their relationship with money and financial products) and appeal to a range of emotional engagement content. Affects mobilization thus works not only as a communicational strategy, but rather, a work with culture to legitimize certain types of consumption and produce consumer models. The authors state that “This emotional dimension represents a significant component in the cultural political economy of the constitution of financial subjectivities and the culture of financialization, that naturalizes the behavioral and dispositional requirements and demands that everyday finance poses to the general public” (Maman; Rosenhek, 2022, s.p.).

Among the various social network profiles dedicated to financial education, a specific niche appeals to humor as its main communication strategy to raise affective calls to the (symbolic) consumption of financial products. The aim of this article is to analyze the discourses mediated by Instagram profiles linked to financial education that appeal to humor as a form of affective engagement to financial products, especially considering the discursive strategies of calls to consumption triggered by these profiles.

The profiles *Faria Lima Elevator*<sup>1</sup> (as of June 2022, it has around 485 thousand followers) and *Investidor da Depressão*<sup>2</sup> (as of June 2022, it has 531 thousand followers) were chosen as the research *corpus*. These profiles were chosen because they use humor as a strategy to address financial content and due to the large number of followers. The posts made by these profiles during May 2022 were analyzed.

French Discourse Analysis was chosen to analyze the media calls for consumption, with emphasis on the intertextuality process that structures such productions and discursively legitimizes certain types of consumption. Maingueneau (2005) argues that intertextuality precedes discursivity, which means that the enunciating subjects never have full control over their discourse because it is generated and acquires specificity from its relationship with other discourses within a discursive field. From the understanding that discourses

<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/farialima.elevator/?hl=pt-br>.

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/investidordadepressao/>.



do not exist in advance, but rather are placed in relation (of alliance or antagonism) to other discourses. Every discourse is thus crossed by other discourses, since the primacy of interdiscursivity constructs “a system in which the definition of the semantic network that circumscribes the specificity of a discourse coincides with the definition of the relations of this discourse with its Other” (Maingueneau, 2005, p. 35). From this perspective, we will map some of the intersections between discourses in media calls that use humor as the main strategy to call for the consumption of financial products.

### THE DISCURSIVE PRODUCTION OF A CONSUMER FOR FINANCIAL PRODUCTS

A study conducted by Brazilian Association of Financial and Capital Market Institutions (Anbima) estimated that there were approximately 255 relevant digital influencers on financial education in the country in the second half of 2022, collectively having around 37.4 million followers<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, it represents a significant and current cultural phenomenon. The pages selected for this study do not exactly fit into the genre of classical financial education - since their contents are not geared towards clarifying how financial products work or how to manage wealth. Nevertheless, we can affirm that they act as educators of finance, since they are important players in the propagation and naturalization of financial products in everyday life, acting on the symbolic aspects that concern the acceptability of these assets in a cultural instance. There is an important aspect of affective engagement triggered by these humor profiles that, in their discursive interpellations, even if it is from a humorous bias, mediate imaginaries about how a successful life is engendered to a successful management of financial assets.

*Faria Lima Elevator* describes himself, in its Instagram profile, as “Root Financial Market”. He was inspired by *Goldman Elevator*, a famous *Wall Street* site, by a Brazilian context. In an interview for *Valor Investe* newspaper, the author of the page, who remains anonymous, states that “much of what is said here is not new to those who are already in the market. But giving publicity to this world helps to publicize what life is like in the ‘county’ (Faria Lima)”<sup>4</sup>. The profile is full of humorous content about the life of Faria Lima’s frequenters, market movements, and financial assets.

<sup>3</sup>Retrieved from [https://www.anbima.com.br/pt\\_br/especial/influenciadores-de-investimentos-3.htm](https://www.anbima.com.br/pt_br/especial/influenciadores-de-investimentos-3.htm). Accessed on 12/16/2022.

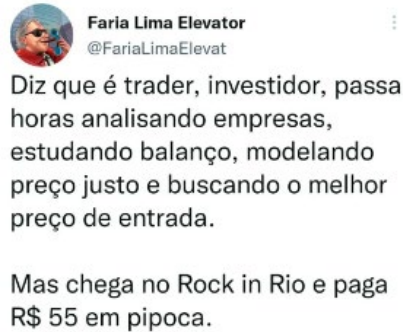
<sup>4</sup>Retrieved from <https://valorinveste.globo.com/objetivo/de-olho-no-mercado/noticia/2019/10/28/executivo-do-mercado-faz-barulho-com-touro-de-ouro-e-chega-na-pessoa-fisica.ghtml>. Accessed on 06/01/2022.

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**Figure 1**

*Examples of posts by Faria Lima Elevator*



Source: Instagram

*Investidor da Depressão*, on the other hand, has the following phrases in its profile description: “Investment Memes” and “Learn how to lose money before you win.” The page is run by Rodrigo Castro and employs a humorous strategy that involves inverting some common places in the financial market - such as, for example, the project “From a Million to a Thousand” (referencing Thiago Nigro’s best seller *Do Mil ao Milhão* - From a Thousand to a Million) - and the stories of failure in finances due to poor choice of financial assets.

**Figure 2**

*Examples of posts by Investidor da Depressão*



Source: Instagram

Thus, these profiles are not focused on providing technical financial education, as they do not teach how CDBs, LCIs, LCAs, and other financial products work. They also do not fall into the popular genre of financial self-help, which refers to publications that offer individualized solutions or procedures for achieving personal transformation in financial matters (Haro, 2013, p. 118). Additionally, they do not sell courses or financial products. However, these profiles share some common discursive assumptions with these other forms of communication, specifically related to the discourse surrounding the legitimacy of certain consumption practices.

According to Britto et al (2014, p. 181), “consumer capitalism has the characteristic of producing consumers and the consumption of products, even before the products have established their needs or utilities.” This implies that the demand for products, services, and goods cannot be solely understood from a utilitarian perspective (consumption because I need it), but rather from needs that are culturally constructed beforehand, based on shared values and norms that rank certain goods as more socially legitimate than others.

We start from a theoretical standpoint that asserts the construction of capitalist subjectivity as prior to and necessary for the functioning of capitalism. It argues that capitalism is not merely a mode of production but also a way of life that depends on the internalization of pre-existing moral values that make economic action rational in relation to its ends. This perspective aligns with various theoretical frameworks, such as the spirit of capitalism strand in Weber, and authors like Dardot and Laval (2016).

From the perspective that the production of the consumer precedes the production of goods and services (Santos, 2001), as the needs for them are mediated by culture as a way of life, *Investidor da Depressão* and *Faria Lima Elevator*, through the use of humor, serve as catalysts for the symbolic consumption of financial products, even if their viewers may not actually invest. Symbolic consumption refers to the idea that consuming a particular good serves not only a practical aspect in everyday life but also addresses broader symbolic and cultural issues. The concept of symbolic consumption encompasses the study of mechanisms through which meanings are attributed to things, as well as the transmission, communication, and hierarchization of sociocultural values materialized in goods and services.

From such theoretical assumptions, it can be argued that the examined profiles play a role in the discursive formation of individual-consumers of these financial products. Furthermore, they share several discursive imperatives with financial self-help, albeit presented in a cynical manner. We will now explore this further.

The pages studied, in a first aspect, are situated within the broader context of financialization, which refers to – which designates “the constant and continued increase of financial markets, players, institutions, and motives as protagonists of the world economy” (Haro, 2013, p. 111) – and its related legitimizing discourses. Financialized capitalism not only refers to a mode of action of the economic field, but rather, it demands the production of a specific type of subject, which “requires and nurtures a way of seeing and acting, a way of perceiving and interpreting the world, and a form of individual self-perception,” as well as “a specific type of behavioral and emotional management, which simultaneously produces and is produced by financial capitalism itself” (Haro, 2013, p. 112). Financial space, in this way, “is dependent on ‘metapolitical’ cultural disputes that shape the space of problem discussions and solutions” (Grün, 2013, p. 179) and aims to create a social and cultural environment that fosters the acceptance of financial products aligned with specific social sensibilities.

If, culturally, the savings account was considered as an effective and secure means of wealth management in Brazil, more recent demands of financialization require the legitimacy of another type of consumer of financial products – more willing to take risks and deal with volatility and possible losses from the promise of greater gains. It is in this environment, supported by discourses of “investment for all”, that a series of media actors gain relevance, with the power to moralize the decisions of individuals. Financial media celebrities invite their interlocutors to think about the legitimacy of their investment choices and propose a new model of emotional relationship with financial products.

The contents of *Faria Lima Elevator* and *Investidor da Depressão* has an intertextuality dialogue with the broader context of financialization and cultural validation of financial products as legitimate consumption practices. While these pages do not directly engage in the sale of assets, they contribute to the affective engagement with financial products and the production of symbolic consumption. In summary, at the discursive level, they are woven in the processes “of legitimizing financial education that, despite the discourse, fundamentally aims to promote the formation of individuals as consumers of financial products” (Britto *et al*, 2014, p. 177).

This way, the consumption of financial education products is not solely driven by utilitarian aspects, which involve the consumption of techniques and products to improve investment practices. It is also closely linked to symbolic aspects, encompassing the cultural and evaluative elements that, in public deliberations, define what constitutes a good investment.

This is why “knowing and using the consumption codes of my culture, I reproduce and demonstrate my participation in a certain social order” (Baccega, 2010, p. 59). In the context of consuming financial education products, the same mechanism applies as individuals’ affective engagement with these products correlates with the collective meanings attributed to them, signaling participation in a specific economic arrangement.

Therefore, if financial education becomes a necessity in today’s world, its symbolic consumption through communication products can be viewed as a process in which individuals participate. Through this process, they seek to establish their sense of identity, which is continuously under construction (Baccega, 2010, p. 59). In light of the financialization of the world, these media platforms produce a specific type of consumer by appealing to their emotions and encouraging them (symbolically) towards consumption (Maman; Rosenhek, 2022).

In *Faria Lima Elevator* and *Investidor da Depressão*, we can observe that this affective call to consumption is conveyed through humor. By discursive mechanisms of media call to consumption, we understand, like Prado (2013) the strategies used by media vehicles to provide viewers, packages of modal discourse related to the good living. The media calls involve how media outlets employ discursive strategies aimed at capturing the viewer’s attention and soliciting an active response by presenting consumption values that promise knowledge on how to navigate the daily world more effectively and thus achieve greater personal success. The call to consumption, therefore, encompasses communication strategies that contribute to the production of a specific type of consumer through media platforms, achieved by mobilizing legitimizing discourses that define what it means to “live well” and how this can manifest in the objects and services available for consumption, grounded in moral values associated with these goods.

Building on the assumption that affections ensure compliance with norms (Safatle, 2016) – including those related to socially validated consumption – the use of humor becomes a powerful discursive tool for fostering symbolic consumption of financial goods and services within the context of financialization and its cultural acceptability.

Media calls are performative. This is because within the call, there is always a slogan “that aims to create the illusion of a communication resembling a contract, but in reality, it is merely a simulacrum” (Prado, 2013, p. 58). It is precisely this aspect of the call that, for Prado (2013), explains how the media act from the language performative force. From this comes the fact that the need that emerges in the call is only manifested at the moment of its enunciation.

“Fantasy brings an object that is lost and must be recovered, but the paradox is that the object emerges at the exact moment of its loss” (Prado, 2013, p. 62). The *media*, therefore, acts from a pedagogy of desire. The consumer, who is produced and shaped by the discourse through this mechanism, is constituted by questioning the media’s discourse..

*Investidor da Depressão* and *Faria Lima Elevator* engage with and embody discourses associated with financialization. And “the mark that the questioning impresses is not descriptive, but inaugural” (Butler, 2021, p. 20), since the questioning is an act of speech whose “purpose is to designate and establish a subject in the subjection” of a discourse that precedes it – producing its social environment, so that “its reiterative operation has the effect of sedimenting its ‘positioning’ over time” (Butler, 2021, p. 20). *Investidor da Depressão* and *Faria Lima Elevator* appeal to discourses related to financialization and, in doing so, they question a type of subject and build a type of consumer *in* and *by* discourse.

In addition to the discourses associated with the financialization of society, these pages also share certain discursive elements with self-help literature and financial education. In the following sections, we will examine the specific discourses that are interrelated within this media landscape.

### AFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT BY HUMOR AND CYNICISM

In relation to discursive processes correlated with the production of positive affections for financial products (and the consequent production of a specific type of consumer), Leite (2017, p. 114) shows how some economic practices condemned at certain times were resignified and gained social legitimacy in others. One example is the figure of the “greedy investor” who, in more recent communication practices is transformed into the image of the “rational investor” – a character “who proclaims the benefits of the finance world and strengthens the programs and projects of financial education”. Thus, “elements of the imaginary about the financial market” such as the stock exchange, with its specific characters and actions, “are social constructions that were prepared at different times and that are related to divergent events in the history of capitalism, presenting them now as important protagonists, now as villains and causes of scandals and major economic crises” (Leite, 2017, p. 115).

In the case of media productions aimed at education or financial self-help, saving and investing wisely operate as slogan, so that “the traditional image of ‘crazed’ operators are slowly losing their ability to attract attention and

produce emotions” (Leite, 2017, p. 121). In turn, “it has been replaced by representations that highlight ‘rationality’ in capital markets, anchored in scientific studies, methods and software that give felling of security and legitimize investment practices, thus corroborating cognitive changes in society” (Leite, 2017, p. 121). The ideas of security and control gain primacy in speech, supported by methods that promise to control and predict the chaos of the market. *Investidor da Depressão* and *Faria Lima Elevator* in a humor way appropriate these discourses and transform the greedy and/or inexperienced investor in their investments into a central figure of the posts and memes made.

We found a number of examples in the analyzed period. In *Investidor da Depressão*, memes are often posted that mock financial education courses, especially those that promise quick and easy gains, very commonly marketed on *Instagram*. On 05/19/2022, for example, the page posted an interview of singer Gustavo Lima with the caption “The sincere course seller” saying: “90% of the things I tell is invented, see guys, and 10% is a lie.” On 05/04/2022, the meme said “Launching my new course ‘Savings Trader’ strategies with a return of 1% per month guaranteed”, with a news report announcing the rise in interest rates by Copom. On 05/17/2022, a comic strip of *Hägar the Horrible* edited as follows:

Course Seller: — This magic sword brings wealth  
 Sucker: — I’ll give you a bag of gold for it  
 Course Seller: — When will the sword bring me wealth?  
 Sucker: — When you sell it!

In *Faria Lima Elevator* it is possible to find similar content that mocks this type of course. On 05/18/2022, for example, the enunciator of the page posted that “Technology is the new daytrader, a lot of people selling course promising to work from the beach in Europe earning dollar”. In addition, the approach that satirizes the dream of hyperbolized financial gains also materializes in content that mocks certain investment decisions: “The Brazilian does not look at the interest rate of the financing, but rather, if the installment fits on the budget” (06/30/2022); “And outside of social networks, do you beat the Ibovespa?” (05/27/2022); “The pinnacle of Brazil: declare IT the day before, fight for the land in the inheritance, (...) buy capitalization bond to get 100% of your money back” (05/26/2022); and “I want to see you explaining to your client that you invest in an inflation fund and that you are losing money in a year that inflation only rises” (05/05/2022).



Thus, in *Faria Lima Elevator* and *Investidor da Depressão* the “crazed operator” and the “bad investor” are highlighted as central characters of humorous narratives. They reinforce, in this way, discourses present in the contents of the books of financial self-help, since they curse the promises of quick gains proclaimed by many popular courses and snipe the crazed investor who makes bad investment decisions (such as not saving and making a large number of installments in purchases, investing in the Ibovespa down in the hope of high gains or buying capitalization bond that usually yield very little for lack of market knowledge).

Humor, in these productions, has as sense effect the indirect reprimand, attenuated, and points the finger at the behaviors and characters that, in the representation of the financial market made by the discourse, should be the object of mockery and contempt. In the process that transforms the crazed and/or unskilled investor into a character about which we should laugh, there is a discursive subtlety that marks a sharing between validated practices for financial success and those that are not, in a type of call for symbolic-affective consumption of financial assets that reinforces the argument that those who actually know what they are doing can achieve good results.

In this respect, we recall that, in the process of making humoristic discourse, it is necessary for it to trigger widely identifiable cultural codes (from a dominant ideological position) while operating a distortion of that same code (Berger, 2012). *Investidor da Depressão* and *Faria Lima Elevator* invite the public to laugh at bad investment choices, which is nothing other than a way to present a critique of a malicious character and ridicule bad investors. Bad investment practices, under this logic, are put under public scrutiny from a rhetoric of bad example. This expedient, however, reinforces the validity of the rules themselves that apparently make fun, from the twisting of their normal codes, since the contents of these profiles do not question the importance of being part of the investment market. Instead of betting on success stories, profiles appeal to failure to create the humorous effect and point out what should not be done.

Leite (2017, p. 121) draws attention to the fact that in the literature of financial self-help “those who are not seen as conscious planners are considered mere selfish speculators, attached to material wealth and money.” And thus, “this field generates normative categories that characterize impulsive speculators as figures that should be excluded from market circuits.” The pages studied start from the same principle by making fun of market agents who supposedly behave irresponsibly.

In addition to offering a vitrine of bad examples, the use of humor still reinforces another discursive field common to financial self-help. In genre,

there is often a discourse that seeks to consolidate the idea “of “rich man” in a simply intelligent man, who knows how to put money at his own service, thus not becoming his slave” (Leite, 2021, p. 332). Thus, “the mantra referred to is legitimized, strengthening a social logic that implies the incorporation of techniques capable of allowing individuals to transform themselves to achieve financial freedom” (Leite, 2021, p. 332).

This reveals a form of subtle sense of humorous discourse mediated by *Investidor da Depressão* and *Faria Lima Elevator*. There is a kind of pact established in the joke: if the reader is smart enough to understand the joke present in the posts and share the censorship made to bad investors, the discourse builds the triangulation that this same reader is smart enough to invest wisely, in a reaffirmation of the discourse of rationality in the financial market. The vitrine of bad examples, therefore, is accompanied by a veiled compliment to the reader who, put in place to laugh at the other, can affirm their own intelligence.

Related to the discourses that highlight negative examples in the relationship with financial products, another common discursive resource employed in financial self-help, as pointed out by Leite (2017), is the appeal to the notion that security and control can be achieved through techniques that predict market movements. The concept of the future is thus consistently invoked as a tool that evokes both negative emotions, such as the fear of losing assets, and positive emotions associated with risk mitigation techniques.

It is not by chance, therefore, that the discourse of financial self-help resorts, commonly, to social players that Casaqui (2020, p. 6) calls “futurists”: media personalities who produce inspirational narratives aimed on the future, “that mix with positive psychology, with the genre of self-help, with the activity of the personal coach, with the ‘coaches of the soul’ who preach the ideal of effective management of life”.

As highlighted by Casaqui (2020), futurism is constructed within media practices as an inspirational discourse. Although it may appear as the production of narratives grounded in expert systems, it often presents partial views of reality that are closely aligned with economic logics. Behind the interpretation of future scenarios, there exists a culture of consumption that emphasizes neoliberal logics, such as the dismantling of labor laws, social policies, and the idea of a minimal state (Casaqui, 2020, p. 17). This culture also praises individuals portrayed as “the man of the future,” such as high-performance entrepreneurs who are resilient, flexible, and perceive no limits to their activities (Casaqui, 2020, p. 17).

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There is a striking affective engagement in these narratives of the future. Feelings of uncertainty, confusion, insecurity and fear are mobilized, for the author, as ways to trigger his reverse:

in a society in which one of the founding links is fear, there is an important role reserved for narratives that mobilize ‘positive’ affections, which return to the subject the belief of a desirable future, planned and conceived from his desires. (Casaqui, 2020, p. 8).

In the analyzed profiles, the future is also repeatedly placed as the object of discourse – from a cynical perspective or from a nihilistic humor. There is a twist in traditional discourses of financial education and self-help that it is possible to predict the future to make rational and assertive investment decisions.

In *Faria Lima Elevator*, we found the following posts with this bias, in the period analyzed: “Just thinking of the elections dreads me” (05/23/2022); “If you had bought the XYZ asset 8 years ago, you would have earned XXXXX% today”. I wouldn’t have. “You would have sold *well* before that” (05/15/2022); “Never bet against IPCA” (05/11/2022); “60 to 100 years: my retirement is on land and real estate.” 40 to 60: all my retirement is in savings. 25 to 40: all my retirement is in Treasury Direct and Stocks. 15 to 25: all my retirement is in Crypto Coins and NFTs” (05/07/2022); and “Market does not discuss politics, discusses risk. It can even be policy.” (05/03/2022).

In *Investidor da Depressão*, the possibilities of predicting the future are also satirized. On 05/20/2022, the profile posted a video of a cut of the The Simpsons cartoon with the caption “The Future of those who do not invest” that had the following dialogue:

- We won’t need social security; we’re going to be rich!
- Yeah, we never going to need government aid
- [scene cutting for the future]
- Help me government!
- We need the retirement payment!
- Release our peanuts every month!

Also, on the page, you can find content such as: “Jesus showing that with the wallet I have there is no way to perform a miracle” (05/30/2022); and “I sell my friend buying trader robot: “I don’t know what is this urge you have to do shit” (05/19/2022).

These contents, which make fun of the idea that it is possible to predict the future, reestablish the pact of humor that we diagnosed earlier: it laughs at the

innocence of those who believe in this possibility (in another type of window construction of bad examples) while praising the reader for understanding the joke. In doing so, it reaffirms the validity of the assumptions of discourses linked to the financialization of society and weaves a morality to the consumption practices of products of the financial market.

In addition to this aspect, we can highlight other discursive lines that intersect. Weaved to financialization, it is quite common, in financial communicators, to a reference to neoliberal discourses, from which the statement “circulates the easy enrichment of the self-centered individual, presenting that it is composed of dialogical relations with discourses produced by capitalism, with emphasis on individualism” (Stafuzza; Pereira, 2021, p. 1685). For Leite (2021), one of the characteristics of the genre is to harmonize, in the discourse, a series of inconsistencies, since it preaches the effectiveness of its products at the same time that, however, suggests (based on principles such as freedom, autonomy and abundance proposed by this sector) that success is tied not only to the intelligence of playing the rule of the game, but rather, to adapt it to real-life contexts. “The production of the ‘neoliberal I’ evokes the importance of financial education, that is, an instrumental education that must stimulate financial skills related to the real world” (Leite, 2021, p. 333). Success or failure, in this logic, is always a responsibility of the individual.

This aspect is often satirized in the profiles analyzed. Faith in individual action is not as blind in humorous profiles as in self-help literature, which superficially may suggest a re-engendering of neoliberal discourse in these profiles. Personal effort and hard work are often satirized in this discourse as a way to create humorous effects.

*Investidor da Depressão* mocks this stance in memes such as “Twice a week I shoots up 5 times at the back of the house, to keep the rents cheap here in the neighborhood” (05/16/2022); “In real life you may be poor, but on Instagram the choice is yours!” (05/15/2022); and, in a meme with the caption “The secret is to stand out” the figure showed an email with the words “Hi, Douglas, good afternoon! How are you? You submitted a bank slip instead of your curriculum. Sincerely” (05/02/2022).

If irony gives a tone of humorous criticism to neoliberal discourses in *Invertidor da Depressão* and *Faria Lima Elevator* there are frequent pinpricks to postures considered lazy or little engaged, in a more explicit adherence to neoliberal discourse, even if under a satire bias. There you can find posts like: “Having a bad boss / leader can be a matter of bad luck. Continuing with a bad boss / leader is a matter of choice” (05/24/2022); “If Warren Buffett were Brazilian he would be a fixed income investor and a public employee” (05/12/2022);

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“Man is born good, the variable remuneration that corrupts him” (05/11/2022); and “You don’t have ADHD, you’re just really disorganized” (05/18/2022).

The pact established by jokes is maintained in these re-presentations of neoliberal discourse. As stated by Gobbi (1999, p. 127), humor mobilizes all instances participating in the communicative process: “the enunciator, who intentionally marks his speech as ironic; the receiver, who must necessarily decode that speech as ironic.” The humorous pact, in this way, will be based on a discursive practice from which the reader is placed in a position to transcend the literal message to glimpse the other meanings of the discourse.

But in addition to positioning the reader in a place of intelligence in the discourse – after all, he is treated as someone capable of understanding the joke – what other senses are these? Or, in other words, how does humor mobilize discourses about calling to the symbolic consumption of financial products?

Safatle (2008a) helps us to delimit these meanings from the perspective that if, for a long time, the discourses that legitimized economic practices demanded an ethics of commitment, today, in a historical moment in which the superego is founded on the imperative of enjoyment, we are incited to a flexibility of the regimes of indexation to the norms. The discursive calling, in these terms, is articulated around a “not taking yourself so seriously”, so that “capitalism would no longer require any kind of blind belief in the normative contents that it itself enunciates” (Safatle, 2008b, p. 1), in a discourse of power that laughs at itself. “This apparent absence of legitimacy,” however, would be the true core of his strength. This is to the point of saying that its legitimacy crisis would be its driving core” (Safatle, 2008b, p. 2), since it reinforces its own adherence to the rules from a cynical enunciation. “In other words, it is enough for them to be followed ‘cynically’ by making them justify the opposite of what they seemed to index.” Thus, the “socio-symbolic law is always complemented by a kind of double, a second superegoic law that can only be enunciated cynically” (Safatle, 2008a, p. 24).

In the ethics of cynicism, the concealment of the fetishistic character of the commodity is given from discourses that are capable of “reveal the secret of its functioning and continue to function as such” (Safatle, 2008b, p. 1). Parodic discourses are manifestations of these mechanisms, from which “we could take all distance from the normative contents of the capitalist ideological universe because the discourse itself of power already laughs at itself” (Safatle, 2008b, p. 2). It is, therefore, a triumphant capitalism that mock at itself and no longer fears critical discourse. Rather than meaning a crisis of legitimacy, such a mechanism is actually its reinforcement, articulated from a discourse that manages to cynically carry out criticism.

This cynical posture of humor, as opposed to meaning the unmasking of abuses of power-perpetuates the normativities while proclaiming the weaknesses of these normativities. Individuals, in this context, are called to sustain ironic identifications, in which “subjects affirm their distance from what they are representing or, even, from their own actions” (Safatle, 2008b, p. 9).

Unlike an ethics of commitment (which would be typical of the genre of financial self-help), humorous profiles call discursively from an ironic ethics – which already creates in it, for Safatle (2008A), a kind of identification by the negative. “This self-sarcasm is a cunning way of perpetuating narrative structures and frames of socialization, even while recognizing that they are completely ruined” (Safatle, 2008b, p. 12). For the author, it is precisely the cynical satirization of these ways of life that allows the content to continue circulating.

*Investidor da Depressão* and *Faria Lima Elevator* cynically appropriate the discourses of quick win, the possibilities of predicting the future and the neoliberal discourses of individual action. When doing it, in an apparent breach of expectations and satirization of the discursive models present in financial self-help, they end up reinforcing the same types of discourse. If, in appearance, they seem to criticize these discourses from humor, cynicism creates, as an effect of meaning, a distancing that recognizes the validity of these same norms, corroborating them. At no time, these discourses propose to criticize neoliberalism and investment discourses, but rather, they propose, from a cynical framework, to better affectively prepare investors for the symbolic consumption of the financial market (its values, norms and assumptions, even if many viewers of these pages may not even invest effectively).

Correlated to this, there is also another effect of noteworthy meaning in the discursive-affective calls to consumption in these pages, which refers to the reiteration of stories of failures and bad financial choices. In addition to acting on the reinforcement of the aforementioned discourses (although from an ironic perspective), another effect of meaning of this iterability is related to the naturalization of the perspective of loss. Failure, thus, is portrayed not only cynically, but also as part of the game.

## **FAILURE AS A NATURALIZED PRACTICE**

Chua (2021, n.p.) draws attention to the fact that “In our era of late capitalism, we can bear witness to the ongoing creative fashioning of successful failure into a commodity which has grown in value”. This is linked to a series of manifestations, in culture, that preach the need to learn from failure and act accordingly, articulated to discourses that this is how entrepreneurial economics works.

Thus, “the marketisation of triumphalist narratives of failure is symptomatic of the rise of a new ‘ideology that justifies engagement in capitalism’, calling for ‘workforce participation’ in a new way” (Chua, 2021, s.p.). Certain types of successful failures are packaged to make an impact and turn into commodified narratives of failure.

Failure, in the literature of financial self-help, is often naturalized and justified from a discourse that preaches that the individual must overcome their fears to take economic risks. Thus, “factors such as uncertainty and risks begin to be read as positive assets in contrast to the ideas of stability and predictability that figured as characteristics of the capitalist model of the industrial period” (Leite, 2021, p. 333).

As we have previously stated, the profiles analyzed are filled with stories of failure. In *Faria Lima Elevator*, one reads joke like: “I’m not cold because I’m covered in losses at the broker” (06/25/2022); “Warren’s Berkshire could plummet 99% and still beat the S&P from the start. That’s the tweet” (05/14/2022);

“Remember: the important thing is not to try to make money, it is to lose less than your friend” (05/10/2022); “We are already in May and all that the Brazilian market has managed to do is lose 5 months” (05/09/2022); “Happy ‘you are not everyone’ Day. Remember, despite being a daytrader, your mother loves you’ (05/08/2022); “Some weeks you simply thank the existence of the weekend for the fact that the market closes” (05/06/2022); and “Income Tax Return: the retrospective prepared by the government to remind you of your terrible financial performance of the previous year” (05/04/2022).

In *Investidor da Depressão*, likewise, we find posts like: “Federal revenue plans loss tax after a large number of investors declare losses in 2022” (05/31/2022); “studies show that couples who trade together double the chances of losing money” (05/13/2022); “Going to work thinking about the losses I’m taking” (05/12/2022); “Asking your wife to open an OnlyFans because you lost your house” (05/11/2022); and, in a meme showing Titanic’s violinist: “Phew, the week is over! Gentlemen, it was an honor to lose money with you guys” (05/06/2022).

Along with the discursive mechanisms previously analyzed, another aspect of the pages studied concerns discourses that take failure as a naturalized practice, as part of the game. Walking alongside cynicism, failure is represented as something ordinary and often observed. There is, here, a kind of discourse that values the failure as a teacher and as part of the way to success. Losing a little to learn to gain a lot later is part of the discourse of financial self-help and is reiterated in these humorous profiles, in a perspective of naturalization that invites the viewer to take more risks and not suffer for it (not even in the face of eventual losses).



The valuation of the failure suggests that “tensions in the financial market continue to exist. Thus, satires have not disappeared, and the figure of the greedy, manipulative investor still feeds moments of crisis and composes fictions” (Leite, 2017, p. 121). Nevertheless, in these productions, the negative images of investments have as counterpoint the use of humor and a cynical rationality that, from an apparent denial, rectifies the assumptions of a discourse that calls for an affective relationship with financial products, even if it is from humor.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

From the use of humor and cynicism as communication strategies, *Faria Lima Elevator* and *Investidor da Depressão* are part of a movement from which “finances are often presented according to a logic of show and entertainment” (Haro, 2013, p. 114) and culturally integrated into everyday practices.

The analysis of the discursive of call strategies to consumption of these media productions reveals that financialization functions as a legitimizing discursive scene and, from this, these productions share a series of discourses with the genres of self - help and financial education - although under a humor bias. Among these discourses, stands out the censure of some types of investor such as the greedy, the unskilled or the ignorant - making them objects of mockery. By showing a vitrine of bad examples, the discourse also reveals its opposite, the appreciation of the rational and well-studied choice of investments, which mediates ordinary neoliberal discourses on meritocracy and the appreciation of individual action.

Although often the contents of these pages seem to mock commonplaces of financial self-help literature – such as the idea that it is possible to predict the future to make good investments and the idea that success depends on great personal commitment and effort – cynical rationality mobilizes a discursive apparatus that legitimizes the norm by seeming to contradict it. This, on the one hand, because the humorous pact positions the viewer, *in* and *through* the discourse, as an intelligent spectator – since it is assumed that he is able to understand the joke and therefore intelligent enough to stay out of the vitrine of bad examples. In a second aspect, because the denial of the norm recognizes the validity of the norm itself. For Safatle (2008B, P.7), “everything happens as if contemporary capitalism and its larger forms work from a certain logic of ‘carnivalization’”, from the assumption that the apparent suspension of the law, typical of Carnival social processes, are nothing more than a form of reinforcement of this law itself.

At times when cynical identification falters, it is possible to count on yet another effect of meaning engendered by discourse from which a successful failure can be valued as a good teacher and as part of the game. These are productions that, based on humor, create an affective discourse in relation to financial products, validate certain types of behavior in relation to finance and build, through discourse, a specific type of consumer, culturally prepared to act in the financial market, by naturalizing practices and legitimizing behaviors linked to the financialization of economic relations from communication. ■

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# Flânerie through the cities of the future

## Flânerie *pelas cidades do futuro*

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### ABSTRACT

This study takes Walter Benjamin's idea of *flânerie* as a methodological tool designed to travel across imaginary futuristic cities in four science fiction films. The *flanêur*, therefore, is a cognitive operator that leads me to think of another way of appreciating films, creating my own time of observation and learning from fiction the ideas of the future that currently create futuristic urban landscapes. This study results from the research "Human Futures: the imaginary perception of urban environments and landscapes of the future in contemporary cinema", which investigates the projections of the social imaginary about the future of urban spaces in science fiction cinema, and ponders on its reflexes in today's society.

**Keywords:** *Flânerie*, futuristic cities, science fiction, imaginary

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### RESUMO

Este artigo toma a ideia de *flânerie*, de Walter Benjamin, como uma ferramenta metodológica pensada para percorrer cidades futurísticas imaginárias em quatro filmes de ficção científica. O *flanêur*, portanto, é um operador cognitivo que me leva a construir uma outra forma de apreciar os filmes, criando meu próprio tempo de observação e apreendendo da ficção as ideias de futuro que hoje criam as paisagens urbanas futuristas. Este artigo resulta da pesquisa "Futuros Humanos: A percepção imaginária dos ambientes urbanos e paisagens do futuro no cinema contemporâneo", que investiga as projeções do imaginário social sobre o futuro dos ambientes urbanos no cinema de ficção científica, considerando seus reflexos na sociedade atual.

**Palavras-chave:** *Flânerie*, cidades futuristas, ficção científica, imaginário



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*The principle of flânerie in Proust. "So, away from all this literary concerns and without tying me to anything, suddenly a roof, the sun's reflection on a rock, the smell of a path held me through the singular pleasure they provided me, and because they seemingly hid, beyond what I could see, something that invited me to seek and, despite my efforts, I could not discover." Du Côté de Chez Swann, vol.01, Paris, 1939p. 256.*

Walter Benjamin

**A**LLOWING YOURSELF TO be taken by everything that surrounds you, inaugurating, at every step on the street, a new experience in the world. But not only being taken by smells and sounds of crowded streets from modern cities, it is also necessary to evoke this feeling and build it in your writing. The thorough report of experience makes time present and gives live texture to experience itself. Walter Benjamin (2018) reinvents the street chronicler in the *flâneur* craft on the beginning of the 20th century, and this character inspires me as a methodological device to the philosopher, the artist or even the ethnographer that wants to recognize the nuances from street life in their era.

Unlike hurried passers-by on the sidewalks, who have countless goals to accomplish throughout the day, the *flâneur* has only one: being completely available to observe and feel how the spirit of time happens in the streets. This single objective has the intrinsic political meaning of trying to resist the speed and rush of modern times that suffocate the time of tradition. Hence, the *flâneur's* focused exercise is to become uttermost present at the sensations and impulses from the streets, as to be able to witness the minimal and almost imperceptible occurrences from his time. The *flâneur* strolls, has fun, talks at newsstands, in bars, but for him everything and everyone are part of his study of experience in the poetic intimacy of urban everyday life.

*Flânerie is based, among other things, on the assumption that the fruit of idleness is more precious than that of work. Notoriously, the flâneur "studies". The Larousse from the 19th century claims in this regard: "his open eye and attentive ear are searching for different things other than what the crowds are looking for. A word casually cast reveals one of those character traces that cannot be invented and needs to be captured live; these physiognomies so naively attentive will provide the painter with an expression he dreamed of; a rattling, negligible to most ears, will touch the musician and give them an idea for a harmonic composition; even to the thinker, to the philosopher lost in their reverie, this external upheaval is fruitful: it mixes and shakes the ideas, as storms mix the waves of the sea..." (Benjamin, 2018, p. 756).*

For Benjamin, Paris from the turn of the 19th to the 20th century is the place where the modernity happens bringing crowds to the streets, with its tables on sidewalks in front of bistro and night life stretched out until late under the glow of streets always illuminated by the electricity recently introduced in the poles of the boulevards. It is a new sociological event in which the agglomerations are immersed in a new city experience. According to Benjamin, people were no longer able to live an experience of tradition that allowed a delicate attention to the present of each moment of the experience. For that reason, he finds in the *flâneur* someone that was not captured by the urgency of modernity that empties the experience of the subject.

*By being a social type that lives on the threshold between the experience of tradition (Erfahrung) and the experience of modernity (Erlebnis), more precisely the astonishing one (Chockerlebnis), the flâneur still manages to have this perceptive flexibility that gives him a way of looking that makes it possible, more than seeing, to read both the city in history and history in the city, as well as its other types. Among them, we highlight the player and the student, with whom he forms, according to Benjamin, some kind of trilogy of idleness. (Biondillo. 2014. p. 14).*

The *flâneur* is an incredibly fascinating character that I become in this article as the operator of a methodological exercise. The motivation to know the spirit of time carefully observing the daily life on the streets I direct to traverse streets, alleys and every urban area presented in 04 futuristic fiction movies. In other words, I have no interest on the plot, nor the story or the protagonists from those movies. What moves me is only the interest in walking and feeling the streets, paying attention to extras, to the architecture of buildings, to the city planning, and to try to imagine what the inhabitants think and feel. I tried to put myself as another extra, that is why I paused the movie many times whenever urban spaces appeared and presented characters and places that would disappear in seconds. I created time to contemplate places where the camera goes too fast. That way I forced the movie to give myself time to appreciate street life. I allow myself to dream and imagine what would be like the life of that woman, or that man, or that robot that appear for 03 seconds or less in the background of the scenes. Since I no longer have a commitment to the film, I let myself be taken over several times by the curiosity of contemplating the city as a landscape.

*Landscape – this is what the city really becomes for the flâneur. Or more precisely: for him, the city splits into its dialectical poles. It opens to him as a landscape and closes around him as a room. (Benjamin, 2018, p. 703)*



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The benjaminian *flâneur* has the mission of returning liveliness to experience, therefore, one must be attentive to let the flow of events in the modern narrative pass and take time when glancing at the simplicity of the streets, thus rediscovering time. In this exercise concerning futuristic cities, as I mentioned I had to pause and rewind the movies several times. I needed to rediscover passages through alleys, bridges and crossings, to find posters on the walls, garbage on alleys and props on the facades of buildings, so I could delve into an urban imaginary of the future through 04 cities in 04 films.

The “visited” places were Los Angeles, *Blade Runner* (1982), by Ridley Scott. I also visited New Port City, an imaginary city in Japan created for the anime and movie *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), by Mamoru Oshii. Finally, I went to the cities of London and Cologne, the latter also an imaginary city located somewhere in Australia, at the end of the 21st century, both created for the movie *Total Recall* (2012). It is important to say that in these films it is possible to follow an everyday life designed for these futuristic cities. They clearly bring the construction of images of an urban life within which their stories unfold, this is why they interested me.

In this paper, I took images of cinema as expressions of a technological imaginary that combines the eternal desire to know the future with the communicative capacity to reach the masses. Futuristic science fiction in cinema manages to create images crossed by the same desires and fears that inspired ancient folk to try to guess what was to come through their prophetic oracles.

Through this speculation new worlds arise, distant planets, mysterious islands, underwater ruins and overcrowded cities of people from all over the world, mixed with robots, cyborgs and a huge fauna of humanoid hybrids with machines vying for spaces in these environments. This is the aspect of human futures that is of interest to this paper: glancing as a *flâneur* over the imaginary that today is made of agglomerations in metropolis and big cities presented in the futuristic films mentioned above. A recursive appearance of images in several films that mix the sophistication of buildings, vehicles, high-end urban digital artifacts with the precariousness of alleys and passageways, where the underworld negotiates remains and contraband from the technological world.

This paper is a result of the research “Human Futures: A percepção imaginária dos ambientes urbanos e paisagens do futuro no cinema contemporâneo”. This study investigates the projections of the social imaginary concerning the future of urban environments in science fiction cinema, taking its reflexes on present society into account. This text deals with the images produced by science fiction cinema not as something that ends in the exhibition halls, but as something that echoes in our fantasy beyond the times. These

images are reappearances of fears and desires - affections - that endure in our imagination and dreams. These affections are intrinsically connected to the human species in this collective social unconsciousness that Gilbert Durand called **imaginary**: “we see the imaginary, more than ever, as constituent of the dynamic and spiritual capital of homo-sapiens” (Durand, 2012, p.5). This symbolic capital accompanies us symbiotically, we feed on it and feed it, in a cycle that defines the existence of the human on the planet.

## BLADE RUNNER

### Figure 1

*Los Angeles, EUA, November 2019.*



*Note.* Screenshot from the movie *Blade Runner*. (Time code: 10'45'')

When I flew over Los Angeles at night it was like floating over the flames of old oil-well towers of the cities bordering the Persian Gulf. Down below, straight lines of lights show the streets of a city drawn with a ruler, dotted with gigantic luminous buildings, true fortresses in the middle of the city. Just like that you arrive in Los Angeles at the beginning of winter when the mornings get warmer and the nights colder, oscillating between 10 and 22 degrees. Arriving at night in Los Angeles in these flying cars is scary. The buildings are intimidating. They are dark, long blocks that project into the skies, sprinkled by numerous lights of their internal environments. Which reminds of Baudelaire through Benjamin:

“There is no object more profound, more mysterious, more fertile, more sinister, more dazzling than a candle lit window.” Charles Baudelaire, *Le Spleen de Paris*, Paris, Ed. R. Simon, p.62 (“Les fenêtres”). (Benjamin, 2018, P.732)

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When I walked along the sidewalks, I was struck by lights flashing over the heads of passers-by. At the top of the facades of many of the buildings Japanese and Chinese advertising videos are projected. Chinese ideograms spread in the marquees of all buildings. In the futuristic Los Angeles of 2019 Japanese and Chinese conquered the night lights. There is always a fog cut off by rain and neon effects on these November LA nights. In parts of the city, a large number of people elbow each other under lighted lightsaber-like umbrellas. They walk through narrow streets reminiscent of the food markets and alleyways of small restaurants in Tokyo. In other sections of the city, more distant from the center, a vast emptiness extends through deserted streets in almost completely abandoned neighborhoods.

Everywhere you walk you can see airships covered with lights and screens through the sky, inviting people to invest in a new life or look for a better world and have a new beginning in the colonies outside the Earth. Aerial advertising tries to repeat the myth of the land of freedom and opportunity that brought thousands of Europeans to America centuries ago. For a moment, these announcements always above people make you feel that life on Earth is hopeless. Los Angeles has big uninhabited empty zones. Many people already left to live on those colonies in other planets, but the city also has overpopulated neighborhoods, crammed with all human tribes, punks, devotees of Krishna, Turkish merchants, eastern street vendors.

People transit in the streets alien to the announcement of another promised land on their heads, not realizing that the city invites them to leave. Maybe many want to, but not everyone can. People with degenerative diseases, such as JF Sebastian, one of the characters in the film, do not pass the medical examinations that allow them to migrate to the colonies. Along with thousands of people, Sebastian goes through his days on naturalized suffocation in which people no longer listen to the advertising that offers a better world.

Even in daylight it is hard to see the top of LA's gloomy skyscrapers when you look up. They always disappear in the middle of the fog that filters out daylight. From inside this fog, you can only see the lights turn on and off at various times of the day. There are several ways to get to know Los Angeles, but all are divided into two planes: traversing a plane at ground level through narrow streets, dirty and overpopulated alleys, lights always flashing on facades, smell of fried food packed through the cold fog of November. In the other plane it is possible to know LA on flying vehicles that run through the city among the skyscrapers tens of meters above the ground. From the window of these vehicles, one crosses the whole city through street lines and aerial corners. Crossing billboards and illuminated signs placed to be seen from above.

The aerial streets show another side of the city, the giant shadowy buildings and their aerials appear more clearly, and you can even see some inhabitants in the bright spots of the dark wall.

When the rain stops on these November nights, several people risk themselves in groups on night bike rides. They wear their yellow raincoats and circumvent the beggars who warm themselves around bonfires in the middle of the street. Blue TV monitors hanging from poles mark what seems to be bus stops. Following the panoramic camera in the cold of night I try to read some words in the streets. There is rarely a phrase or word in English, everything is full of ideograms on posters or on the graffiti in garbage dumps and walls of colossal buildings. This city has gone sad, it echoes that one day it welcomed its inhabitants, one day it was possible to be happy in Los Angeles. Suddenly the rain stops, and you can see the dirt on the streets become mud.

The street markets for synthetic animals are especially curious. They resemble the old street bazaars of Istanbul and Tehran where you could find the most diverse products scattered on crammed small stalls and shops. Right on the sidewalk there are street food vendors with their grills lit with the most diverse types of skewers. The LA synthetic animal market is multicultural and contains eagles and ornamental fish. The animals are announced by the shouting of the vendors in search of customers. Raccoons in cages and ostriches on the loose share space with customers in crowded alleys at any time of the day. Hybrid horses and snakes made with genetic engineering and robotics are displayed in stores. Walking through these alleys brings a mixture of excitement, curiosity and fear of bumping into the animals.

## Figura 2

Downtown Los Angeles



Note. Screenshot from the movie *Blade Runner*. (Time code: 56'49")

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At the outskirts is where you can find the most people at any time of the day. In Chinatown, people and flightless cars compete for space on the streets. Amid the noises of the city, I can hear a metallic voice that also disputes the sound ambience. In an attempt to organize the traffic, a robotic mechanism installed on a street pole, with several monitors and sound outputs, insistently says: “cross now, cross now, cross now”. Or “don’t cross, don’t cross, don’t cross” over and over. Nobody listens, nobody obeys.

### GHOST IN THE SHELL

**Figure 3**

*New Port City, 2029*



Note. <https://www.behance.net/gallery/51424063/GHOST-IN-THE-SHELL>

Arriving in New Port City, the Japanese imaginary city created for the movie *Ghost in the Shell* feels like arriving at an amusement park. The city is introduced by its commercial center, the busiest neighborhood in the city. The first thing that draws attention are the streets that can have floors. They both run at ground level, as well as spread in elevated corridors, like viaducts over several floors crossing the entire city. So, the travelers in vehicles have different notions of the city depending on the street floor being used to go through a neighborhood. This way of walking through the streets also influences the way street advertisements are presented. The billboards were replaced by giant holograms, shapes several meters high that appear in the middle of the street under slogans and jingles that echo throughout the environment. The ads feature new robotic implants for improvements to the human body,

called cyber-enhancements, cosmetics with nanotechnology substances; safety services for the genetic structure of children (I have no idea what that is) and a vast number of products and services of several types.

Many giant light panels stream Japanese calligraphy – which are beautiful in its own – through the facade of buildings, even if it is not known whether they are part of some advertisement or just the name of the company installed in the building. When you walk the streets, it is difficult to distinguish 100% organic humans, robots, holograms or enhanced humans; somehow, they all look alike. Their faces have no expression or are covered by masks and accessories for expanding communication and reading information from the environment. Everyone seems taken by an automated daily life. People do not speak in the streets, the voices that can be heard are the advertising of gigantic holograms. Each one lives in a particular world of virtual interaction with things that are not in front of them. Consequently, even when walking in the streets, people do not interact with each other in person, they manage their lives in simultaneous metaverses.

But there is one thing extremely curious about humans and humanoids in New Port City: robots are trying to appear more and more humanized, using all kinds of synthetic skin and advanced conversation programs, whereas, on the other hand, humans are increasingly robotic, with hundreds of implants and biotechnological enhancements that can clearly show that they are cyborgs. Therefore, as the body-machine fusion is a tendency of humanization (or robotization) here, even humans who have no technological improvements simulate enhanced body parts with plastic masks of metallic appearance, like the prostitutes from the outskirts.

On the psychology of flâneur: “the unreasonable scenes, which we can all rewatch by closing our eyes, are not those we contemplate with a guidebook in hand, but those we did not paid attention to at the time, the ones we went through thinking about something else – a sin, a girlfriend or a puerile annoyance”. (Benjamin, 2018, P.733).

To know the diversity of beings of New Port City you need to look very closely at people who pass by. At the commercial center is the most diverse fauna of cybernetic beings ever seen, some with minor improvements made by implants and others with bodies completely modified by genetic engineering, as well as many robots and holograms. This central part of the city is extremely colorful with its LED fluorescent and neon lights, fluorescent, as well as the lights of the holograms themselves. For this reason, this region is always very



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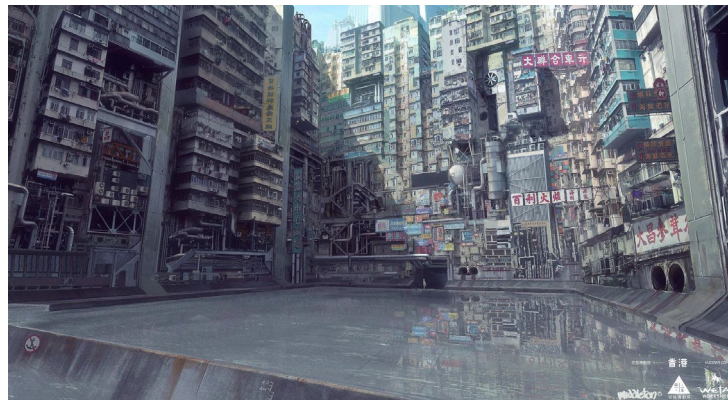
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luminous at any time of the day, you can hardly notice the little sunlight that crosses the heavy and gray clouds in the morning.

All traffic signs in this central part of the city are holographic, they can appear, disappear, or simply change indication at any time. But holograms are not only in buildings and traffic signs, they also are spread through the streets in shapes of people or animals, on taxi plates, as hair for androids, even luminous fish swim over heads as if all around were a corridor of lights. The central region of New Port City resembles a pinball machine lit and in activity, with many lights always alternating, provoking the feeling of a game in which those who pass on the street are the characters.

But as soon as you get a little away from the streets of the New Port commercial center, it is like going back in time. On the multiethnic popular markets, narrow corridors of alleys and passageways have exposed hydraulic pipes and air conditioners hanging from the windows of buildings. The dumpsters and traffic signs are the same as any 20th century Japanese city. The remote neighborhoods are not only more geographically distant from the center, they are also more technologically distant, which makes them therefore more distant in time. It is as if the most peripheral neighborhoods were 150 years away from the central region of the city. In the region called Lawless Zone, you can see kludges of wires on poles crossing the streets, old cars abandoned on the street corners, heavy constructions resembling prisons, coffin-like buildings filthy of mud with clothes hanging from the windows and garbage on the marquees of the floors, thrown by the residents from the above floors.

**Figure 4**  
*Outskirts of New Port City*



Note. <https://www.wallpaperflare.com/ghost-in-the-shell-digital-art-urban-city-water-anime-wallpaper-gjaeo>



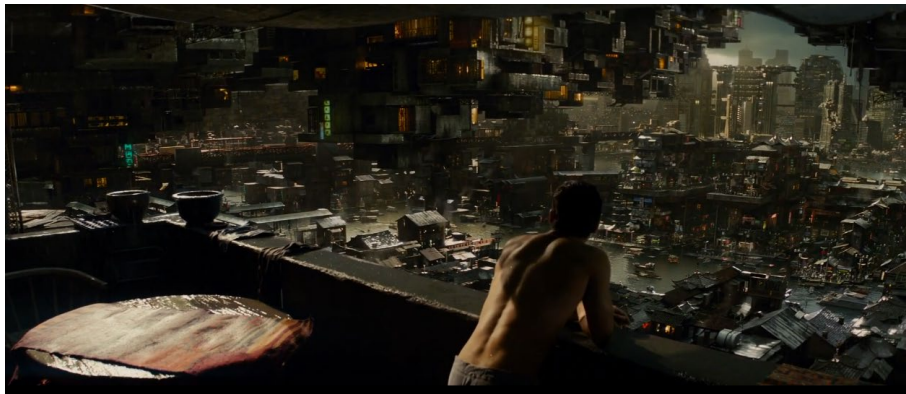
The distant residential complexes from the more remote neighborhoods maintain the same strong trend of verticalization of the skyscrapers that can be seen at the center. Gigantic buildings – without the sparkles and lights from the center–, with tiny apartments, which seen from afar are reminiscent of the huge residential complexes that spread through the working-class neighborhoods in the outskirts of cities such as Moscow and Warsaw during the time of the old iron curtain of communist countries. Buildings without personality, huge concrete boxes dotted with windows crammed into reduced square meters in each apartment. New Port City further widens the gap between social classes by creating through technological difference a time gap between different regions of the city.

### TOTAL RECALL: THE COLONY

I loved diving through the time of this place, even though it was a city designed to be the expression of the planetary periphery at the end of the 21st century. At first, looking panoramically at the city, we are frightened by the considerable number of enormous boxes of dark reinforced concrete, juxtaposed as if they were embedded, which serve as housing for the workers. The Colony is like any overpopulated metropolis of the 20th century. This impression of overpopulation is noticed through the landscape of houses that have a large number of illuminated boxes piled up on the banks of a river. It is always exceedingly difficult to describe what the image of a place makes you feel when we experience them calmly.

#### Figure 5

*Colony, end of the 21st century*



Note. Screenshot from the movie *Total Recall*. (Time code: 08'44")

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I will attempt to describe the Colony in another way: it is as if we visited a large container park piled up in the courtyard of a port. The containers are concrete boxes, each being a store or an apartment. Public lighting wires connect the airspace between the containers. There are a lot of stores that sell Chinese goods, but their facades are discreet. They can be recognized by the pagoda-shaped roof or the luminous ideograms on the doors. Knowing that the Colony houses the poorest part from the proletariat of the planet in the future of this film, at first the precariousness of the always dark buildings draws the attention. The city is not welcoming at first sight. When the city is seen from a distance, it reminds you of dark pieces of a randomly assembled LEGO toy.

On this description I add another picture: narrow streets that are linked by alleys and passageways bordering canals that branch out between the neighborhoods, remembering the canals that spread through Venice. Much of the circulation in this city passes through these neighborhoods with boats and ferries full of Asian people. The boat activity on the canals reminds me, on the other hand, of the floating markets of Bangkok. When I experienced calmly this part of the city, I started to like the Colony. It has a more pleasant and attractive atmosphere in the nightlife on the banks of the canals.

This is one of the last regions of the world where life is still possible, despite the dense air, always gray due to chemical discharges that have made life on Earth almost completely unfeasible. In the Colony I focused and realized that it rained thin, almost at the same time I saw that the subway is some kind of robust train, which most resembles a war tank, with plasma screens where advertising is displayed to those who are outside. There is a strong vigilance everywhere, carried by robots or soldiers dressed in white armor throughout the body.

It is intriguing how the buildings and the streets are so dark. Large rectangular structures of concrete spread out everywhere. One night, walking through the Colony I saw a night street market, with products that could be found at any other street market in the world, such as peppers, tomatoes, greens of all kinds (probably produced by genetic engineering). These markets spread across the contours of the canals, side by side with bar tables, along with incense sellers attached on car hubcaps. It is interesting to notice how there are young people in the Colony. In these narrow streets you can hear laughter and conversations in bars. Everyone ends up getting remarkably close to each other by the very geography of the business district. By hearing the voices of people on the streets I feel like the city pulses, it somehow welcomes the desires of life that shape it.

On the legend of the flâneur: “With the help of a word I hear as I pass, I reconstitute an entire conversation, a whole life; the tone of a voice is enough to unite the name

of a capital sin to the man with whom I have just come across, from whom I only took a glimpsed at the profile.” Victor Fournel, *Ce Qu'on Voit dans les Rues de Paris*, Paris, 1858, p.270. (Benjamin, 2018, P.723).

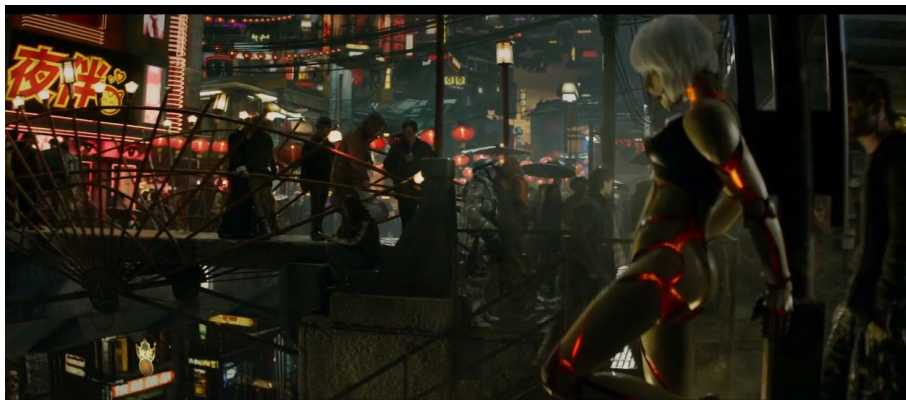
On a poster glued to the wall of an alley I see a young woman sitting on the floor of a stage. There are several posters like these scattered on these streets, this one in particular seems to be the announcement of a show or a play. Impossible to know. On the Colony, the posters are usually written with Chinese ideograms.

The Colony has its own Red-Light District<sup>1</sup>, the most illuminated neighborhood of the entire city. Here it is possible to feel the ubiquitous atmosphere of fun and leisure in the air. Music echoes on the streets, people dance on the sidewalks. A robot with female characteristics offers sexual programs leaning against a pole; a mutant girl with three breasts approaches customers in the streets. The most diverse tribes of young people with multicolored hair make their private parties on the sidewalks. On an outdoor store a tattoo artist creates a gigantic fluorescent image of a dragon on the back of a customer; women dance in display windows; in the streets people have fun under a constant fine rain. Most of these people carry Chinese umbrellas to protect themselves. The sidewalks are connected by small bridges over the canals and the songs are played from everywhere, but it catches my attention when I see a DJ on a boat parked in one of the canals and many people stopping on the bridges and sidewalks to dance to their songs.

<sup>1</sup> Amsterdam's central district known for neon lights in display windows where women exhibit themselves for prostitution.

### Figure 6

*Downtown Colony*



Note. Screenshot from the movie *Total Recall*. (Time code: 32'40")

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## Flânerie through the cities of the future

### TOTAL RECALL – LONDON

I did not spend too much time in London. In fact, the film spends little time in the streets of London, but the little I saw from the city center left me perplexed. London has become the gearbox of a giant machine for everyone to see, this is the best image I can come up to define what a landscape made me feel and think. Despite all its technological sophistication, the city is not beautiful anymore, it lost its charm. It seems to me that in this future not even the rich got the best part of the world. Here London mixes its old urban layout with new heavy and giant buildings. The city is packed with skyscrapers that look like fortresses.

#### Figure 7

*London, end of the 21st century*



*Note.* Screenshot from the movie *Total Recall*. (Time code: 53'24").

However what shocks the most is the verticalization of the city. This is the most radical form of street structure superimposed on different floors, creating different city floor plans, that I have ever seen. There are several overlapping types of London cut by suspended streets, supported by huge cables and vehicle lifts. Those who look from the ground up at the Big Ben, for example, will no longer see the free sky, but a heap of iron structures and cables that support elevated highways on different floors.

In these highways cars move on magnetic mattresses at extremely high speeds. When vehicles want to go up or down to other highways on other floors, they can use the lifts on the roadsides. Therefore, the traffic system is hung and suspended by cables and steel structures through the skies of the city, creating a web spread over tens of meters high. But that does not eliminate the land traffic with wheeled cars that still exists as it was known in the 20th century.

**Figure 8***Overlapping streets in London*

Note. Screenshot from the movie *Total Recall*. (Time code: 59'24'')

Similarly, as vehicle traffic, open spaces for pedestrians also spread across raised platforms with trees between buildings, creating the idea of a verticalized public environment throughout the city. So, finding an address in London also means knowing on which floor it is located. There are banks, shops, residences, and restaurants distributed on several floors that those coming from ground level only have access through a building that has an elevator to the indicated floor. London remains a very gray, cosmopolitan city, but with an aging population. You can hardly see young people on the streets. Unfortunately, I did not had access to more images of the city that allowed me to imagine what its residents dream about.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Even though my *flâneries* through the cities of the future have been limited to what the plots of the films allow me to see from the urban spaces, therefore, I was not at liberty to follow my own paths through the cities (I just rewatched the same excerpts, paused and calmly contemplated the environments as a landscape). It is possible to say that the idea we form today of the future of the cities mirrored in these films reveal many coincidences. The *flânerie* thought as a methodological exercise runs out of diegetic time, and this allowed me to let myself be taken and expand the perception of an ambience that was thought to be mere backdrop of the films.

There is a similarity between this methodological proposal and the method of **psychogeographic drift**, proposed by Debord (1958). The drift is mobilized by the affective effects of the urban environment on those who travel it. The method



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involves being taken by chance through an indefinite route, being attracted or repelled, designing a more intense emotional participation in the psychic construction of inhabiting a city. The one who drifts has a notebook in which he records why the paths made were chosen, why he turned to the left and not to the right, which sensations drove or stopped the choice of routes. Thus, emerges one clear difference of intentionality between thinking of this gesture of looking through the diegetic landscapes of the films as a drift or as a *flânerie*.

The *flâneur* is less passive to the environment, in fact he is deeply active in the choices he makes without consulting his motivations in choosing the path. As a method, the *flâneur* intentionally brings his gaze on what is not seen, describes what is not seen, because the intention of modern life, as the intention of these films, is to have the city as the background of its temporal and narrative logic, respectively. The *flâneur* method stops time to observe carefully what occurs outside the temporal logic of the city or the intentional logic from the film narrative, in my case. In this sense, he is more active about the city and less reactive to its affective mobilizations.

The depiction of the flâneur forecast the one of a detective. The flâneur should seek social legitimacy for his behavior. It suited him perfectly to see his indolence presented as a semblance, behind which is in fact hidden the firm attention of an observer following relentlessly the criminal who suspects nothing. (Benjamin, 2018, P.739).

So, this form of research that is the *flânerie* revealed the power of recurring images of the future presenting forms that become commonplace in the imaginary of urban centers from futuristic megalopolises. Megalopolises full of neon and large holograms on the facades of buildings; robots and cyborgs that walk the always busy streets, immersed in the polyphony of noises from flying vehicles, advertisements and indiscernible voices. The skies can rarely be seen, they are always heavy with acid clouds that create a gray-lead tone over the buildings. In any case what we see when we look up are large luminous panels, holographic or not. People walk the streets immersed in the schedule of their commitments or in their virtual interactions in metaverses via implants or devices such as glasses and helmets. They are alien to their surroundings, just like the crowds that Benjamin found in early 20th century Paris.

However, where these cities resemble themselves the most is on the idea of verticalization of the urban road network. In all of them, the streets spread through the neighborhoods as several floors on top of each other. Sometimes, there is a steel structure suspended in the skies that let vehicles circulate on

different plateaus of altitude. Other times vehicles only fly between buildings that always have advertising images at any level of air circulation. Namely, there is a city at ground level and several others that overlap as floors in space.

When we move away from the central region of these cities, we can see how the outskirts are taken by heaps of buildings, in neighborhoods centuries distant from the technologies the great centers have. Poverty, junk and garbage are spread through the streets. Further away from the urban regions of these cities, ruins and deserts that did not survive the ecosystem collapse can be found. In all these futures the planet's ecosystems have collapsed completely. It is not clear what happened and how it happened. The fact of the matter is that it has led much of the planet being sterile, contaminated by levels of radiation and unfeasible to any form of life.

The Chinese and Japanese people appear to be the only living ones that have spread across the planet regardless of any collapse. Only in *Blade Runner* was Earth destined for the more advanced replicants and for humans who could not migrate because of some health issue and the outcasts unwanted in the new worlds. However, the natural way for those who can is to leave the planet. All those who remain, except for the replicants, are days past their extinction. They are about to disappear due to the terrible environmental conditions that befall the city, and certainly the planet.

These cities show various forms of blurring the physical and psychic boundaries between humans and machines. They show that the Earth is now home to a more improved species than the homo sapiens. And by more improved, I mean more resistant to acid rain, toxic air, lack of food and lack of sun. A species more resistant to all forms of destruction that homo sapiens left on Earth before leaving to live in space colonies.

This is what this picture of the future reveals in these works. The imaginary is a repertoire of images that constitutes themselves affectively as a psychic ballast of our species. This timeless image bank is formed by all the references inherited and created by homo sapiens, of all aspects of life that migrated by affectivity to unconscious dimensions of human collectives. The imaginary is composed of the structuring perceptions of social life, constituents of our values, fears and perspectives. But the way I perceive it, it is indistinguishable from a real world. As though there was a real world and an imagined one. What we call the real world is an aspect of the imaginary that we socially and historically agreed to call reality. This way the imaginary wears what is considered real as a hand wears a glove. What is considered real is a possible, collectively chosen and shared dimension of our creations, of what we imagine and legitimize as truth.



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The futuristic imaginary presented in this article is inseparable from the technological repertoire that we are used to imagine through science fiction narratives. This future is also intertwined with our present, with our fears and expectations for the present. Therefore, this is a small sample of some expressions of the contemporary imaginary about the future of urban landscapes on our planet. They do not define what it is to come, but they indicate the fear and perplexity on our own destiny expressed through the western technological contemporary liberal historicity regime<sup>2</sup> (Hartog, 2019). These are symptoms that still give us time to choose and change. Change the very regime of historicity or perhaps allow ourselves to explore other imaginaries of western cultures and marginalized people, that were prevented from expressing and building options of worlds to come in our present. ■

<sup>2</sup> Historicity regime means the perception about past and future conceived and lived in the present of a social group inserted in a historical and cultural context.

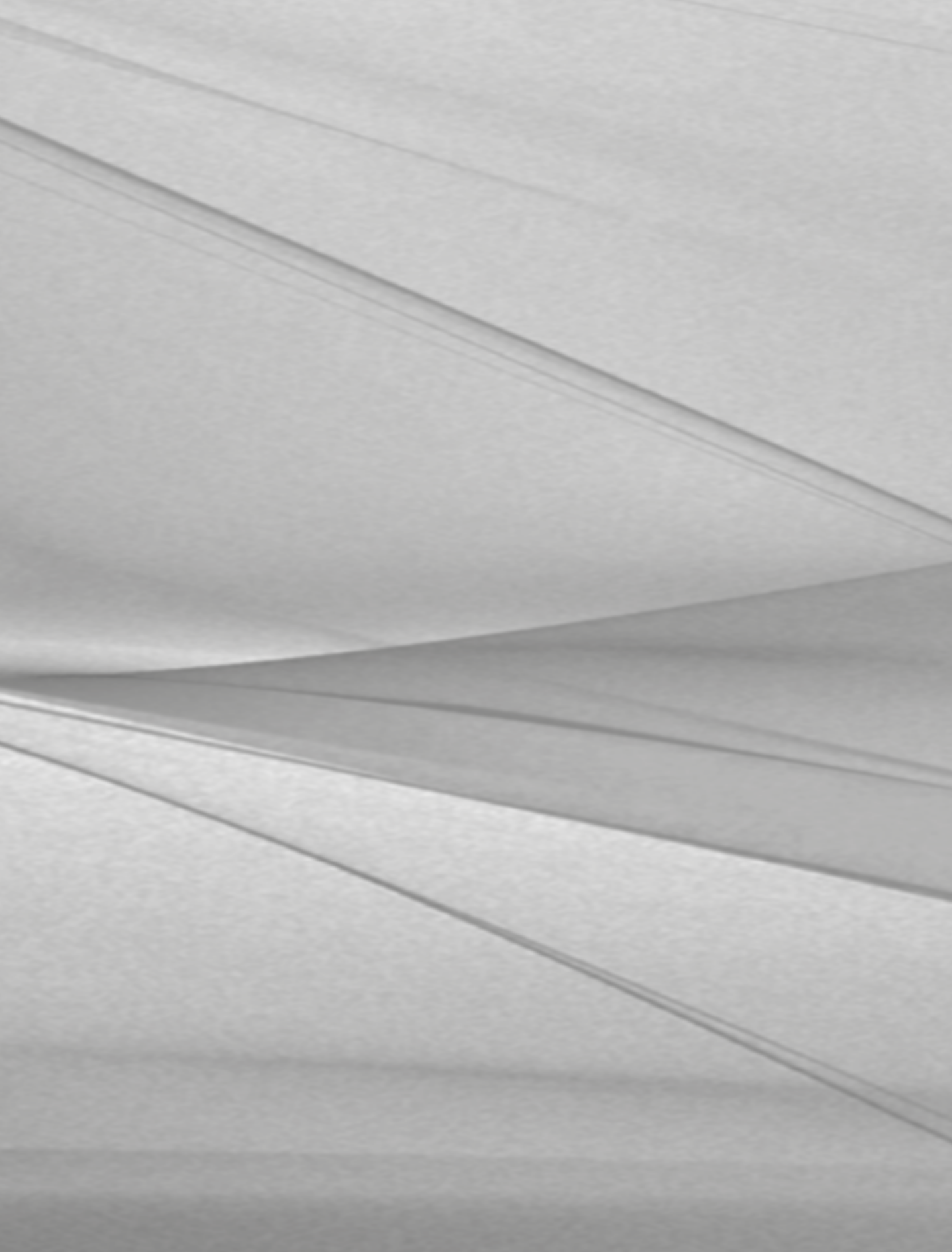
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# INTERVIEW



# Relations between science and culture: 20 years of the Spiral of Scientific Culture<sup>a</sup>

## *As relações entre ciência e cultura: vinte anos da Espiral da Cultura Científica*

Interview with

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**T**HE COVID-19 PANDEMIC has thoroughly altered the relationship between science and society. It has brought forward new demands and opportunities for faster and more comprehensive sharing of scientific information. Scientists and science communicators played an active role in stimulating the debate with the public. Responding to high societal demand, they have informed non-scientists in Brazil about the results of ongoing research on the pandemic and have participated in decision making processes, behavior modulations and development of public policy.

Such a task was neither exempt of tensions or unidirectional (from scientists to society in a one-way process). Scientific knowledge was integrated in Brazilians' daily routines and was applied to the particularities of a myriad of lifestyles while also impacting scientists and research institutions which had to cope with new demands. In sum, this mutual influence between science and society is the fabric that makes up the scientific culture.

The interactions among different social actors that either produce or consume scientific information and who codify and decodify its language in order to make communication more efficient are represented in the Spiral of

<sup>a</sup> Interview given in person at Labjor, on the 27th of January 2023.

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## Relations between science and culture: 20 years of the Spiral of Scientific Culture

Scientific Culture. The Spiral is a science communication model developed by linguist Carlos Vogt 20 years ago.

To rethink the spiral following the emergence of a new respiratory disease that caused a global public health crisis allows us to reflect on the relevance of both the circulation of scientific information in the public sphere and the ways in which the incorporation and development of such knowledge has emerged from interactions between science and society.

Vogt has been working on developing Science Communication practices in Brazil for over 30 years. At 80 years old in February 2023, he has been unstoppable throughout his leading participation in ambitious and pioneering projects to further the public access to scientific knowledge. He has a Master's degree in General and Stylistic French Linguistics from the University of Besançon (France) and a PhD in Sciences by Campinas University (Unicamp). Vogt was also one of the founders of the Laboratory of Advanced Studies in Journalism at Unicamp (Labjor), which was created in 1994 with the aim of becoming a research cluster for studies on media.

For 24 years Labjor has been offering a free Graduate Certificate in Science Journalism and a Master's degree in Science and Culture Communication, the latter about to complete its 15 years of history comprising over 200 successful dissertations. Vogt has also led the creation of Agência Pesquisa Fapesp, which has become a key source of science news in the country. Moreover, he is also a poet with seven published pieces.

Vogt has worked in several prominent institutions for national scientific production: he was the Dean at Unicamp between 1990 and 1994 and president of the São Paulo Research Foundation between 2002 and 2007. He is one of the founders of the Virtual São Paulo State University (Univesp), of which he was also the president between 2012 and 2016. Vogt worked as São Paulo State Secretary for Higher Education (from 2007 to 2010) and currently holds both the 23rd Chair in the Campinas Academy for the Letters and 15th São Paulo Education Academy. He is the co-founder of *ComCiência*, an online magazine published by science journalists in training and was also the Executive director of *Ciência e Cultura* magazine for over a decade. During his time at *Ciência e Cultura* the publication regained its status as a prominent science communication venue.

The concept of scientific culture is of great importance to understand Science Communication as part of larger social and cultural phenomena through which science gets established. To describe the mutual and dynamic workings of different phases for production and diffusion of scientific knowledge, Vogt distinguishes four overarching quadrants through which the Spiral of Scientific Culture gets constituted. In each one of them science fits distinct paradigms, plays varied



roles and dialogues with different types of publics. Moreover, the model also highlights scientific culture's intrinsic democratic characteristic: it assumes that science is a fundamental democratic exercise. "In order to have a scientific culture one does not need to be a scientist necessarily (...). It is about being a citizen, in the broader sense of contemporary societies)", he emphasizes at some point during this interview.

The spiral was created amidst discussions about how science communication can contribute to democratic exercise. To that end, the language it assumes is of high relevance. When we move from quadrant 1 of science production to the other 3 quadrants, the language of science becomes more didactic and affectionate. The ongoing shaping of linguistic codes progresses to the point where technical data and expressions are modified to better become integrated to culture. Therefore, the language used throughout the quadrants in the spiral provides the means to which citizens come to contact with science and incorporate it, thus maintaining their participation in socio political issues.

In this interview Vogt updates the concept of the Spiral of Scientific Culture in light of the new discussions on the science and society relationship brought forward by the Covid-19 pandemic. This was a period characterized by the enlargement of public access opportunities to scientific knowledge. Such access became more widely available due to open science initiatives such as peer-reviewed articles available without paywalls, shared databases and preprints. In other words, during the pandemic science was opened to actors outside the scientific community, a process that illustrated the high speed and the dynamics between science and culture on which the spiral theorizes. In Vogt's words, "Science moves away from a behavioral particularism and gradually becomes increasingly universal. It is at this point that it becomes a fully cultural phenomenon".

**MATRIZes:** Open Science and Open Access are themes usually framed within the concerns from the scientific community. On the other hand, science communication is a way to open scientific knowledge to other publics as they allow free access to scientific publications. With new open access policies such as the determination by funding agencies that research funded with their grants must be published in open access, it seems that there is a new aspect of the scientific culture. What are your thoughts on these issues?

**Carlos Vogt:** It is like the case of generic drugs. There is a proprietary regime, that is, patents, and there is an international movement to break them. This way, you grant access to a specific medication and health technology. Immediately, companies like Sandoz, Pfizer and others start offering generic options. This is the flexibility made possible by capitalism and it is



important to highlight this because it is an issue of propriety in some aspects. It is a sophisticated issue but it is still about somehow maintaining properties. So important questions include: how does the system adapt? How does it reinvent itself? How does it maintain its fundamental goal i.e., profiting over a product or service?

<sup>1</sup> Aaron Swartz (1986-2013) was a programmer and activist for the democratization of access to information who participated in the creation of numerous pioneering initiatives, such as Creative Commons (which defines copyright policies) and Reddit, a social news aggregator. He was arrested in 2011 for using the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) system to download millions of scientific articles from the JSTOR digital repository, which charges the access to part of the publications. In January 2013, Swartz was found dead after committing suicide.

Aaron Swartz<sup>1</sup> tried to change this intellectual property structure made available through the economic handling of journal articles. What were the consequences of this to big institutions that are aware of property and control issues of such publications? In his case, there was not only the tragic consequence of his death but there were also technological and cultural consequences if we consider the scientific culture and the payments-to-a-propriety issues?

This is not to say that the whole system has changed as the economic system is powerful – there is a thing called capitalism and it is powerful. The fundamental of capitalism is property so changing this will be difficult. I think this is an important matter. I think that reflecting on Open Science means reflecting also about all of this.

**MATRIZES:** Could you recall the ideas that influenced you when you created the spiral 20 years ago?

**CV:** I remember exactly how the creation happened in 2003. I was thinking about Science Communication and I recalled something John Ziman<sup>2</sup> said at some point during the 1980s that communication is an essential element of science, it is one of its fundamental features.

<sup>2</sup> John Ziman (1925-2005) was an English physicist and professor, working with condensed matter physics. He dedicated part of his career to the popularization of science and to studies on the philosophy of science and the social responsibility of scientists.

There is the science literacy issue at hand too, which prevailed for some time in the United States and subsequently in Europe as well. The model stated that those who know something ought to teach it to those who do not know it. Hence, the role science communication plays would be to take information from one place to another straightforwardly, not to incorporate information. This idea has since been criticized and it is within such criticism that I have built the concept of scientific culture.

Through it, there is an attempt to see this communication relationship as a more complex activity that concerns not only education, but, above all, the broader social upbringing within this scientific culture. That is, in order to have a scientific culture one does not need to be a scientist necessarily. One can be [a scientist], naturally, but not necessarily. It is about being a citizen, in the broader sense of contemporary societies.

The concept of scientific culture emerges from this context in my conception because seeing science as culture is precisely exposing it to an “other” meaning that it demands that there is an exterior element. This “other” in science is the



individual to which science communications aims to talk, to the ones it wants to reach. Put differently, the “other” in science is the non-scientist.

**MATRIZES:** However, science often gets communicated to reach solely those already trained in its specific scientific codes and language.

**CV:** Indeed, the ways in which you talk to a non-scientist has changed from the moment that science has become a phenomenon highly codified and abstract that it cannot be understood solely through images and analogies. Science got increasingly distanced from the analogy world and entered a realm of an autonomous code that has its own logic, consistency, efficacy and so forth.

The mathematical languages are continuously transformed into the language of the world or, more precisely, into the language with which one gets to understand the world, especially if we consider Physics and Biology. It so happens that this language gets so abstract that if you use it with a non-scientist, it is not possible to illustrate the concept using analogies. However, science still aims to describe the world.

But scientific phenomena are carried by the cultural movement. Physics went through a thorough transformation towards the late 19th century and early 20th century. During this period, the clearly organized world described with the cause-and-effect laws of Newton gets invalidated by Einstein’s and Max Planck’s theories. From this moment on, Quantum Physics develops and postulates that things do not work as previously thought, that there are beings that are and aren’t at the same time, that appear and disappear simultaneously.

So, how do you “capture this creature”? It changes everything and it promotes well known cultural consequences – fantastic and political consequences, such as wars, arise with the great changes that science paradigms will imprint. One may get surprised, if too attached to positivism, and may wonder “how is it possible?”

What happened to science from this moment onward is fundamental to the creation of a scientific culture. This great phenomenon (Classical Physics and Modern Physics) put forward all-encompassing changes and their incorporation is multifaceted. The subsequent incorporation of Darwinism and Evolution theory also shakes things up and brings a sense of relativism.

It is a world that gets transformed and these movements also change the relationship between science and society. With time, the element of the “other” in science gets created, which is a fundamental element in the concept of scientific culture for it is about a goal-oriented and precise culture that is related to what science does, its practices and consequences but whose participants



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are not necessarily scientists. All this means that we have to consider science communication in these processes.

**MATRIZES:** How have you developed the Scientific Culture Spiral concept with these issues in mind?

**CV:** Thinking about this phenomena, I have distributed different moments of the relationship between science and society in metaphoric quadrants that describe such moments.

There is the first moment which consists of scientific production and in which communication is essential but it is nonetheless a highly codified communication that happens between peers. It is a communication between people that have already been trained to know the codes, otherwise it is impossible to get in. This moment I call the first quadrant and it describes science communication through journal articles and conferences, for example.

The second moment is key because it is within it that science becomes educational. Here, the highly specific and codified language from the first quadrant gets simplified because the aim is to teach science. The relationship between science and society in these moments happens within schools and at different levels. Nonetheless it is a communication between people who know more, on one hand, and people who know less but will learn, on the other.

Hence, language history is fundamental in these distinctions because you have a highly specific and coded language to do science and simplified language that is predominantly geared towards understanding.

The next moment is the movement of trying to make people love science. I say that it is time for science amateurs: those who love science and are not professionals. This includes the birth of science museums in the 19th Century, science fairs, major events, exhibitions, among others. The intention is as follows: in a society that is transformed after the Industrial Revolution, based on the development of the steam engine, energy and coal – in which new challenges arise with the age of large machines and their social consequences – it is necessary to train people in the broadest sense and educate them, because you need manpower to manipulate these machines. So, you need to attract people to this matter, you need to awaken their love for this new reality.

There is a shift in the concept as we simultaneously cross into the fourth quadrant, in which there is the need to take science to non-scientists. This is inevitable within the framework of scientific culture as it solely in relation to an “other” that a culture gets established. So dating back to at least the 19th century, we can think of the French and English science popularization magazines, curiosity magazines, but that also worked on that issue.

Particularly in the 20th Century following major changes in scientific paradigms, the science literacy issue emerges. It is not about training future scientists but to allow people to become interested in science instead so that they are not bored and do not turn away when science starts to hit the front pages of newspapers and ultimately the science sections within the news and, later, on editorials.

It is this big movement that closes these quadrants dynamics. I mean, science moves away from a behavioral particularism and gradually becomes increasingly universal. That's when it becomes fully cultural. Then the spiral advances and returns to the same axis, although not in the same place because, theoretically, people are transformed, there are new discoveries. As a result, a new cycle begins. As it is about communication, I think that, in all of this, a fundamental thing is the issue of language.

**MATRIZES:** Why is language so important?

**CV:** The language in each of the quadrants is not steady and nonetheless the same, although there are similarities. The language of communication between peers, as I said, is coded, abstract and in jargon-form. Consequently, it is absolutely esoteric in the sense that Aristotle thought about esoterism, to the point where it becomes exoteric with an 'x' (that is, concerned with communication). I think that it is interesting to at least mention the characteristics of such language given that we are discussing communication issues.

You move from a closed (esoteric) universe to an open universe of communication (exoteric). One of the things that characterize these phenomena is if you look at science communicators that are scientists and see their effort to transform a closed and restrictive code to an open code, which is the common language. Ultimately, they transform the codes in a way that it still preserves the essential components of the concepts being discussed.

You cannot lose concepts, so how do you do it? You try to sensitize them. Which means that you do it by trying to transform concepts that can be digital into analogical ones, because without analogy there is no metaphor and, without metaphor there are no images capable of transforming a concept into a sensible thing. In other words, it is transforming a subject into something that seems to belong to the experiential order of each one. You read and, as you read, you experience – as the poet says – even what you have not lived, but you incorporate it as a lived thing. So, this is an interesting effort because it's when science gets closer to poetry and poetry to science. About that, I have not the slightest doubt.



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**MATRIZES:** In 2002, you took part in the creation of Agência FAPESP, a news agency about studies funded by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP). Fapesp is one of the main sources of funding for national research, considering the volume of science produced in this State, and the agency guides journalists towards it. Through these materials, research reaches society. At that time were you already thinking about the Spiral model, was there a connection between the model and the practice?

**CV:** I created Agência Fapesp with a practical and a cultural motivation. The practical one was that we did not have any news agency in Brazil capable of establishing itself as a source of science for the mainstream news media. From a cultural point of view, if we managed to do this, we would have taken a big step towards shaping scientific culture because we would be working on a daily basis not only with information and the press, which is the broadest and most direct form of contact, but also with the configuration of that scientific culture in the country. So, when I created the Agency, it was with the idea of doing something different from [the existing] *Pesquisa Fapesp* magazine<sup>3</sup>.

[José Fernando] Peres himself, who was the scientific director [of FAPESP] at the time, questioned ‘are you going to do something that already exists?’ to which I replied that the agency was something completely different, first because it was purely virtual, not printed and whose cost consisted of content production costs. And secondly because of the idea that the agency should build a large mailing and activate it every morning – which it continues to do until today and it is a very significant mailing. In other words, I thought ‘why only [science journals] *Nature* and *Science* [can do it]? Let’s do that too.’

**MATRIZES:** The access to scientific information changed during the pandemic, which brought about major changes in the flow of information and promoted greater openness of knowledge due to an international agreement between major publishers to advance discoveries about Covid-19. In this scenario, the knowledge that belonged to quadrant 1, accessed exclusively by peers, began to be widely disseminated through preprints and accessed directly by patients and anyone with internet access and interest in these issues. How do you see these changes in relation to the spiral?

**CV:** What you are saying is impressive because at Unicamp [State University of Campinas], Unesp [São Paulo State University] and universities in general, the impact that this had on them directly provoked a scientific effort in the sense of improving not only the understanding and comprehension [of science], but [also] solutions that could ease and bring relief to [Covid-19] situations. Including the story of mechanical ventilators, [and] a lot of other things.

<sup>3</sup>The *Pesquisa Fapesp* magazine is published by Fapesp, it was launched in October of 1999 and was sold in newstands. It has around 30 thousand issues monthly printed and it can also be freely accessed online: <https://revistapesquisa.fapesp.br>

This caused and accentuated the phenomenon of transversality, which has been happening as an epistemological phenomenon. The transversality between the actions at different levels within universities and the multidisciplinary are very large and have intensified enormously. So, this is a phenomenon that ended up being accelerated in this scenario of changes that were already ongoing and were, in fact, accentuated, rushed.

The changes were very big and what you are saying is also true, but it is part of this movement that was already happening because the number of scientists who start to worry about communication outside academia is very large. And the subject of interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity are also phenomena that were accentuated with the pandemic.

**MATRIZes:** Would you say that, in your initial model, the origin of scientific knowledge needs to be in the first quadrant? Because, the pandemic made clear that it can happen anywhere.

**CV:** I think so. It can come from anywhere, it does not mean it has to be orthodox, canonical knowledge. However, it needs to be systematized knowledge. If it is not systematized it cannot acquire reference power.

**MATRIZes:** From the point of view of knowledge output, in which quadrants do you see the possibility of democratizing knowledge? Some theoretical lines will say that the formation of scientific culture does not occur at the end of a process, like the spiral spin, but throughout it.

**CV:** My idea is that the scientific culture as a cultural process is necessarily dynamic. This means that the parts that make up the model are parts that are actually only methodologically distinguished. As the process is dynamic, these parts only make sense when they work integrated. The very conceptualization of the culture is related to reading this movement by its parts. And what is the 'other' of quadrant 1? The other in quadrant 1 is quadrant 4, for two reasons: because it is the different other and because it is the other that integrates quadrant 1 to modify it, to transform it and to precisely make that movement and change the conception of science itself.

This is not innocent. I mean, when you involve society, you involve the other, then you bring to science all the issues you are talking about: all the problems, all the traditionalism, the traditional cultures, which is exactly what will provide the strength to the concept of scientific culture. It is precisely this concept of movement, which does not stop and does not end. This means that each spin incorporates what is part of each moment. Of course, all this is didactic and methodological, but it is a phenomenon that aims to define science as a social phenomenon. Hence the concept of scientific culture.



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It is necessary to understand, first, that the phenomenon is dynamic. Second, that the concept of scientific culture is not in quadrant 1, 2, 3 or 4; it is the spiral and it is in motion.

**MATRIZes:** When you pass the message from one quadrant to another, does it become more immortal? As you move from one quadrant to another, you refine the social aspect of the production of scientific knowledge and this has consequences for understanding how science is done. If we take the example of chloroquine, Didier Raoult<sup>4</sup> published a scientific article that supposedly proved the effectiveness of the drug against Covid-19 and the fact that the production of science is not understood as a social phenomena made this paper be understood as if it was a proof of effectiveness of something that, in fact, would have needed to go through the process of social legitimation in the first quadrant but it did not. Sometimes there are these situations where the information generated in the first quadrant escapes.

**CV:** To take your example of Didier and chloroquine, it was taken from the altar in the fourth quadrant. This happened in the consequences that began precisely in a key social aspect of the scientific question, which is effectiveness. If it was a purely scientific discussion and not a cultural-scientific one, we would be oblivious to all of this, but in fact we were the ones who disclosed it. By 'we' I mean the cultural social phenomenon that brought this thing down. And this is key to showing how much these things are intertwined, how they are related because in each of these moments you obviously have different aspects. That means, in the first moment and above all, the thing for which the scientist is fascinated is required: beauty. Beauty means harmony, consistency, logical and mathematical efficiency of the subject. As you get out of that, the spiders, the bed bugs start asking not only about efficiency and beauty, but also about effectiveness and social relevance.

So science is not as immune to this as it thought it would be. On the contrary, it realizes this in a dramatic way because it starts to work necessarily and constantly with the relationship with the social. An interesting phenomenon is, for example, what has been happening universally around the world with funding agencies. All of them started to incorporate the need for diffusion, communication, dissemination of knowledge and so on. Not only because it is about passing on to society, but listening to society. It is about trying to establish feedback mechanisms. But that is it, the spiral spin is exactly a spin that does not leave science incognito because what transforms it into culture is exactly the coexistence with what science is not. This is what makes science cultural and therefore brings it closer to mortals.

<sup>4</sup>Didier Raoult is a French physician known for advocating the use of chloroquine as a treatment for Covid-19. The studies he published dealing with drug efficacy were the target of investigations by scientific publishers for violation of research ethics and misconduct of clinical trials.

**MATRIZES:** Do you agree that, as the flow of the spiral goes on, science is losing control of its verification processes, leading to these leaks?

**CV:** Totally, it is true. Do you remember the discussion about genetically modified food? Regulatory instances were created to mediate the relationship between science and society as a way of institutionally activating citizen participation. So, here in Brazil, years ago, the CTNBio [National Technical Commission on Biosafety] was created, precisely where the subject of food was discussed. And there were already visions that had nothing to do with science, but were part of the cultural process that concerns science.

This involved issues of science governance, participatory governance, and so on. There are a series of phenomena that relate to these great transformations and that does not mean that science does not maintain its particularities, but this commitment to knowledge as a public good is fundamental. This has to do with the topic of open science as well.

**MATRIZES:** Related to that, we noticed that in the 20 years of debates about open science and the need to open up scientific knowledge to the public, these practices did not leave quadrant 1. In other words, the goal of constituting science as a 'public good' remained as a mere justification, and was restricted to the scientific community. But the pandemic brought the urgency that open access of scientific information alone is not enough. It democratizes information among peers, but it is not enough to be socially appropriated. In this scenario, we have thought of science communication as a key tool to bring knowledge of scientific papers and preprints to society, since it brings the notion of democratizing knowledge at its core.

**CV:** That's right, I think the answer is along these lines. The whole motivation behind the concept of scientific culture, as I said, is in that. I mean, what turns science into culture is dissemination. It is at this moment, called dissemination of science, that the scientific culture materializes. ■

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**AGENDA**  
IN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH



# Refused States: The Effect of Culturalism on Nations with a colonization history

## *Estados recusados: o efeito do culturalismo em nações com histórico de colonização*

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyses the formation of minority states — following Deleuze & Guattari (1997) —, the effect of culturalism in nations with a history of colonization — as proposed by Souza (2019) —, and the influence the economic system has in this process — as per Mandel (1998) as it also acts as an agent of purity — according to Bauman (1998). The culmination of this process divides countries and their populations into two castes, the Europeanized elite and the populace, in a movement that spirals and feedbacks. The elite sees itself as distant from the population and occupies the main information positions in a country, spreading culturalism to all layers of the population.

**Keywords:** Colonization, refused State, minority, culturalism, social division

### RESUMO

Este estudo analisa a formação de Estados de minorias com Deleuze & Guattari (1997), o efeito do culturalismo em nações com histórico de colonização proposto por Souza (2019), além da influência que o sistema econômico tem nesse processo com Mandel (1998), atuando também como agente de pureza de Bauman (1998). A culminação desse processo divide os países e as populações em duas castas, a elite europeizada e o populacho, num movimento que se espiraliza e se retroalimenta. A elite se enxerga como distante da população e ocupa os principais cargos de informação no país, alastrando o culturalismo para todas as camadas da população.

**Palavras-chave:** Colonização, Estado recusado, minoria, culturalismo, divisão social

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**A**LBERTO FERNÁNDEZ, THE president of Argentina, made a statement that, viewed in the light of sociology, philosophy and economics, may indicate more than he himself expected. When he exclaimed: “The Mexicans came from the Indians, the Brazilians came from the jungle, but we Argentines came by boat. And they were boats that came from there, from Europe”, the Argentine president revealed a sentiment that not only permeates his country, but is also reflected in countries with a history of colonization, especially since this statement was made to the then Prime Minister of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, during an event with Argentine and Spanish businessmen on June 9, 2021.

The president’s speech generated a lot of negative repercussions for him, who has already retracted it, saying that he used the interpretation of the Mexican writer and Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz. However, the sentence attributed to the writer is quite different, as it does not even mention Brazilians: “Mexicans are descendants of the Aztecs; Peruvians, of the Incas; and Argentines of the ships “.

The phrase actually comes from a song by Argentine musician and composer Litto Nebbia, who sings the line spoken by the president in his song “Llegamos de barco”. In an interview, the president declared himself a “Europeanist”, referring to his last name, Fernández.

The president’s statement reveals some identity problems on the part of his country and its people, problems that can also be observed in other countries whose history is marked by European colonization, becoming capitalist. The President of Argentina makes a mistake and takes responsibility for his mistake, but we have identified in this work that this mistake may not be a mere coincidence, but a reflection of a stigma that affects not only Argentina, but all of South America. There are countless examples of similar content that we can extract from the former president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, such as when he made a statement calling Brazil garbage<sup>1</sup> or when he saluted the flag of the United States<sup>2</sup>.

In this way, the leaders and representatives of these nations imprint a sense of inferiority in relation to the *center* countries, a concept defined by Deleuze & Guattari, who bring important reflections on the subject.

### THE FORMATION OF NATIONS

The formation of a country depends exclusively on the creation of a majority state, which Deleuze & Guattari conceptualize as the *White State*. Although the relation of the denomination of a majority does not exist only in the absolute numbers of the population as a kind of count, it functions in the constitution

<sup>1</sup> In video, Bolsonaro calls Brazil “garbage” and says the Amazon “is no longer ours” - Accessed on 07/04/2023 available at: <https://revistaforum.com.br/politica/em-video-bolsonaro-chama-brasil-de-lixo-e-diz-que-amazonia-nao-e-mais-nossa/>

<sup>2</sup> Bolsonaro receives award, salutes the flag and changes the catchphrase - Accessed on 04/07/2023 available at: <https://www.metropoles.com/mundo/politica-int/bolsonaro-recebe-premio-bate-continencia-a-bandeira-dos-eua-e-troca-bordao>

of the state as a question of the identity of the majority and its relations with the minority or minoritized groups.

Ours is becoming the age of minorities. We have seen several times that minorities are not necessarily defined by the smallness of their numbers but rather by becoming or a line of fluctuation, in other words, by the gap that separates them from this or that axiom constituting a redundant majority. (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005, p. 469)

The majority axiom is the catalyst of the white state, even if it does not reflect the majority of the population. In Brazil, the example is clearer, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the country has a population of 56.22% black (considering the black and ‘pardos’- brown population), according to data from the first quarter of 2023:

**Table 1**

Table 6403 - Population, by color or race			
Variable - Population (per thousand)			
Brazil			
1st. quarter 2003			
Color or race			
Total	White	Black	Brown
215.046	91.706	22.577	98.319

*Note.* IBGE - Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios Contínua Trimestral

In this context, we observe a country with an absolute black majority, but with very low representation in the government. The 2020 municipal elections broke records for black participation in power, with 32% of the total. Although it is an absolute majority, blacks are a minority group in the country, a contradiction that the authors also theorized: “A minority can be small in number; but it can also be the largest in number, constituting an absolute, indefinite majority.” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005, p. 469).

From this perspective, what defines a minority is not its number, but the internal relations of that mass of people. A minority can even be infinite, in the same way as a majority. The difference is that the majority, however numerous, is always a numerable whole, whereas the minority is not. In fact, what characterizes the innumerable is the connection that occurs between the elements of this minority. (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005).

Brazil is thus a state in which the majority of the population is a minority. The reason for this apparent incongruity lies in the very genesis of capitalism as a builder of societies in which the realization of a minority state is impossible:





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It is hard to see what an Amazon-State would be, a women's State, or a State of erratic workers, a State of the "refusal" of work. If minorities do not constitute viable States culturally, politically, economically, it is because the State-form is not appropriate to them, nor the axiomatic of capital, nor the corresponding culture. We have often seen capitalism maintain and organize inviable States, according to its needs, and for the precise purpose of crushing minorities. (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005, p. 472)

So it becomes a challenge to understand how a state can be formed mainly by the refused, the minorities. A capitalist state exists only as a majority, white state, so that it can connect with the other capitalist states, or center countries, represented by the rich countries of the northern hemisphere (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005). According to the authors, the states of the different poles do not cancel each other out, but enter into a process of metamorphosis, assuming a new meaning that starts from models of realization of this world axiomatic, generating a global market that has as dominant culture, or axiom, the Eurocentric model.

The prescription of this axiom has the effect of rejecting what is genuinely national in peripheral countries. There are countless cases in which national culture, such as cinema, has been abolished or disregarded by both the state and the population (Miranda & Freitas, 2013). But other forms of art also suffer from this stigma, in which foreign cultural products are valued, and the elite refer to them as having high value, or high culture, while national products are of low value, or popular culture.

More recent bourgeois cultural criticism has undoubtedly become too cautious to follow them [the Athenians] openly on this point, although it secretly cozies up to the division between high culture and popular culture, between art and entertainment, between knowledge and uncompromising worldview.<sup>3</sup> (Adorno, 2002, p. 53)

<sup>3</sup> All translations were made by the authors

Popular culture itself was questioned by the author, who came to a simple but highly synthetic conclusion: "What has ever been called popular art has always been a reflection of domination". (Adorno, 2001, p. 195), and therefore almost always repressed by the police force. What is relevant for this repression to take place is not necessarily the situation that would constitute a crime, but the use of the poor person's body for any activity other than work (Adorno, 2001). It is worth highlighting the tragic case that occurred in the neighborhood of Paraisópolis, on the suburbs of São Paulo, where nine people were trampled to death in a police action on December 1, 2019. In the press coverage<sup>4</sup>, a mother of one of the deceased young people even pointed out that this was a war against the poor, that if the event had occurred in Jardins (an upper-class neighborhood

<sup>4</sup> Nine people trampled to death in riot after police action during baile funk in Paraisópolis, SP - accessed on 04/07/2023 available at: <https://g1.globo.com/sp/sao-paulo/noticia/2019/12/01/perseguido-e-tiroteio-em-baile-funk-em-paraisopolis-deixa-ao-menos-8-mortos-pisoteados-em-sp.ghtml>



of the city), the result would have been different, because even the way the police approach is different there.

This example is emblematic because, although it can be argued that the police action was carried out to repress the use of drugs, both legal and illegal, during the Baile Funk, we do not see the same approach in the neighborhoods of the more privileged classes, as pointed out by the mother of one of the victims. This does not mean that the parties held in these areas do not involve the consumption of legal and illegal drugs in the same way, although this second use does not arouse the same anger from the population or the *need* for police intervention. This example is echoed by Andrés (2023, p. 61) “State action in the cities has always been marked by selectivity, based on the assumption that there are first and second class groups.”

The structures of capitalist states thus invoke a morality that can exert influence over both citizens and government, providing the elite with guidelines on what should be valued in economic and cultural terms.

## THE CULTURALISM

The social sciences are endowed with paradigms that change from time to time due to the increasing complexity of the studies or simply because they become obsolete given the new contexts of the moment in which they are inserted (Giddens & Sutton, 2017). It is important to remember that not so long ago the dominant paradigm of the social sciences was the racist paradigm, as Souza points out (2019, p. 16):

Until the 1920s, phenotypic racism based on skin color and physiognomic features was recognized as a science both internationally and nationally. This made clear, for example, the fundamental difference in the development of different peoples.

The author explains that, over the years, the question of why some peoples are more developed than others, or even what this development would be could no longer be answered by this racist paradigm. After all, the skin color of the body of the people who inhabit it cannot justify their behavior or their social condition.

Therefore, a new argument would have to be created to explain such differences. If we are all human beings who possess equal abilities, what is it that makes some people live in misery while others have fortunes greater than those of entire countries? Superficially, the first answer that may arise in the reader’s mind is: cultural difference, there are simply countries where the culture is oriented towards development, while in others it is not.



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The explanation that the cultural stock comes either from the heritage of the colonizing countries or from a historical structure of the dominant countries has quickly gained academic and common sense, has been absolutely normalized and now constitutes the majority of society. It is to this paradigm that the author Souza (2019, p. 17) has given the name *culturalism*:

The golden moment of culturalism was the enthronement of the theory of modernization, which was produced primarily in the United States in the second postwar period and spread throughout the world. It explained exactly why some societies were rich and advanced and others poor and backward. The United States was thus transformed into an exemplary model for the world, and empirical comparisons with other countries were made on a massive scale to demonstrate that it was paradise on earth and that all other countries were imperfect realizations of this model.

We can observe part of this culturalism in several studies. We will highlight Almond & Verba (1963, p. 474), who were fundamental in this process:

Recent studies of political behavior call the rationality-activist model into question, for it is becoming clear that citizens in democracies rarely live up to this model. They are not well informed, not deeply involved, not particularly active; and the process by which they come to their voting decision is anything but a process of rational calculation.<sup>2</sup> Nor does this model accurately represent the civic culture we have found in Britain and the United States. It is true—and this point is both substantively important as well as indicative of the usefulness of comparative data—that the informed, involved, rational, and active citizen is more frequently found in the successful than in the unsuccessful democracies. The characteristics of the rationality-activist model of democratic citizenship are indeed components of the civic culture; but the point to be stressed here is that they are only part of that culture.

In this fragment, it is possible to see that only the democracy of Great Britain and the United States fit the model of civic activity proposed by the authors. Such studies were central to Western society's understanding of the success of democracies. Moreover, at the root of this thinking was the individualistic Protestantism of the United States as a foundational paradigm for the constitution of wealthy, democratic societies. These studies were funded by the U.S. government in much of the world, including and especially in South America (Souza, 2019).

It is part of this international common sense that to this day guides institutions like the World Bank and the IMF with their *moral hazard*<sup>5</sup> (Freitas & Prates, 2002), as well as rooting misperceptions about the economy and the model of each country. Thus, when a theorist concludes that individualistic Protestantism produces more intelligent, productive, and morally superior individuals, it is clear that even culturalism is extremely racist in the sense that it creates castes of people and divides them into superior and inferior.

Replacing the racist paradigm with the culturalist one also establishes a layer of scientificity that seeks to reproduce and validate old prejudices is also established, as Souza explains (2019, p.19): “Superior beings would be more democratic and more honest than inferior ones, such as Latin Americans, for example”. This process ignores the collective learning of nations and is capable of creating naturalized and definitive distinctions.

Culturalism, with its scientific premise, plays the same role as its racist predecessor. It generates a moral superiority and distinction for the countries in a situation of domination, in a way that legitimizes their position of domination through a meritocratic discourse.

Today, in Europe and the United States, there is absolutely no one who does not feel superior to Latin Americans and Africans. Among the best Americans and Europeans, those who are not consciously racist, there is a politically correct effort to treat an African or a Latin American as if they were effectively equal. This very effort shows the effectiveness of the prejudice that divides the world into people of greater and lesser value. (Souza, 2019, p. 20)

Culturalism works particularly well for countries in a situation of domination for two reasons. First, it creates a mechanism for legitimizing their social system among their own people, who should not criticize the system as they are superior to others. Second, the discourse, properly understood by all countries, serves as a facilitator for the exploitation of poorer countries, since it is easier to appropriate and manage the wealth of a population that is perceived as inferior and dishonest<sup>6</sup>.

The legitimacy of this discourse has become an unreflected dimension of social and expressive-artistic behavior that is not only limited to relations between countries, but also functions in a relationship between classes within the same country (Zocca & Martins, 2021). In this sense, there is a division between different social stratum within a given population, characterized by an *Europeanized elitist* caste and the most marginalized layer, baptized by Souza (2019) as the *populace* (*populacho*).

<sup>5</sup> Moral hazard: a term often used in the analysis of the effects of insurance. It refers to the idea that the very provision of insurance increases the probability of occurrence of the event insured against. This is because insurance reduces the incentives for the insured party to take preventive measures. At the IMF, the term is mostly used for emerging economies or peripheral countries.

<sup>6</sup> Adrilles says US must annihilate inferior cultures, accessed 07/07/2023, available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBNnwNYnH38&ab\\_channel=MeteoroBrasil](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBNnwNYnH38&ab_channel=MeteoroBrasil)



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<sup>7</sup> Cala a boca, accessed on 06/07/2023, available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8\\_5ARGXCnpg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_5ARGXCnpg)

The *populace*, which represents the absolute majority but a political minority, is the target of constant devaluation by the Europeanized class, which literally does not feel like an equal and tries to distance itself with various arguments ranging from those learned in school through culturalism to ancestry. There is an anecdote in Brazil, very well represented by the group Porta dos Fundos<sup>7</sup>, which captures the need of people of European descent to express this descent.

It is precisely in the desire to differentiate themselves from the populace that the constant reaffirmation of this distance lies, as if they were better people, with *purier blood* and therefore less prone to dishonesty, in addition to having a more refined cultural tastes like Europeans. The spiralization of this discourse penetrates so deeply into the identity of these countries that even the most peripheral layers of society try to differentiate themselves from others in similar situations, in a cycle that seems to have no end (Souza, 2019).

This association is based on an idea that is quite common today, but which has already usurped the public spheres in an overwhelming way and reached the leadership of some nations in the recent past. It was the idea of purity that, among other consequences, strengthened extremist movements such as Nazism and Fascism by stimulating a perspective of social purity.

Purity is a vision of things placed in places different from what they would occupy, if they were not led to move to another, impelled, dragged or incited; and it is a vision of order - that is, of a situation in which each thing is in its proper place and in no other. (Bauman, 1998, p. 14).

According to the author, it is the *location* of things that acts as a catalyst for this impurity, not their characteristics per se. Those who seek purity establish order within an idealized system.

Once idealized, when an individual opposes this order or refuses to be in his *proper place*, a conflict is generated. The capacity for understanding and discernment of those who seek order is too small to accommodate those whom the author calls *disrupters*. Even relocating them is often insufficient, leaving only one option. The purity movement becomes dangerous at this point, when only the elimination of the threat seems to be sufficient (Bauman, 1998).

Part of this hatred of the impure is created because the *disrupters* have the ability to control their own location, so they mock the efforts of those who seek purity. This movement naturally reveals the fragility and instability of the idealized order (Bauman, 1998).

Although it sounds like the exclusivity of some individuals, the author points out that the sense of purity comes from the human being's own ability to

memorize. And it happens all the time, as we learn how the world is managed, generating patterns that are conserved and that change from one time to another or from one region to another, it is natural in all human beings some degree of search for the pure.

According to Geertz (2008), humans are animals that live suspended in *webs of meaning* and, as such, depend on a set of concepts and preestablishments, or symbols, that serve to striate and understand the world as it functions. This constant effort to create our own safe version of the world often goes unnoticed, so that the use of these symbols becomes commonplace and we do not even realize that they are symbols, for example, the universal symbol of money.

As well as symbolism, the *dream of purity* (Bauman, 1998) is also learned and grasped in everyday experience. However, it can be dangerous when the creation of these senses reaches the point of judging another human being as dirt or impurity, a movement that opens spaces for extremism and totalitarian regimes such as those mentioned above, the association between purity and hygiene is not mere chance.

The growing accumulation of capital that we are witnessing today, which we will examine in the next section, causes populations to stagnate in their social classes, making it very difficult to move up. This stagnation of the social position of people in relation to the market is configured from the perspective of purity and generates idealizations of *meritocracy*.<sup>8</sup> of the social status they possess. The implication is that it is possible for all pure people to ascend, but people do not do so because they are not *worthy* of such ascension.

In fact, the dream of purity directed at the economy generates an apparently or superficially justified rejection of the poorer stratum of the population, and the repercussions, like culturalism or even as part of it, are entrenched in entire societies (Adorno, 2001; Bauman, 1998). Highly naturalized, the dream of purity operates even among the poorest stratum themselves. In other words, they are rejected for not being pure enough, in a cascade effect.

<sup>8</sup> Why this angry audio sums up the Brazil of meritocracy - Accessed 05/07/2023, available at: [https://www.vice.com/pt\\_br/article/wj9max/por-que-este-audio-pistola-resume-o-brasil-da-meritocracia](https://www.vice.com/pt_br/article/wj9max/por-que-este-audio-pistola-resume-o-brasil-da-meritocracia)

## CAPITALISM AS A DRIVER OF DIFFERENCE

In order to correlate the above-mentioned speech of the presidents of Brazil and Argentina, and the positioning implicit in it, we seek to contextualize capitalism not only as a concept, but also as a way of thinking about society. For this purpose, we are based on Deleuze & Guattari (2005), but also on the history of capitalism with Mandel (1998) and on the specificity of this model in Latin America with Souza (2019).



## Refused States: The Effect of Culturalism on Nations with a colonization history

Capitalism, as a system, operates through enunciations that establish the semiology of capital itself (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005). Such enunciations do not derive from theoretical propositions or even ideological formulations, but only from flows of axioms that are not necessarily interdependent. It is this amnestied character of capitalism, free of its own axioms but functioning as a flow of independent and elusive axioms that can lead it to evolve without limits. Such evolution contributes to the configuration of the *wild* structure of contemporary postmodern capitalism.

In addition, there is a division between what are considered to be the *center countries* and the *peripheral countries* (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005) in an amorphous but interdependent relationship. The history of colonization leaves some organizational gaps in developing countries. By constantly reporting of the activities and outputs of the colonized countries to the colonizing nations, whose affairs often covered the internal and hierarchical structure of these countries, left little room for the colonized countries to develop their own regulatory and political systems. In addition, the imposition of the purchase of manufactured goods from the colonizers contributed to the absence of an organized domestic industry and market. (Mandel, 1998). These gaps were then opportunistically filled by axioms chosen by the center countries.

At first it was the colonizing country that dealt with this dictate. Subsequently, the forms of domination were gradually replaced by the division between the capitalist and the socialist world, and then a single global market was forged, or the ethics of aesthetics, which tends to standardize consumption, as Maffesoli points out. (2002, p. 16).

As an expression of contemporary mythology, science fiction films, numerous «video clips», and sometimes even advertising emphasize this relativization of free will by the supra-individual «force» [...]. It disturbs the social imaginary, ensures the success of folkloric spectacles and historical re-enactments, draws crowds to places of pilgrimage and makes initiatory novels triumph. In each of these cases, and the list is far from exhaustive, what is at stake is a collective spirit, a mass subjectivity, what the initiatory tradition calls the «égregore», that is, a social bond that no longer rests on simple reason alone, but on a global interaction in which «pathos» is omnipresent.

This standardization of consumption takes place not only in goods, but also in the form of culture, the media, cinema, popular books, the massification of streaming platforms, and so on. All these products contribute to the configuration

of the hierarchy between peoples, races and countries, and it happens so naturally that we are not even aware of it through culturalism. (Souza, 2019).

The standardization of consumption takes place, but the difference in production costs is strategically maintained, exploited by the implementation of factories in *peripheral countries*, which have lower production costs due to greater exploitation of labor, less concern for environmental issues, easier access to raw materials, among other factors. (Mandel, 1998).

The importance of the process of fulfilling the axioms by the center countries is often minimized by culturalism. Among the implications of this system is the creation of a master mentality in countries with greater economic development, which benefits them by giving them the appearance of deserving the condition they hold, and also that of a slave mentality in countries whose genesis is in the direction of obedience and subordination to the ruling countries.

Since we have never reflected on this force-idea and its consequences, it is uniquely suited to separating and hierarchizing the world in a practical way that is very different from the legal rule of formal equality. In fact, it is even much more effective than all legal codes put together. The separation not only between peoples and countries, but also between social classes, between genders and between 'races' is constructed and becomes extraordinarily effective in practice. (Souza, 2019, p. 22)

Taking advantage of this relatively arbitrary creation of axioms for its own evolution, capitalism thus becomes metacapitalism, since all the laws that govern it are exclusively immanent (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005). Although capitalist praxis tries to convince us that the maximum constraints of capitalism lie in the laws of the universe, the limits of energy or the resources of the planet, we observe that capitalism only collides with its own limits, be they the gradual devaluation of capital itself or the creation of new industries with high rates of profit.

However, the authors point out that these changes, such as the creation of new industries and the creation of other forms of exploitation of capital, not only change the form of capital, but also require a redistribution of the world's resources, which will turn to the new form of exploitation. In this way, new sets of minorities are also created, the relocation of groups that become marginal to the new forms of exploitation is constantly transformed (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005). This is the reason why the creation and arrangement of minorities is more related to the dominant power and not limited to population numbers alone.

Part of this constant transformation is addressed in "Late Capitalism", which explores the understanding of money as one of the great fictional narratives constructed and adapted by humanity. The metalinguistic character of capitalism has





led to its repeated narration, reinterpretation and reification over time, even to the point of being divided into three phases, as proposed by the Belgian economist Mandel (1998) in the 1970s, when he predicted the decline of economic growth experienced in the post-war period. Although he faced criticism, time proved the accuracy of his conceptions, and the book, homonymous with the concept, reached its 23rd edition in 1998, confirming his assertiveness in identifying what he called late capitalism.

This theory predicted the condemnation of capitalism itself, so that the big monopolies would grow larger and larger, creating unbearable competition for small and medium enterprises, which would be forced to exploit the workers even more and then close their businesses. The dominance of large conglomerates also influences the accumulation of wealth, which in turn tends to become even greater. This factor, combined with the precariousness of work due to the possibility of paying less and less to increasingly productive workers, as Marques (2020), points out, creates a cycle in which the resources of the majority of people gradually trickle down to a small portion of the super-rich. According to Sheidel & Friesen (2009), the gap between rich and poor in the United States already exceeds the gap that existed in ancient Rome, a society based on slave labor.

According to the UNDP report<sup>9</sup>, Brazil is the eighth most unequal country in the world, surpassed only by African countries: South Africa, Namibia, Zambia, Sao Tome and Principe, Central African Republic, Swaziland and Mozambique. The indices show that wealth does not only flow into the hands of the richest, but that the flow also begins in the poorest countries, in both micro and macro terms.

It is no coincidence that we live in increasingly shorter cycles of crisis, in fact, even the fragments of time in which the overcoming of the crisis is preconized, are already tainted with a new crisis to come, as theorized by (Martins, 2017, p. 187): “Vertigo, crisis, risk, and the end are words that characterize the atmosphere of the age in which we live”. According to the author, this imminence of an unknown danger keeps us in a kind of state of alert that integrates us in a fast lane of constant movement, of constant running. We swim like fish in an aquarium where a shark is lurking, it is enough not to be present at a certain overtime at work, to ignore a certain e-mail or to refuse a certain phone call to be left behind and swallowed without a trace.

The acceleration of our world is such that we often do not even ask ourselves why we are in this situation, has it always been like this? Although Mandel (1998) synthesized the path that capitalism has taken, he does so in a very general way, focusing, of course, on his field, economics. Bauman (1998) also offers a critique of the precarious models that were being designed at the time of his book's

<sup>9</sup>United Nations (2022) Human Development Report 2021/2022. <https://report.hdr.undp.org/>

publication, as well as the pragmatic reasons that led companies to adopt such predatory practices toward their workers:

Once limited to steel and concrete, heavy factory buildings and unwieldy machinery, capital itself has become the embodiment of flexibility. It has mastered the tricks of pulling itself out of a hat like a rabbit or disappearing without a trace, with the information superhighway playing the role of a magic wand. But just as what heals some kills others, the changes that rationalization and flexibility mean for capital resonate as catastrophes at the receiving end - as inexplicable, as beyond human capacity, and as stalling opportunities at the solid wall of fate. (Bauman, 1998, p. 50)

Again, the crisis comes to the fore, it exists and gradually intensifies, reinforced by other current problems such as global warming, the pandemic, the accumulation of plastic in the oceans, etc. This constant creation of crises diverts the population from the core issues of their problems and eradicates the dream or utopia of change. (Bregman, 2018), while populations or even peripheral countries are forever tainted in their idealized positions of purity (Bauman, 1998), never fully and definitively integrated into the group of center countries:

If the two solutions of extermination and integration hardly seem possible, it is due to the deepest law of capitalism: it continually sets and then repels its own limits, but in so doing gives rise to numerous flows in all directions that escape its axiomatic. At the same time as capitalism is effectuated in the denumerable sets serving as its models, it necessarily constitutes nondenumerable sets that cut across and disrupt those models. (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005, p. 472)

Although it can be perceived with greater vehemence in some specific points of the planet (Souza, 2019), the crisis seems to affect the entire globe, or at least a good part of it, with a special focus on countries with a history of colonization or peripheral (Mandel, 1998). As punctual convulsions of this model of crisis and capital outflow, also proposed by Deleuze & Guattari (2005), we include several social movements, such as the struggle for the rights of minority populations in Ecuador, severely punished by police actions, as Ávila (2023), recounts, or even the conflagration that occurred in France in April 2023, triggered by the increase of the minimum retirement age in the country, both with different approaches and successes. The prospect of a change in the culturalist paradigm through the social sciences promises to bring new perspectives and new dreams to a reality that is gradually becoming grey and naturalized, suffocating the transformative capacity contained in non-numerical groups and minorities.



## CONCLUSIONS

We are faced with the challenge of understanding the way in which minority states are constituted, since this contradicts the axiom of capital, as pointed out by Deleuze & Guattari (2005). In fact, in the cases of countries that have experienced colonization in their history, there is a division between castes of the population, the so-called *Europeanized elite* and the *populace*, according to Souza (2019).

Culturalist theory, when assimilated as scientific knowledge, ends up becoming a rooted and naturalized belief through institutions such as schools, universities, media, and cinema. This naturalization of the culturalist paradigm makes it difficult to critique and reflect on its limitations and effects, thus perpetuating its influence almost imperceptibly. In countries such as Argentina and Brazil, we observe through the speeches of presidents elected with an essentially culturalist discourse (Souza, 2019), the perpetuation of the need to differentiate part of the population, as in the case of the anecdote of the humorous group Porta dos Fundos or the speech of Adrilles Jorge, and the tenacious devaluation of national culture (Miranda & Freitas, 2013), that the elite sees itself as Europeanized and therefore distant from its own population. In this sense, the elite that sees itself as Europeanized adheres to the pseudo-scientific racist discourse of culturalism, in which the populations of the peripheral countries are seen by those of the center as ignorant, corrupt, and impure.

If we look at the case of police violence in Paraisópolis, directed against people from the periphery, who are minorities, it is clear that the problem is not the loud music, or even the consumption of legal or illegal drugs that can occur at parties, both funk and electronic music in upper class neighborhoods, the problem is characterized by the use of the body of the poor. This use evokes a sense of purity idealized by the Europeanized elite of these countries, the body of the poor has place only as a productive unit, in this sense dancing is *impure, dirty*, deserves to be eliminated. This is the reasoning behind not only this case, but a systematic violence against minority groups in these countries.

The effect spirals from the macro to the micro so that, initially, countries with a history of colonization, here Argentina and Brazil as examples, are considered as inferior or *populace* by the so-called center countries, colonizers and holders of capital, through a pseudo-scientific argument of culturalism that has been pumping for years how much the culture and the inhabitants of these countries are inferior, justifying the poverty and injustices that exist in them.

In fact, part of the elite in these countries has also bought into this discourse, because instead of contradicting it, they support it, and the movement is reflected in how culturalism has become entrenched and proliferated. We conclude that

national art and culture is devalued because it is popular, precisely because it is part of the real population of a country divided into the two castes. (Miranda & Freitas, 2013; Souza, 2019).

The highlighted speeches of the presidents of Argentina and Brazil make this reality clear and the very fact that they were elected, often emphasizing precisely this difference between them and the populace, reveals how much this discourse and racist culturalism already constitute the formal and informal thinking of these countries.

In this way, there is an implicit erasure of national identity, in which the inhabitants of peripheral countries tend to see themselves as Europeans or Americans, blaming all the problems they face economically and culturally on a second caste of people, the populace of their own country. Through this dynamic, individuals armed with a vision of purity ascend to the most important positions in their countries, promoting a discourse that is openly opposed to their own population, which in turn does not see itself as the population of its own country, sharing and endorsing this culturalist sentiment.

In conclusion, the term spiral is used to describe the arrangement that has been architected. The center countries, historically dominant in scientific thought and publications, set the tone for the very conception of scientificity in the peripheral countries.

In this tone, which proved to be fundamental for these countries, was the presence of the stigma associated with the idea that such nations were considered ignorant and corrupt. The discourse found fertile ground for dissemination among the wealthier classes, who had the means and resources to pursue more formal education, including the possibility of studying abroad. Already possessing a certain academic or intellectual prestige, these people gain space as opinion-makers, both in universities and in the media, sometimes through their internal mechanisms, deciding on the content presented, sometimes as invited experts. In this way, culturalism penetrates all layers of the population, which now tries not to feel like the *corrupt natives* and tends to create systematic differentiations between itself and the populace.

In fact, national art is devalued because it is created by and for the populace. State enterprises become synonymous with places of illegal corrupt practices, and the only way to create some development is to imitate what the United States or other center countries are doing, even if this imitation makes no logical sense. In this way, the peripheral states open themselves up to foreign exploitation, which appears more dignified and rational, so that they will better understand what to do with the resources available. This is the mechanism that exists and works for the plundering of a country's resources, aided and abetted by the



locals themselves, who try to get closer to the foreigners by declaring themselves Europeanists or by saluting the US flag.

We hope that the critical gaze itself, which configures a convulsion in the culturalist model, will gain strength and begin to formulate a new axiom. The creation of new axioms capable of integrating the economic model, even if it is not ideal, is one of the few ways to create the possibility of breaking the crystallizations that fragment beings between first and second class, through a more humanized vision. ■

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# The LGBTQIA+ journalist community and the effort of affirmative action in a conservative Brazil

## *A comunidade de jornalistas LGBTQIA+ e o esforço das ações afirmativas num Brasil conservador*

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### ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the effort undertaken by the LGBTQIA+ journalist community in gender affirmative actions in the workplace, considering the conservative wave that has taken over the Brazilian social-political scenario. We highlight three initiatives: the creation of an LGBT Commission by the São Paulo State Union of Professional Journalists; a survey, on journalism professionals who identify themselves with this acronym; and the *LGBTI+ Communication Manual*, aimed at supporting the work of journalists toward gender agendas. Although significant, in a context marked by prejudice and the silencing of minorities, these actions move slowly precisely because they collide with other issues resulting in a paradox similar to the one feminism found, long ago, regarding the sexual division of labor: “everything changes but nothing changes”.

**Keywords:** Journalism, journalists, gender, LGBTQIA+ Community, workplace.

### RESUMO

Este ensaio discute o esforço da comunidade de jornalistas LGBTQIA+ em ações afirmativas no mundo do trabalho, considerando a onda conservadora que tomou conta da cena político-social do Brasil nos últimos anos. São evidenciadas três iniciativas: a criação de uma Comissão LGBT pelo Sindicato dos Jornalistas Profissionais no Estado de São Paulo; uma pesquisa sobre profissionais de jornalismo que se identificam com a referida sigla; e o *Manual de Comunicação LGBTI+* destinado a amparar jornalistas em relação às pautas de gênero. Embora significativas, em um contexto marcado por preconceitos e por silenciamentos de minorias, essas ações caminham devagar, justamente porque esbarram em outras questões, resultando em paradoxo semelhante ao que o feminismo identificou, há tempos, sobre a divisão sexual do trabalho: “tudo muda, mas nada muda”.

**Palavras-chave:** Jornalismo, jornalistas, gênero, comunidade LGBTQIA+, mundo do trabalho.

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# A

## The LGBTQIA+ journalist community and the effort of affirmative action in a conservative Brazil

<sup>1</sup>This acronym represents the social group comprised of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, queers or questioning, intersex, asexual, and other “identities such as pansexual, non-binary people, etc.” which are represented by the “+” symbol. Although there are variations, we use this acronym because we believe it to be the most inclusive and revealing “of a movement – not only in Brazil, but also in other countries – that has gained space and showed the importance of the uniqueness of these individuals who live through different experiences, prejudices and struggles” (Vicenzo, 2021).

**H**UMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS always say: Brazil is the country that kills the most LGBTQIA+<sup>1</sup> people in the world, a statistic that has escalated mainly due to the murders of transvestites and transsexuals. According to monitoring published by Transgender Europe (TGEU), Brazil has had the highest numbers of reported trans and gender diverse killings in the world every year since 2009 (Pineiro, 2022). A report prepared by the National Association of Transvestites and Transsexuals (Antra) shows that an average of 123.8 transgender and/or transvestite people were murdered every year between 2008 and 2021 (Benevides, 2022). According to a survey conducted by the Gay Group of Bahia (GGB), 300 LGBTQIA+ people were murdered in 2021 alone, registering 276 homicides (92%) and 24 suicides (8%), which equates to one death every 29 hours. These numbers are alarming, especially when we consider that “mortality like this is only the tip of the iceberg of hatred and blood as our statistics are underreported due to the lack of criminal statistics from the government” (Oliveira; Mott, 2022, p. 13). This is therefore a group at constant risk, which has been exacerbated in recent years as a result of the rise in conservatism we have seen in politics, reflected in different social fields (Lacerda, 2019).

It is also true, however, that this rise in conservatism has gained more prominence since 2018, the year was elected as President of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro, politic who, over almost three decades as a parliamentarian, has openly expressed his disapproval of sexual diversity and gender diversity, as well as equal rights for these people (Guazina; Leite, 2021), something which is not new over the history of Brazil. Male chauvinism, misogyny, racism, LGBTQIA-phobic<sup>2</sup>, and other reactionary prejudices are structural elements of the country, which means trying to deconstruct them is a socially relevant, yet complex, endeavor. The fatality numbers presented in the beginning of this paper are not self-contained; they are indications of the tensions that LGBTQIA+ people are susceptible to and consequently of the obstacles they face in their daily lives.

Journalists who identify with the acronym face these kinds of issues in their work environment – a cis-heteronormative environment predominantly based on parameters of masculinity perpetrated over time (Darde, 2009; Silva, 2014). Those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transvestite, transsexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other orientations and identities are often victims of attacks – especially on social media<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, the sexual and/or gender category they identify with is also made invisible due to the social structure that imposes an old and strong binary pattern.

This article, written in an essay format, seeks to discuss the commitment of that community to affirmative actions. To do this, we look at the following three

<sup>2</sup>Although the term “LGBTQIA-phobic” – in Portuguese, “LGBTQIA+fobia” (Pires et al., 2020) – may sound strange, perhaps that is why some authors prefer to use related expressions, such as “homotransphobia” (Oliveira & Mott, 2022, p. 15) or “LGBTphobia” (Vasconcelos, 2021, p. 127), we use the term as we consider it to be more comprehensive.

<sup>3</sup>A recent case involving two journalists from Rede Globo, Erick Rianelli and Pedro Figueiredo, are a case in point. On June 12, 2021 (Valentine’s Day in Brazil), Rianelli made a declaration of love to his partner during a live broadcast on the *RJTV* newscast. The video went viral and fueled homophobic attacks by a myriad of individuals, including a businessman from the Federal District and a priest from Mato Grosso.

initiatives created between 2017 and 2018 (these are the most recent ones we were able to map out) and their actions and intentions: an LGBT Commission created by the union of journalists from São Paulo, a survey of journalism professionals who identify as LGBTI+ (headed by the aforementioned commission), and the publication of an *LGBTI+ Communication Handbook (Manual de Comunicação LGBTI+)*, designed to assist the press when writing about gender issues. We shall describe each one of these actions in more detail further in this paper.

Before we go into detail about these actions, it is important to note the context of “neoconservatism”, a contemporary ideological political movement that began in the United States in the second half of the 20th century in response to the counterculture, organized and acting in defense of traditional values (Lacerda, 2019; Vaggione et al., 2020). It is in this macrocosm (explored below) that LGBTQIA+ journalists are inserted and try to make themselves seen and heard.

### **CLASHES BETWEEN DIVERSITY AND CONSERVATISM IN BRAZIL**

Diversity and conservatism are two diametrically opposed realities. The former presupposes openness, inclusion and acceptance, while the latter insists on exclusionary and discriminatory standards. The notion of conservatism is comprehensive, as Juan Marco Vaggione, Maria das Dores Campos Machado and Flávia Biroli (2020, p. 24) remind us. These authors define it as “positional” and conclude that it occurs “when social minority segments that challenge the established order are strengthened to the point of threatening the ideal and material foundations of institutions”. In other words, it is a defense of their ideals from groups that conquer space and legitimacy.

Conservatism is about maintaining hegemonic conventions and customs. It is not restricted to just one social field; it crosses through many and establishes a close link with orthodox religious principles and other systemic elements – in this case, the particularities of neoliberalism (Dardot & Laval, 2016). Finally, it gets its basis from a combination of intellectual and political positions that are guided by specific ideas of what is moral, especially when it comes to gender and sexuality, and is consistent with a model of society based on individuality and the downsizing of the state (meritocracy, privatization, entrepreneurship, etc.).

As the philosophy tends to reject or deny certain achievements reached in recent decades, such as those of feminism and the LGBTQIA+ movement, it seems reasonable to suggest that we are indeed talking about “neoconservatism”. Taking its limitations into account, Vaggione, Machado and Biroli (2020, p. 25) – drawing on political scientist Wendy Brown – explain that the term “characterizes the



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rise of the phenomenon in the *current political moment*” and refers to “a political rationale which heavily regulates sexual morality”. Here, the issue of gender is not a one-off, it is a focal point in contemporary conservative discourse. This is either because its supporters wish to “protect and guarantee a sexual morality that defends the (heterosexual) family and is legitimized by its reproductive potential” or because they believe that the changes to this morality they defend are also responsible for a number of other changes, for example, in the world of work where a greater number of women are now gainfully employed.

It should be noted that neoconservatism is not just a project to defend values or a power to be legitimized. It acts as “a normative and disciplinary logic internalized by contemporary subjects” (Vaggione et al., 2020, p. 26) and therefore overlaps into a number of intrinsic elements of social relations, ultimately intruding on them. What this means is that this opposition to identity affects certain groups not only on moral issues, but also on other issues such as economics. Biroli (2020, p. 149) has an interesting thought to this point:

Neoconservatism defends moral traditions but does so in order to instrumentalize them in political disputes. One angle to this defense is the praise of an age-old order where gender roles are “clearer” and women meet the demands of everyday family life while men could “take on the burdens of masculinity”. Defenders of moral traditions cling to varying degrees of repressive approaches to diversity and mobilize anti-pluralist views that see the acceptance and naturalization of sexual roles and inequalities as a response to the supposed decline of the moral order.

Marina Basso Lacerda (2019) also talks of the “new Brazilian conservatism”, comparing it to that of US neoconservatism. She points to the Chamber of Deputies, a place where parliamentarians defend conservative flags, especially of “hard line” public security, agribusiness and Christian fundamentalism. Her research is not limited to analyzing the Legislative Power, she also sees the Chamber of Deputies as a regulator of social aspirations. These parliamentarians, particularly strengthened after the 2018 election (Tatemoto, 2019), are the reflection of a society that identifies with regressive ideas and that is unwilling to abandon its prejudices.

Even though attention was beginning to be drawn to the LGBTQIA+ community in the 1990s, once they started to gain visibility<sup>4</sup> and subsequently more rights (albeit quite slowly), the conflict between conservatives and defenders of diversity has always been on the “agenda” in Brazil, including being endorsed by journalism, which often holds a position very close to that of conservatism. One example can be taken from an interview conducted with

<sup>4</sup>Inspired by the international movement, the LGBT Pride Parade was first held in São Paulo in 1997. Approximately 2,000 people participated in the Parade that year. This number has skyrocketed to an impressive 3 million in 2019, the last time the Parade was held. The event was held online in 2020 and 2021 due to social distance restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

television show host Hebe Camargo (1929-2012) on the television program *Roda Viva*, broadcast on TV Cultura in August 1987. When asked why she defended homosexuals and, more specifically, whether her statements as an opinion maker might be “promoting homosexuality”<sup>5</sup> (a question asked by a viewer and by journalists José Roberto Paladino and Ricardo Kotscho), Hebe gave a frank and to-the-point response, which is probably why it was circulated across social media decades later. She said: “What I say does not change anything. Either people are born that way or they are not. It’s not because Hebe Camargo said it and now people will go... ‘Ah, Hebe Camargo said it, how wonderful, now I’m going to be homosexual!’ Those who are meant to be, will be”<sup>6</sup>. The tension between the question raised and the answer given is symptomatic of the sexual order defended by the *status quo*, which is often necessary to state the obvious.

It is true that from the 1980s to the 2020s the LGBTQIA+ community has achieved some victories in the country. In 2011, the Federal Supreme Court (STF) ruled that preventing same-sex marriage was unconstitutional, setting a precedent that led the National Council of Justice (CNJ) to publish a resolution<sup>7</sup> two years later, “establishing the right for same-sex couples to marry in a civil registry just as heterosexual couples do” (Simões, 2021). In 2019, the STF also ruled LGBTQIA-phobic to be a crime, labeling it as a category of racism. This ruling has become an important protection mechanism, but it still runs into obstacles such as “difficult access and proper framework by security operators and/or the judiciary. One of the biggest reasons for this ineffectiveness is the difficulty in denouncing these crimes, since the justice system also reproduces LGBTIphobia” (Vasconcelos, 2021, p. 127).

It should be noted that the two achievements mentioned above were the result of judicial decisions and not of legislation proposed by the Legislative Power. The role of the Legislative Power, at the federal level, is deferential when it comes to the constitutional right to sexual and gender diversity. The National Congress has not proposed an LGBTQIA+ bill since the re-democratization and the 1988 Constitution; there are however 50 bills pending, some of which are on the verge of expiring (Brito, 2021). One of these bills (Senate Bill No. 134 of 2018, which proposes for the creation of the Statute of Sexual and Gender Diversity) has been awaiting approval since 2019, with no opinion having been issued so far (April 2022). A symbolic example, one that is also in line with Lacerda’s perception (2019) that Congress reflects social behavior, is a poll available on the Senate page<sup>8</sup>. As of April 8, 2022, this poll had a total of 93,672 respondents, with 40,460 (43.19%) in favor of establishing the statute and 53,212 (56.81%) against establishing the statute.

<sup>5</sup> The term “homosexuality” is considered “incorrect and prejudiced by virtue of the suffix ‘ism’, which denotes disease and abnormality. The term was substituted for homosexuality, which correctly refers to an individual’s sexual orientation, describing a ‘way of being and feeling’” (Reis, 2018, p. 64).

<sup>6</sup> The interview can be seen in its entirety on the *Roda Viva* YouTube channel. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvE09tDb\\_Ls](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvE09tDb_Ls)

<sup>7</sup> Resolution No. 175 of May 14, 2013, which reads: “The competent authorities are prohibited from refusing a license, a civil marriage, or converting a stable union into a same-sex marriage”. Retrieved from <https://atos.cnj.jus.br/atos/detalhar/1754>

<sup>8</sup> Retrieved from <https://www25.senado.leg.br/web/atividade/materias/-/materia/132701>



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If it is true that advances have been made, it is also true that their effects are relative because they are stuck in the neoconservatism (particularly with regards to religious doctrines, many of which uphold fundamentalism and the male chauvinistic nature of a patriarchal model of society) that override the principles of equality and freedom guaranteed by the Constitution. These obstacles affect the LGBTQIA+ community on a number of levels and various aspects of life, such as professional activities (Lando et al., 2020), hence the need for affirmative actions.

### AFFIRMATIVE ACTIONS IN THE WORLD OF WORK

There are a number of affirmative actions that can be taken in the world of work; we shall talk about two of them. The first is the diversity of groups in the workforce in terms of class, race and gender (Abreu et al., 2016). The other involves issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity and their claim for rights and working conditions (Souza, 2020). Addressing these agendas in the *locus* of the productive sector, in addition to combating prejudice, can help legitimize LGBTQIA+ rights, which includes equal access to professional environments.

Many of the individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ – particularly those identified by the letter “T” – face a number of difficulties when entering the world of work, many end up having to unwillingly work in low-skill and low-paying jobs, or even turn to undesirable alternatives such as prostitution (Paniza, 2019). Promoting discussions on gender issues and putting policies into place that protect LGBTQIA+ workers allows for advances to be made to the rights they deserve.

The core of the issue here is that this community needs to be made more visible in order to successfully obtain spaces in professional environments and society as a whole. Doing this within a dominant system that tends to evade or gloss over anything that deviates from the norm has a direct impact on how the economic contribution of LGBTQIA+ community and their place in the social environment are perceived. We can compare this observation to what Margaret Maruani and Monique Meron (2016) conclude about statistics related to women’s work: official figures underestimate women’s participation in gainful employment as a result of much of the data being erased or deleted.

As important as they are, gender affirmative actions are relatively recent. They were initiated in the second half of the 20th century – in the 1980s, according to Anabelle Carrilho da Costa (2011, p. 11) – considering “discrimination in this context as a consequence of complex and diverse previous relationships that are reflected in inequalities that need to be focally fought, however, without prejudice to policies that also act at their origins”. Despite not having all the



available data, what has been achieved so far, especially with regard to women and feminist initiatives (which share similar demands and actions as the LGBTQIA+ community), is that the cis-heteronormative and masculine standard that had remained hegemonic and unchanged for centuries has now been challenged.

It is important to highlight the “sexual division of labor”, a concept of French origin that refers to the systematic unequal delegation of tasks – professional or domestic – which demonstrates, in the words of Helena Hirata and Danièle Kergoat (2007, p. 596), “processes which society uses to hierarchize activities, and ultimately the sexes, basically creating a gender system”. In other words, this sexual division follows relationship structures in a patriarchal society where men are primarily the breadwinners and women are housewives and responsible for childcare.

This particular form of the social division of labor has two organizing principles: the principle of separation (there are men’s jobs and women’s jobs) and the hierarchical principle (a man’s job is “worth” more than a woman’s job). These principles are valid for all known societies, in time and space. They can be applied through a specific process of legitimation, the naturalist ideology. This debases gender to biological sex, and reduces social practices to gendered “social roles” that refer to the natural destiny of the species (Hirata; Kergoat, 2007, p. 599).

The separation and hierarchization of work, which has historically situated women as inferior to men, also places LGBTQIA+ in a similar position, mainly because they are at the bottom of the pyramid (cis and heterosexual men at the top). The more the LGBTQIA+ community is distanced from this paradigm (that is, performing aspects different from heterosexual cis men), the more unfavorable the conditions are for performing their professions. It is in this sense that the concept of “sexual division of labor”, despite being based on the binary pattern (male-female), can very well be used in the discussion proposed here. Luiz Henrique Braúna Lopes de Souza (2020, pp. 271-272) echoes this idea when he says:

It is also necessary to critically understand that the inequalities, prejudice and discrimination faced on a daily basis by the population who do not comply with the norms and rules imposed by heterosexuality and natural and compulsory cisgenderism, condition and determine the space in which these subjects will be inserted in the world of work, as well as remuneration for their labor power. Not only that, but these aspects also affect the real possibilities of achieving professional training. They even affect access to basic education. In other words, these subjects’





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lives are marked by greater precarious living conditions and, consequently, will be subjected to precarious jobs.

A survey conducted in 2021 by Mais Diversidade consultancy on the LGBTQIA+ community and its insertion into the labor market presents some interesting data: 74% of respondents see the labor market as not very inclusive, while 54% claim there is a lack of LGBTQIA+ references in their areas of activity (Rodrigues & Tadeu, 2021). Another survey conducted in Brazil by the Center for Talent Innovation in 2019 adds to this: 61% of gay and lesbian employees claim they hide their sexuality from colleagues and managers for fear of losing their jobs; 33% of companies would not hire LGBTQIA+ people for leadership positions; 41% of workers who identify as LGBTQIA+ have already suffered some type of discrimination in their work environment due to sexual orientation or gender identity; and 90% of transvestites resort to prostitution because they cannot find gainful employment – even those who have qualifications (Simor, 2020).

The symptoms of LGBTQIA-phobic in the world of work are also – and perhaps mainly – a reflection of capitalism, which itself is based on inequalities. Similar to the “functionality of racism” (Menezes, 2010), the sexual division of labor contributes to the capitalist mode of production where the unfavorable conditions of certain groups make them susceptible to exploitation. There is an interrelation between class, race and gender. In saying this, we look back to Souza (2020, p. 272) and his line of thinking, based on Marxism, where “political emancipation is fundamental to guaranteeing the survival of the working class, but human emancipation is an outlook for revolutionary struggle”. This author concludes that the obstacles related to sexual and gender diversity will only be overcome by overcoming capital.

### LGBTQIA+ JOURNALISTS: REFLECTIONS ON THEIR EFFORTS

Apart from binarism, considering gender variables is something relatively new, even in demographic notes. In the case of journalism, there are two important works on professional profiles – carried out over the last decade and coordinated by Roseli Figaro (2013, p. 29) and Jacques Mick and Samuel Lima (2013, p. 34)<sup>9</sup> – yet they only collected information and divided it into “male” and “female” journalists. It is only recently that we found studies going beyond this categorization, such as the survey on the performance of communicators during the Covid-19 pandemic, also conducted by Figaro (2021, p. 26), which include the gender identity categories “non-binary” and “others”<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>9</sup>The cis-heteronormative standard, rarely questioned in studies on the world of work (particularly those pertaining to journalism), is evident in the titles of the two highlighted studies: *As mudanças no mundo do trabalho do jornalista* (Figaro, 2013) e *Perfil do jornalista brasileiro* (Mick & Lima, 2013).

<sup>10</sup>The research report entitled *Como trabalham os comunicadores no contexto de um ano da pandemia de Covid-19: ...1 ano e 500 mil mortes depois* (in English, *How communicators are working one year into the Covid-19 pandemic: ...1 year and 500,000 deaths later*) makes the following analysis: “The issue of gender identity is quite relevant in the case of communicators, as these are the professionals who deal with this approach in the varying communication and cultural products they produce; the production of meanings is the structural axis of the profession. 59% of respondents claimed to be female, while 41% claimed to be male. In addition to the gender options of female and male, the closed questionnaire included non-binary, I prefer not to declare, and other as alternatives. Not many of these alternatives were selected by the respondents: 4 respondents preferred not to declare, 2 identified as non-binary, and one identified as other, without giving any further details. This is yet another survey demonstrating the female profile in the communication profession” (Figaro, 2021, p. 26).

This lack of gender identity categories is not a mere observation, but an expression of the invisibility of the LGBTQIA+ community. In a society where the patriarchal family is the normative standard and the advances of feminism and “minorities” are constantly being stymied, especially by movements that mix religious interests with secularism (Lacerda, 2019), expressing sexual orientation and/or gender identity hits an institutional wall, one which affects the dynamics of different social fields.

Affirmative actions are, for this very reason, a necessary tool to mitigate discrimination, violence, and other obstacles faced by the LGBTQIA+ community, both socially and in the workplace. In the case of Brazilian journalism (with its prominent male representation, as mentioned earlier in this text)<sup>11</sup> there have been a number of mobilizations seeking to legitimize LGBTQIA+ over the years, publishing their issues in journalistic productions (Carvalho, 2012; Ribeiro, 2010) and giving visibility to journalists who identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. The newspapers *Lampião da Esquina* (1978-1981) and *Chana com Chana* (1981-1987)<sup>12</sup>, produced by gays and lesbians, respectively, are examples of this advocacy for rights before the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Both of these publications were created during the civil-military dictatorship that ruled Brazil in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1964-1985) and championed counterculture movements.

LGBTQIA+ journalists are no longer located solely in alternative spaces, they have gained space in the *mainstream* press over time. However, public demonstrations in favor of sexual orientation and gender identity (like the one mentioned previously, and others<sup>13</sup>) are still seen as experiences that deviate from the norm, especially when they involve TV professionals. It should also be noted that this visibility has basically been granted to white men who adhere to cis-heteronormative masculinity.

We shall discuss three current initiatives in this area. The first two initiatives came from the Union of Professional Journalists in the State of São Paulo (SJSP), a leading entity in the defense of LGBTQIA+ rights in the country. In May 2017, the SJSP board created an LGBT Commission based on the principle that “LGBT journalists are harassed and discriminated against on a daily basis in the labor market, often the subject of disrespectful jokes and comments” (“Jornalistas organizam”, 2017).

This collective held a meeting at the union’s headquarters on May 30th, 2017, where they decided on an agenda of actions to carry out immediately, such as participating in the June 18<sup>th</sup> LGBT Pride Parade in the same year, held on Avenida Paulista in São Paulo. They produced stickers, t-shirts, and a banner with the phrase “Journalists against discrimination” written on it (Figure 1).

<sup>11</sup>Up until the early 2000s, Brazilian journalism was performed predominantly by men, who accounted for 50.30% of all professionals, according to an estimate from 2003 (Rocha; Sousa, 2011, p. 16). More recent data show that the percentage of male journalists in the country is 41.9%, while female journalists are at 57.8% (Perfil..., 2021), maintaining the trend of feminization verified since the late 2000s (Rocha & Sousa, 2011; Figaro, 2013; Mick & Lima, 2013).

<sup>12</sup>Even though they are widely considered significant initiatives, *Lampião da Esquina* and *Chana com Chana* were not the first initiatives of this nature to circulate in Brazil. Flávia Péret (2012, p. 130) identifies that the pioneers were launched in 1963. That year, “in Rio de Janeiro, the fanzine *O Snob* was created by Agildo Guimarães. This publication, which was published until 1969, became a small-format magazine [...] dedicated to issues of gay culture and behavior. In Salvador, the fanzine *Fatos e Fofocas* was created, which reported on gay culture and behavior. It was edited by Waldeilton de Paula”.

<sup>13</sup>Two other journalists who became the subject of articles on sexual orientation in the workplace were Matheus Ribeiro and Marcelo Cosme. The former drew attention in 2019 for being the first openly gay news show host on *Jornal Nacional*, from the *Rede Globo* network (Dias, 2019). The latter attracted attention in 2021 when he talked about his boyfriend while hosting a live broadcast of *Em Pauta*, from *GloboNews* network (Carvalho, 2021).

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Figure 1. The SJSP LGBT Commission at the LGBT Pride Parade (2017)



Note. Archives/SJSP.

The Commission also conducted a survey with the goal of learning more about the issues that LGBTQIA+ journalists face. The survey was made available on an online platform, and the following partial results were released in September of 2017: 39.3% of the respondents stated that they had already been discriminated against in their profession because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, while another 17.9% stated that they may have been discrimination against. This data is in line with what we are discussing here.

Some of the prejudices mentioned included inappropriate jokes in the workplace, unequal treatment, not to mention even more offensive actions such as openly homophobic slurs, insults, and name-calling. The research participants also suffered discrimination in the form of job opportunities, for example, promotions and sections of the workplace which openly excluded LGBT professionals (“Quase 40% dos”, 2017).

The purpose of the questionnaire was to provide support for the Commission’s actions based on conclusions reached from the collected information. There were, however, a few obstacles this questionnaire encountered which slightly hindered its progress. The main obstacle was the labor reform, enacted in 2017<sup>14</sup>, which made for more flexible rules, reduced rights, and particularly sought to weaken the union<sup>15</sup>. Since that year, the union has begun to turn

<sup>14</sup>Law nº 13,467 of July 13, 2017, sanctioned by Michel Temer, who assumed the presidency of the Republic in 2016 after the legal-parliamentary coup that removed Dilma Rousseff from office. Retrieved from [http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/\\_ato2015-2018/2017/lei/113467.htm](http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2015-2018/2017/lei/113467.htm)

<sup>15</sup>One of the alterations put into place by the new legislation was discontinuing the mandatory payment of union dues which the unions needed for their survival.

more of its attention to actions aimed at maintaining rights and adequate remuneration for the LGBTQIA+ community, which unfortunately left the union with less time to focus on other initiatives. This lack of time not only affected the LGBTQIA+ group, but also other associations within its scope, such as the Commission of Journalists for Racial Equality and the Commission of Journalists for Gender Equality (formerly known as the Women’s Journalist Collective).

What is clear is that initiatives focusing on diversity in the world of work encounter other obstacles – something which is significantly exacerbated in times of political and economic instability. The “cascading effect” of harmful actions to the working class (like the new labor legislation) hinders any forward movement for agendas that embrace other claims not directly related to employment and income. As a result, many discriminatory acts end up becoming normalized, which makes it much harder to fight them. This is what happens with sexual and moral harassment, which mainly affects women but does tend to spill over to other members of the LGBTQIA+ community<sup>16</sup>. One case in point is the survey carried out by the SJSP Commission which revealed how some journalists reported being neglected or even excluded in or from certain editorials due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

For journalists, an antagonizing factor in all this is that discrimination tends to be “concealed” by the false idea that there is no prejudice in their field, which makes *bullying*, harassment, and even censorship go widely unnoticed. “It may be less than [in] other professions, you may have less difficulty than [in] other areas, but that does not mean that you are free from any discrimination or that you will not encounter any problems related to this”. This was a statement, in October 2017, from former SJSP Secretary of Communication and Culture, Priscilla Chandretti, who was head of the LGBT Commission<sup>17</sup>.

It is safe to say that (self)reflection on LGBTQIA+ journalists and their situation is one of the aspects that affirmative actions can help explore further. Additionally, the apparent lack of in-depth studies on this issue could be one reason why this group’s movements have fallen short of expectations. This movement appears to make more progress when compared to other places. While initiatives in Brazil are less organized and dispersed<sup>18</sup> throughout the country, the United States has had the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association (NLGJA) since 1990, founded on the ideal of “improving media coverage of LGBT issues. Similarly, the Association des Journalistes LGBT (AJL), founded in France in 2013, works on issues such as marriage equality (also passed in 2013) and gives wide coverage to LGBTQIA-phobic issues (“Pour une association”, 2013, our translation).

<sup>16</sup>Concern over harassment led the SJSP to push forward on this issue in salary campaign negotiations (Serafim, 2017) and create a channel which journalists could use to report cases that occurred in the workplace (“Sindicato tem canal”, 2018).

<sup>17</sup>Interview with Priscilla Chandretti on October 10, 2017.

<sup>18</sup>In addition to the SJSP’s LGBT Commission, we also identified a similar entity in the Union of Journalists in Ceará and a collective in the Union of Professional Journalists in Minas Gerais.

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<sup>19</sup>The manual is free to read and download. Retrieved from <http://www.grupodignidade.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/manual-comunicacao-LGBTI.pdf>

Lastly, there is the LGBTI+ *Communication Handbook*<sup>19</sup> (Figure 2), released in 2018, the aim of which is to combat hate speech and strengthen the democratization of the media. The handbook was prepared by the National LGBTI Alliance and the GayLatino Network and received funding support from the LGBTI Center of the Union of Journalists in Ceará (Sindjorce), the Union of Professional Journalists of Paraná (SindijorPR), and the National Federation of Journalists (Fenaj), among other entities. In the words of its organizer, Toni Reis (2018, p. 7), the handbook seeks to “reduce prejudices and stigmas, and collaborate for a better understanding of recurrent terms within the LGBTI+ population [...] in order to contribute to a more inclusive journalism, and one that is more attentive to realities”.

**Figure 2.** LGBTI+ Communication Handbook



*Note. Reproduction.*



The handbook is divided into ten chapters and discusses issues such as “sexuality, gender and biological sex”, “gender identity and expression”, “terms and behaviors to avoid” and “suggested agendas for the LGBTI+ Movement”, among others. In the preface, the director of the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) in Brazil, Georgiana Braga-Orillard (2018, p. 9), states that the handbook is “essential not only for media professionals and communicators, but for all people who want to advance human rights and the rights of LGBTI+ people”.

The material denounces LGBTQIA-phobic (which is often quite subtle in the way it occurs, even in the world of journalists) and helps make the legitimizing process more accessible. As important as claiming equal rights and social recognition are, it is also just as important to have these guidelines communicated properly, replacing “prejudice with information”, as highlighted by Sindjorce when the handbook was released (“Manual de Comunicação”, 2018). Gender activists, including other members of the community who play a less active role in this constant struggle, have demonstrated that they are aware that real change to their living conditions can symbolically occur through media communication.

Although we do not have any concrete data showing the effectiveness of the *LGBTI+ Communication Handbook* on the daily life of the Brazilian press, it does seem reasonable to consider that its existence at least regulates attitudes and helps encourage LGBTQIA+ mobilizations within journalism. Considering the visibility of certain agents in the field (like the TV journalists mentioned earlier in this paper) there has been somewhat of an advance, a slight change in the way identity issues are raised in the binomial media and society. Of course, we must not be seduced by the appearance of change within this process; we must recognize its limitations and its possibilities. There is still so much to be achieved.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

If we look from the 1960s when the “gay press” emerged in Brazil (Péret, 2012, p. 11) up until the 2020s, we can see how journalists have slowly but surely been “coming out of the closet”, especially those who work in the conventional press; however, going public with this information continues to be fairly unaccepted. Despite the progress that has been made, we are a long way from being able to say that LGBTQIA+ are properly incorporated into the dynamics of the field. This means that the sexual orientation and gender identity of these people are still being treated as exceptions to the rule, and not inclusive elements of a diversity, as they deserve to be.



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Not all is lost, however. Even if the three initiatives we discussed in this paper do not become very successful, they are at least extremely valuable contributions. Going back to the initial argument in this paper regarding the dominant conservatism in Brazil (especially over the last five years) and the distressing statistics that show the country as having the largest number of homicides in the world, it is important to note that there are some Brazilian LGBTQIA+ journalists who have managed to assume their identities in journalism, that is, they have been able to “be themselves in the work environment” (Lando et al., 2020).

Despite these considerations, we understand that the community of LGBTQIA+ journalists faces the same paradox as feminism: “everything changes, but nothing changes”. Similar to how changes to women’s situations in the labor market “are always evolving” yet have not been sufficient enough to bridge the gap in the sexual division of labor (Hirata; Kergoat, 2007, p. 597), the achievements of the LGBTQIA+ community have also not been able to eliminate the prejudices, have not led to employment equity, nor have they been able to break the cycle of discrimination which they are subjected to. With the exception of the odd case here or there, the scenario has not changed much, which leads us once again to concur with Hirata and Kergoat (2007, p. 607-608) when they say: “We need to reflect not only on the reason for this change, but more importantly on how to change it”. This is the main challenge that gender affirmative actions in the field of journalism face. ■

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# Media resistance and digital disconnection in Western literature

## *Resistência aos media e desconexão digital na literatura ocidental*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the debate around digital disconnection by discussing resistance, a related and more established concept in media studies. A meta-analysis on the specialized literature highlighted two main trends: a media-centered perspective and a context-centered perspective. Our literature review suggests that these two main approaches are not linear and sequential, but rather cyclical and recursive. That is, they can be understood as waves of constraints. In its conclusion, the paper suggests that disconnection studies would benefit from moving away from an individualistic agency perspective in favor of a more context sensitive approach.

**Keywords:** Resistance, disconnection, connectivity, agency, context

### RESUMO

Este artigo visa contribuir para o debate sobre a desconexão digital por meio do conceito de resistência, um construto relacionado e mais estabelecido nos estudos dos media e da comunicação. Para tal, realizámos uma meta-análise aos artigos científicos que abordam ambos os conceitos e destacamos duas tendências principais: uma perspetiva centrada nos media e uma outra centrada no contexto. A análise da literatura sugere que essas duas tendências principais não são lineares nem sequenciais, mas cíclicas e recursivas. Ou seja, essas tendências podem ser entendidas como relatos de ondas de constrangimentos. Em conclusão, o artigo sugere que os estudos sobre a desconexão se beneficiariam se se afastassem de uma perspetiva assente em uma agência individualista em favor de uma abordagem mais sensível ao contexto.

**Palavras-chave:** Resistência, desconexão, conectividade, agência, contexto

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**M**ODERN SOCIETIES CAN be characterized by an overall increase in the role of digital technologies in several dimensions of life, as the social is increasingly constructed from, and through, technologically mediated communication infrastructures. Media indispensability (Jansson, 2018), concept related to media mobility, connectivity and interactivity, is a key dimension to this process. Perceived as elements that help to build normality in everyday life (Bräuchler & Postill, 2010), the cultural shifts brought by the digital revolution contributed to change social structures, contexts and roles. What once was a given set of rules, demarcated spaces and prescribed roles, became objects of constant negotiation. Media indispensability reinforced the functional dependence on various technological systems and infrastructures, and increased ambiguous feelings among individuals who live in such hyper-connected societies.

The perceived social advantages of digital self-empowerment, freedom and liberation often co-exist with social costs and feelings of anxiety about being always connected. This relates to the fact that due to processes of context collapse (Pagh, 2020), the transitions between activities and spheres of life are shrinking, or even disappearing, as work can continuously be performed while one is commuting from office to home or shifting from professional to family roles—conditions dramatically reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Connectivity, in the digital age, is thus associated with paradoxical experiences of liberation and imprisonment. Such co-existence demands constant negotiation and redefinition of rules and boundaries by the individual with oneself and others—that is, dealing with conflicted dynamics between internalized media practices under the culture of connectivity (van Dijck, 2014; Pagh, 2020).

Against this backdrop, we can observe a movement of people from media saturated contexts towards media disengagement, even if only temporarily. Even though media resistance is not a new social phenomenon and is associated with an established research tradition, in the last decade disconnection studies emerged from media resistance research to tackle key issues within the field of media and communication related to the costs of connectivity in the digital age (e.g., Light & Cassidy, 2014; Syvertsen, 2017).

Within this framework, this article seeks to contribute to the debate around digital disconnection by addressing the related and more established concept of resistance. Analyzing resistance to media over time offers an opportunity to shed light on aspects not conceptually covered by the construct of resistance, showing that disconnection may have in a distinctive or unique fashion, which

may contribute to define a research agenda beyond resistance. We also stress the relatedness of these two concepts.

For this purpose, we conducted an interpretative literature review (Eisenhart, 1998) of previous research on media resistance and disconnection, which identified two main trends: a *media-centered perspective* and another one we called *context-centered perspective* on media resistance. Organizing the literature thus offered us an analytical tool to identify the focal points in the theorized media/technology/individuals relation. Bearing in mind, however, that these trends do not reflect a dichotomizing stance as they are porous and may be considered as part of a spectrum. We concluded that these two approaches are not linear and sequential, but rather cyclical and recursive. Each time a new media is introduced into society, one can identify the revival of some 'old' analytical frame, such as the moral panic thesis, even if elaborated in a more complex manner.

Thus, we argue that one should perceive media resistance as waves of constraints, since media resistance, both as a concept and as a practice, is flexible and adaptable. How resistance is elaborated in a specific period may be understood as a symptom of the social debates underway at a particular moment in time—e.g., The United States Capitol attack in January 2021 was associated with Facebook's toxic business model and the dilemmas it produces for democracy (polarization, hate speech, misinformation). Technology discussed as pathology is a recursive topic, and in this sense, resistance is connected to social, political and cultural narratives of collective decline.

Moreover, the last decade saw a conceptual evolution from moral panic to digital disconnection associated with historical and cultural changes. As such, we also question what underlying assumptions, meanings and needs fueled media and communication researchers to engage in an approach that may at a first glance be difficult to set apart from existing media resistance research. Our analysis suggests, as a concluding argument, that the concept of disconnection was adopted for being perceived as a construct structured upon the core values of Western society, one that centers agency and puts the locus of power on the individual.

After outlining our methodological approach in the next section, we provide a theoretical overview of both media resistance and disconnection. We then present our findings and elaborate on the two main trends identified by the literature review, highlighting some of their dominant threads. The article concludes with some reflections about media resistance and disconnection and their relatedness.



## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This article is a review of previous research published on media resistance and disconnection that seeks to inform a revised agenda for disconnection studies, field that emerged from media resistance research in the last decade. As our main aim is to explore the relations between resistance and disconnection, we focused our searches on the period between 2010-2020, during which communication became digital by default and led to a paradigm shift to digital media and the digitization of traditional media.

We selected the research literature relying on our expertise in the field, but also on a goal-oriented search for articles using specific expressions or keywords, such as “media resistance,” “disconnection,” and “digital detox.” Since this exploratory research sought to present a broadened view of the field, we chose a wide range of journals: from high ranked, Anglo-Saxon contexts to Latin American journals with impact on other cultures, languages, and geographies. Hence, we selected articles in English, Portuguese, and Spanish published in journals based in Europe, North America and Latin America. These included high impact titles that widely publish about digital disconnection—such as *Big Data and Society*, *Convergence*, *Communication Research*, *Digital journalism*, *International Journal of Communication*, *Information Communication and Society*, *Media, Culture & Society*, *New Media & Society*, *Social Media & Society*—and also titles that could give us alternative views and contexts—like *Participations*, **Matrizes**, *Revista México*, and *cuadernos.info*. We adopted this wider-angle approach to contemplate several dimensions; but the group of high-impact journals is the one showing a greater concern with the topic of digital disconnection, reinforcing the Anglo-Saxon perspective.

After collecting data on media resistance and disconnection, we proceeded to an interpretative literature review (Eisenhart, 1998). Rather than conduct a quantitative based and systematic review, we sought to achieve a qualitative insight on how both media resistance and digital disconnection have been conceptualized in the period, languages and geographies under analysis.

In analyzing the literature on media resistance and disconnection we identified two main trends: one which we named *media-centered perspective* and another we called *context-centered perspective*. Organizing the literature thusly offered us an analytical tool to identify pivotal points to media/technology/individuals relations. One, however, must bear in mind that these trends do not reflect a dichotomizing stance and should not be perceived as opposites. Rather, they are porous and may be considered as part of a

spectrum. Although media-centered research does not ignore the wider context in which resistance and disconnection practices and attitudes may occur, it focuses primarily on a specific technology or media content. In turn, the context-centered perspective sees media and technology as nodes in a web of life structures or circumstances that hold an explanatory value to understand both resistance and disconnection as contextualized expressions. When presenting our arguments in the following section, we use examples taken from the articles selected, but we also use other publications when a broader contextualization is needed.

### **MEDIA RESISTANCE AND DISCONNECTION**

The concepts of resistance and avoidance dominated both public debates and media studies discourse during late 20th century. As a concept, media resistance bears many definitions, such as Louise Woodstock's (2014, p. 1986):

“Resistance exists on a complicated continuum of attitudes toward and behaviors of media use, with lack of critical thinking about use and full acceptance of all technologies on one extreme and a completely critical mindset and concomitant disuse of all technologies on the other. Very few people occupy either extreme position.”

This definition conceptualizes media resistance as a continuum in terms of degree, duration, and types of content and technology that are avoided. It also sheds light on the paradox that lies in the gap between cultural meanings around media and actual media experiences. Resistance is a thus practice embodying social imaginaries related to broader values such as morality, health, culture, enlightenment and democracy (Syvertsen, 2017).

In the new millennium, media resistance begun to lose ground to new words and expressions more related to digital media, such as disconnection, digital detox and wellness. ‘Disconnection,’ which dominates currently, means removing or breaking a connection (Light & Cassidy, 2014), whereas ‘digital detox’ expresses various actions and beliefs counteracting media’s ‘toxic’ effects, namely offline phases varying from months to merely hours. Disconnection is also used to describe rules for screen-free steps, lifestyle changes, gradual withdrawal or reduced media diets (Syvertsen, 2017).

In the digital age, everyday routines are profoundly interwoven with mobile media used for a wide variety of activities during free time, working, commuting



or while carrying out other routines. Everyday use of networked media technology has, thus, progressively fostered a socio-cultural climate of questioning the normalization of the digital in one's life (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019, p. 2). This is connected to what Natale & Treré called the *disconnection momentum*: “a particular historical phase where the perception of the saturation with digital technology has reached a climax” (2020, p. 627).

### **Media-centered perspective**

Media-centered research places the explanatory factor of resistance practices in the media itself, whether it be a specific media technology or device, media content, or the relation between media and social change when a new media enters society. Drotner (1999) pioneered the media panic perspective about new media, a trend that evolved to political panic about media trust, technology restraints, and resistance to different media aspects.

Resistance to new technologies pertains to a process of contested social change (Kline, 2003, p. 8), linking, from a social imaginary standpoint, technological progress to technological determinism. Modernity and progress symbolized by “urban technologies” (Kline, 2003, p. 52) such as telephone, radio, automobile and electricity would forever compromise established worldviews, social structures and moral, edifying values based on tradition, repetition, and predictability. As such, resistance is a voluntary act of protection against an imagined change, as Kline's (2003) analysis of US rural farmers' resistance to the telephone and electrification in the first half of the 20th century illustrates.

Later, fear and anxiety of the unknown brought by new technology fueled a resurgence of the moral panic thesis about the unknown virtual world of the internet—perspective that shaped the research agenda in the 1990s and following decade. The internet's framing as a world of deception was fed by real-world fears, such as: online risks related to addiction, social isolation, exposure to strangers, pornography, and other issues related to the lack of Internet governability. In this context, moral panics about media controlling people, especially children and youth—considered as the most vulnerable age group in society—has become a recursive and renewed fear every time a new media emerges (Drotner 1999; Livingstone et al., 2018). Hence, the imposition of technological restraints, such as protecting children from screens and their content, became a relevant topic of research: restraint as a resistance practice explores the anxieties and fears related to how communication technologies—based on mobile and immediate

connection—transform human interaction (Woodstock, 2014, p. 1996). Heavy-use of media technologies may harm one's physical and mental health, and less use is beneficial because it opens space for offline activities, such as playing, reading a print book or having co-present conversations.

### ***Media distrust and the persistent case of news avoidance***

Our interpretative review showed that, in recent years, the moral panic framework has sometimes evolved into political panic about distrust in the news media, and related practices of news avoidance. Woodstock explains news avoidance as a “cocooning strategy” (2014, p. 838) against discomfort produced by negative, depressing or sad news (as other authors in the broader media studies context argue, e.g., Author 3 and other, 2016), or by political disenchantment with politics and journalism, as both are seen as part of a single, untrustworthy system (Palmer & Toff, 2020).

The article analyzed presents this crisis in media credibility as a major explanatory factor of news avoidance, which challenges the civic conceptions of news relevancy for society's democratic well-being. At the country level, countries with polarized and/or unstable political systems show high levels of news avoidance, against low levels of avoidance in more stable and welfare-solid democracies. Regardless of this considerable variation, however, concern over news avoidance has become a global trend “if it means that citizens are not sufficiently equipped to take decisions in elections or referendums” (Newman et al., 2017, p. 40).

Studies highlight that news avoidance is often informed by a general sense of impotence related to a lack of political efficacy (Palmer & Toff, 2020). In this context, people perceive themselves as “having minimal efficacy toward news and politics” (Palmer & Toff, 2020, p.1645). Other article analyzed looked at news resistance and avoidance, showing that people who are unable to deal with an opposed political stance use the news to confirm and reinforce their existing beliefs and attitudes, while blocking out new or challenging information. In this sense, resistance as an ideologically motivated practice leads to both partisan selective exposure and avoidance: the choice of avoiding opposing information by purposefully seeking supportive media only (Stroud & Collier, 2018). As this boost ideological self-identity, it also helps to connect to like-minded individuals (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2014), and consequently widen intolerance to opposing viewpoints. In the US, for instance, during the Trump administration, left-leaning individuals were more likely to avoid news than right-wing people because it had a negative effect on their

mood or increased their sense of impotence, whereas right-wing individuals were more likely to avoid news because they did not trust mainstream news media (Newman et al., 2017).

Several of the articles analyzed also considered individual preferences in order to explain “selectivity” or avoidance as a resistance practice: not wanting to interact with a certain medium, avoiding a particular program type or content. Selective avoidance on social media may also express individual options for political engagement (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Yang et. al., 2017). In an age of growing political polarization in some countries, citizens increasingly and openly dislike their political opponents. Unfriending on social media has become a strategy to avoid coming across certain people or certain kinds of information, serving as a tactic of both political repression and resistance (Bucher, 2020; John & Gal, 2018; Natale & Treré, 2020).

On a more positive note, some studies shed light on a different meaning of news avoidance. Resistance to news can be compatible with civic public engagement (Woodstock 2014, p. 2016). Thus, managing exposure to media and communication technologies is a resistance practice that translates “a greater sense of focus developed by single-tasking” (Woodstock, 2016, p. 405) and may be associated with a counter-narrative of citizenship. Resisting media becomes a coping mechanism to fight against news fatigue and civic disenchantment by creating commitment via different practices of social and political involvement involving “signing petitions, donating money, attending rallies, volunteering in various capacities, starting neighborhood organizations, making lifestyle choices in concert with their politics, and (...) conversing about politics” (Woodstock, 2014, p. 837). Similarly, recently researches have called for the need to refine definitions of news avoidance as to not regard incidental news avoidance as democratically suspect (Palmer & Toff, 2022).

### ***Disconnection and political choices***

Under this media-centered approach we included research that attributes the explanatory factor of resistance practices to the media itself; but as in the digital age no one can escape from a digital record, disconnection can be understood as an actualization of resistance, shifting from the media to connectivity itself. In this context, a thread of studies linking disconnection to political choices emerged from the literature review.

Disconnection studies came to focus on individuals’ strategies to cope with connectivity in the digital age. Problematizing the limits of connection

requires accessing social imaginaries and practices that confer meaning to the act of disconnecting. The ability to disconnect is thus what gives connection meaning. As Light argues (2014, p. 159), “connection cannot exist without disconnection.” Disconnection practices include avoiding digital devices (e.g., smartphones), limiting screen time or abstaining from using specific platforms (e.g., Facebook) or choosing to temporarily opt out, for example in digital detox camps (Bucher, 2020).

Research focusing on social media use, and the multiple continuous choices associated with it (what content to like, share and comment; with whom we aim to create online ties and, conversely, do not want to interact with anymore), illustrates how the contours of connectivity are delimited by what stays outside or by what one disconnects from. In disconnection studies, one way of addressing this kind of limits is by looking at unfriending on Facebook (Light, 2014; Yang et al., 2017; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). In analyzing cancel culture, John and Gal (2018, p. 2982) realized that political unfriending was a way of “regulating the boundaries of the personal public sphere.” This call-out strategy seeks to control who is inside one’s personal public sphere and able to contribute to political discussion, and who is kept apart. As a form of social exclusion, unfriending delineates how, through disconnection, one manages the amount of political disagreement one is willing to or can tolerate.

Alongside such control strategies, as a form of escapism, detox camps can be seen as an example of how disconnection, instead of a threat, became colonized by neoliberal ideology. This explains why Hesselberth (2018) argues that disconnection is not transformative but restorative of the informational capitalism to which the culture of connectivity belongs (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Jorge, 2019).

Personal information in the digital age has become a product of collected, processed, stored, retrieved, bought, and sold data as it is almost impossible to go online, walk in the street, take public transportation, pay with a credit card, or make a phone call without data being captured and thus surveilled (Manokha, 2018). In this vein, recent studies have emphasized what could be called invisible or new types of consequences produced by selective avoidance (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Digital technologies train algorithms to automatically filter out unwanted dissonance and create tightly controlled content ecologies or filter capsules that can lead to further isolating worldviews.

Big data is the foundational component of a new regime that has been integrated into the general operations of contemporary capitalism at every level. Zuboff (2015) named this new economic logic “surveillance capitalism,”



based on monetizing behavioral data by selling access to the real-time flow of daily life to directly influence and modify behavior for profit. Individuals are tied to this system that enables tracking and monitoring user's consumption habits, mobility and private interests. Although people may not immediately grasp how data production works, and the extent or consequences of such data aggregation, personal data modulation occurs in all contexts. Algorithms find any kind of information relevant, be it use or temporarily non-use of any digital device. Indeed, refusing to connect or temporarily opting out is a form of connection: "to an algorithm any form of absence provides important pieces of information" (Bucher, 2020, p. 611). Even those that are technically not connected to the network are not outside of the data-production system.

### ***Disconnection and health choices***

According to the reviewed literature, interrupting technology use, such as a smartphone or social media, for a specific period of time is another way of addressing the costs of connectivity by emphasizing health issues. High stress and anxiety levels lead several people to want to slow down and switch off from the online world.

This particular disconnection practice offers an opportunity to access other social imaginaries in the digital age, translating a wish to deal with time differently. Communication speeding up related to technological innovation is one of the most measurable forms of acceleration—the temporal structure and the time regime of modern capitalist societies (Rosa, 2013)—associated with further mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), which spawned a new temporality in the current high-speed society. In this context, disconnection is linked to the idea of both suspending time pressures and (re)gaining control over time.

Studies also suggest that digital disconnection is a strategy used when one aims to contemplate other forms of connection or reconnection to the physical world without technological mediations of any kind. Free from the pressures of digital technology, one can "experience a form of superior reconnection to a primordial state of nature" (Natale & Tréré, 2020). If over-connectivity to digital technology is criticized for being toxic and intrusive, non-digital media and offline experiences have now acquired new meanings associated with more genuine, authentic forms of engagement and sociality, i.e., increased interaction with others offline (Karlsen & Syvertsen, 2016; Light & Cassidy, 2014; Woodstock, 2014).

Hence, media resistance and disconnection can be seen as a coping mechanism for what one cannot control. Resistance is a practice used to manage anxiety and uncertainty related to a sense of powerlessness produced by media



technology. Jorge (2019) noted that wellbeing is getting increasingly commodified as individuals stress the need and relevance of self-control regarding digital media use. Franks, Chenhall, and Keogh (2018) found that disconnection can be beneficial to health but detrimental to social relations, as they become increasingly bi-dimensional (online and offline at the same time). We thus move on to the second trend identified by the literature review, as the context emerges as a key and central aspect to better understanding the paradoxes within media resistance and, especially, digital disconnection.

### **Context-centered perspective**

This approach discusses the increasing mediatization of life as well as the role of structural and contextual factors in shaping media resistance. In this context, media resistance is tackled in relation to social, cultural, and psychological standpoints, connecting resistance to everyday practices and dynamics. It is also rooted in individual constraints, namely in social forms of subjugation (such as family and socioeconomic pressures) and in active self-decisions (such as the right to be different or to follow a political view on technologies).

Structural and contextual factors shaping media use and resistance are key dimensions to the research included in this second trend. Moreover, resistance comprises a variety of approaches and tools that express a political space of resistance to dominant sources of inequality. Velkova & Kaun (2019, p. 13), for example, have explored the notion of “resistance as repair,” that is, as a strategy for correcting the function of algorithms: “one that does not deny the power of algorithms but operates within their framework, using them for different ends.” In this sense, resistance can signify a political stance against a particular form of social organization structured within the power asymmetries between those who collect and analyze data and those who are subject to such data collection and analysis criteria (van Dijck, 2014; Milan & van der Velden, 2016).

### ***Life cycle and family***

Life cycle, especially negative phases such as unemployment, is a relevant explanatory factor, since economic restraints may create non-voluntary media resistance routines, and temporary disconnection can impair living conditions. In the digital age, where technology ownership and maintenance is pivotal to navigating life, for the most vulnerable in society being able to maintain cell phone access usually comes at the cost of other social (e.g., tensions from



borrowing phones from friends or neighbors) or material resources (e.g., gas money, new shoes for kids). Nonetheless, inability to maintain cell phone access can impact their access to healthcare, job opportunities or social services (e.g., housing, food stamps), in addition to losing social connections (Gonzales et al., 2016).

At the opposite side of the spectrum, one can find resistance strategies to constrain media use (Woodstock, 2016). As a symbol of social capital and an act of distinction (Bourdieu, 1979), resistance can assume that media content dumbs people down. From an affluent position, dosing media use, namely cell phones and social media, is a resistance strategy to limit the presence of technology in one's life (Kaun & Schwarzenegger, 2014; Woodstock, 2016). Space and time without connected screens—digital silence (Beattie & Cassidy, 2020)—emerges as a strategy to increase people's awareness of offline life (Dickinson et al., 2016; Rosenberg, 2019). Family as well as social and psychological variables influence people's relation to media content, such as news consumption habits. Some studies focus on contextual factors (e.g., school curricula), others on uses and gratifications (e.g., surveillance), and others on personality traits (e.g., need for cognition) and orientations related to public affairs (e.g., sense of civic duty) (Valenzuela et al., 2016). Age also shapes news avoidance: younger people are increasingly less interested in public affairs information and in consuming news in general. But as older cohorts (e.g., college students) tend to be the central focus of research, adolescents remain “an understudied demographic in the research on youth and news media” (Valenzuela et al., 2016, p. 3).

### *Civic path*

Despite positive and refreshing findings regarding news avoidance, which can be associated with strong civic interests (Woodstock, 2014; 2016), Palmer & Toff (2020) note that social incentives to be updated has become a less internalized norm. Connection to a “news community” is increasingly less frequent in digital societies. News avoiders often consider that important news will find them, as they are part of a two-step flow of information filtered by personal sources. These people rely on others, often family members, to inform them on what is important to know about (Palmer & Toff, 2020).

Imagination—and, at the same time, user generated content affordability—is opening paths to critique the pervasiveness of communication technologies. Even if often framed as an inevitable consequence of living in a digital world, algorithm pervasiveness gave new meanings to resistance, namely as a reaction

to surveillance (Light, 2014), as a lifestyle choice (Kaun & Treré, 2018)—or more specifically a lifestyle politics (Portwood-Stacer, 2013)—, or as political activism (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019).

Whether framed as a useful temporary experience or a strategy to tame connectivity, Hesselberth (2018), Jorge (2019) and Treré, Natale, Keightley, and Punathambekar (2020) argue that disconnection is much less transformative than restorative of the data capitalism (Zuboff, 2015; Couldry & Mejias, 2019) that the culture of connectivity is part or an expression of. Research highlights that neoliberal ideology found its way into colonizing disconnection by framing it as a form of escapism that, ultimately, serves the needs of neoliberal ethos. If one considers detox camps, for example, whose participants come from the technological elites, one can understand that “temporary ‘disconnective escape’ reveals itself as another way to increase productivity, and is thus, completely functional to the capitalist status quo” (Natale & Treré, 2020, p. 628). The authors continue: “disconnection as a form of critique and sociopolitical change is often deactivated and subsumed by the dynamics of digital capitalism under the innocuous facade of escape in connection to issues of authenticity, mindfulness and nostalgia.”

Similarly, “disconnection-through-engagement” (Natale & Treré, 2020, p. 626) signals a set of practices that activate disconnection as critical engagement with digital technologies and platforms. Hybridity, anonymity, and hacking are the main ways to “decommodify disconnection and recast it as a source of collective critique to digital capitalism” (Natale & Treré, 2020, p. 626). However, the will to disconnect is not sufficient. It is an act beyond one’s control, since data is shaped (both actively and passively) in conjunction with others and requires digital skills. Consequently, disconnection is profoundly paradoxical in the digital age: as a practice or a critique it is a modality within—and not outside of—the connective culture.

Top-down enforced disconnection from the internet can be an act of political repression (Kaun & Treré, 2018) conducted by illiberal or democratic governments, as the Snowden case illustrates (van Dijck, 2014). This approach has also resumed a moral panic perspective related to big scale surveillance cultures embedded in big data systems. Bottom-up disconnection (e.g., signal jamming), in turn, is practiced as an act of hacking or resistance against state and commercial surveillance or, in a broader sense, a critique and resistance against the paradoxes of digital societies. Surveillance modalities express a critique to a particular form of social organization structured upon the power asymmetries between those who collect and analyze data and those who are subject to such data collection and analysis criteria (Milan & van der Velden,



2016; van Dijck, 2014). Special attention is paid to how state and commercial surveillance exploits individuals without their full knowledge, will or interests.

In this context, this discussion benefits from considering what Treré, Natale, Keightley, and Punathambekar (2020, p. 607) identify as the “universalism of disconnection.” Such approach stemmed from a particular Western-centric perspective, related to privileged educated actors and a discourse that revolves around rich media environments and ensuing problems. Consequently, Treré, Natale, Keightley, and Punathambekar (2020, p. 607) argue, the dis/connectivity research agenda has been “disregarding the ways disconnection is performed and lived in other parts of the world and indeed, among vulnerable minorities within wealthy Western nations.”

## FINAL THOUGHTS

This paper brings contributions to the debate about digital disconnection by discussing resistance, a related and more established concept in media studies. We mainly aimed to identify the main trends within which both concepts have been investigated in media and communication studies by conducting a meta-analysis of media and communication research.

By reviewing the literature on the topic, we identified two main trends: a *media-centered approach* and a *context-centered perspective*. As mentioned previously, both these trends do not reflect a dichotomizing or opposing stance, but should be perceived as part of a spectrum. Hence, despite media-centered studies not ignoring the wider context in which resistance practices and attitudes occur, they focus mainly on a specific technology or media content. In turn, the context-centered perspective looks at media and technology as part of a web of life structures or circumstances that hold an explanatory value to understand resistance and disconnection as expressing a given context.

Framed by changes in the media technology landscape, our literature review suggests that the two main trends identified are not linear and sequential; rather, they are cyclical and recursive in time. If media resistance related media to moral panic anxieties and fears in late 19th century, this framing returned to social discourse in the early years of cinema and television throughout the 20th century. In turn, as we discussed in this paper, the rise of social media platforms has refined rather than disrupted the waves of moral panics, spanning from media resistance to digital disconnection contexts, in fear and ultimate reaction to the unknown and excesses. In the new millennium, the digital as pathology is recurrently surfacing in the public discourse (the “Facebook files” and the

“Facebook Papers” are both an example of this), showing that the historical preoccupation around media is recurrent and rapidly spurs waves of fear and suspicion every time an emergent medium enters society. Thus, we suggest that one should perceive media resistance as waves of constraints.

Moreover, we argue that media resistance, both as a concept and a practice, is flexible and adaptable. How resistance is elaborated in a specific period can be a symptom of certain debates underway in society at a given moment in time. As such, resistance is connected to social, political, and cultural narratives of hope and decline.

We also considered the relatedness between resistance and disconnection, which led us to unveil what underlying assumptions, meanings and needs pushed media and communication researchers to develop a thread of studies that at a first glance is difficult to distinguish from media resistance research.

From a pragmatic standpoint, one could say that the concept of disconnection better explains the digital age’s connective pervasiveness by using its theoretical apparatus to address individuals’ experiences and meanings of connectivity. More polemically, to talk about disconnection rather than resistance could be seen as more of a vocabulary update than an actual distinctive perspective from the one consolidated by resistance studies. We contend, however, that the concept of disconnection constructs a different relation between media/technology and individuals, one that centers agency and places the locus of power on the individual. This approach can be seen as expressing the self-regulation culture inherent to Western society (Syvertsen et al., 2014), in which individuals are perceived as having both the burden and the responsibility to cope with the pressures and tensions of connection.

Regardless of the quantity, diversity, and intensity of disconnection practices one may adopt, and the subjective meanings associated to such practices, the literature on disconnection and daily life clearly tends to center agency. Opting out, for whatever reason, is usually framed as an option controlled by the individual, i.e., as a selective and strategic form of individual agency. Disconnection is associated with self-regulatory practices and acts of individual choice, either for political or well-being reasons. Within this framework, and as suggested by the literature review, one perspective that seems to be missing recursively from disconnection studies is the role played by the individual’s social web in their disconnection experiences (explored elsewhere by Authors 1 and 2, 2022).

In sum, we argue that disconnection studies would benefit from moving away from an individualistic agency approach, centered upon individual choice

and control, to include a critical approach that considers how disconnection, even if initiated by an individual, is shaped by collective possibilities. As Lomborg observes, “individual disconnection is futile” (Lomborg, 2020, p. 304). Next to the narrative of disconnection as an act of self-awareness and self-control lies a different perspective that examines the interplay between the individual and the community in the individualized digital age. An even larger story, however, is necessary to mobilize resistance against platforms’ datafication and colonization of our lives as a collective critical endeavor.

Lastly, issues of the privileged in the Global North and Western societies still dominate the disconnection research agenda. Thus, a more context sensitive approach is needed, one that gives grater room to research practices and meanings given to disconnection in vulnerable contexts and groups living in the Northern hemisphere as well as in the Global South, as experiences shape meaning. This was quite evident during data collection: our analysis included only a few articles on disconnection published in non-Anglo-Saxon journals, stressing that such a narrow approach falls short beyond privilege and individualism. ■

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# Listening beyond the Anthropocene: Poetry as an ecological survival

## *Ouvir para além do Antropoceno: Poetry as an ecological survival<sup>a</sup>*

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### ABSTRACT

From the analysis of *Poetry as an ecological survival* by sound artist Nuno da Luz, we reflect upon forms of environmental and ecological involvement. This exhibition proposes a sensorial alternative to the critical discussion around Anthropocene narratives, answering some of the critics of this concept. Sound art plays an important role given its material characteristics and the fact that it complements the Western world-view, which privileges vision. The way the work of Nuno da Luz creates a being-in-the-world in which visitors are penetrated by sound waves proposes a redefinition of our ecological condition, hence creating an “ecological survival.”

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, sound art, ecology, contemporary art, cultural studies.

### RESUMO

A partir de *Poetry as an ecological survival* do artista Nuno da Luz, iremos refletir sobre formas de envolvimento ambiental e ecológica. Esta exposição nos permite propor uma alternativa sensorial à discussão crítica sobre as narrativas do Antropoceno, respondendo às críticas colocadas sobre este conceito. A arte sonora tem um papel fundamental na redefinição da nossa relação com o planeta dadas as características materiais do som e o fato de complementar a mundividência ocidental, que privilegia a visão. O trabalho do artista cria um estar-no-mundo em que o visitante é penetrado pelas ondas sonoras, o que causa a redefinição da sua condição ecológica: criando, assim, uma “sobrevivência ecológica.”

**Palavras-chave:** Antropoceno, arte sonora, ecologia, arte contemporânea, estudos culturais.

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## CHRONICLE OF A DISENCHANTED NATURE

**I**N THE LAST DECADE, the destruction of nature by human societies has become evident. While the emergence of youth ecologist movements is not new<sup>1</sup>, current indications suggest that we are on the brink of an irrevocable turning point. Judging by the media predominance it has assumed, awareness of the planet's state appears to be higher than at any point in recent decades. However, the evidence of the problem, rooted in a prolific production of images depicting overexploitation and climatic disasters, is still insufficient to significantly influence the decision-making circles of human societies. The narrative of the Anthropocene, as a new geological era characterized by the significant impact of human activities on terrestrial ecosystems, seems to have transcended the specific realm of geography to penetrate the collective unconscious. This concept, which will be further discussed ahead in the text, underscores the necessity of implementing global measures to delay or reverse the problem.

If a more ecological policy and economy are necessary in themselves, we consider them to be insufficient. Such a strategy would be based on correcting the consequence, leaving untouched the cause of the current state. Contemporary capitalist societies practice and embrace a “disenchanted nature.” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944/2006, p. 4). The primary cause-consequence of this disenchantment is the opposition between nature-culture, one of the dichotomies that define Western reason<sup>2</sup>. This structuring dualism of Western societies is based on a social production: the extraction of humans from the ecosystems to which they belong and the creation of the cultural sphere encompassing all that is human, hence becoming antipodal to everything considered natural. This ontological transformation defines the rupture that traverses the history of the relationship between Western societies of the Northern Hemisphere—and more recently, a vast majority of Eastern and

<sup>1</sup> 30 years before Greta Thunberg, another teenager, Severn Cullis-Suzuki, played a prominent role in the climatic struggle. Recovered from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOp5ATk\\_rIM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOp5ATk_rIM).

<sup>2</sup> The undergoing process of globalization consists in the global expansion of domination of the Epistemologies of the North (to use a concept that has been widely used, namely by Boaventura de Sousa Santos) over other systems of knowledge around the globe.

Southern Hemisphere societies—and nature. The complexity of natural systems is ordered, classified, and reduced to numerical formulas with the sole purpose of learning “how to use it in order wholly to dominate it [nature] and other men.” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944/2006, p. 4). This action, often carried out by science and technology, consists of the “the reduction and malleability of men are worked for as ‘progress’” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944/1967, p. 44), a progress measured also by the ability to dominate and exploit ‘natural resources.’ This positivist perspective views all species and elements of each ecosystem as something to be used and exploited without limits.

The rationale of domination is nowadays the rationale of capitalism itself. That which “we call ‘nature’ is *internal* to capitalism, not a wholly separate domain” (Castree, 2017, p. 58). Neil Smith (1984, pp. 49-91), drawing from the writings of Marx and Engels, developed the concept of the “production of nature,” which delineates the diverse processes through which humans, as an integral part of nature, produce the means to satisfy their needs through labour. As the economic stages progress—from general production, that is, production directed towards satisfying biological needs, to contemporary capitalist production, a stage in which the need for surplus production becomes naturalized to ensure the survival of the system—the “material substrate is more and more the product of social production, and the dominant axes of differentiation are increasingly societal in origin”<sup>3</sup> (Smith, 1984, p. 50). Within this process, Smith elucidates the parallelism between the escalating alienation of workers and the growing social production of nature as the outcomes of the complexification of production processes within a capitalist system. Consequently, despite this human social system having some dominion over nature, human beings (at least those who do not control the means of production) do not live freely, and a revolt that “would bring with it the historically unique opportunity for human beings to become the willing social subjects [and] not the natural subjects of their own history” is imminent (Smith, 1984, p. 85).

The disenchanting relationship with nature is inextricable from capitalist production practices and the Western model of reason. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018, p. 262) explains how Western reason, which is ‘as necessary as it is partial,’ actively produces the non-existence (disappearance, coercion) of other forms of knowledge and understanding of the world. At the core of Western reason, science is constituted as the sole way to interpret the world - or the one that gathers and connects all other forms - and the measure of the valuation of a particular knowledge corresponds to its use value, exchange value, and capital value.

Any lasting solution that allows overcoming the great impasse in the relationship of human societies with nature will not only involve reconfiguring the

<sup>3</sup>To the point that a ‘second nature’, referring to human societies and institutions, emerges: “Through human agency, a cleavage is created between nature and society, between a first nature and a second nature. The latter comprises exactly those societal institutions which facilitate and regulate the exchange of commodities, both directly and indirectly” (Smith, 1984, p. 65).



current economic system but fundamentally promoting a greater diversity of forms of knowledge. Thus, it may be possible to reconsider the human element as part of nature and perceive it not as an external entity to be studied and exploited but as a complex system of which we are a part and whose harmony also defines our own.

### **ANTHROPOCENE – AN ANTHROPOCENTRIC CONCEPT?**

The Anthropocene calls for action: without a radical change in the habits of modern societies, the survival of the human species is at risk. As a narrative, the most pessimistic version of the Anthropocene – the one in which we fail to alter our habits – is familiar to us. It reminds us of the punishment of Prometheus, who dared to steal fire from the gods, a pessimistic myth that describes the tension between civilization and nature. It suggests ideas of guilt and moralism that have a history of paternalistic oppression. On the other hand, it highlights the manifest human capacity to act critically on its actions, appealing to responsibility and the exercise of freedom. Despite being a useful concept, we cannot avoid discussing some of the limitations of the various narratives of the Anthropocene.

Françoise Vergès (2019) denounces the “Anthropos” that defines the concept, as it ignores the fact that not all humans have the same geological impact and treats humanity as a homogeneous category that does not reflect its historical conception as an entity “internally differentiated and constantly developing via internal contradictions” (Hartley, 2015). Thus, epistemological, racial, class, and gender dynamics appear amalgamated in a single concept that gains part of its relevance through an operation of culpability assignment. By ignoring other forms of exploitation and domination, the concept proves unable to recognize that the movement that generates the overexploitation of natural ecosystems is historically the same as that which defines the power relations and domination of capitalist societies.

This mythical figure of *Anthropos* lies at the core of the concept under analysis and, despite conveying a general sense of dissidence, it remains anthropocentric and ultimately feeble in countering its own essence – the myth metamorphoses into a catastrophic prophecy. The anthropocentrism of this concept derives from a certain fascination, as Simon (2020, p. 186) notes, “in the acknowledgement of the unprecedented powers of human beings,” akin to a “human supremacy complex” (Crist, 2013, p. 133) that “place[s] humans on a pedestal as the only species in the history of the planet” capable of reshaping the balance of the biosphere (Whitehouse, 2015, p. 54). Donna Haraway (2016) contends that this concept exemplifies human exceptionalism, disregarding all



other species that also shape the planet – particularly those she deems as the “most significant planetary transformers”: bacteria. Hence, any satisfactory model must not overlook the intricate relationships between “organic species and abiotic actors.” The narrative of the Anthropocene fails to encapsulate the complexity of planetary – and social – systems, let alone construct a narrative that aids us in envisioning an alternative future, given its inherent pessimism.

Crist (2013, p. 130) argues that despite the lack of such intention in many who employ it, even “compounding uses of the term are indirectly strengthening that discourse by boosting its legitimacy.” When referring to the discourse of the Anthropocene, Crist primarily refers to the naturalization of the “managerial mindset and active stewardship of Earth’s natural systems,,” alongside the concepts of natural “resources,” “natural capital,” and “ecological services,” all in conjunction with the “human enterprise” (2013, p. 137). The “human enterprise” already considers the subordination of the natural – that which is external to it – to the status of a resource and capital, available for utilization. In this context, even the most serious ecological concerns are secondary to preserving the foundations of the economic model as it stands. Without “rejecting history’s trajectory of planetary conquest” (Crist, 2013, p. 136), they are powerless to “create (or even imagine) another way of life” (Crist, 2013, p. 138).

On the other hand, Bruno Latour (2014), from an anthropological perspective, contends that any narrative of the Anthropocene, no matter how limited to recounting a fact, also serves to denounce a grave situation, thereby appealing to the responsibility of human communities. Latour goes further, considering that it is precisely the anthropocentrism of the term that makes “Anthropos” an active entity – contrary to the passive role it assumed in earth sciences – thereby acquiring, as a species, an intrinsic moral and political dimension. Following this line of reasoning, we can pragmatically assume that all inconsistencies of the concept become immediately transparent. In this sense, Latour (2014) argues that “as soon as you give that pride of place to human agent, the exact nature of this assemblage” – disregarding epistemological, racial, class, geographical, and gender factors – “is immediately thrown into doubt.”

In addition to its dissemination and operability in inter/transdisciplinary confrontation and dialogue,<sup>4</sup> the Anthropocene proves to be useful as a concept due to its

ambiguities, which emphasise the anxieties and possibilities that might be imagined in human-driven global systems, and in its power to signal both the interconnectedness of human and non-human lives and the potential for their destruction and silencing. (Whitehouse, 2015, p. 54)

<sup>4</sup>We should be careful with the apology to interdisciplinarity made here. The debate around the Anthropocene was launched by geographers – even if, as Latour ironically recalls, sponsored by the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, in a rare inversion of productive hierarchies – and it was (relatively) early adopted in scientific communities. It is important to remember that “[g]eoscientists thus side-bar questions of social power, social disagreement, and social conflict to focus only on what is considered ‘achievable’ in light of perceived opportunities and constraints in society.” (Castree, 2015, p. 61) That happens because “the aspirations to interdisciplinarity only favour collaborations between geoscientists and other scholars who share the ‘scientific’ norms of objectivity and rationality” (Castree, 2015, p. 60) of Western societies. In this way, they ignore how science – and by science we mean the scientific system – is “sustaining the current unjust and ecologically mindless political economy.” (Castree, 2015, p. 60).



Although we conceive of the Anthropocene as a phenomenon that brings about a rupture and instigates an “unprecedented change that rewrites disciplinary codes as we know them and demands new arrangements of knowledge we are yet to establish, (...) we still think about our radically new predicament in terms of our more familiar arrangements of knowledge,” namely, cause-and-effect narratives (Simon, 2020, p. 194). To adequately address the demands of this concept – along with its limitations – it becomes imperative to incite an epistemological rupture that challenges the Western model of reason, which inherently perpetuates a rationale of domination. As briefly demonstrated earlier, the relation between domination of nature and subjugation of fellow humans is inherently linked to a dominant, Western, or Eurocentric epistemology, where knowledge and power are equated. Knowledge is treated as a means of producing violence, while violence becomes a means of producing knowledge. The dilemma of the Anthropocene calls for novel representations and ecologies of knowledge, emancipated from the ideological structures to which it is subject. We claim that, to this end, the centrality of narrative must be repositioned, as it tends to favor cause-and-effect relationships, and instead, complemented by other forms of knowledge, such as the embodiment of knowledge and sensations.

### A PHILOSOPHY OF EXPERIENCE AND SENSATION

Senses are our first contact with the world. Despite being based on physical and chemical processes, the body is perfectly articulated with consciousness, encompassing both mental and spiritual aspects. If the “world is [our] representation” (Schopenhauer, 1819/1991, p. 39), it is not merely composed of objective perceptions of the world, but above all, of subjective reading and interpretation of stimuli that reach us from the exterior. Our senses always possess an “ideological as well as cultural function” that exists even before we employ them, and thus, the “judgment and understanding achieved are inadvertently directed by that ideological functioning of the sense employed” (Voegelin, 2010, p. xi). To overcome the ideological and aesthetic predeterminations of the senses (Voegelin, 2010, p. 3), it is necessary to develop not a philosophy that explains the experience, but rather “a philosophy that experiences”<sup>5</sup> (Voegelin, 2010, p. xiv). For this purpose, the task is to “suspend” conceptual notions such as artistic genre and historical context, and “achieve a hearing that is the material heard, [in the moment], contingently and individually” (Voegelin, 2010, p. 3).

Western reason<sup>6</sup> prioritizes vision over the other senses. The visual and the conceptual are analogous, while “the sonorous (...) outweighs form” (Nancy, 2002/2007, p. 2), making its explanation through discourse more challenging.

<sup>5</sup>Salomé Voegelin is referring here to a philosophy of sound art – “the aim is not a philosophy of sound art that explains experience but a philosophy that experiences” – , but we believe it can also be applied to other senses, including vision.

<sup>6</sup>Western reason, as descended from the Enlightenment, is the dominating epistemological form in the great majority of contemporary societies and therefore it is the descendent of a history of production of knowledge that transmitted itself mainly through texts and images, perhaps also written music. In that sense, it is natural that semiotic and ideologic structures have developed more at the level of vision and writing, and less in senses that are more difficult to be recorded and transmitted.

The ideas developed in the conceptual sphere follow a “discursive logic (...) raised up on the basis of actual domination” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944/2006, p. 14). The position of vision is inherently distant from its object, receiving it “in its monumentality” (Voegelin, 2010, p. xi). It happens, therefore, in a “meta-position, away from the seen, however close,” which implies a “detachment and objectivity that presents itself as truth,” thus invoking the necessity of belief: “seeing is believing” (Voegelin, 2010, p. xii). This is also the stance of the scientific method that promotes a distance between the subject and the object, in pursuit of an objective scientific truth. “The ideology of a pragmatic visuality is the desire for the whole” (Voegelin, 2010, p. 4), the desire to comprehend the real through this objective distance in a manifest manner – one that can be visualized.

Against the clarity of vision, sound “is always ephemeral and doubtful” (Voegelin, 2010, p. 11). While vision is based on the reading of light rays reflected permanently by bodies, listening takes place simultaneously with the sonic event (Nancy, 2002/2007, p. 14). “The visual persists until its disappearance; the sonorous appears and fades away until its permanence” (Nancy, 2002/2007, p. 2). The ear creates a “resonant” experience, moving inward, whereas the eye, outward, creates an “evident” one (Nancy, 2002/2007, p. 3). Thus, sound also engages the subject in a distinct manner. “To listen is to enter that spatiality by which, at the same time, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as around me, and from me as well as toward me” (Nancy, 2002/2007, p. 14), already revealing the properties of sound waves’ space-time dimensions (Nancy, 2002/2007, p. 13). This way the real “can be experienced through the listening body as sound incorporates and mediates a connection between space and narrative” (Taylor & Fernström, 2007, p. 4). The sonic involvement places the subject at the center but emerges from a universe from which sound waves originate, pervading them – and bodies “are not constructed to interrupt at their leisure the sonorous arrival” (Nancy, 2002/2007, p. 14). The sonic space is a space of belonging, and “the subject of listening is always still yet to come, spaced, traversed, and called by itself, *sounded* by itself” (Nancy, 2002/2007, p. 21)

Listening demands a principle of “sharing time and space with the object or event under consideration” (Voegelin, 2010, p. xii). During the act of listening, the subject is simultaneous with what is being heard, devoid of a meta-position or distance, engaging in a “continual production that involves the listener as intersubjectively constituted in perception, while producing the very thing he perceives, and both, the subject and the work, thus generated concomitantly, are as transitory as each other.” (Voegelin, 2010, p. xii). The sonorous involvement challenges “the prevailing bias or dependence upon a predominantly ocular-centric focus of reading an environment through visual metaphors” (Taylor &

# A

Fernström, 2007, p. 4). However, according to Voegelin (2010, p. xiii), a “sonic sensitivity would illuminate the unseen aspects of visuality, augmenting rather than opposing a visual philosophy.” Challenging “notions of objectivity and subjectivity,” listening does not distinguish the object or event from the rest of the sonic background, as audition is a process of discovery: “in listening I am in sound” (Voegelin, 2010, p. 5).

For these reasons, sound art constitutes an ecologically-oriented practice – that is, one that respects and integrates with the surrounding environment. Therefore, sound art provides a means to engage with reality that is largely detached from everyday experiences. Such an experience inherently challenges ocular-centrism and, above all, allows for a sensitive connection with the world, free from the inclination to interpret or engage in conceptual or narrative readings that typically accompany sonic events and their surroundings. This immersive experience engulfs and transforms us, rooted in the notion of “being-in-the-world” (Whitehouse, 2015, p. 62), complementing and expanding other language-based and culturally-infused experiences.

### POETRY AS AN ECHOLOGICAL SURVIVAL BY NUNO DA LUZ

*Poetry as an ecological survival* by Nuno da Luz<sup>7</sup> engenders a form of being-in-the-world that addresses a many of these challenges. Developed within the context of an artistic residency at the School of Arts, at Universidade Católica Portuguesa, in Porto, with the support of the *inresidenceporto*<sup>8</sup> program, the research for this project was conducted between September and December 2018.

#### Figure 1

*View of the exhibition ‘Poetry as an Ecological Survival’* © Carlos Lobo



Note. Photography by Carlos Lobo.

<sup>7</sup>Nuno da Luz is an artist who works with sonic events, print media and installations. He lives and works in Lisbon and has presented his work in spaces such as Kunstraum Botschaft, (Berlin, 2017), Syntax (Lisbon, 2016), enblanco projektraum (Berlin, 2013) and Galeria Solar (Vila do Conde, 2013). He has participated in the artistic residencies Künstlerhaus Bethanien (2017), Cité internationale des arts (2015), Residency Unlimited (2014), and Sound Art Braunschweig Projects (2013).

<sup>8</sup>The program is organized by Porto Municipality and aims at “connecting national and international artists to opportunities of developing residency projects in the city in multiple artistic disciplines.” Recovered from <http://inresidenceporto.pt/PT/>.

The project consisted of a context-specific research focused on the surroundings of the School of Arts – Foz, the mouth of Douro river. The artist’s main objective was to “reassess certain acoustic phenomena, such as reverberation and resonance, as environmental and social processes”<sup>9,10</sup>, employing a speculative approach.

In this regard, encompassing the “environment” of the School of Arts, the mouth of Douro river, and the Atlantic Ocean, the proposition identifies representative elements based on “observation and data collection.” This entails acquiring maritime and sub-aquatic data, such as “tides, waves, temperature, and others, gathered near the Foz and in the coastal area of Gaia, Porto, and Matosinhos” - collected by the Portuguese Navy’s Hydrographic Institute (IH); sound and image captures.

The resulting exhibition<sup>11</sup> manifested as an immersive installation of sound and light, featuring the following components: modulation of incandescent lamps through simulated tidal height data, presented in real-time scale; two wind gongs vibrating in accordance with recorded maritime agitation data – one corresponding to the coastal buoy, and the other to the oceanic buoy of Leixões, throughout a year; recordings of waves breaking at the Douro bar, during the peak of both high and low tides: beach-sea playback through frontal speakers, and low tide through rear speakers; 16 mm film transferred to digital format.

The exhibition design reinforces the interconnectedness between the concepts of home, environment, and sound evoked by the notion of “echo”, functioning as a cohesive system through the integration of sound and light installations. Nuno da Luz’s work comprises few visual elements, which, rather than urging interpretation and the recognition of specific figures, envelop us in the rhythm of sound – the light modulated by wave data and the atmospheric images captured on 16 mm film by the artist Ana Vaz. As expressed by the artist, the focus lies in “listening to what is happening in the air” (Escola das Artes – UCP, 2019a) and engaging with the material dimension of the very air itself. “For those who can listen, there is this idea of sound production and reception,” even in the absence of “direct visual referents” for the cause-effect relationship of “what causes what” (Escola das Artes – UCP, 2019a).

By working with data from the IH, Nuno da Luz pursued two paradoxical processes: the “spatio-temporal visualization” of sound and its “abstraction.” The artist acknowledges that ocean waves already “presuppose or appear as sound waves in profile” (Escola das Artes – UCP, 2019a).

<sup>9</sup>Nuno da Luz’s residency proposal.

<sup>10</sup>All quotations translated in this article, were translated by the authors.

<sup>11</sup>The exhibition opened on the 7th of March 2019 and it was preceded by a masterclass with the artist and the commander Pires Barroqueiro from IH. It was on until the 5th of April 2019. Ficou patente até 5 de abril de 2019. More images and information available here: <https://artes.porto.ucp.pt/pt-pt/art-center/exposicoes/poetry-ecological-survival>.

**Figure 2**

*View of the Poetry as an ecological survival exhibition* © Carlos Lobo



*Note.* Photography by Carlos Lobo.

In Porto, the artist had the “opportunity to become acquainted with a new environment, considering the School’s surroundings as a field of work” (Escola das Artes - UCP, 2019a). The exhibition’s title (“Poetry as an Echological Survival”) derives from a quotation that Álvaro Lapa mentioned, possibly mistakenly, in the text “Nota solta sobre o possível ‘valor’ das obras de arte, para o futuro” in the book *Raso como o Chão* (1977). This quotation, in turn, originates from Gary Snyder’s essay “Notes on Poetry as an Ecological Survival Technique.” In this citation, Lapa added an “h” to “ecological,” transforming “eco-” (from the Greek “oikos” - house) into “eco-” (“ēchos” - sound). In Snyder’s essay, he suggests that poetry and the arts retain much of the thinking and culture of primitive societies, possessing a “knowledge of connection and responsibility” which amounts to a spiritual ascesis for the whole community” (Snyder, 1969, p. 157). For Snyder, this knowledge can serve as a form of salvation. Thus, Snyder aligns himself with the ideas of Adorno and Horkheimer, for whom art represents the last stronghold of a way of being-in-theworld that, in primitive societies, characterized ritual and magical practices, but which has been devalued and limited in contemporary societies by scientific discourse.



The artist formalizes the hypotheses raised by Snyder's text and explores the confusion introduced by Lapa with the "h", between "eco" (oikos), that is, home or environment, and "echo" (êchos), meaning sound. Nuno da Luz proposes the development of an "attention to certain echoes of space, and to the ecology of that space." This entails recognizing the diversity of elements coexisting within a given ecosystem, "within a liminal space of tension between what is possible as geological and environmental force, and what is anthropogenic force" (School of Arts - UCP, 2019a). Returning to Snyder and his assertion that "the universe is not a dead thing but a continual creation" (Snyder, 1967, p. 162), Nuno da Luz's work with its echoes reintroduces a primal connection to the environment. It reintroduces into our epistemological subconscious cyclic rhythms of creation, countering the era of grand linear narratives that marked the 20th century and left the post-Fukuyama trauma of the 21st century.

Nuno da Luz's proposal has been regarded with curiosity by the IH: "what new horizons can this bring to the work of the Institute as the national cartographic service" (Escola das Artes – UCP, 2019b). Commander Pires Barroqueiro of the IH finds the novelty of this perspective lies in the potential to "immerse into a much broader, boundless, and subtle environment" when compared to IH's products, which are primarily driven by a more "utilitarian" motivation focused on "navigation safety and marine use" (Escola das Artes – UCP, 2019b). The commander emphasizes that while the buoy readings are objective, the observation and interpretation of data provided by scientists remain a "subjective" process, as it necessitates human intervention. He remarks, "It is very intriguing to witness how a conversation can take place between these two domains of knowledge," bridging the scientific and artistic perspectives, both inherently subjective in nature (Escola das Artes – UCP, 2019b). Although one could question the accuracy of these statements, we refrain from doing so, as they serve here merely as a means to invoke artistic creation as a form of writing the possible. The scientists at IH became interested in the project because it generates an alternative representation, with different motivations when compared with scientific depictions.

Despite its capacity to comprehend, dissect, and, in some instances, even control nature, science does not aid us in understanding the chaotic array of forces that constitute it, nor does it mediate our connection with it. In a society where the monopoly over knowledge production lies within the realm of science, the connection between humans and nature becomes disenchanting – as the enchantment is contingent upon forms of knowledge that science cannot generate. This remains true despite the efforts of scientific systems to broaden their horizons, notably through the inclusion of artistic research and the humanities.

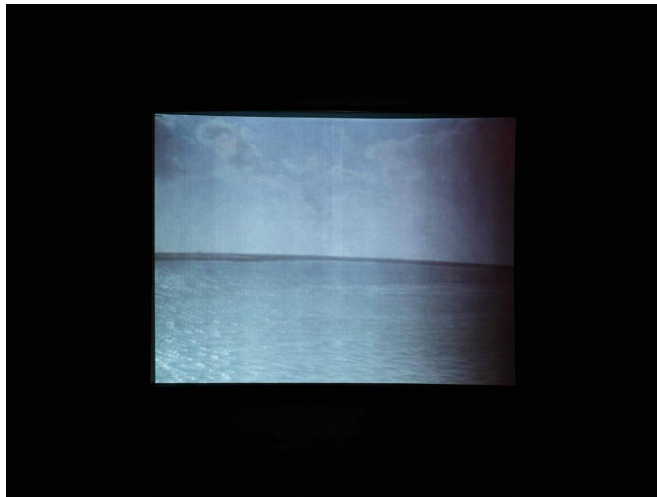


## AN ECHOLOGICAL RUPTURE

Poetry must sing or speak from authentic experience. Of all the streams of civilized tradition with roots in the Paleolithic, poetry is one of the few that can realistically claim an unchanged function and a relevance which will outlast most of the activities that surround us today. Poets, as few others, must live close to the world that primitive men are in: the world, in its nakedness, which is fundamental for all of us – birth, love, death: the sheer fact of being alive. (Snyder, 1969, p. 152)

**Figure 3**

*View of the exhibition Poetry as an ecological survival* © Carlos Lobo



*Note.* Photography by Carlos Lobo.

Nuno da Luz proposes an experience of sound transformed into poetry, an immersive encounter that places us in a state of being-in-the-world, establishing an enchanting connection that skillfully articulates the fundamental paradox of human nature. On one hand, we are an integral part of the surrounding nature, and on the other hand, we coexist with our distinct social constructs, our very own ‘second nature.’<sup>12</sup> The deeply immersive relationship that the exhibition fosters ensures the preservation of a highly specific ecosystem over time. Thus, it becomes an experience of ‘ecological survival,’ embodying a significant mission that sound art practices can undertake in fostering a more ecological society.

In this sense, it emerges as a highly relevant practice, quite distinct, for instance, from the pioneering works of Bernie Krause - which are also fundamental for ecological practice - that “illustrate” the impact of human intervention on an

<sup>12</sup>See footnote number 6.

ecosystem by studying soundscapes and revealing the transformations undergone by the sounds of a given environment, particularly through the disruption of the harmony that characterizes natural settings (Whitehouse, 2015, p. 56). Sound possesses the inherent advantage of unveiling imperceptible alterations, ones that elude our senses, particularly our vision. Nevertheless, Nuno da Luz's approach is distinctive, for it delves into the material properties of sound and its reverberative capacities, surpassing our utilitarian and positivist biases of understanding. In "Poetry as an Ecological Survival," there exists nothing to be explicitly comprehended; rather, the sound permeates us while variations of light synchronize us with the ecosystemic rhythm of Foz do Douro. It not only imparts new knowledge but also represents a novel mode of understanding, or rather, an ancient form of knowledge that had been lost or, at the very least, alienated and confined to specific moments of enjoyment, fetishized as an experience - particularly within the context of the natural tourism economy that counterfeits this connection to the natural world.

In the Anthropocene, an epistemological rupture towards a more ecological direction is necessary – one that defines a new understanding of the economy as the management of our home, our planet. It is not enough to implement measures that aim to make the current economic system sustainable, as it is fundamentally rooted in a rationale of domination that fosters a disenchanting relationship with nature. What is required is a transformation in how we relate to the environment. Sound art possesses a unique, albeit not exclusive, potential to induce an epistemological rupture by elevating forms of knowledge that have been hitherto overlooked and reestablishing a connection with the planet. By invoking non-semiotic and non-interpretive forms of knowledge inherent in matter, art can once again mediate our relationship with the natural world. Despite being an activity exclusively developed for humans, art opens up the possibility of a change in perspective, a repositioning. Works such as those by Nuno da Luz prompt us to reflect not only critically but also corporeally on the central position we occupy and the unilateral impact we have on ecosystems. By making us feel part of nature once again, art may impel us to think beyond the Anthropocene: transforming our relationships with nature and enabling the creation of a new concept that does not mirror the anthropocentrism of our current condition, but instead expresses a becoming-ecological enveloping. ■

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# Eduardo Kac's "Inimagens" and experimental photography in Brazil

## *As "Inimagens" de Eduardo Kac e a fotografia experimental no Brasil*

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### ABSTRACT

This study seeks to contribute to the history of Brazilian experimental photography by reflecting on the photographic series "Inimagens" (1983), by Eduardo Kac. To this end, we will briefly contextualize how this work fits into Kac's artistic trajectory and the history of Brazilian experimental photography. Then, we will discuss in more detail the images that make up the series, reflecting on the experimental gesture from the notions operationalized by Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault, and Georges Didi-Huberman.

**Keywords:** Experimental photography, Brazilian photography, transgression, Eduardo Kac.

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### RESUMO

O artigo busca contribuir para a história da fotografia experimental brasileira através de uma reflexão acerca da série fotográfica "Inimagens" (1983), de Eduardo Kac. Para tal, faremos uma breve contextualização de como esse trabalho se insere na trajetória artística de Kac e, também, na história da fotografia experimental brasileira. Em um segundo momento, discutiremos mais detidamente as imagens que compõem a série, fazendo uma reflexão sobre o gesto experimental na arte fotográfica a partir das noções de transgressão e informe, operacionalizadas por Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault e Georges Didi-Huberman.

**Palavras-chave:** Fotografia experimental, fotografia brasileira, transgressão, Eduardo Kac.

# A

## Eduardo Kac's "Inimagens" and experimental photography in Brazil

### THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ART OF EDUARDO KAC

**E**DUARDO KAC, RENOWNED worldwide for his innovative work in art and biotechnology, emerged onto the Brazilian art scene in the early 1980s as part of a generation characterized by experimentalism and global recognition. Typically, discussions about this phase of Kac's career focus on comprehensive descriptions of his performative and poetic practices, overlooking his contributions to the history of Brazilian experimental photography. However, a deeper study into his output from this period reveals a diverse array of experiments across various mediums, including fanzines, graffiti, billboards, and urban interventions. Additionally, there is a lesser-known photographic series titled "Inimagens" (1983), created using Polaroid, which we aim to explore in this article.

To provide context for this proposition, it is important to clarify that this article is the outcome of the initial exploration of Brazilian artist Eduardo Kac's Polaroid photographic work within the research project titled "Chronology of Photography in Brazil: 1979-2000." This project is conducted by the research group FIP-Fotography, Image and Thought, affiliated with ECO/UFRJ. The group comprises research professors from various institutions across different states in Brazil, collaborating with curators Angela Magalhães and Nadja Peregrino. The primary objective of this project was to illuminate a specific period of Brazilian photography influenced by public policies implemented by FUNARTE and the significant role played by Infoto - the National Photography Institute.

It is important to note that the Polaroid works by artist Eduardo Kac are largely unknown. These artworks have few historical references in catalogs or art books, and there is a lack of analysis within the artist's body of work. The images presented here suffer from low quality reproduction due to the loss of the original pieces. They were discovered through this research at CEDOC - Funarte Documentation Center and were photographed in an amateur manner at the moment of their discovery. This approach preserves the originality of the appearance, including the marks of time on the frames and papers.

Photography in Brazil has historically been influenced by a referentiality that recognized its political potential in capturing instantaneous moments and the realism of mimesis. It also inherits a range of historical references shaped by the photographic experiments of notable figures such as Geraldo de Barros and José Oiticica Filho, as well as the influence of the concretist art movement. These experiments challenged the normative practices of modern photography and pushed the boundaries of the medium. When examining these experimental practices within the context of contemporary Brazilian photography, we encounter a diverse range of strategies, aesthetic approaches, and political perspectives

developed by artists like Cassio Vasconcellos, Gilvan Barreto, Dirceu Maués, Feco Hamburguer, Luiz Baltar, Letícia Ramos, Chris Bierrenbach, and many others.

These images defy the limitations of photography in its conventional essentialist form, pushing the boundaries of recognition and offering an experience of the limits through the image itself. Therefore, it is crucial to revive the visual production of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and recognize its contribution to the development of an experimental photography history in Brazil. This endeavor aims to foster a broader understanding and aesthetic-political contextualization of what experimental photography can represent in contemporary times.

While there has been significant critical attention given to Brazilian photography in the 20th century, there remains a notable emphasis on photography associated with the documentary and journalistic traditions. Within the realms of cultural production and historical research, certain texts have played a central role in recognizing the existence of experimental photography in the country. These include Helouise Costa's "A fotografia moderna no Brasil" (1995), Nadja Peregrino and Angela Magalhães' "A fotografia no Brasil: um olhar das origens ao contemporâneo" (2005), and the 2013 publication "Fotografia na Arte Brasileira Séc. XXI," edited by Isabel Diegues and Eduardo Ortega. However, in terms of theoretical reflection, there are still gaps when it comes to dissident photographic experiences—those less concerned with the representational aspect of the photographic image and more focused on exploring the medium and language in transgressive and experimental ways.

By delving into Eduardo Kac's "Inimagens" series (1983), this article aims not only to address these gaps but also to propose conceptual frameworks that can contribute to the development of a critical and theoretical repertoire for investigating other experimental productions within the field of contemporary Brazilian photography. Our intention, firstly, is to provide context for Eduardo Kac's photographic output in the 1980s by examining the experiences in the visual arts during the 1960s and 1970s. Subsequently, we will delve into a more detailed discussion of selected images from the "Inimagens" series (1983), employing a conceptual toolkit that will aid in the analysis of this work and others associated with the experimental gestures of transgression and formless found in the works of Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault, and Georges Didi-Huberman.

### **EDUARDO KAC AND THE "80'S GENERATION"**

In the realm of visual arts, traditional mediums like easel painting and pedestal sculpture have faced significant criticism since the 1960s and have been



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deemed obsolete or outmoded by various artistic movements. One notable group that spearheaded this shift was the Rio de Janeiro Neo-Concrete group, led by theorists and artists such as Ferreira Gullar, Lygia Clark, and Hélio Oiticica. They advocated for a new artistic relationship where the viewer ceased to be a passive, contemplative subject, and instead became an active participant in the construction of the artwork. A similar concern was shared by pioneers of kinetic art like Waldemar Cordeiro, Abraham Palatnik, and Ivan Serpa, who emphasized the importance of interaction with the observer, as well as elements such as movement, light, geometry, and mathematics. The idea that the observer could play a more active role in the artwork has gained increasing prominence in the Brazilian art scene, driving the development of works that embrace technology as a means of artistic production.

As a member of the "80's Generation," Eduardo Kac sets himself apart from many of his contemporaries who turned back to painting, as his interests lie in the realms of interactivity and technology. The early stages of Kac's artistic journey were marked by performance experiments that showcased his deep emphasis on the processes of constructing and perceiving images. He chose the body as his primary interface for artistic expression, stating, "In my work in the early 80s, the body was the tool I used to question conventions, dogmas, and taboos (...). The body became my writing medium ultimately" (Kac, 1994). This highlights the significant role he assigned to the body as a means to challenge norms and explore unconventional artistic avenues.

Creator of Arte Pornô<sup>1</sup> in Brazil, one of the last organized avant-garde movements in Brazilian art, Eduardo Kac played an active role in various urban interventions and published texts and images in diverse formats, including zines, booklets, and anthologies. During this time, Kac would gather with a group of artists every Friday at Cinelândia, in downtown Rio de Janeiro, where they would engage in improvised performances in front of an audience consisting of a wide range of individuals, including passers-by, merchants, and even those who specifically sought out the performances.

These performances, known as "poems-to-scream" or "oral poems", were characterized by the prominent use of obscene language, linguistic mockery, parodies, verbal inversions, and colloquialisms. Kac strategically employed forbidden words as a means to integrate the body into the realm of poetry in a broader sense. He developed an entire poetic program aimed at subverting the conservative and stigmatizing use of language associated with gender.

Drawing inspiration from notable figures such as Gregório de Matos, Bocage, Marquis de Sade, Antonin Artaud, and even lesser-known authors like Bernardo Guimarães and Emílio de Menezes, whose works often went unpublished,

<sup>1</sup> Besides Kac, key members of the movement were Glauco Mattoso, Teresa Jardim, Braulio Tavares, Leila Miccolis, Hudinilson Jr, Cynthia Dorneles and Cairo Trindade (Kac, 2013).



Kac went beyond mere inspiration, implementing a program that inverted the negative semantic associations commonly attached to the body. His artistic pursuits centered around questioning the suppression of the body and all aspects related to it, including bodily fluids, different body parts, and various forms of sexuality. Through his poetic art, Kac sought to challenge societal norms and provoke contemplation on the multifaceted nature of the human body.

Alongside his performance experiments, Eduardo Kac delved into the exploration of transgressive possibilities within poetic language and image representation, giving rise to a new art form that intertwined body art, design, political resistance, performance, activism, photography, and poetry: the Pornograms (Kac, 2013, p. 41). In a recent discussion with the authors<sup>2</sup>, Kac asserts that this was his most radical artistic venture during that period. A comprehensive retrospective of his Porn Art was initially showcased in the solo exhibition “Pornograms: 1980-1982” at the Laura Marsiaj Gallery in Rio de Janeiro in 2010. The exhibition presented a generous selection of Kac’s works from 1980 to 1982, including the complete series of nine Pornograms. The culmination of this exploration was captured in the bilingual publication titled *Porneia*, which was released in 2022 by Nightboat Books, located in Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>2</sup> Interview given to the authors on August 3, 2021.

The Pornograms, situated at the intersection of performance, design, and photographic imagery, sought to merge the visual image with the human body. Out of the series’ nine works, two were featured in the artist’s book “WRITING” in 1983, a publication that brought together poems and visual pieces exploring the interplay between artwork and the body. This collection can be seen as a significant transitional point in Kac’s artistic journey, as it foreshadowed his later experiments with photography and holography, which would increasingly shape his exploration of new image technologies. Notably, the last three Pornograms in the series were created using Polaroid, a photographic technique that played a decisive role as an artistic intervention strategy, surpassing the temporal and representational limitations of conventional modernist photography rooted in two-dimensional mimetic representations and capturing singular moments.

### “INIMAGENS”

From the very beginning of his artistic journey, Eduardo Kac has displayed a keen interest in the production and perception techniques of images, consistently exploring their transgressive potential. His approach to photography commenced with experimental practices and direct interventions on the image, subverting its mimetic nature and the notion of a singular, instantaneous temporality,

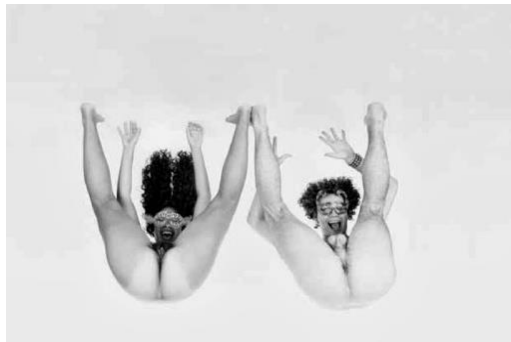
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that defined photography within the Brazilian context of that era. It entailed utilizing the photographic medium to uncover new spatial and temporal dimensions for visual representation. Since his work with the Pornograms, transcending clichés became a fundamental aspect for Kac, as he aimed to push the technical and conceptual boundaries associated with modern photography, which often leaned towards documentary and purist tendencies. Through the act of montage, combining diverse images on a single photogram, and blending photography with other artistic forms such as design, performance, poetry, painting, and sculpture, Kac continuously challenged the limitations imposed upon the photographic medium.

**Figure 1**

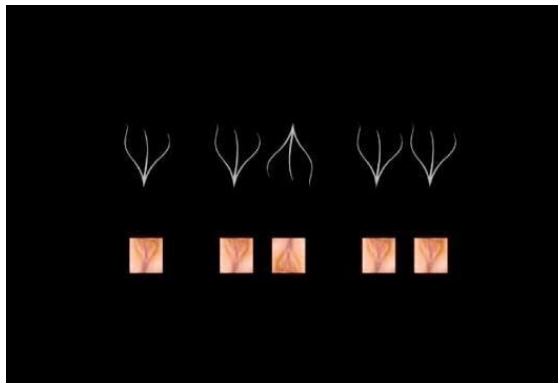
*Pornogram III, Eduardo Kac, 1982*



*Note.* KAC, 2013.

**Figure 2**

*Pornogram VI, Eduardo Kac, 1981*



*Note.* KAC, 2013.

The experimental nature of the Pornograms extends far beyond photography as a visually impure element. It treats photography not merely as a representation of pre-existing objects, often naked bodies, but also as linguistic signs that generate alternative, non-referential meanings within the images. An example of this can be seen in Pornogram II (Fig. 1), where bodies form a mirrored “U” shape, evoking the sound of boeing. Faces are concealed by masks, while the foreground highlights the buttocks and genitals of the couple. A similar transformation of the image into a linguistic sign becomes even more apparent in Pornograms VI (Figure 2). In this piece, the female vulva takes on the form of a “V” with an added “I” or “M”, depending on its position. Through the sequencing and stylization of the photographs, we can discern the words: “Vi, Vim, Vivi” (Kac, 2013, p. 44). The textual quality of the photographic image propels it beyond referentiality, creating a temporal dimension tied to the rhythm of reading and the multitude of meanings that poetry encompasses.

Kac had a profound interest in challenging the two-dimensional nature of images. In 1984, he expressed his experimentation with this concept, saying, “My eyes reject the two-dimensional. If the world is three-dimensional, why can’t art be as well?”<sup>3</sup> It is within this framework that Kac presented his Polaroid photographs at the 1983 Funarte National Fine Arts Salon, held at the Museum of Modern Art/MAM in Rio de Janeiro. He titled his series “Inimages,” perhaps alluding to the inherent paradox in this body of work: are they images or non-images? If they are not images, what exactly are they? Are they unimaginable images? The two-dimensionality of traditional photography is shattered through direct interventions on the photographic paper itself. This can involve adding objects to the photograph or transforming the photograph into an object.

In “Inimages,” I transformed Polaroid photos into three-dimensional objects. In one photo, I placed a miniature revolver amidst my family gathered together. The picture of my girlfriend appeared scorched, while in another, I turned my grandfather into a rattle (Kac, 1984)<sup>4</sup>

During his peak of photographic experimentation, Kac participated in the exhibition “Polaroid - instant images” at the Photography Gallery of Funarte<sup>5</sup> in May 1986, under the coordination of Angela Magalhães and Nadja Peregrino. In the same show were Marcos Bonisson, Pedro Vasques, Rose van Lengen, and Sergio Zalis. This exhibition was part of a significant program developed by INFoto - the National Photography Institute, affiliated with Funarte, aimed at promoting and showcasing various fields of Brazilian photographic production.

<sup>3</sup> Statement given in the article “At the exit of the tunnel, Kac’s ‘Cro-Magno’. The first art door exhibited in Rio”, published in the newspaper O Globo on 02/20/1984.

<sup>4</sup> Idem.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to emphasize that during the 1980s, Eduardo Kac had been participating in several exhibitions at Funarte, especially the National Salons of Plastic Arts and the Regional Salons of Arts. Highlight for the year 1984, when Eduardo Kac participates in the Exhibition “Urban Interventions, in the Gallery of Funarte presenting his graffiti. The same year he participated in the exhibition “How are you doing Generation 80?” at Parque Lage and also in “Generation 80: young artists”, at the MP2 Art Gallery.



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More than just a camera or a brand, the name Polaroid signifies a distinct process of photographic production that left its mark on an entire generation. It enabled new vernacular uses and gained enthusiasts both in the realm of canonical photography, including renowned figures like Ansel Adams and Walker Evans, as well as among artists and experimental photographers like Andy Warhol, William Anastasi, Elen Carey, Lucas Samaras, and many others. The first Polaroid camera was introduced in 1947, promising to eliminate the need for the traditional developing process and offering instant photography. Edwin Land, the process's creator and founder of Polaroid, rejected the term "instant" due to its vagueness and potential confusion. In the history of photography, "instant" referred to the exposure time of the film, which was already fast enough during that time for a photo to be considered an instantaneous capture. The focus, therefore, was on expediting everything that followed the click, rendering subsequent steps like removing the film from the camera, sending it to a lab, developing the negative, and enlarging the image on photographic paper unnecessary. For this reason, Land favored the concept of "one-step photography."

However, the initial version of the Polaroid camera still required several actions from the photographer, making the process far less automatic than initially promised. The photographer had to wait a few minutes before peeling off the paper covering the photo during the development process to prevent the film from being further exposed to light. It wasn't until 1972, with the introduction of the SX-70 camera, that the photograph was actually ejected from the device virtually ready, with no additional steps required by the photographer (Buse, 2016). All Polaroid cameras operated on a similar basic process: after the film was exposed, a sandwich of negative and positive sheets emerged from the camera through a pulley mechanism. These pulleys ruptured a bag of reagent, spreading the substance into a thin layer and initiating the development process. The SX-70 camera employed an opacifying agent, a chemical that protected the still-forming image, allowing it to develop right before the photographer's eyes in what became known as integral film.

What may appear as a time and cost-saving measure actually revealed new possibilities for photographic practice. The fact that photography occurred in front of the subject created a unique intimacy between the photographer and the subject, allowing potentially intimate or even explicit images, such as nudes or erotic poses, to remain within the realm of the photographer's gaze and prevent them from accidentally reaching an unintended audience. This use, which was certainly explored in vernacular photography, also found followers among professional photographers. For instance, Mapplethorpe extensively worked with Polaroid and had a retrospective of his work at the Whitney Museum in 2008 (Bonanos, 2012, p. 73). Other distinguishing aspects of a Polaroid photo compared

to a traditionally produced photograph include its uniqueness, ephemerality, and the thickness of the image created. Unlike traditional photos, Polaroid photos lack a negative from which multiple copies can be made indefinitely. Over time, Polaroid photos tend to degrade in quality due to light exposure. Additionally, these photos have a predetermined frame and format that give Polaroid photography its distinct brand and unmistakable style. The images produced by the SX-70's integral film also exhibited a technical limitation that became an additional aesthetic element—an inherent lack of focus resulting from the dyes having to penetrate a thick layer of white pigments (Bonanos, 2012, p. 101).

Many of these characteristics made Polaroid cameras highly appealing to photographers and artists during a period when experimentalism was pervasive across procedural, conceptual, and performative works. Examples such as William Anastasi's performative self-portrait "Nine Polaroid Photographs of a Mirror" (1967) and David Hockney's renowned mosaic montages demonstrate how the instantaneity of the Polaroid process was explored during this time. However, one of the most intriguing aspects of this process was the ability to intervene during the development of the image itself, utilizing physical-chemical alterations to produce unexpected and profoundly unsettling effects. Lucas Samaras' emblematic self-portraits and certain works by James Welling from the early stages of his career exemplify this approach.

Although Polaroid cameras did not achieve the same level of popularity in Brazil as in other countries, Pedro Vasques, the author of the exhibition catalog "Polaroid - instant images" (1986), stated that they offered "a fertile ground where the wildest imagination can unfold in endless combinations" (Vasques, 1986, p. 1). Vasques was referring to the potentialities offered by the SX-70 camera, which promised radical technological advancements, particularly in the process of self-revealing the image. Eduardo Kac interpreted this promise as yet another opportunity for image transgression, using his intervention in the conventional process of photo development. For Kac, it was about creating intermediate steps within the automatic Polaroid process, allowing for creative and unexpected interventions.

The discussion surrounding Polaroid photography encompasses long-standing dilemmas within the field of visual arts, such as its direct or indirect relationship and its role in mimesis. It has been a topic of tension for those seeking the unique qualities of photography and for those who view it as part of a diverse repertoire of inventive possibilities in dialogue with other art forms. Overall, certain practices and discourses surrounding the potential of Polaroid indicated a sense of freedom within photography—an opportunity for intervention and creation within a process that no longer required specialized laboratories and chemicals.

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Within this context, the articles by Florence Méredieu and Hervé Guibert (1981) are emblematic, as they associate Polaroid photography with erotic freedom from different perspectives, often intertwined with linguistic freedom, "allowing for the emergence of the freest images" (Meredieu cited in Vasques, 1986, p. 7).

To disrupt the automated process of image development, Kac frequently engaged in separating the layers of paper and chemicals that comprise a Polaroid photograph. On other occasions, his interventions took place towards the end of the process, involving the insertion of objects between the film and development layers, resulting in unrecognizable, formless, blurred, and distorted images. One particular intervention involved applying heat to the chemical compound used in Polaroid development. After removing the photo paper from the camera, Kac would ignite a lighter near the chemical base to warm its surface. The heat generated chemical bubbles, causing layers separations, and creating a volumetric dimension within the photograph—a third dimension in an image originally conceived to be two-dimensional. Regarding the exhibition at the Funarte gallery, Pedro Vasques deemed Kac's Polaroids as the most radical among the works of the six participating artists, describing them as "deliberately anti-photographic and boldly anti-aesthetic" (Vasques, 1986, p. 5), a characterization that could also be extended to the "Inimagens" presented at MAM three years prior.

### Figure 3

*Eduardo Kac, Inimagem (matches), Polaroid, 1983*



*Note.* Image given by the artist.

**Figura 4***Eduardo Kac, Inimagem (face), Polaroid, 1983**Note.* Image given by the artist.

The direct interference on the photogram's materiality was the procedure used by Kac in Figure 3. By inserting two matchsticks, one vertically and the other horizontally, crossing and tearing the photographic paper, the artist establishes a sculptural relationship with the photographic image, which will challenge the main canonical definitions of photography in modernity: a static image, two-dimensional, and made with light. This work (figure 3) intrigues us by different aspects, starting by the excess of magenta, a color that occupies almost the entire paper, and that could indicate a manipulation resource, used by experimenters at the time, of turning the film upside down in the camera so that the red layer of the film - there are three color layers in the negative: blue, green and red - would be the first to receive the chemical, thus creating an effect known as redscale. We also observe some scribbles on the upper part of the image that direct the attention of the eye less to the forms captured with the light, and more to the forms added by the artist throughout the process. An unintelligible poetic writing, aimed only at the most sensitive stratum of perceptual experience. It is not possible to recognize the original photographed scene clearly, it was lost amid manipulations and layers of chemical fluids, but it is interesting to note that Kac makes sure that the image is not a complete abstraction, for the matchsticks are there to offer us a relationship with the forms, and challenge the limit of the photographic.



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In Figure 4, in the midst of a scorch, produced by the intervention at the moment of development, we can recognize the features of a male face, that of a friend of the artist. However, this feature resists the unity and contention of a face, as it is fragmented, without the outline of the head, floating on a two-dimensional and shadowy background. Like a worn mirror that loses part of its reflective surface, which reminds us of Raoul Ubaç's "Portrait in a Mirror" (1938), the photograph does not give us a totally recognizable image. The effect of disquiet is precisely in this strange familiarity that the reflection/portrait becomes, as Rosalind Kraus observes in relation to Ubaç's work (Kraus, 2002, p. 191).

### Figure 5

*Eduardo Kac, Inimagem (write), 1983*



*Note.* Image given by the artist.

### Figure 6

*Eduardo Kac, Inimagem (hand), 1983*



*Note.* Image given by the artist.

Eduardo Kac's artistic works during the Generation 80 era were characterized by a radical approach that questioned the boundaries of the body in visual experimentation. Kac viewed the body as an interface to be explored through various practices, encompassing its sounds, movements, forms, functions, and individual or social behaviors (Kac, 2013, p. 32). In Figure 5, we can discern faint traces of what appears to be a small statuette depicting two bodies, possibly human, engaged in a libidinous act. However, the image is obscured by numerous scratches and scribbles on the photographic paper, including the distinct frame of the Polaroid format. Figure 6 reveals the shadow of a hand, almost like a photogram, with minimal visibility and lacking any details. It resembles a form in the process of dissolution, except for the nail positioned in the center of the image, piercing through the materiality of the paper. All of Kac's Polaroid images bear the marks of his manipulation: cuts, scribbles, stains, bubbles, and fingerprints. These direct interferences with the image's materiality partially erase the scene while introducing another layer of observation that challenges our understanding and calls into question what the photographic image truly reveals, as well as the very nature of photography itself.

The wide range of manipulations made possible by the Polaroid medium greatly expanded its artistic possibilities, leading to the suspension of its most significant aspect according to Walter Benjamin: reproducibility. Benjamin (2012) argued that the reproducibility of photography was responsible for the most radical transformations in art and politics. Once freed from its ritualistic existence and detached from a regime of authenticity, art would assume a different social function. However, while the Polaroid restored the characteristic of a singular and irreproducible image to photography, it certainly did not promote a regression to the ritualistic constraints of an aesthetic authority like the dominant regime that existed before its emergence. Firstly, the radical shift in perspective regarding the nature of art resulting from the disruptive impact of photography within the art field no longer allowed for such a step backward. The notion of a unique photograph itself presents a challenge to both art and photography. Secondly, the uniqueness of Polaroid images experiences no longer encourages passive contemplation but rather demands an engaged, disrupted, and active observer who must engage with the image based on its technical, aesthetic, conceptual, and political nuances.

According to researcher Nathalia Brizuela, author of the book "Photography at its Limits" (2019), photography in the digital age establishes an asymmetrical power dynamic in the production and reception of messages. It reproduces and reinforces the notion that it captures a singular moment, a truth of the world, whether from the perspective of the photographer or the viewer on social media

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platforms. Brizuela highlights technology and access to it as the primary factors responsible for this asymmetry, which in turn perpetuates colonialism and exploitation (Brizuela, 2019, p.10). From this standpoint, modern photography is seen as causing a complex crisis that involves both overexposure and the normalization of codes as truths, while simultaneously rendering it invisible to those without access to photography. Pushing photography to its limits, therefore, becomes a way to critique these traditions rooted in a single preconceived truth. In a previous text, "The matter of photography in the Americas," in 2018, Brizuela already argued that artists who embraced the irreproducibility of photography in their works were critiquing the total visibility imposed by the internet era: "The unique work (such as Polaroid) resists the displacement, speed, and informative quality of contemporaneous images" (Brizuela, 2018, p. 9).

Within the interplay of visibility and invisibility offered by images, the question of representation resurfaces in instant photographs as a boundary to be explored. In the Polaroids of artists like Eduardo Kac, for instance, we are presented with fragmented glimpses and hints of forms rather than clear representations of objects. It is necessary, therefore, to observe what these images reveal at the threshold of their own disappearance. Take, for instance, "Atardecer 1103904104" (2015) by Costa Rican artist Priscilla Monge—a Polaroid devoid of any discernible form, displaying only an infinite golden gradient that engages with the materiality of the world itself. This prompts a questioning of the photographic medium itself and serves as a critique of the dematerialization promised by the digital realm (Brizuela, 2018, p. 8). Similarly, Kac's images demand a sensitive observation, a tactile way of looking that traverses the surface, explores the folds, and responds to the sensations evoked by light.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Polaroid was embraced by many artists as a blank canvas to be filled in diverse ways (Hitchcock cited in Indrisek, 2017). Artists like Peter Beard experimented by incorporating writings, drawings, and eventually even blood into their Polaroid images. John Reuter created unusual large-format collages, while Lucas Samaras' "Photo-Transformations" (1972) became emblematic of a distinct type of Polaroid experimentation. These experiments involved errors, defects, various forms of montage during the image-making process, and the insertion and manipulation of objects onto and through the film, resulting in unprecedented visual effects. The transformations achieved in Lucas Samaras' images, for example, can be viewed as a reconfiguration of the very nature of reality and the definition of a photographic image. While the Polaroid initially presented itself as the ideal technology for capturing reality and reinforcing the belief in photographic verisimilitude, Samaras' fantastical, fabricated, and hallucinatory images exposed the conflict of an impossible

photographic truth. Eduardo Kac's images are part of this broader collection of experiments that exalted the monstrous and the psychedelic, pushing beyond the limits of visibility and representation.

## THE PHOTOGRAPHIC FORMLESS AND THE TRANSGRESSION OF THE FORM-PHOTOGRAPHY

In a broad sense, it can be said that nearly all the experimental photography in the 20th century aimed to defy the established norms of image creation. Artists sought to distance themselves aesthetically and politically from the traditional operation of the equipment in order to discover alternative uses.

Vilém Flusser's concept of the "apparatus"<sup>6</sup> and his belief that artists could subvert its intended function through playfulness appears to align with many experimental photography practices (Lenot, 2017). Flusser suggests that it is possible to playfully explore the program beyond the mere functional aspect of the device. It is evident that numerous experimental practices, across different artistic disciplines and not limited to photography, emerge from the spirit of play and the deconstruction of predetermined expectations associated with technical image production. When considering experimental photography as a genre among many others, we can observe a recurring tendency for artists to push the boundaries of their equipment, investigating its imperfections and unforeseen potentials, as exemplified by Kac's Polaroid photographs. This perspective is succinctly summarized by Michel Poivert.

The genre of experimental photography embraces the medium as a space for aesthetic exploration. It functions as a poetic practice that harnesses the full potential of photographic materials and manipulations, pushing the boundaries of the medium itself. As a result, it disrupts the viewer's conventional relationship with photography, introducing unforeseen effects. According to Poivert (2017), the experimental approach is an encounter with limits, an experience that requires a transgressive act.

To truly grasp the experience of limits, one must engage in a gesture of transgression. Foucault suggests that transgression is a relative gesture that emerges in response to a limit, ultimately leading to the direct experience of that very limit. As Foucault (2009) states, transgression continuously shifts and transposes a line that, once crossed, immediately closes again, leaving a trace in our fragile memory. This interplay of transgression and the limits it challenges unveils an inherent uncertainty, through which the limit opens up to the boundless. However, as Foucault (2009) asserts, transgression, in its violent act of surpassing boundaries, simultaneously unleashes itself upon the limit and upon that which it contains. Interwoven in a spiraling relationship, the concepts

<sup>6</sup> For Flusser, "black box devices that simulate human thought, thanks to scientific theories, which, like human thought, exchange symbols contained in their 'memory' in their program" (Flusser, 2002, p. 28). The photographic camera would be the first device of the post-industrial era, although it is commonly thought of as a simple, pre-algorithmic machine.



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of limit and transgression possess a complex existence that defies simplistic oppositions. Within this intricate connection, there exists only the affirmation of the infinite and limitless possibilities that transcend conventional boundaries.

In his insightful analysis of the surrealist journal "Documents", Didi-Huberman (2015) suggests that transgression, as understood by Georges Bataille, primarily involves the transgression of form. By surpassing the boundaries of form, one reaches the limit, and it is from this point that form can establish itself, dissolve, or even reinvent itself. It is crucial to note that Bataille's notion of transgression does not entail a rejection of form, but rather signifies "the opening of a bodily encounter, a critical assault, at the very place where transgression emerges from the collision" (Didi-Huberman, 2015, p. 28).

Thus, Bataille's work encompasses a vast realm of philosophy by challenging and defying the strict requirement that everything must conform to a predetermined form. In his concise yet provocative article on the formless, Bataille associates the formless with the act of declassification, creating a parallelism that emerges precisely from dissimilarity. He exemplifies this concept with phrases such as "the world as spit" or "the universe as a spider."<sup>7</sup>

The formless, therefore, possesses a rebellious nature, a transformative gesture that not only rejects the initial form but actively engages in the "work of forms" (Didi-Huberman, 2015, p. 29), suggesting the potential for the invention of something entirely new. According to Didi-Huberman, "transgression is not a refusal, but rather the embrace of a direct encounter, a critical assault, occurring precisely at the point where what is expected to be transgressed will ultimately converge" (Didi-Huberman, 2015, p. 28).

It is intriguing to observe the prominent position the experimental genre has gained within the realm of contemporary photography<sup>8</sup>. Increasingly, we encounter works that acknowledge the current image landscape as one characterized by passages, gaps, and deviations from hegemonic image norms, as well as a growing interplay between different mediums. In this context, particular emphasis is placed on works where the image is not presented to us in a clear manner but rather appears blurred, distorted, or even partially erased, revealing a complex relationship between the visible and the invisible. It is within this perspective that Eduardo Kac's work emerges as an unparalleled reference in Brazil. His relatively unknown Polaroid production resides within a historical context marked by the transgression of the established photography-form<sup>9</sup>, pushing the boundaries of the medium itself. By subverting forms without entirely severing ties with them, Kac ventures beyond the traditional understanding of photography in modernity while still maintaining a photographic essence. In doing so, he opens up photography to new possibilities and, most importantly, fosters a dialogue with other art forms.

<sup>7</sup> According to Didi-Huberman, in both examples, the conjunction "as" would be the transgressive term, which produces a similarity between the world and the spit, capable of associating the world with the "miserable forms of subversion" (Didi-Huberman 2015, p. 29).

<sup>8</sup> We do not think of "contemporary photography" only by its chronological character, although we recognize in the term a historiographical function, as Poivert points out. The historical object designated by the term "contemporary photography" refers to "a moment when the aesthetic questions raised by photography are central to art" (Poivert, 2010, p. 10). Translation by the authors.

<sup>9</sup> Term coined by Antonio Fatorelli to refer to the hegemonic model of photography: "(...) the history of photography is marked by a hegemonic model characterized by the status of the direct and instantaneous image" (Fatorelli, 2013, p. 10).

**EDUARDO KAC AND EXPERIMENTAL PHOTOGRAPHY IN BRAZIL**

While various forms of photographic experimentation in Brazil can be traced back to the 1920s, including works like “Os trinta Valérios” by Valério Vieira or the photographs from Mario de Andrade’s “Turista Aprendiz” project, the history of experimental photography in Brazil finds its narrative through the photoclub movements, particularly the Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante<sup>10</sup> in São Paulo. Established in 1945, the Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante solidified an experimental approach characterized by geometrical compositions, abstractions, and an intensive exploration of light. Figures such as Thomaz Farkas, José Yalenti, Geraldo de Barros, German Lorca, and José Oitica Filho, among others, shaped what would later be recognized as the Paulista School of photography. This experimental aspect within the photoclub significantly influenced subsequent generations of photographers.

The fervent quest for new visual languages that propelled the artists of the 1980s inherited not only from the tradition of photoclub photography but also from the groundbreaking works of artists like Waltécio Caldas, Ana Bella Geiger, Iole de Freitas, and Antonio Dias, who also employed photographs as their medium (Fatorelli, 2003, p. 156). Since then, it is noteworthy that experimentalism has become an enduring characteristic of Brazilian photography. Among the vast array of contemporary artists who have ventured into photographic experimentation, one particular series stands out: Cassio Vasconcellos’ “Noturnos São Paulo” (1998-2002), captured through Polaroid. According to Nelson Brisac, “the Polaroid image illuminates the city immersed in darkness, bringing it to life with a brilliant glow” (Brissac, 2002). Cassio’s images, taken at night using an SX-70 camera, take on a different palette of colors, textures, and materiality, intensifying the interplay between the visible and the invisible through contrasts with the intangible and transitory nature of the urban environment.

Eduardo Kac’s engagement with Polaroids emerges within this particular context, characterized by a deliberate resistance to the dominant modes of operation observed in various visualization and reading devices. Often, these devices perpetuate manipulations within the realm of photography, aiming to induce shifts in temporality—a theme that unfolds further in Kac’s subsequent works, employing diverse strategies<sup>11</sup>. The exploration of time as a transformative force is a consistent thread throughout Eduardo Kac’s artistic practice. The concept of time, serving as a catalyst for unique experiences and perceptions of images, recurrently manifests in his body of work, spanning his entire career. This focus has propelled him to employ an extensive range of technical and aesthetic approaches.

<sup>10</sup>On April 28, 1930, the Foto Clube Bandeirante was created in São Paulo. Only in 1945 did it change its name and become the Foto Cine Clube Bandeirante (Navarrette, José Antonio. 2022, p. 13).

<sup>11</sup>The work *Retrato Suposto - Rosto Roto*, co-authored with Mario Ramiro in 1988, is a good example, combining fax and live television to create a feedback system based on the continuous exchange and transformation of images. Kac communicated from his studio in Rio de Janeiro in real time with Ramiro, who in turn was in the studios of TV Cultura in São Paulo. While the fax is normally a private and dialogical means of communication that makes possible a two-way street between the sender and the receiver, television is a vehicle that covers a large public in a unilateral way. The union of these two antagonistic and naturalized media enhanced their interactive and creative possibilities (Kac, 2004, p. 130).





## Eduardo Kac's "Inimagens" and experimental photography in Brazil

Through his interventions in the conventional processes of photography, Eduardo Kac expands our understanding of the medium itself. Specifically with his Polaroid works, which researcher Philippe Dubois describes as “the most tactile of photos” (Dubois, 1993, p. 294), Kac subverts the established codes of production and reception, giving rise to new spatial and temporal dimensions within photographic images. Notably, Kac’s Polaroids were exhibited in glass frames that preserved the image’s volume, transforming them into object-photographs that allowed observers to engage with them from different perspectives. It is essential to emphasize the photographic sculpture aspect, or photo-sculpture<sup>12</sup>, within Kac’s work, which expands the boundaries of both sculpture and photography. This expanded understanding grants photography not only a third spatial dimension but also a fourth temporal dimension. For Kac, the focus was less on composing a scene and more on exploring the intricacies of time itself.

Exploring the boundaries of photography allows us to contemplate not only what photography currently represents but also its potential for what it could be. It is an endeavor to reexamine its entrenched modernist concepts, the attempts at theoretical explanations, and even the reduction to a narrow set of singular strategies associated with a static, two-dimensional representation. From this standpoint, it becomes evident that the interplay between images, the emergence of photo-cine-videographic hybrids, and the various ways of inscribing images have always existed, albeit historically categorized under the broad label of “experimental,” as highlighted by Antonio Fatorelli (Fatorelli, 2013, p. 10). Within this experimental realm, a diverse range of works can be found, spanning from pictorialist photography to the photographic productions of the modernist avant-garde, and extending to the latest hybrid configurations that challenge the notion of a single photographic model. These configurations prompt us to reassess and consider new formulations and perspectives on what photography can potentially encompass. ■

<sup>12</sup>The notion of photographic sculpture (or photo-sculpture) was widely addressed by Philippe Dubois to characterize a set of practices that for the author bring together the main challenges of contemporary art, such as the works of Stefan Der Jaeger and David Hockney, among others (DUBOIS, 1993).

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# Mapping the communicative relations in journalistic awards

## *Mapeando as relações comunicativas em premiações jornalísticas*

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### ABSTRACT

This research is based on a theorization that can locate problems related to the crisis of journalism and be applied to awards. Using discourse analysis, the themes of 41 award winners are located on a Relational Map and illustrative case studies are carried out. Results show that the projects focus on current issues that, when located on the Map, provide an insight into the global events from 2020 to 2022, which may be related to misinformation, abuse of power, dehumanization, sensationalism, and negativism. We found experimental, experiential, artistic, visualization, and communication features that can contribute to reconfiguring the news. By indicating abusive communicational relations, our mapping contributes to reflections on journalism and highlights news practices.

**Keywords:** Communicational theories, mapping, communicative relations, Relational Map, awards

### RESUMO

Parte-se de uma teorização que permite localizar problemas relacionados à crise do jornalismo e pode ser aplicada às premiações. Por meio de análise discursiva localiza-se no Mapa relacional os temas dos 41 vencedores de premiações e realizam-se estudos de casos ilustrativos. Nos resultados, salienta-se que os projetos enfocam questões relacionadas à atualidade que, ao serem localizadas no Mapa, proporcionam uma visão de acontecimentos globais de 2020 a 2022 e podem ser relacionadas a desinformação, abuso de poder, desumanização, sensacionalismo, negativismo. Identificam-se características experimentais, experienciais, artísticas, de visualização e comunicação, que podem contribuir para reconfigurar o noticiário. Ao indicar relações comunicacionais abusivas, o mapeamento contribui com reflexões sobre o jornalismo e destaca práticas noticiosas.

**Palavras-chave:** Teorias comunicacionais, mapeamento, relações comunicativas, Mapa relacional, premiações

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# A

WE START FROM a conception based on Latin American cultural matrices and semiotic regimes of interaction in the form of a Relational Map that, by mapping communication, allows problems to be visually located and can be applied to awards, analyzing in what it can contribute to clarifying journalistic awards.

This is in a context where, in addition to the constant changes resulting from the new technological times (Uhry & Caetano, 2021), a disruptive crisis in journalism is evident due to aspects such as: the free availability of information on the web; the arrival of new non-journalist competitors (youtubers, digital influencers and other amateurs) who post information on the Internet more quickly; the arrival of technological platforms that have become intermediaries and broken the dominance of news distribution; the “loosening of the quality” of information due to the lack of verification of “content, relevance and authenticity” and the renunciation of “responsibility for what becomes public”; “deviation from the public function and renunciation of the social role with communities” (Christofoletti, 2019, pp. 90-91), among other issues.

To analyze this problematic, Uhry (2021) applied a Relational Map based on Martín-Barbero (2003; 2010) and Landowski (2014), which identified issues such as consumerism, sensationalism, negativism, and misinformation. The mapping of awards can allow the visualization of journalistic practices that allow us to go beyond the problems and the crisis and, thus, somehow contribute to reflect on the future of journalism, a concern of authors such as Salaverría (2015).

In view of this, the question that arises is: “Can mapping clarify the contribution of journalistic awards?” The hypothesis is that a reconfiguration of the news discourse is underway that can be related to the awards, which is what we seek to understand.

The original configuration of the news has an ancient origin, of which there is the record of a doctoral thesis, dating from 1690, by Peucer (1690/2004), addressing “news reports” (*Relationibus Novellis* in Latin, in the original) in which the following characteristics are evident: 1) Actuality. 2) Quality: accuracy, truthfulness, interest, credibility, clarity, usefulness, lightness. 3) Technique: subject (who?), object (what?), cause (why?), manner (how?), place (where?) and time (when?). 4) Objectivity. 5) Profitability: distribution (print) and advertising. 6) Noticeability (news agency, validation) (Peucer, 2004, pp. 16-26). In short, it is possible to consider the original configuration of journalism. Nowadays, there is a reconfiguration of digital and artificial intelligence.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach is qualitative: through discursive analysis, the themes of the 41 winners of the Sigma Awards, WAN-IFRA, ICFJ Knight and King of Spain Awards are located on the Relational Map and four illustrative case studies are carried out. As a source of evidence, we used web documentation: a bibliographic survey on the problems and crisis of journalism; identification of international awards in which Brazil can participate: Sigma Awards, WAN-IFRA Digital Media Awards Worldwide, ICFJ Knight International Journalism Awards and King of Spain Awards; four case studies as an illustration (Machado & Palacios, 2007), thematic discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2009a), sociosemiotic analysis (Landowski, 2014) and the categories of analysis from the Relational Map itself.

It is proposed to carry out an analysis of the news discourse in which the theme is highlighted, which is the expression of what is most relevant in order to combine macro acts or global events and arrive at the summary of the main theme of the news discourse (adapted from van Dijk, 2009a, p. 141), which is complemented by illustrative case studies (Machado & Palacios, 2007), with the findings being visually located on the Relational Map and linked to the sociosemiotic interaction regimes, seeking to identify a possible relationship between the awards and the practice of journalism.

## RELATIONAL MAP AND THE AWARDS

The starting point is a Relational Map that allows to visually locate problems related to the crisis of journalism and, at the same time, can be applied to awards. The origin is in the Latin American cultural matrices and the semiotic regimes of interaction on which the theoretical proposition of the Relational Map is based.

The starting point is the map of mediations (Martín-Barbero, 2003, pp. 11-21), in which a reflection on the communicational hegemony of the market in society is proposed, situating it in a way that encompasses not only technological aspects, but mainly issues related to culture and politics, in the form of a map with two axes: one horizontal, diachronic, long-term historical, between Cultural Matrices and Industrial Forms; another vertical, synchronic, between Production Logics and Reception Competences (Consumption).

The relations between Cultural Matrices and Production Logics are mediated by different regimes of institutionality, while the relations between Cultural Matrices and Reception Competences (Consumption) are mediated by different forms of sociality. Between Production Logics and Industrial Forms, technicalities mediate and between Industrial Forms and Reception Competences (Consumption), ritualities mediate (Martín-Barbero, 2003, pp. 16-21). This can be graphically represented as follows:

**Figure 1***Map of mediations*

Note. Martín-Barbero, 2010, p. XXV.

Martín-Barbero (2010, pp. XIII-XIX) notes that technological changes have given rise to a new configuration, which has led to a new map of mediations, which he calls “communicative and cultural mutations”, also with axes: one horizontal (migrations - flows); another vertical (temporality - spatiality). The mediations between temporality and flows are given by technicality; flows and spatiality are also mediated by rituality’s; while between migrations and spatiality the mediations are given by cognitiveness; and migrations and temporality are mediated by identity. For Martín-Barbero (2010), temporalities highlight the experience of time, the cult of the present and the confusion of times with the issue of current simultaneity; spatiality refers to spaces related to proximity and belonging, the communicational space woven by digital networks; mobility relates to migrations and virtual navigations and new forms of sensitivity; flows are those of information, images and digital writings that destabilize literate and school culture (Martín-Barbero, 2010, pp. VII-XX).

By the way, Lopes (2014, pp. 72-73) opines that this last writing by Martín-Barbero (2010) is “a remarkable effort to offer clues to elucidate” the relationships between media and mediations, but points out that the previous map of mediations (Martín-Barbero, 2003) is quite rich and comprehensive, to the point that Lopes (2014, p. 71) points out that it makes it possible to “operationalize the analysis of any social phenomenon that relates communication, culture and politics” by

articulating “producers, media, messages, receivers and culture”. These are the bases of Latin American cultural matrices.

Next, we move on to expose the semiotic regimes of interaction that are also at the basis of the proposition. Regarding the possible forms of interaction, Landowski (2014) proposes a theorization in a macro sociosemiotic perspective, which consists of four regimes of interaction and respective logics: I. Accident (risk), based on the logic of randomness, mythical or mathematical probability, related to discontinuity and to “make over”. II. Manipulation (strategy), based on the logic of intentionality, on consensual or decisional motivation, related to non-continuity and to “make want”. III. Programming (regularity), based on the logic of causal or symbolic regularity, related to continuity and to “make happen”. IV. Adjustment (sensitivity), based on the logic of perceptive or reactive sensitivity, related to non-continuity and to “make feel” (Landowski, 2014, p. 80). Here is a summary of the sociosemiotic basis of the Map.

Having synthesized the theorizations of the Latin American and semiotic cultural matrices that underlie the Relational Map, four perspectives of analysis are proposed. The Social perspective is the sociocultural trajectory in which the media developed, focusing on “what” and “why” it communicates; in this perspective, the issue of public space and a path of mass communication are presented. The Social/Mercadological perspective, which highlights the integration and strategic management of communication and the “how”. The Communicators’ perspective, from which the question becomes who mediates, the logics of production and social control. The perspective of the Public, which emphasizes “for whom” (consumers, citizens, proconsumers, and all other stakeholders) and involves issues of reception and appropriation of communication actions.

Thus, considering as a starting point the map of Martín-Barbero (2003; 2010) and the logics and regimes of interactions of Landowski (2014), and an overview of the interactants of communication relations, which indicates the actors, the forms of discursive action and other relations, the conception of communicative relations is proposed in the form of a Relational Map that allows to visually formalize different territories and relations, with two relational axes with counterflows:

First axis: integrating in a mediated way: horizontal, diachronic, long-term historical axis that allows relating the Social/Cultural aspect (what and why?) with the changes suffered towards the predominance of the Social/Mercadological (how?), the one related to citizen social integration, the latter more linked to the perspective of communication managers, which involves integrated communication management and the adaptation of cultural and industrial





formats to market conveniences. In the counterflow of integration mediated, there is also a counter-hegemonic stance that reaffirms citizenship and not market integration, which is the primary function of social integration of communication in society, in the sense of contributing to building identity, forming public opinion, etc.

Second axis: mediate to integrate: vertical, synchronic, which interactively relates the social actors and the Publics at a given moment, analyzes the production logics of the Communicators (who?) and the reception competences of the Publics (to whom?). In the counterflow of mediation to integrate, the communicative relationship can also assume a counter-hegemonic stance of reaffirming citizenship and the social role of communication.

The relational axes refer to mediation systems as integrative models, due to the meeting of the axes “Integration in order to mediate” and “Mediation in order to integrate”, and with four perspectives they make up the Relational Map in such a way. Thus, exactly in the central quadrant of the Map, where the relational axes - which indicate the actions of integrating and mediating - intersect, are located the macro-environmental forces “political-legal, economic, technological and cultural” (Wright et al., 2000, pp. 47-59), concepts of Administration, to which is added the symbolic dimension, which can also permeate the other dimensions. The classical typology of Management bears a certain resemblance - and is complemented by Sociology - to Parsons’ social system in the synthesis of Habermas (2003, pp. 334-442) and Münch (1999, pp. 184-187): political (purposes), economic (resources), social/cultural (values) and personality (symbolic). In addition, Landowski’s (2014) logics and regimes of semiotic interaction are included in the model: regularity (programming), intentionality (manipulation), randomness (accident) and sensitivity (adjustment), composing the dimensions of the Relational Map.

- Legal politician: involves the subsystem of integration (norms) and the achievement of purposes (Habermas, 2003, pp. 334-442) and “political action controlled by the regulating power in an order of authority” concretized in the “achievement of purposes” (Münch, 1999, pp. 184-187). It can be related to the logic of regularity and the regime of programming interaction (Landowski, 2014), which is close to the conception of “institutionality” (Martín-Barbero, 2010, p. XIII)..
- Economic: encompasses the subsystem of adaptation (technological means) and behavior (resources), according to Habermas (2003, pp. 334-442) and “is determined by acts of competition and exchange in a market”, performing “the functions of resource allocation and preferences” under the bias of “utility” (Münch, 1999, pp. 184-182),

and which is possible to relate to the logic of randomness and the risk interaction regime (Landowski, 2014). and is a reinterpretation of the concept of “technicity”, which would be the “sociocultural thickness of new technologies” (Martín-Barbero, 2010, p. XIII).

- Social/Cultural: encompasses the system of maintenance of cultural standards and structures (values) (Habermas, 2003, pp. 334-442) and “arises from discourse, driven by arguments (value commitment) regulated by the order of discourse” and “is the concretization of the function of maintaining standards” (Münch, 1999, p. 187), and it is possible to relate it to the logic of intentionality and the regime of manipulation interaction (Landowski, 2014), and to the conception of “everyday sociality” (Martín-Barbero, 2010, p. XIII).
- Symbolic: involves “a subsystem of personality”, life symbolically structured to achieve purposes, play roles (Habermas, 2003, pp. 334-442), with “a maximum of symbolic complexity” and in which “the meaning scheme is the internalization of the relevant meaning by the personality” (Münch, 1999, pp. 184-187). It is related to the logic of sensibility and to the regime of interaction of adjustment (Landowski, 2014), and there is proximity to the concept of “rituality”, the “symbolic nexus of contemporary culture with broad memories, its mestizo rhythms and rites” (Martín-Barbero, 2010, p. XIII).

In this way, the Relational Map is proposed from the perspectives presented in Figure 2, below, in which communicative relations take place in all directions (and suggest possibilities of feedback and counterflow) and can be visualized in the form of a Map in which the two relational axes (mediate and integrate) with counterflows in the opposite direction (counter-hegemonic) are indicated, connections, interfaces, articulations and confrontations between social actors, sociological categories, macro-environmental forces, disciplines, specialties, ways of enunciating and other possible connections that suggest the circularity of the model, which allows counterflow in two-way to all sides and in all directions.

With this theorization, which is intended to be flexible, we start to examine communication and news under the following perspectives of analysis: the first, the Social/Cultural Perspective, focusing on “what” acts in the social and cultural (strategy or form) and on “why”, objective or effect to be communicated, in which, in its axis towards the second perspective, Social/Mercadological (types and cultural products), it is related to the adequacy of cultural formats to social and commercial conveniences, for the purposes of consumption by the Publics, and the path of communication. The third, the Communicators’ Perspective: “who” is producing the enunciation, discursive competences, social control,

professional ideologies and productive routines, and is related to the fourth, the Publics' Perspective, who are citizens, consumers and all other stakeholders.

**Figure 2**  
*Relational Map*



Note. Adapted from Uhry (2021).

It is noteworthy that the Publics Perspective involves “for whom”: consumers and/or citizens and others and covers reception issues and, towards the Social/Mercadological perspective, refers to symbolic life in function of achieving purposes, role performance and the personality subsystem, relating to the imaginary, the sensitive, and the logic of sensitivity and the interactive relations of adjustment. The Social/Mercadological perspective is related to the “how” and covers the strategic management of integrated communication, the economic macro-environmental forces and, towards the Communicators axis, it is related to economic forces, resources and the logic of randomness and the interaction relations of risk and accident (Landowski, 2014).

From the above, it should be noted that the Relational Map is based on Martín-Barbero (2003; 2010) and is imbricated in Landowski’s theorization (2014), which can also be adapted to help analyze the news. Based on this theoretical conception, this article proposes mapping the international journalistic awards, and, to this end, it start the discursive analysis of the 41 awards (winners - projects - themes) that are summarized in the spreadsheets partially reproduced in the following figures and that will be commented below, in the results.

**Chart 1**
*Spreadsheets of the winning projects and the themes highlighted*

No.	Winner	Projct	theme	theme	theme	Prêmio
1	OCCRP	The Troika Laundromat	Corruption, under-billing	International affairs	International affairs	Sigma20
2	Disclose	Made in France	Conflicts, deaths	Health	International affairs	Sigma20
3	Texty	Hot disinfo from Russia (Topic radar)	Data verification, transparency	International affairs	International affairs	Sigma20
4	New York Times	Polluted Air Compares With Your City's	Health	Environment	Education	Sigma20
5	Pointer	Danish scam	Human rights			Sigma20
6	Associated Press	AP DataKit	Education			Sigma20
7	El universal	Zones of Silence	Conflicts, deaths	Artistic		Sigma20
8	OjoPúblico	Funes: an algorithm to fight corruption	Corruption, under-billing			Sigma20
9	Poder	Todos Los Contratos.mx	Corruption, under-billing			Sigma20
10	Pointer	The Real Estate Books of the German Occupiers	Human rights	International affairs		Sigma21
11	Agência Lupa	At the epicenter	Health	Educação		Sigma21
12	BuzzFeed	Inside China's Vast Infrastructure To Detain Muslims	Human rights	International affairs		Sigma21
13	Convoca	Convoca Deep Data: The most complete data analysis platform on extractive industries in Peru	Data verification, transparency			Sigma21

Continue...



Continue...		No.	Winner	Projeto	theme	theme	theme	Prêmio
14	High Country News		Land-Grab Universities: How expropriated Indigenous land became the foundation of the land-grant university system	<i>Human rights</i>				Sigma21
15	Atlantic		The COVID Tracking Project	<i>Health</i>				Sigma21
16	Corretivo		Kein Filter für Rechts	<i>Data verification, transparency</i>				Sigma21
17	Kloop		I would have killed her anyway	<i>Conflicts, deaths</i>		<i>Human rights</i>		Sigma21
18	ABC News		Rough justice: How police are failing survivors of sexual assault	<i>Conflicts, deaths</i>		<i>Human rights</i>		Sigma21
19	New York Times		Who Gets to Breathe Clean Air in New Delhi	<i>Health</i>		<i>Environment</i>		Sigma21
20	Code for Africa		Mapping Makoko	<i>Human rights</i>				Sigma21
21	New York Times		Tulsa Race Massacre Destroyed	<i>Conflicts, deaths</i>		<i>Human rights</i>		Sigma22
22	Palm Beach Post		Black Snow: Big Sugar's Burning Problem	<i>Health</i>		<i>Environment</i>		Sigma22
23	Weihua Li, Louisville Courier-Journal e USA Today		Millions of People with Felonies Can Now Vote. Most Don't Know it	<i>Human rights</i>		<i>International affairs</i>		Sigma22
24	101 East		This is Myanmar's State of Fear	<i>Conflicts, deaths</i>		<i>International affairs</i>		Sigma22

Continuation...

Continue...

No.	Winner	Projeto	theme	theme	theme	Prêmio	
25	Disclose	Murrooa Files	Health	Environment	International affairs	Sigma22	
26	Cívio	Use and abuse of emergency contracts during the pandemic	Corruption, under-billing				Sigma22
27	Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism	Lanes of Death in East Cairo	Conflicts, deaths	Health		Sigma22	
28	Pointer	The Digital Army	Health	Data verification, transparency		Sigma22	
29	IndiaSpend	Rukmini S Indian excess mortality investigation	Health			Sigma22	
30	Natália Leal	At the epicenter	Health	Education		ICFJ Knight	
31	Pavla Holcová	Report to OCCRP	Conflicts, deaths			ICFJ Knight	
32	Notícias Caracol	The assassination of Haiti's president	Conflicts, deaths	International affairs		Rei de Espanha	
33	César Luís Melgarejo Aponte	Withstand "Resistir"	Fotogram artístico				Rei de Espanha
34	Prodavinci	The broken promise: the collapse of social security in Venezuela	Data verification, transparency	Human rights		Rei de Espanha	
35	InfoAmazonia	Inhaling Smoke	Health	Environment		Rei de Espanha	
36	Gatopardo	Daughter of Cotton a profile of Cristina Rivera Garza	Artistic			Rei de Espanha	

Continuation...



Continue...

No.	Winner	Projeto	theme	theme	theme	Prêmio
37	Cívico	La transparencia, la veracidad de datos y la rendición de cuentas	<i>Data verification, transparency</i>			Rei de Espanha
38	Infoglobo	Coronavirus coverage without paywall	<i>Health</i>			WAN-IFRA
39	Washington Post	Reimagining The Washington Post Reader Experience	<i>Experiential</i>			WAN-IFRA
40	Ojo Público	Cheques en lenguas	<i>Health</i>	<i>Data verification, transparency</i>		WAN-IFRA
41	VGTV	Tarjet's experiment	<i>Health</i>	<i>Experiential</i>		WAN-IFRA

Note. Authors' elaboration.



Among the 41 journalistic awards that make up the corpus, Sigma Awards had 29 winning projects in 2020, 2021 and 2022, one Brazilian; ICFJ Knight 2021 had 2 winning projects, one Brazilian; King of Spain 2021 had six winning projects, one Brazilian; WAN-IFRA Digital Media Awards 2021 had four winners, two Brazilians.

In order to analyze the news discourses, a discursive analysis was carried out (van Dijk, 2009a, 2009b, 2020) in which the themes addressed are highlighted, which are a summary of the central point, the expression of what is most relevant, in order to combine macro acts or global events and arrive at the main one (van Dijk, 2009a, p. 141). Highlighting the theme is a choice of what is considered most relevant among the possibilities offered by discourse analysis. It is an interpretative and explanatory discursive analytical practice that consists of not only describing, but also explaining how abusive relationships, social problems, abuses of power, domination, social inequalities, etc. are represented, reproduced and/or combated in the awarded works (van Dijk, 2020, pp. 113-115), that is, the actuality that is represented in the awards and situated in the context of communicative relations, which is complemented by visual location on the Relational Map and related to sociosemiotic interaction regimes.

## FINDINGS

In the findings, it is highlighted that the projects focus on themes related to the media actuality that, when located on the Map, provide a vision of global events from 2020 to 2022 and can also be associated with the issues: misinformation, abuse of power, dehumanization, sensationalism, negativism.

Thus, in the results of the discourse analysis, we highlight nine major blocks of themes with the incidence indicated in parentheses: health (15), human rights (10), conflicts, deaths (9), International politics affairs (8), data verification, transparency (7), environment (5), corruption, under-billing (4), experiential, imaginary (4) and education (3).

The themes of the international winning projects give an idea of the most relevant issues that, from 2020 to 2022, occupied the international news discourse, which is suggested to constitute the media actuality, which can be considered in its virtual dimension - connectivity, interactivity, simultaneity - related to the reduction of complexity, to enable existence in the face of social roles. Space, time: its own historicity that alters our relationship with history. It interconnects and unifies existences to understand the world and reality now, allowing the establishment of new social relations. It generates social



representation and serves as a basis for social life, helping to orient oneself in the present beyond one's immediate environment. It expresses not the event itself, but the interest we devote to it. It generates values that displace tradition, making the present the reference system, the center of social life. Technology of action and technology of representation that make up the social organization (Martino, 2017, pp. 96-110).

Regarding to each of the winners, up to three themes were identified related to the central point, the most relevant aspect in each project which, being complex, can cover more than one theme and be included in more than one thematic block, as will be seen below.

The theme with the highest incidence was that related to "health" (15), mainly due to the covid-19 pandemic, which was highlighted in the news with the search to present accurate information and clarify about covid-19, regarding vaccines, care, etc. (The Atlantic, InfoGlobo, Agência Lupa and Natalia Leal), since health systems were not prepared to face the pandemic and it is evident that there was an abuse of power by certain governments (Brazil, United States) that favored the economy as if the pandemic were irrelevant, despite the increasing number of deaths. This situation also called for verifying misinformation regarding vaccination and due to denialism (Pointer, OjoPúblico), and led to reports of excess deaths from covid-19 of one ethnic group (India Spend). There has also been evidence of corruption in purchasing, with abuse in the waiver of tenders, due to the pandemic, in which there is a detour of public resources for a purpose other than health (Civio, Spain). And there is damage to health through the laundering of embezzled public resources (OCCRP and partners), and as a result of pollution in the world (The New York Times) and in India, socially unequal (The New York Times), as a result of fires that cause health problems (InfoAmazonia, Palm Beach), radiation due to atmospheric tests (Disclose, France) and due to lack of treatment for health affected by lymphoma (VGTV, Norway). The topic of health has been treated in a sensationalist way by touting global impacts: number of infected, deaths, the scope of the pandemic, etc.

The second largest thematic incidence concerns "human rights" (9)", which involves issues such as minority rights with the detention of Muslims abused in forced labor in China (BuzzFeed), the right to vote of US ex-prisoners (Weihua Li et al.), the right to life of African Americans of Tulsa ethnicity (The New York Times) and women - femicide (Kloop, Kyrgyzstan), sexual violence against women (ABC News, Australia), the right to property with appropriation of real estate under occupation in war (Pointer, Netherlands)

and indigenous lands (High Country News, United States), the right to retirement (Prodavinci, Venezuela), the right to democracy (101 East, Miamar) in a military dictatorship and the right to identity referring to a news story about theft of Dutch identities by Danish digital scammers (Pointer, Netherlands) that involves the investigation and reporting of digital crimes. In the highlighted works there is the investigation, the denunciation of the abuse of rights. It is possible to relate this theme to dehumanization by disrespecting the most sacred good, life. The issues of abuse of rights and dehumanization are evident.

Another theme with a high incidence was “conflicts, deaths” (9) which covers violence, conflicts and deaths in the world: the killing of journalists, with the domination of organized crime demanding silence (El Universal, Mexico), the abuse of military authoritarian power that establishes a state of terror (101 East, Miamar), the reenactment of the racism of the Tulsa massacre of ethnic African Americans (The New York Times), the abusive killings as a result of the lack of safety on the highways (Arab Reporters, Egypt), the deaths of investigative journalists (Pavla Holcová, Slovakia), the killings in Yemen with French weapons (Disclose, France), a consensus of abuse against women with femicides “accepted” as normal (Kloop, Kyrgyzstan), sexual assaults disregarded by the police (ABC News, Australia) and the assassination of Haiti’s president by politicians and mercenaries in the midst of a power struggle (Noticias Caracol). In all the award-winning projects, there is evidence of investigation, denunciation, the fight against rights abuses and dehumanization, which are serious problems of disrespect for the human being.

The process of reporting also involves “data verification and transparency” (7), related to combating misinformation spread by a far-right digital army (Pointer, Netherlands; Correctiv, Germany), and to other problematic issues, such as news projects facing difficulties in obtaining pension data, which is harming ageing Venezuelans (Prodavinci, Venezuela), and visualizing information and communicating it accurately and transparently (Civio, Spain); many projects are internationally recognized for pointing out, for example, misinformation coming from Russia (Texty, Ukraine); or for addressing pandemic-related misinformation, which can be verified and reported in indigenous languages themselves (OjoPúblico, Peru), in addition to the references to misinformation in the pandemic mentioned above (classified under “health”). An app to facilitate the news work of journalists (Associated Press) can also be cited, which is about news making and the search for effectiveness. The abuse of misinformation and manipulation have been combated and rewarded.



Also noteworthy is the incidence of journalistic work on the “environment” (5), which involves projects showing air pollution around the world (The New York Times) and a project on the social impact of air pollution in New Delhi (The New York Times); Similarly, works that show the social problems arising from atmospheric testing in French Polynesia (Disclose), the burning of sugar cane (Palm Beach United States) and, likewise, the burning in the Amazon (InfoAmazonia) and its effects on the environment, which end up affecting everyone with climate change, excessive heat, thawing glaciers, etc. News reports have been frequent, but solutions are still slow. This topic has been treated in a sensationalist way to highlight the impact of the problem and demand that political solutions be put forward.

The theme “international politics affairs (8)” refers to: abusive and illegal relations such as money laundering of Russian corruption in Europe (OCCRP and 23 partners); sending weapons from European country (France) to another intermediary country for a war in Yemen (Disclose); misinformation in Russia (Texty, Ukraine); creation of political-legal consensus of tolerance of organized crime killings (El Universal, Mexico); news about international political attacks, which involves a power struggle using mercenaries from other countries (Noticias Caracol); ignored social problems that lead to the mapping of small neglected community where there is social inequality (Code for Africa, Nigeria); investigative project about extractive industries (Convoca, Peru); representation of economic interests in which abusive labor relations are denounced, a political affair. In addition, we chose to leave out projects involving domestic policy issues, which ended up being reflected in the other themes mentioned, because politics is present in most of the work. Abusive relationships have been combated through media association in various countries and other forms.

Among the awardees of the corpus, projects related to the “experiential and imaginary” (4) still stand out, that is, with the act of experiencing, related to the symbolic imaginary. Projects on reimagining the reader experience (The Washington Post), more focused on the Post’s readership and the newspaper’s commitment to improving the news experience of reproducing the status quo and the news, can be highlighted; the valorization of the literary imagination representing Hispanic culture in America (Gatopardo, Mexico), in which a positive representation of the Mexican minority in America is constructed in a report; in addition to the shared online experience of facing lymphoma without medical treatment (VGTV, Norway), a health problem represented from the media perspective as a show. And finally, one can highlight the news action most related to the imaginary of “resisting” through

photojournalism (Melgarejo in *El Tempo*, Colombia), which involves the representation of protests against the abuse of political power with repression of demonstrations, highlighting aesthetically the photograph that represents the side of the oppressed who resist political oppression and makes a very strong denunciation of repression. This theme can be related to negativism, as it highlights aspects such as protests, repression, negation of illness, discrimination by ethnicity, etc.

“Corruption, under-billing” (4) involves abusive and illegal social relations of money laundering of corruption from Russia to Europe (OCCRP and 23 news partners), under-billing with abuses of emergency contracting and detour of resources (Civio, Spain), public contracting suspected of corruption and or under-billing (OjoPúblico, Peru; Poder, Mexico), issues that are fought through investigation, denunciations of illegalities and deviations. This theme can be related to dehumanization, through the inhumane practice of diverting public resources that would be intended to combat social inequalities, alleviate social problems, etc. and the abuse of political and economic power.

There are also themes related to “education” (3): educational projects that present issues related to the themes “air pollution”, a very relevant issue (*The New York Times*); the impact of Covid-19 (Agência Lupa; Natália Leal) on the place where the reader or Internet user is; the verification and dissemination of audios on Covid-19 in indigenous languages (OjoPúblico, Peru). The award-winning apps have an effective educational function in clarifying the social problems pointed out. This theme can be related to negativism by highlighting the most negative aspects of the media reality of the societies represented in the awards.

Thus, the analytical data summarized above suggest that the international news discourse can be considered adherent to some of the main problems of “media actuality as a culture of the present”, as it can identify “present time, information, novelty and news” (Martino, 2017, p. 97), with emphasis on the pandemic and health (15), human rights (10), conflicts, deaths, violence (9), international politics affairs (8), misinformation that challenges and demands verification and transparency (7), the environment (4), experiential and imaginary (4), corruption and under-billing (4) and education (3).

## DISCUSSION

Incidentally, one must initially reflect on the adequacy of the problematic issues - misinformation, negativism, sensationalism, consumerism - initially

# A

proposed by Uhry (2021). It can be suggested that, for the most part, the problems referred to appear in the themes, except consumerism, not located in the awards analyzed. And, from the analysis of the empirical, when highlighting the blocks of themes, new issues are evident: dehumanization and abuse of power, which stand out in the news and are related to conflicts, violence, deaths, disrespect for human rights, and the abuse of power (abuse, corruption, under-billing, etc.), which suggests abusive communicational relations.

It is also suggested that there are interrelationships between the dimensions of the Map, in the same way that a project was framed in more than one theme, since the themes overlap and can be considered multifaceted, as already mentioned. It is suggested that the identified themes can be visually located on the Relational Map based on the essential issues of each of the dimensions: purposes (Legal politician), values (Social/cultural), imaginary (symbolic) and resources (economic), as proposed below in figure 5, indicating the issues with the “#” symbol.

**Figure 3**  
Themes located on the Relational Map .



Note. Authors' elaboration.

Analyzing the visual location on the Relational Map, regarding the theme of international news discourse, we identified that most of the awarded works (23) are related to sociocultural values: human rights (10), conflicts, deaths (9), corruption and under-billing (4), which are located between the Social/cultural and Publics perspectives in the sociocultural dimension,

suggesting that these are the most problematic issues. The problem of violence, conflicts and killings is reflected in killings in Yemen, Miamar, Cairo, of journalists in Mexico and Slovakia, femicides, sexual violence, massacre of Tulsa ethnic African Americans; and disrespect of human rights of minorities, women, African Americans, detainees, and disrespect of property rights of Jews and indigenous people, identity theft, which are problematic issues, as if life is not culturally the highest value. Also related to a deviant socio-cultural aspect is corruption and under-billing (4), which involves corruption, under-invoicing, and embezzlement of public resources in Russia, Peru, Mexico and Spain, issues that are serious worldwide, reflect current affairs and challenge us. Investigative and denunciatory news alternatives are effective. As already explained, the preliminary problem of consumerism is not evident in any award-winning work, highlighting the problems of dehumanization and abuse of power, as well as the confirmation of issues of misinformation, sensationalism, and negativism.

We also identified, in the international news discourse, themes that can be visually located on the Map and are related to the themes of health (15) and environment (5), which may suggest something of sensationalism in the news approach to the pandemic and ecology themes, which have an impact with the catastrophism of deaths by covid-19 and the destruction of the environment, and which are related to the perspectives of Communicators and Social/Mercadological. The themes can be located in the economic dimension, related to resources, suggesting that the area is also very problematic, due to the costs and investments involved in health problems and in their accurate reporting, and that with the covid-19 pandemic many lives have been taken, which is often due to failures in health management and even misappropriation of public resources in the health emergency, which was reflected in the works. The neglect of the environment is also evident, especially air pollution in the world, fires, atmospheric tests or other forms that signal the predominance of the economic dimension to the detriment of the human being. These are topics that have gained attention in the news discourse as investigated complaints that point to open questions.

The themes of international politics (8) and data verification, transparency (7) can be in the perspective of Communicators and Social/Cultural, in the Legal politician dimension, related to the purposes, suggesting that it is a problematic area, with 15 papers. Preliminarily suggested, the problem of misinformation is confirmed, and the alternatives are the projects that work with data verification and transparency, and an app to optimize news work, which we have highlighted; but we can consider that there are still other projects





related to covid-19 and that have been in health. The problem of international political affairs (8) brings projects that involve Russian corruption laundering money in Europe, France selling weapons that kill civilians in Yemen, Russia disinforming, a community in Nigeria neglected, the assassination of the president of Haiti by mercenaries at the behest of a politician, Mexican organized crime embarrassing the political-legal apparatus and demanding silence about its atrocities - issues addressed in the awarded projects that highlight the problem of abuse of power, very relevant today.

Finally, analyzing the Publics and Social/Mercadological perspectives in the symbolic dimension and visually locating the awarded projects on the Relational Map, with regard to the theme of international news discourse, we identified seven journalistic works recognized as winners: educational works in relation to air pollution and the location of the covid-19 extension; a project highlighting the imagination of Hispanic literature, another reimagining the reader's experience, and one reporting "resisting" through photojournalism and suggesting the imaginary of resistance against oppression in national demonstrations. Such works suggest that the area is promising, with fewer problems reported, among the set of awards in the corpus. The imaginary is also reflected in other projects and stands out for the works that accurately and transparently communicate visualization and communication, the focus of the Sigma Awards, which constitutes the largest part of the corpus (29 of 41 works), and other awards.

As for the problem of negativism, preliminarily suggested, it may also be more associated with violence, deaths, corruption, politicking, issues that have been visually situated in other dimensions. The symbolic dimension can be related to negativism by highlighting aspects such as protests, repression, negations of illness, discrimination by ethnicity, etc. On the other hand, there is a certain optimism with the sensitive visualization, aesthetic, artistic, experiential, and experimental possibilities that involve the imaginary. The experiential cannot, however, be considered as only seeing things from the good and beautiful side, as it also involves the way of making social problems felt.

In the symbolic dimension, visualization, imagination, and education that are projected by the news stand out. However, we cannot deny the bias of negativity in the news, which visually can be included in the Legal politician dimension, alongside misinformation and abuse of power. This suggests that the dimensions interpenetrate and have links with each other. Thus, it can be shown that the symbolic also has a negative valence that is very present in journalism.

Finally, as for the reference locations of the projects, which is reflected in the news discourse, most of the works refer to the United States of America (10), the country with the highest number of winners; then, with 3 works each, there are winning news referring to the following countries: Netherlands, Mexico, Peru and Brazil (one of which with three awards, here we consider only one); there are also 2 projects that have as reference location the following countries: Spain, France, Colombia and Russia. The winning news stories also refer to Europe, Yemen, Ukraine, China, Germany, Kyrgyzstan, Australia, India, Nigeria, Miamar, Polynesia, Egypt, Slovakia and Venezuela, characterizing an approach, in terms of locations, that can be considered global and comprehensive. This suggests that the problems listed as themes in the papers referred to reflect much of what might be considered the most relevant issues in each of the countries and blocs, and it might be suggested that they reflect current affairs.

When examining and critically reflecting on the communicative relationships established between the different interactants represented in the award-winning news, it is found that they are mostly - 58 out of 65 themes - unequal, illegal or abusive relationships in which rights or laws are disrespected, one makes the other uncomfortable, without dialog being exercised, or even risk communicative relationships, in which one puts the other in danger of life, disrespecting their human rights, health, discriminating, excluding, corrupting or under-invoicing, destroying nature. Equal communicative relationships in which there is a symmetrical connection between one interactant and another, in which rights, personal and cultural identity are respected are those involving education, imaginary and experiential (7 of 65 themes identified).

A survey and systematization of the themes was thus carried out by means of discourse analysis of the 41 winners of four award events, which allowed them to be visually located on the Relational Map and to draw some interpretative inferences and relationships with the conception of actuality.

It is also suggested that in the winning practices it is possible to identify experimental, experiential, artistic, visualization and communication characteristics - identified in the illustrative case studies - that can be associated with reconfiguring the news. Thus, from the corpus of award winners, we selected, to enrich the article, some projects to compose the following illustrative case studies. Thus, we present below awardees in the form of illustrative case studies (Machado & Palacios, 2007) of empirical related to news actions, indicating the communicative relations mainly from the theorizations of the Relational Map and Landowski (2014):



### **First illustrative case study**

El Universal (Mexico) was awarded at the Sigma Awards 2020, in the innovation category, for the project “Zones of Silence” (El Universal, 2020). Regarding the possible communicational relationships that are established, the individuals Esteban Román, Gilberto Leon, Elsa Hernandez, Miguel Garnica, Edson Arroyo, César Saavedra, Jenny Lee, Dale Markowitz, and Alberto Cairo, who make up the collective of social actors “Communicators” of El Universal, maintain a relationship with individuals who make up the collective of social actors “Publics”, specifically consumers, readers and Internet users. They disseminate the “Zones of Silence” project, an innovative journalistic practice in visualization and aesthetic communication, made available to the consumer market of El Universal in a certain society (Mexican) with the informative and humanitarian visual artistic values to denounce the deaths and the lack of disclosure of violence.

The “Communicators” have legal support in the “Social/Cultural” to trigger a mediated communication relationship aimed at reaching the “Publics” to disseminate news about the silence of Mexican newspapers on the deaths caused by organized crime. These are aspects of the cultural dimension, seeking to establish interactive relationships with readers and authorities to support the news visualization experiment situated in the “Social/Cultural” perspective and generate alternative solutions to the violence denounced, with the purpose of reestablishing the sacred right to life, the greatest value to be preserved. There is also the aesthetic value of the visualization graphics “degrees of silence” and “code of silence” of the news, which are artistic alternatives for measuring silenced deaths, or not, so that such degrees and codes suggest aesthetic bias. Silencing the deaths of Mexicans allows an aesthetic look at the “degrees of silence” and “code of silence”, measurement alternatives created artistically from the visualization and communication of such degrees and codes of silence, suggesting artistic formulation even when reporting (or not) the deaths, which characterize dehumanization. By silencing the murders, which suggests an interrelationship with the sociocultural dimension, by having created a political consensus with organized crime, it would also be appropriate to relate to the political dimension.

The action in principle seems to involve a commercial purpose, being an implicit form of commercial relationship, so that readers and Internet users become integrated (commercial relationship) into the “Publics” readers of the newspaper, and the individuals who make up the collective of actors of the “Social/Cultural” integrate into the “Social/Mercadological”

as consumers of El Universal. Critically analyzed, the project goes beyond the purpose of forming new readers and denouncing the situation and signals a counter-hegemonic practice of defending the highest values: life, collectivity and the public interests of citizenship, the preservation of life and the right to public disclosure of deaths. This can be related to the “manipulation interaction regime” of establishing interactive news relations to denounce the consensual decisional motivation of non-disclosure of violence by organized crime, so that the right to life and news is restored. This is predominantly based on the logic of intentionality of disclosing deviant interactional relations, which, on the one hand, may be associated with the acquisition and loyalty of readers of El Universal and, on the other hand, related to “making want” (Landowski, 2014, p. 80) the disclosure of deviant interactions involving the violence of deaths, defending aesthetic (visual) values and life, the greatest value. Dehumanization is characterized since organized crime has managed to silence journalists in the face of the inhuman act of killing, which is made visual and communicated interactively, from investigative news reporting with artistic characteristics, through the Zones of Silence project.

### **Second illustrative case study**

OjoPúblico (Peru) was awarded at the Sigma Awards 2020 in the innovation category (small newsrooms) with the project “Funes: an algorithm to fight corruption” (OjoPúblico, 2020a) and was also a winner at the Digital Media Awards Worldwide 2021 in the Best Project for News Literacy category with the project “Chequeos en lenguas” (OjoPúblico, 2020b). As for the possible communicational relationships that are established, the individuals Gianfranco Rossi, Nelly Luna Amancio, Gianfranco Huamán, Ernesto Cabral and Óscar Castilla, who make up the collective of social actors “Comunicadores” of OjoPúblico, maintain a relationship with individuals who make up the collective of social actors “Publics”, and disseminate the “Funes” project, an innovative news practice of visualization and communication from algorithms with purposes related to citizenship and control of power, on the possible abuse and effectiveness of the use of public resources.

The project was made available to the consumer market in a certain society (Peruvian), since the “Communicators” have legal support, which authorizes them to trigger a mediated communication relationship aimed at reaching the “Publics” to spread the news of corruption from the use of the algorithm and partnership with local media after investigating public contracts, reporting



on abuse of power in the form of corruption in tenders and in public bodies. The aim, from a “Social/Cultural” perspective, is that action will be taken to prevent corruption in public procurement. In essence, this involves a social purpose related to citizenship and the good use of public resources, based on news and information provided by the “Funes” project. This is an implicit form of commercial relationship, in which the readers of the project are integrated (commercial relationship) with the readers of the newspaper, and the individuals who make up the collective of actors of the “Social/Cultural” can thus be integrated into the “Social/Mercadological” as consumers of OjoPúblico.

Analyzing the interests, it is a hegemonic practice of production of public discourses that is on the side of public interests, in defense of citizenship in the sense of the social role of journalism of investigation and denunciation of corruption and communication to readers. The news discourse of the case can be linked to the “bringing about” of interactive relations aimed at the purposes, the effectiveness in the use of public resources, as established by law, which is predominantly related to the “programming interaction regime” (Landowski, 2014, p. 80) of acceptance of legislation that provides for the good use of public resources and minimizes the risk of corruption. This is based on the ‘logic of regularity’ of reporting on illicit corrupt relationships. It seeks to report and enlighten readers, which can help the “Publics” to accept regular operations and “enforce” the preservation of public resources and to disclose possible deviant interactions, corruption, and abuse of power in the public area, taking care of public resources and avoiding the abuse of power. Also, by checking and presenting the news in indigenous languages, “Chequeos en lenguas”, a project in which human rights and indigenous culture are respected by presenting them with information about covid-19 in their own languages, the problem of misinformation is combated.

### **Third illustrative case study**

OCCRP, Guardian, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Newstapa, El Periodico, Global Witness and 17 other partners were the winners in the best reporting category of the Sigma Awards 2020 with the news project “The Troika launders capital” (OCCRP et al., 2020). As for the possible communicational relationships established, the individuals Paul Radu, Sarunas Cerniauskas, Olesya Shmagun, Dmitry Velikovskiy, Alesya Marohovskaya, Jason Shea, Jonny Wrate, Atanas Tchobanov, Ani Hovhannisyanyan, Irina Dolinina, Roman Shleyynov, Alisa Kustikova, Edik Baghdasaryan and Vlad Lavrov, who make up the Organized

Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) “Communicators” collective of social actors, The Guardian, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Newstapa, El Periodico, Global Witness and 17 other partners, maintain a citizen relationship with individuals who make up the “Publics” social actor collective, and disseminate the Troika Laundromat news project with an investigative bias using visualization and communication resources, high-tech and informative about corruption in Russia and its money laundering practices in Europe. This is made available to citizens in a given society (European), since, although they are forbidden to disseminate in Russia, the “Communicators” have legal support, the result of a relationship they have with European and other countries’ governments, which authorize them to trigger a mediated communication relationship aimed at reaching the “Publics” to disseminate news and warnings about corruption in Russia and its money laundering connections in Europe. With the project, they seek, from the “Social/Cultural” perspective, that the “Publics” will “enforce” sanctions against the Russian corruption money laundering system with the complicity of European banks. This constitutes a counter-hegemonic initiative, with no commercial purpose, which was proposed by the individuals who make up the collective of social actors communicating the “Institutional Mercadological” of the institutions that make up the investigative collective coordinated by the OCCRP project with many partnerships. Despite being a project with a sensationalist bias, which was awarded “best report of the Sigma Awards 2020”, however, there is no evidence of a marketing intention. The project is a form of citizen action, so that Internet users become aware or aware of the possible risks of the European banking system becoming a huge money laundry of Russian corruption, without, however, becoming part of the “Mercadological”, prevailing citizenship in the “Social/cultural”. Analyzing the interests, it is a counter-hegemonic practice of producing discourses whose hegemony is on the side of collective interests, with the purpose of informing the “Publics” about Russian corruption and money laundering by European banks. The project is predominantly related to the “regime of risk interaction” (Landowski, 2014, p. 80), based on randomness and the risk of possible “discontinuity” of interactive relationships aimed at laundering money from corruption, which is related to the “risk” of the illegal interactions of the corrupt and their money laundering connections being discovered, which constitutes a relational problem between Russian and European societies. It is something that requires citizen actions to denounce and contain deviant communicational relations and involves risks of discovery of the flow of laundering of Russian corruption money.



### **Fourth illustrative case study**

The New York Times was awarded at the 2020 Sigma Awards in the best visualization category for the experiential news project “See How the World’s Most Polluted Air Compares with Your City’s” (The New York Times, 2019). As for the possible communicational relationships that are established, the individuals Nadja Popovich, Blacki Migliozi, Karthik Patanjali, Anjali Singhvi and Jon Huang, who make up the collective of social actors “Communicators” of the Times, can establish a sensitive relationship related to the informative and educational visual experiential imaginary with the individuals who make up the collective of social actors “Publics” by disseminating through the web the experiential that is available in the “Social/Cultural” and also in the “Mercadological” of certain societies (North American and others).

The “Communicators” have legal support to trigger a mediated relationship of experiential communication, aiming to reach the individuals who make up the collective of “Publics” social actors to disseminate information and provide the experience of how the world’s air pollution is compared to that of their city. The action is related to the hegemonic status quo, seeking to clarify, from the “Social/Cultural” perspective, so that the “Publics” will have an experience related to air pollution, even without using 3D glasses, but with Virtual Reality simulated from the cell phone. This occurs without greater impact on the community, being characterized more as a marketing action to raise awareness and loyalty of readers. Analyzing the interests, it is a hegemonic practice of discourse production whose hegemony is on the side of private interests, with the purpose of leading the “Publics” to experience reflection on air pollution. The “regime of adjustment interaction” is predominantly evidenced by establishing an interactive mediated relationship that contrasts the perception of the air in its locality and the reality suggested by the project, which is related to sensitizing and “making people feel” (Landowski, 2014, p. 80), almost living an experience that involves an essential issue, polluted air. It is something that evidences negativity by showing the worst rates of air pollution, by highlighting air pollution and its consequences for health, and by reporting the political neglect of the issue of the air we breathe, which is aimed at sensitizing us to the issue..

The illustrative case studies allow communicative relationships to be established. Thus, analyses are synthetically presented that suggest relationships that can be established and visually located in the following dimensions of the Relational Map:



**Figure 4**  
*Illustrative case studies located on Map*



Note. Authors' elaboration.

First Dimension, Social: El Universal orients its news discourse by the values of visualization and informative aesthetic communication to contribute in a risky interactive relational way by publicizing the silence of the Mexican news regarding the deaths of organized crime, with the project “Zones of silence”, which has a humanistic purpose of defense of life, with emphasis on the socio-cultural dimension, characterizing a news discourse aimed at preserving life and the right to information, which, in principle, may be to the advantage of the market for the formation of future readers, but which is characterized as a counter-hegemonic practice in defense of citizenship that has the right to information. It is evident the “making want” the news about violence and the “logic of intentionality” of disseminating what happens that involves an inhuman interactional relationship, related to the disrespect of sacred values - life, disclosure -, suggesting that El Universal defends public interests in which the “regime of manipulation interaction” and the logic of intentionality prevail (Landowski, 2014, p. 80), which is possible to relate to the problem of dehumanization.

Second Dimension, Legal politician: OjoPúblico with the project “Funes: an algorithm to fight corruption” makes use of visualization and communication with “purposes” of denouncing irregularities (corruptions) in the public area and defending the regularity of the use of public resources, demonstrating the logic of regularity to expose the distorted situation of corruption in contracts,



which demonstrates that the news discourse of the case can be related to the public interest of “making the program come” in the use of public resources in the manner established by law, which, indirectly, can bring more readers, and is “founded on the logic of regularity” of investigating and controlling the use of public resources to avoid corruption in contracts, suggesting that in this case the “programming interaction regime” prevails (Landowski, 2014, p. 80) aimed at the regular use of public resources. 80) aimed at the regular use of public resources, to avoid the abuse of power and misinformation (“Chequeos en lenguas”).

Third Dimension, Economic: OCCRP, Guardian, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Newstapa, El Periodico, Global Witness and 17 other partners cooperatively use experimental high-tech “resources” for the purpose of scouring European companies and banks that function as laundromats for money embezzled by Russian corruption, which was uncovered by “The Troika Laundromat”, and is related to the “catastrophic” events of corruption in Russia and money laundering in Europe, which suggests a stance of “overcoming” actions regarding the crime of corruption and is “based on the randomness” of money laundering and corruption actions, suggesting that news discursive practices are counter-hegemonic, with a planetary ecological bias rather than economic and that, in this case, collective interests prevail and the “accident interaction regime” (Landowski, 2014, p. 80) of the discovery of money laundering and corruption, which constitutes a sensationalist news of great global impact.

Fourth Dimension, Symbolic: The New York Times orients its journalistic discourse in a way that private interests prevail, and the project can be associated with the experiential imaginary. At the same time, there is an educational visual bias, in the case of the “See How the World’s Most Polluted Air Compares with Your City’s” project, with emphasis on the symbolic dimension of the experiential imaginary and an attempt to foster the internet user’s experience, which involves “relationships and gratifying adjustment” in the sense of generating “value in a mutual realization in itself” (Landowski, 2014, p. p. 1). 51), which is related to the “making feel” of Internet users and “based on the sensitivity” of the Internet user in the face of air pollution, suggesting the “logic of sensitivity” and that it can be associated with the “adjustment interaction regime” (Landowski, 2014, p. 80).

In addition to the correlations made with Landowski’s theory (2014) and the visual locations on the Relational Map, it is noteworthy that the empirical cases presented can be considered internationally awarded journalistic practices related to the experiential (Longhi & Caetano, 2019), with news visual aesthetic values, visualization and educational communication, high technology from the counter-hegemonic perspective and educational experimental with political

biases in the news discursive relationship. Correlating with the thematic discourse analysis, the symbolic dimension chosen to visually locate the work on air pollution (New York Times), by emphasizing the educational experiential bias, also has an interrelation with the economic dimension, of resources, because the damage to health and the environment can also be mentioned. The experiential aspect of the Times can be related to negativity, because the news is unfavorable to health, but, on the other hand, it is possible to consider a positive highlight for the beautiful visualization and communication, highlighted in terms of credibility, news quality, so well-conceived and communicated, allowing to experience the issue of pollution - which does not make the news less impactful and negative. Likewise, the framing in the economic dimension, as a result of high-tech resources (OCCRP and partners), is a choice that presents links with the Legal politician and sociocultural perspectives as a result of politics and corruption and can also be considered a case of news sensationalism. In the visualization and communication from the Funes algorithm (OjoPúblico), abuse of political power is characterized, which could also be linked to the sociocultural dimension due to the value of corruption impregnated in the social sphere. This shows that the dimensions of the Relational Map are not watertight, but are interrelated, which was more evident in the discourse analyses, in which more than one theme was identified in some works, suggesting complexity that is reflected in more than one of the possible locations on the Relational Map.

Thus, from the examination of the empirics, it was highlighted that the dimensions are interrelated: the symbolic (imaginary) is also reflected in cultural values, in experimental educational and humanistic resources and in the experiential, in addition to the fact that all cases are somehow related to educational practices and involve information, which suggests that the dimensions interpenetrate and communicate with each other.

## CONCLUSIONS

The starting point was a Relational Map, a theorization that allowed to visually locate problems related to the journalism crisis and, at the same time, can be applied to awards. In the results, it was pointed out that the projects focus on themes related to current media events that, when located on the Map, provide a vision of global events from 2020 to 2022 and can also be associated with the issues: misinformation, abuse of power, dehumanization, sensationalism, negativism. It is concluded that the winning practices have experimental, experiential, artistic, visualization and communication characteristics that are relevant and can contribute to reconfiguring the news.



Regarding the question: “Can mapping clarify the contribution of journalistic awards?”, which involved the hypothesis that a reconfiguration of the news discourse would be underway that could be associated with the awards. On the question, the following elements of the digital reconfiguration of journalism should be considered: 1) Timeliness, connectivity, interactivity through the web to understand the world and reality. 2) Quality: loosening of authenticity verification; misinformation (fake news); credibility shaken by authorities; eroding confidence; speed. 3) Technique unknown to amateurs (content aggregators, bloggers, influencers); abdication of responsibility. 4) Objectivity: information overload. 5) Profitability: digital distribution crossed by platforms, advertising in crisis; new business model - free. No news agencies. New entrants. 6) Newsworthiness without validation, without editing; no news agency. 7) Function of news. 8) Ethics. 9) Dependence on groups. 10) Interactive relationships with audiences with service provision, among others.

Thus, it could be said that a digital reconfiguration of journalism is evident. From what has been summarized, there is a trend of news reconfiguration because of digital, which contributes to the reconfiguration of journalism and can be seen in experimental, experiential, artistic, visualization and communication practices. It is suggested that problems and crises are more related to the traditional configuration of journalism, which is facing an accelerated reconfiguration that mainly involves digital news and requires new conceptions, new business models, innovative technologies, etc. The new news configurations are more related to awards.

By indicating illegitimate and abusive communicational relationships, the mapping of awards contributes to critical reflections on the function of journalism, in addition to highlighting practices that reflect the problems of relevance in actuality. ■

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# The thermographic narrative in *Incoming* and *There Will Be No More Night*

## *A narrativa termográfica em Incoming e There Will Be No More Night*

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### ABSTRACT

*Incoming* (2017), by photographer and filmmaker Richard Mosse, is a multi-channel art installation that is based on the thermal detection system of a powerful and restricted military surveillance camera, adapted by Mosse to observe refugee camps in southern Europe. *There Will Be No More Night* (2020), a film by filmmaker Éléonore Weber, triggers records of military operations filmed from a war aircraft in tracking and attack actions, using thermal images from pilots' helmets. This study analyzes the artistic appropriation processes of the immersive and multi-screen format produced by artist Richard Mosse and the use of military archives in cinematographic modulation, used as technological clothing and surveillance images in the documentary by director Éléonore Weber.

**Keywords:** Image, artistic appropriation, refugees

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### RESUMO

*Incoming* (2017), do fotógrafo e cineasta Richard Mosse, é uma instalação artística multicanal que se baseia no sistema de detecção térmica de uma potente e restrita câmera de vigilância militar, adaptada por Mosse para observar campos de refugiados no sul da Europa. *There Will Be No More Night* (2020), filme da cineasta Éléonore Weber, aciona registros de operações militares filmados desde aeronaves bélicas em ações de rastreamento e ataque, utilizando imagens térmicas visualizadas nos capacetes dos pilotos. O presente trabalho é uma análise dos processos de apropriação artística do formato imersivo e multitela produzido pelo artista Richard Mosse, e o uso de arquivos militares em modulação cinematográfica, acionados como vestimenta tecnológica e imagens de vigilância no documentário da diretora Éléonore Weber.

**Palavras-chave:** Imagem, apropriação artística, refugiados







## The thermographic narrative in *Incoming* and *There Will Be No More Night*

**I**NCOMING (2017), BY PHOTOGRAPHER and filmmaker Richard Mosse, is an artistic installation that works with biopolitical logic (Beiguelman, 2021) associated with the dimension of thermal detection carried out from a high-tech camera built for US military agencies, and adapted by Mosse for cinematographic use. Developed in partnership with cameraman Trever Tweeten and composer Ben Frost, the project is a multichannel installation that analyzes heat maps of human bodies captured by a military camera classified as a weapon under international law (Martin, 2019). The technology is structured to display body heat at a distance of more than 30 km, domain restricted, and initially designed for battlefields, war zones, and conflict spaces<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> It serves, for example, for tracking hidden individuals in mountainous dimensions and dense urban areas. According to Martin (2019), it is also occasionally used for searching, detecting, and rescuing people. Its manipulation is computer-programmed, and the equipment works as a thermographic camera that records the visual specters and the “biological signatures” (Heat Signatures) produced by different bodies.

Mosse reconfigures the camera for cinematographic use in classic steady-cam support and applies the technology to observe people in refugee situations in United Nations camps and areas of the southern border of Europe (Mediterranean Sea). He circumscribes the spectrographic images generated by the military apparatus in an artistic dimension: the mirrored caloric modulations reveal graphs of heat, the biological intimacy undetectable to the human eye (breathing and heart rate, traces of sweat, blood circulation, etc.).

In Mosse’s work, the images are re-signified in a powerful and innovative audiovisual effect that results in a film without narrative accompaniment or dialogues but incorporates acoustic elements, soundtrack, and cinematographic *mise-en-scène* in its aesthetic dimension. The result is a creative conception developed with the use of multi-screens: a video installation and a photographic project that dialogue in a 52-minute video based on thermal images produced with refugees in southern Europe<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Incoming combines photographic material (*Frameworks*) and audiovisual language, scheduled to be exhibited in museum spaces and art galleries. It is a *sui generis* creation, made for immersive rooms that use three large screens, measuring 8 meters in size, with synchronous and asynchronous progress of the displayed images – in three-channel High Definition video. Its realization occurred in 2017 at the request of the National Gallery of Victoria (Melbourne) and the Barbican Art Gallery (Londres).

Arranged in audiovisual language, the invisible images or specters produced by Mosse with the high-tech camera flow from the cinematographic modulation adapted for close use (in steady-cam) and distant (equipped with a telephoto lens, with the possibility of zooming over ten kilometers). Monochromatic images are generated, subtracted from a wide range, showing mainly two capture universes: everyday scenes of refuge zones showing the movements of people in different activities (from children eating and teenagers playing soccer to subjects talking and walking alone in the confinement space); and dramatic images of the processes of rescue and salvage of shipwreck survivors in the Mediterranean.

In a way, this thematic conception is built practically throughout the diegesis. Challenging sequences of rescuing victims’ bodies in Mediterranean waters alternate with images of faces and specters of individuals in refugee camps. The images generated by thermal modulation make it possible to watch complex scenes, such as a filmic sequence in which the dissection of a corpse of

a drowning victim is exposed in close range (zooming of details of the hands, body, and visual spectrum).

*Incoming* exposes, therefore, the contemporary logic of biopower, developed, as Giselle Beiguelman (2021, p. 26) writes, from the “retinal tyranny of modern subjectivity” and the *de-subjectivation* from technologies of graphic visualization, thermography, and telepower, as Beiguelman refers, in the “reconfigurations of the look, ways of seeing and being seen.” It focuses on heat and invisible images, undetectable to human eyes, which show the human being in their most basic biological trace. Similar to the images detected by long-range missiles, which look for sources of heat and thermal traces, the technology recognizes invisible and camouflaged thermal specters and sensorialities. In Mossé’s artistic treatment, the procedure that tracks bodies and does not see identities is reorganized to propose a unique aesthetic, acousmatic, and immersive experience, operating in the interstice between documentary, photojournalism, and contemporary art.

*There Will Be No More Night* (2020), a 77-minute film by French filmmaker Éléonore Weber, uses several videos recorded by helicopter and fighter pilots in regions of NATO military actions (mainly Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan). She organizes the material into a narrative centered on the spectral modulation of the image, thermal and profane, which replaces the traditional view of pilots dressed in high-tech helmets. The powerful cameras with long-range zoom and night vision and the possibility of thermographic modulation alternate the traditional view of military apparatus, allowing viewing from kilometric heights and distances. The effect also facilitates the undetectable and deadly approach in the execution of military operations, which are recorded and displayed by the pilots<sup>3</sup>.

The film’s narrative, which largely follows the filmmaker’s comments (in the voice of actress Nathalie Richard) on the recorded records, is based on footage of military operations produced from aircraft in tracking and surveillance actions, which often turn into attack and elimination of people. The director interviews Private Pierre V., whose anonymous and protected testimony (which does not appear in the film) feeds the narrative structure. In the gesture of narrative organization, Weber produces a meticulous essay on the complex images generated by American and French troops in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. The pilots recorded the files themselves, and their use and easy dissemination available on YouTube without restriction show the terrible coincidence between the gesture of looking, recording, and identifying targets and the staging of violence (in this case, instrumentalized in the concomitance of the human eye with the machine – the high-tech helmets)<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup>While the film’s narrative text, by actress Nathalie Richard, explains that NATO regulatory procedures require recording the actions, later analyzed by military supervisors, in most cases, it is not used in legal actions (even when the recorded action results in execution). Most of the videos used in the film were quickly pulled from YouTube and listed at the end.

<sup>4</sup>What Farocki (2013) called “operative images” to erase the human trace make it challenging to accuse and even more difficult to recognize the authors. Disseminated mainly during the Gulf War in 1991, coming from cameras attached to the tip of guided missiles, they became known as “images without people,” or “machine-images,” without human manipulation, transmitting the impression of precision and cleanliness – contrary to the “dirty-images,” or “counter-images,” standard in wars (mutilated bodies, corpses, and destruction).



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Placing the spectator at the center of the modulated image – the targets and supposed military targets – Weber turns the files recorded by the pilots into cinematographic content. Here, the very nature of the image, conditioned by surveillance and execution technology, deepens the perspective of elimination. As impressive as the biological trail and the possibility of viewing targets at extreme range, the silhouette generated by the images from hot springs does not undo the confusion with the human perspective. In the voice of the pilots, at various times, it is possible to see the installed doubt (and the abject joy) in recognition of targets and supposed targets. The military pilots scour the image generated by the technology of the helmets, looking for signs of violence and possible threats (weapons, suspicious gestures, etc.) – but no concrete threat, other than that produced by the aerial surveillance system, is actually seen throughout the film.

The present work is an analysis of the immersive and multi-screen format (the video installation *Incoming*) produced by the artist about contemporary refugee camps and the use of military archives generated by attack situations and surveillance by thermal tracking cameras in fighter planes and helicopters flown by Europeans and North Americans in attack missions, artistically reorganized in the context of the film *There Will Be No More Night* (2020).

<sup>5</sup> *Incoming*, in this sense, captures images mainly of two of the most critical routes used for the passage of populations in a migratory situation: the one known as the Turkish route, which begins with displacements of people from Syria, the Middle East, and Central Asia and which often ends at Tempelhof Airport in Berlin (converted into a shelter for refugees); and the one commonly established as the African route, set in motion by migrants coming from black Africa on their way through the Sahara desert towards Libya (usually through boats used to cross the turbulent waters of the Mediterranean towards Italy, Spain, etc.); in addition, the film ends with images of the port of Calais, in northern France, a place known for the Jungle Camp, temporary shelters that serve as the last port before crossing the channel towards England.

### INCOMING (RICHARD MOSSE, 2017)

Between 2014 and 2017, photographer and filmmaker Richard Mosse captured images of massive migrations of people, mainly from Africa and the Middle East, searching for refuge and shelter in European countries. Most of the time, coming from known migration routes and displaced by humanitarian disasters, civil wars, and disastrous political and social situations, migrants seek the southern borders of Europe to enter the continent, where they end up detained in temporary refugee camps<sup>5</sup>.

Using a high-tech thermographic camera with a qualified range of over 30 kilometers and use restricted to the military sphere, Mosse organizes thermal maps of migratory flows and focuses on heat as a figurative modulation. He develops, on an audiovisual and photographic level, a set of images documenting the experience of massive displacement and life in refugee camps in Greece and Germany (in addition to the Port of Calais, in France, where the film ends). The use of a sophisticated camera adapted for filmic technology (steady-cam, telephoto zoom), accompanied by a musical score and cinematographic montage,

creates *Incoming* (2017), an immersive video installation that proposes a vigorous aesthetic narrative defined by heat specters, similar to the X-ray effect, which conforms undetectable images transforming them into biopolitical modulations (Beiguelman, 2021).

Developed jointly with cameraman Trever Tweeten and musician and composer Ben Frost, the work is a multichannel installation that scales the minimal biological registers produced by body heat (map heats), invisible to the human eye, in a cinematographic montage. The thermal monitoring camera explores the remaining human biological spectrum in the surveillance system's military effect. It marks the spectrographic work by imposing a narrative based on thermal detection (rather than through sound and/or image).

The video installation conceived by Mosse, programmed for immersive rooms and audiovisual use, is projected onto three large screens (8 meters). It was exhibited for the first time in 2017 at the Barbican art gallery in London, just before being published in a photobook<sup>6</sup>. Accompanying it is the photo exhibition, winner of the Prix Pictet, *Heat Maps* (2017), which exalts the figure of refugees on the contemporary geopolitical map based on the metamorphosis brought about by the reduction of the thermal sign. Invariably, it is accompanied by another composition, reproduced on sixteen panels forming a visual and acoustic architecture of great dimensional power, presented together in some galleries – called *Grid* (2017).

In the 52 minutes of video in three HD channels on the immersive screens, the work intertwines images of US planes flying over targets of ISIS fighters – in a military operation conducted in the Syrian city of Dabiq, a few kilometers from the border with Turkey –, with images of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, and missiles launched against enemy positions and fires caused by bombs and movement of military troops carried out during the night. The film is completed with images of search and rescue missions for African refugees in the Mediterranean Sea, in addition to scenes from temporary reception camps: images from refugee camps on the island of Lesbos and Lampedusa, sequences shot at the temporary shelter for immigrants at the former Tempelhof airport, in Germany; and images of the Port of Calais, in France, the final passage of the composition.

The film's opening is structured with scenes of guided missiles used to bomb strategic objectives by the United States Army. The film also depicts flights of helicopters and jet planes in the skies over Syria and nearby countries. The images from the island of Rhodes, in Greece, present the second movement

<sup>6</sup>The eponymous work *Incoming* (MOSSE, 2017).

# A

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of the visual organization, being possible to see in generally distant shots the gestures of the rescue teams and the population removed from the rescue boats attended. It is possible to observe images of some of the faces of the immigrants from the sea crossing, taken with the adapted telephoto lens but protected from identification because of the thermal camera.

The sequence of assistance provided by a rescuer to some of these refugees is, in this sense, quite revealing: the hypothermia of the bodies of the rescued immigrant's contrasts with the caloric impression of the rescue agent's hands (Figure 1), which covers the bodies of the immigrants with blankets and aluminum blankets while trying to massage them. Dark shadows that signal human heat can be seen in the rescuer's hands printed on the flanks of the boat and the blankets used. At the same time, it is possible to notice almost no sign of heat in the subjects lying there (we can imagine how cold these bodies are in the thermal difference exposed by the heat detection camera).

### Figure 1

Richard Mosse – *Photogram of Incoming*. Video installation on three screens (7.1 sound, 52 min 10 sec)



<sup>7</sup> Digital chromogenic print on metallic paper, #100 (2014-2017). Retrieved from <http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2019/richard-mosse-incoming.html>.

Note. Source: *Incoming*, Richard Mosse<sup>7</sup>

In the same cinematographic movement, a second scene, captured with telephoto images, structures a second striking sequence. In an autopsy room, a camera-mediated dissection is performed on a child's body, a drowning victim. We see the removal of part of the femur for DNA extraction, shots of the child's

skull, and the sound of the electric saw used for the procedure<sup>8</sup>. The thermal modulation of the images produced by Mosse allows us to witness the arduous process, in a sense close to the coding displayed in films with animated content or in documentaries that use partially or entirely animated configurations (Honest, 2013) to respond to sensitive viewings.

The traumatic and unbearable experience of the scene is covered by the coded access allowed by the thermal camera. In a transversal way, the effect and indexing of the image apprehended from the heat points to an exhibition that is simultaneously more testimonial and less invasive. In this sense, the approach structured by figuration in thermal capture interacts with the cinematographic image, imposing a thread of expression that artistically warns and allows watching the complex discourse. In this case, the thermal specters generate imaginary information that rebalances the thematic tension, confronting painful scenes without losing their indexing power (essentially, fraying their symbolizing effect). Indeed, by making the invisible and/or difficult visible and modulated, Mosse's thermal forms developed in narrative and cinematographic language are sources of transmissibility defined by the symbolizable gap: they show the relationship with reality that is difficult to narrate.

In this sense, balancing the interstice between documentary and contemporary installation, *Incoming* questions the role of border control agencies, which employ sophisticated military equipment and explore hypermodern surveillance technologies to produce an essentially legal-police reading (Nash, 2005) of human displacement (in search of humanitarian aid). Such agencies, e.g., Frontex in the European Union and ICE in the United States, extensively use sophisticated military technologies adapted for border surveillance. In the case of Frontex, which specializes in using drones for aerial coverage, as Saugman (2019) exposes, multiple reports have exposed the problematic relationship between the agency's mercenary activities and European funding.

In Mosse's film, there are shots of faces, but they are all protected by thermal disfigurement. The subjects are seen in the "fantasy of a panoptic visibility of the world" (Lavoie, 2020) but also structured in a "denaturalized" image that, in a way, implies an unconventional contrast of reality. This outline is partly an excavation or deepening of the visible/invisible dynamic structured in the film – which is also found in the mass exodus of refugees and immigrants, known through statistics and very little through personal narratives.

<sup>8</sup>The viewing of the film available in live narration by the director mentions that the victim is a seven or eight-year-old girl who died along with other immigrants in a multiple drowning off the coast of Greece (11 min 25 sec). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3iWMihBtmuk>-Live Narration of *Incoming* by Richard Mosse



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**Figure 2**

Richard Mosse – *Photogram of Incoming*. Video installation on three screens (7.1 sound, 52 min 10 sec)



<sup>9</sup>Digital chromogenic print on metallic paper, #281 (2014-2017). Retrieved from <http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2019/richard-mosse-incoming.html>

Note. Source: *Incoming*, Richard Mosse<sup>9</sup>

In the body of the film, the following sequence is images of groups of young people and children walking around the facilities and playing at Tempelhof airport in Germany. Formerly created by Albert Speers as part of the futuristic Nazi city in the 1930s and later abandoned for several decades inside a civic park in Berlin, it is now, from 2007, converted into an improvised shelter for refugees. It is the only moment in the film where we see domestic footage shot close by and with the people's permission<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>10</sup>According to Richard Mosse, the scenes were recorded for two weeks in the local structure, with notices about the days and times of filming, in addition to the authorization of the immigrants (41 min 13 sec). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3iWMihBtmuk>

Scenes appear of children playing in the spaces of the place, in addition to the daily work of immigrants, in an attempt to organize an environment that does not have the minimum conditions for survival, without electricity and basic sanitation. Located in the middle of a tree-lined area of a park in Berlin, the site has an impact due to the relationship between the ruins of the airport, with the landscape dimension associated with the controversial public and political use of the former “topography of terror” (Huysen, 2014) in Berlin. With authorization to record and with the thermographic camera close to the people, the film excerpt presents a significant relationship between memory, absence, and invisibility. It is the new migrants within Europe that, after Auschwitz, show that governments still do not know what to do with the massive populations of refugees. Within these critical and forceful sequences, the film produces the possibility of debate



on the politics of meaning, the imaginary of belonging (the visible and invisible migratory bodies when inside and outside borders), and the ghosts of European history – especially the German one.

As the entire film is about the human body and the relationship between (protected) identity and identification (reduced to thermal flux), the images taken in the former airport facilities mirror-inverted projections of the relationship between surface, transparency, and biographical (non)detection. The artistic appropriation conceived by Mosse breaks with the militarized proposition initially understood in the use of the camera and the “cold images” generated from biological heat. When looking for closer views of the bodies and faces of the immigrants, the camera becomes an *a priori* mediation that, on the one hand, extinguishes or attenuates the physiognomies and, on the other hand, accentuates the invisible characteristic of the refugees, placing them as spooky and disturbing figures.

In the case of immigrants, who seek the borders of Europe to get help that only arrives in a precarious or emergency way, distancing (from bodies and people) is one of the most defining characteristics because, as Tramontana (2018) writes, successive migratory crises have been gaining the western agenda only when the catastrophe acquires epic proportions<sup>11</sup>.

The last movement of the diegesis deals with the scenes captured when crossing the Sahara Desert in the Libyan region and with images taken (Figure 2) in the Port of Calais in France. The convoys of immigrants that cross the desert region in large trucks for days are displayed in images captured from a long-range, again using thermal cartography to structure the mass exodus. The legibility of the images produced, always with a hypnotizing and spectral effect, in a slow and grandiloquent action of temporality, allows us to reorganize the perceptive sense, re-dimensioning the look on the biological spectrum and the founding subjective (dis)identification (how we structure and access narratives about migratory bodies).

According to the images of the departure of the convoys from the city of Agadez, in Libya, and the trucks full of people, in Mosse’s report in the live narration<sup>12</sup>, it is known that most of them will not be able to stay in vehicles, which do not stop if someone falls from them). The images are impactful by how human bodies are visualized (similar to hordes of ghosts expanding toward a violent destiny). In Mosse’s artistic proposal, the dystopian scene merges with the iconographic and photojournalistic reformulation commonly associated with migratory flows. In this sense, in the final section of the diegesis, the apparatus with a military purpose reveals the legal-police intentionality of the European border control regime, which sells rescue images<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>11</sup>For immigrants and refugees who die practically daily in the Mediterranean and reception camps, most bodies are not recovered; The author shows that the reported cases of drowning immigrants are much lower than the number of people who disappear along these maritime borders.

<sup>12</sup>Director’s live narration retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3iWMihBtmuk> (50 min 02 sec).

<sup>13</sup>According to Hussein Baoumi, Amnesty International’s Libya researcher: “European countries are cooperating and are directly complicit in the military approach to displaced people. They want to separate themselves from the dirtiest aspects of containing migrants. It doesn’t matter.” Retrieved from [https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/drones-frontex-funciona-maquinarria-europea-devuelve-migrantes-libia\\_130\\_8528417.html](https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/drones-frontex-funciona-maquinarria-europea-devuelve-migrantes-libia_130_8528417.html).



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Mosse's film thus reorganizes the aesthetic experience into the field of the political image yet to be made. It points to the duality of the machine – of restrictive and military technology equipment – highlighting the disproportionality of the observation and the impeded dynamics between *territorialism* and displacements. Migrant subjects assumed as specters “without real consistency and an individual face” (Lavoie, 2020), are captured in *Incoming* as they move into the biopolitical question: they are seen as targets in an enemy lens, reduced to their thermal traces unreachable by the naked eye, and raised to the gesture of having their bodies exposed (and their identities made invisible). Ultimately, the film's migratory subjects are reborn in the artistic appropriation that highlights in narratives of heat how surveillance technologies show the geopolitical disorganization of the refugee issue within European states (in a Europe that, according to history, should be the first to know how to host).

In a certain way, in the milky and ghostly gravity produced by the film, the “real” bodies assume themselves in front of a figuration that overcomes the military detection of the costly apparatus. The specters that cross the borders to Europe, as in the poem by Niki Giannari (Didi-Huberman & Giannari, 2017), become, individually and collectively, “creatures that ask for passage” and, also, they remind, when asking to enter, the commitment and co-responsibility between “persecutor” and “persecuted.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>“With a desire\that nothing  
can conquer, neither exile  
nor confinement nor  
death\orphans, weary\  
hungry, thirsty, disobedient  
and obstinate, secular and  
sacred, arrived, undoing  
nations and bureaucracies\  
and pose here, they wait  
and ask nothing\just pass”  
(Didi-Huberman;Giannari,2017).

### THERE WILL BE NO MORE NIGHT (ÉLÉONORE WEBER, 2020)

Filmmaker Éléonore Weber's documentary comprises material recorded by the US and French armies in operations to track, identify, and execute targets from remote areas in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. Available on the internet (appearing in the film's credits), the recordings used by the filmmaker are thermographic images visualized in the high-tech helmets used by military pilots, who have no other vision than those produced by technological devices.

According to the filmmaker<sup>15</sup>, most of the videos available on YouTube were posted by US Army veterans (according to the director, at 24 min 33 sec, French and English videos are rare), released mainly after cyberactivism actions by WikiLeaks. The organization brands some of the materials that appear in the film and are records from various anonymous sources. The famous sequences of the American Apache helicopter, where it is possible to follow the execution of twelve people (including two Reuters journalists) in Baghdad during air strikes in Iraq in 2007, are used in one of the most critical moments of the diegesis. (We see the execution in total).

<sup>15</sup>Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8G5yk5o9t3Q>  
(21 min 16 sec).

Most of the records come from night missions, generally carried out in remote areas and spaces of conflict and taken at great distances by NATO fighter jets and military helicopters. They are inscribed in a deadly relationship between monitoring and elimination. Pilots use powerful thermal and night vision cameras to qualify individuals in suspicious actions by observing movement on the ground from the heat emitted by the detection. During missions, images generated from extreme ranges create shadows or visual silhouettes, transforming spaces/landscapes, people, and animals into abstract patches of light and dark, which, rather than solving, confuse identification<sup>16</sup>.

The stained and shiny figures seem to hide an emerging phantasmagoria when seen through the thermographic camera: throughout the filmic flow, constructed with images from operations recorded by the pilots themselves (sequences without editing, derived from night vision cameras), biological traces prevail about human signs. Instrumentally, they focus on the relationship between seeing (enemies) and identifying (people), turning almost everything into a target. In a sense, they are images of perpetrators (Brink & Oppenheimer, 2012), developed in a relationship between the act of seeing and the gesture of killing. This disposition turns the generated contents, mainly in a strange and diffuse black and white, almost always presented with sound intercessions (produced by the muffled noise of the helicopters), a silent and denatured narrative, which confuses the interpretation. They generate a kind of sonic bubble, where only the sound of the propellers and the noise of the machine guns is heard, interspersed with the voices of the pilots, who find it difficult to perceive the action behind the spotlights and bright intensities – and from a universe of shadows. Due to the technical specificity of visual processing and the fact that most images are taken at night, taken at great distances, the excess light and optical scanning confuse visualization – deepening the boundary between what is seen and what can be seen and its relation to reality.

In the pilots' position, with the same visual concomitance and detection technology, in addition to the audio generated by the aircraft, the visualized specter's structure modulated images, as frightening as "beautiful as video games" (Farocki, 2013). This perspective, in a way, makes the distinction between technical processes and visual functioning coincide, producing images without a counter shot on the "border between two fields of force" (Daney, 1991)<sup>17</sup>.

Thermal technology, which allows "eliminating the night" (Weber, 2020) and deepening the technological distances between persecutors and the persecuted, does not resist the paradox pointed out by Farocki (2013). Through the "image-machine," the disproportionality of instruments and the signs of violence are even more alarming. What emerges on the pilots' technological

<sup>16</sup>In the testimony of the French soldier Pierre V. (19 min 02 sec), the film's main witness, and in the voices of the aircraft pilots themselves, it is possible to follow this confusion constantly.

<sup>17</sup>In the final passage of the film (at 72 min 01 seconds), the director's narrative text, in addition to being beautiful and poetic, points in this direction: "More recent cameras will be able to suppress the night. Only the stars can disturb this visualization because they shine a lot (more than the exposed denatured luminosity). There will therefore be no more nights. Nor the need for light bulbs. Not far, not close. No openings, no reports. They will be images impossible to distinguish between faces, without reciprocity, without face to face" (Weber, 2020).

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display transforms visual activity into *de-subjectivized* and anesthetic surfaces, protected by kilometric distance and the sonic barrier (pilots hear only the aircraft's noise and the machine gun's sound).

**Figure 3**

*Éléonore Weber – Photogram of There Will Be No More Night*



<sup>18</sup>Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CBJgANNYJE>

Note. Source: *There Will Be No More Night*, Éléonore Weber <sup>18</sup>.

On the border between image and ignorance, the shapes conceived in light cutouts deepen the imminent indexing, and increase, for the pilots, the commitment to prospecting and finding suspects. The surveillance program coincides with the elimination program between image, thermal index, and ignorance. In the voice of the pilots, explored in the diegesis, we observe the confusion between peasants and combatants, between weapons and tools, and between role-playing games and everyday situations – and between intentionality and representation. The modulated vision seen by the soldiers from kilometric and protected heights (Figure 3) delineates a *sign* processing field that prevents contrast with the actual vision, installing the justification of war: combat and terror. On the thermal imagery of long-range images, the reality presented in sophisticated helmets is structured in a possibility of interfering with or diagnosing the real from the representation.

The first sequences shown in the film show this: the luminous and ghostly figures that appear in the eyes of the pilots are, rather than people engaged

in different activities, characters situated in an atmosphere where everything is read in a code of violence. In the pilots' audio, the recorded conversations between the pilot and the aircraft gunner seek to diagnose everyday actions: the strange movements of vehicles, the houses generally located in rural and remote surroundings, and people's attitudes in the middle of the night. Here, the night is "opened up" by the discovery's authenticity, which considers visual exploration a suspicious way of seeing. In this sense, specters are subjects without faces, which need to be extinguished. Visuality intensified by light creates a disproportion of metamorphoses that does not eliminate the difference between the real and its double but reorganizes perception through living substances (to be killed) and suspicious ones (to justify the recording).

The pilots are confused and in a role game. They focus on potential enemies, who hide their weapons in suspicious fields and landscapes, always disguised and ready to attack. The stealthy bodies in the night, lost on dirt roads and around houses, are much more than Afghan and Iraqi fighters, characters from a video game – and a world of specters and biopower (Beiguelman, 2021). Figures, or light effects, dimensioned in terms of abstraction and biological reduction. For the pilots, the recorded images are full of disclosure and feed the paranoia of surveillance (in an imagery cloak that hides the simulation and the traces of its symbolization). Contaminated by thermal transformation, the image generated in *There Will Be No More Night* is, rather than a condition (innuendo), a content (live-action) determined to be authentic. The real transformed into surveillance and suspicion.

Contrary to what happens in video games, the technological clothing presented in the film is not based on a sensory fantasy. It is used as a breakthrough or a technical advantage (see at night), focusing reality on a biological, anamorphic, vestigial – and terribly deadly – emphasis in the military program. Its strategy of presenting itself as real, without the contrast with the visual distinction (without any division between light and dark, day and night, and between reality and suspicion), takes everything into the context of staging violence. The possibility of transforming reality, difficult and undetectable, into limiting modulations does not convey, in Weber's film, its associative and sensorial disposition.

The thermal cameras intensify the light sources and program a surveillance universe that does not make images, understanding them as covered surfaces. It presents them with openness: emancipation from their human, physiognomic dimensions, and ethnic traces. The images are transferred to the place of reality, like light specters, (in)sensitive forms displaced from their surroundings, and immersed in a context of bellicose accentuation. As Català (2012) writes,

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the image is always a way of pointing out and hiding the real. This notion is erased in technological helmets, as caloric modulation projects images of “iridescent,” ghostly, and luminous figures, where the real is summoned as delirium.

Twenty-four minutes into the film structure, the first sequence that shows a live execution performed from an American helicopter displays this murderous intensity. The shots are fired by the gunner from the aircraft, which matches the pilot’s vision - and with the machine guns of the apparatus<sup>19</sup>. The essayistic and interrogative narration of Weber’s text questions the use of force, the disproportion, and the inequality of technologies. We see the pilots firing until their bodies dissolve into patches of light, sprawled across the floor. The feeling is strange, as there are no murdered bodies, but specters of thermal light transformed into smears of blood on the dark ground. Pierre V., the pilot of the French fleet who acts as a consultant on some of these recorded sequences, responds to the filmmaker that, even if there is confusion, “when one starts shooting, it is difficult to stop.” In this case, it is possible to listen to the pilots’ audio, the sound of the helicopters’ rods, and the relationship between image, performance, and violence. The scene is, in a way, marked by the distortion that exists in the technological display, which accepts the image as if it had never been encoded. The image is, here, a transparency, a disposition of approach in which each instant is a register and an index of warning.

<sup>19</sup>As the voice-over explains, helicopters usually have a crew of two soldiers: pilot and gunner. The gunner’s vision coincides with the movement of the thermal chamber, also moving the machine gun installed at the base of the aircraft. Simple verbal commands bring the possibility of shooting.

### Figure 4

Éléonore Weber – *Photogram of There Will Be No More Night*



<sup>20</sup>Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CBIgANNYjE>

Note. Source: *There Will Be No More Night*, Éléonore Weber<sup>20</sup>.



The elimination of the Reuters agency reporters appears in a different sequence, in an episode that became well known due to the material made available by an anonymous source on WikiLeaks. The filmmaker's gesture, appropriating the material and making it be viewed more than once, allows the viewer to become more aware of the killing action: the camera tripod of one of the journalists is mistaken for weaponry, and the execution goes forward. The scene shows the cadence of the helicopter and the repeated flyover until it finds the targets around a house, ending in destruction. In the action contingent, the thermal and saturated image serves the illusionist purpose: it cannot erase the difference between real bodies and spectral modulation, designating a simultaneously bellicose and ghostly identification.

Choosing to return to the material twice and making the spectator an accomplice, Weber comments in the voice-over narrative text that accompanies the sequence: "There is always someone behind the camera ... there is always someone who asks permission to shoot." Pierre V., the anonymous pilot who examines some of the film's sequences, refers to this passage in particular: "The more the pilot can see, the more risk there is." In the sequence below, structured from the fifty-two minutes of the filmic flow, we observe two aircraft circling, with the thermal resource and the possibility of zooming, a group of individuals digging a part of the ground. Positioned in a circle, crouched, and making an effort to open the ground, they are accompanied by helicopters in the distance (they do not realize that they are being filmed). With the pilots speaking, who react when there is an impactful explosion, we witness the power of elimination. In this case, a crater is formed because of what is supposedly the deflagration of a homemade bomb that was on the ground. There is rejoicing in the pilots, who are not the perpetrators of the execution, but who exchange enthusiastic comments about the explosion. On the open ground, around a large opening, nothing is left but debris from the blast (shed as shards of light). An individual approaches puts his hand on his head, and searches among the victims' signs.

The power of execution and the logic of biopower (Beiguelman, 2021) return in the set of later files and characterize the final passage of the film. The luminous halos return under the lens of the technological helmet, and we watch more images of elimination. After several shots had eliminated his companions, we observed the death of a man crouched and looking for protection behind a vehicle in the middle of a field in a remote area. The scene is brutal because the subject crawls, wounded, and the machine guns spare no effort: his body is reduced to a patch of light, after which a large cloud of dust caused by the artillery fire finishes dissipating. There is no commentary among the pilots. Just silence. Furthermore,





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the sound of the helicopters also captured on the desert floor (now closer to the targets). The luminous dust as a piece of war recalls the logic of the Nazi extermination, pointed out by Primo Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1990). The Nazis forbade their soldiers to call the funeral remains of the concentration camp “corpses” or “cadavers.” They designated the dead as *figuren*, final, skeletal forms scrutinized by the industrial killing mechanism. Here, the figures are destroyed and become luminous spots. Incandescent puddles that, for a few moments, before disappearing on the dark ground, can only be seen through the pilots’ technological display.

The last scenes, made with domestic archives, produce a figurative fracture (a devolution of the image) in a film with no bodies and physiognomies but contours and dissolved profiles (atrocious luminous spots that spread on a floor of death). At that moment, it is possible to perceive the contrast and the uncomfortable compensation with another body, that of the spectator. The sayable and unspeakable repair of the last images, saved by the organization of a human visibility that contains faces, physiognomies, bodies, and clothes (garments), safeguards and challenges the subsequent violence. By the filmmaker’s choice, bringing archives of records of homemade scenes made available by the military, we see happiness, audibility, and a world without pain gathered. Totally different from the sequences produced by thermal cameras, which open up other reciprocity – non-existent, unequal, and opposite.

As Comolli (2006) writes, we are, therefore, facing the politics of the image. The visual enunciation that, by triggering the mixture between the living and the dead in an unbalanced and atrocious *continuum*, does not relate the deceased to their human likeness. In Weber’s film, this happens with the possibility of being urged by the ripping and the luminous stain that dissolves the traced figures without any possibility of projecting oneself into them; in the filmed body, which, unlike the bodies produced by the Nazi concentration camp, is neither a corpse nor a figure, neither a subtraction nor a statue (or a body in pain); just a dissolved sign, an imperfect blur, destined to have no inscription.

A stain, circumstantial and provisional, which is no longer a disturbance. It is no longer an image, which cannot be a thing and a portrait to be seen. Just disappearing. Resigned, sliding, and residues of elimination.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS – BIOMETRY AND HEAT NARRATIVES

The artistic dimension of Richard Mosse’s work is processed in the redefinition of the images generated by the military surveillance and documentation apparatus: a camera that intentionally captures camouflaged bodies in the landscapes

and reveals them from primordial biological traces. In cinematic dynamics, Mosse exposes testimonial images (but testimonials based on the conceived disfigurement) that narrate visual monitoring and the anonymized presence of immigrants. Such disfigurement, intended as an original aesthetic effect, calls into question the traditional typology associated with the theme. Often captured in the dark, the images shock by fraying the *modus operandi* of photojournalistic images commonly used to address the subject (Chouliaraki & Tijana, 2017; Santos & Teixeira, 2019).

Mosse's work, in effect, inscribes these images, most captured from a great distance, in an aesthetic and analytical dimension that shows how the epistemic figure of the refugee in the contemporary world is seen mainly from the perspective of the biopolitical logic of surveillance, impediment, and power.

Mosse's film, in effect, works with aesthetic experience and figurative modulation in images that undermine the "verification" of the surveillance structure and the will to detect. The aesthetic transformation – in thermal specters – carries on its surface an image of a more substantial, political content, which allows knowledge (biographical, subjective) to be traversed. Outside the image, on the freer side of "clothing technology," the duality of the machine scrutinizes a path to be highlighted: the heat takes care of observation, and observation is a postponement.

In this sense, the image is an imminence, a camouflage that deprives surveillance of its genealogical and machinic purpose. In artistic fraying, heat narratives disorganize the experience of representation from the singular aesthetic experience (heat as a source and as a modular interstice).

The caloric modulations built in *Incoming* create vanishing points that combine deeply dehumanized images or humane in their elemental appeal (biological data). The bodies are at the same time index and metaphor (Lavoie, 2020), showing the political subjects detained in refugee camps and in the attempt to cross European borders. Therefore, the biological intimacy impossible to be seen by the human eye serves as a central element in the filmic organization, revealing the work of the body (and often the despair and pain) underneath the images of the subjects that cross borders.

As Demos (2013) writes, the image of world migrants often goes through an alarmist circuit and a discourse of sealing borders. Technological devices have gained increasing sophistication with all military technology, being able to detect bodies at a great distance, but not being able to activate and return us to the position, uncomfortable and critical, in the face of the exposure of people (reduced to thermal signs and media and photojournalistic images).



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On the other hand, filmmaker Éléonore Weber's film produces a different articulation of the use of thermographic narrative (from military files recorded by aircraft pilots in surveillance and combat missions). Similar to animation images, modulated by the alternative and symbolizing relationship of visuality (and also harmful and *scopophilic* of the audience), Weber's film is composed of the (non)neutrality of the camera, which, in its desire to see/predict, pursue and execute, terrifyingly updates the dynamics of the elimination of people.

The filmmaker's gesture, choosing known files that circulate without restriction on the internet, acting with texts, speeches, and sequential repetitions of the material found, highlights the murderous visuality that engenders complex assistance and frightening perception. The possibility of "seeing everything" of the pilots' actions, and, at the same time, the easy deception between figures (or specters) and people (or threats), builds a committed relationship with reality, seen through the visor or technological helmet of the pilots (chosen among the best gamer shooters). The visual forms qualified by the thermal camera, rather than aesthetic modulations, are perceived as a technological opening (an effect of panoptic advantage, which presents an "apparent and hidden world" transported into the real universe. Such a procedure induces a determined vigilant interpretation of the pilots, voracious for distinguishing threats (and for killing)<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>21</sup>Introducing "an eye of an eyelid that never closes. An endless eye" (Weber, 2020).

Unlike Richard Mosse's video installation, which is constructed without narrative accompaniment or dialogue, Weber's work explores the cold neutrality of the pilots and their *in situ* commentary. He tries to interpret the images generated by the camera, which coincide with the pilot's vision and the machine guns and weapons of annihilation.

The two works, within their distinct visualization procedures and processes (multi-screen installation accompanied by a photographic series and documentary that feeds on material accessible in video recorded by pilots), are aesthetic experiences that circumscribe surveillance images, and the discussion about their placement (deadly and compromising), in cinematographic fraying. Together with the narrative and poetic text produced by Weber, sometimes comparing the video essay format and Mosse's immersive multi-screen experience, it is possible to observe the gamification of contemporary war and the panoptic and hegemonic structure that transforms the image into a police force of violence. ■

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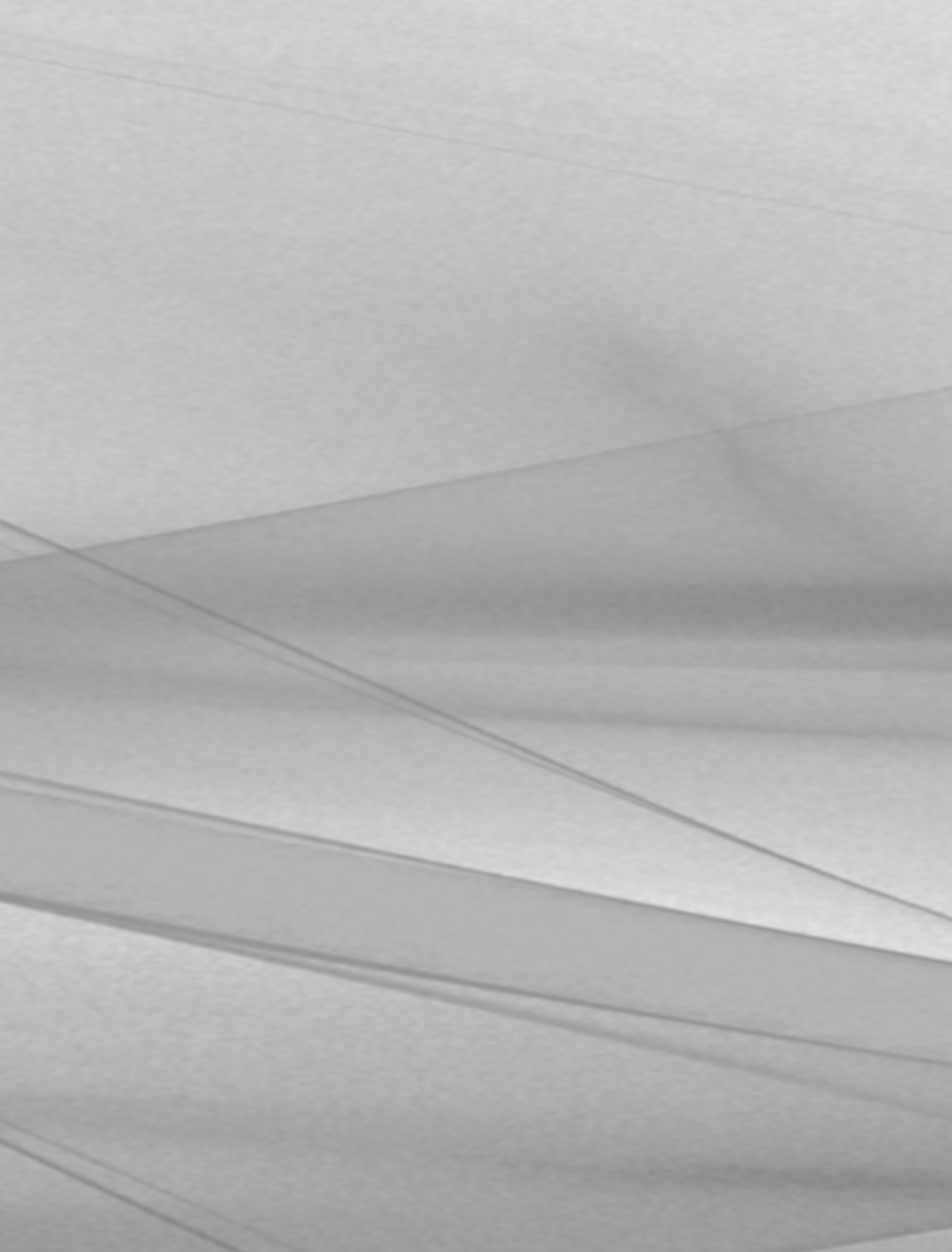
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# 1 R D REVIEW







# The gaze as a vector of thought and jouissance

## *O olhar como vetor do pensamento e do gozo*

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### ABSTRACT

In *A Superindústria do Imaginário: como o capital transformou o olhar em trabalho e se apropriou de tudo que é visível*, Eugênio Bucci worked on the topic for a third of a century, proposing to reconfigure and broaden the imbrication of linguistics and psychoanalysis in communication—transformed into the core of a data-extracting capitalism which circulates them as commodities (especially among advertisers), influencing the information flow so dear in times of unrelenting spread of fake news. Hence, the gaze as an axis acting in secret circuits configures an act of language. In fanciful societies, subjects, as if puppets, have their thoughts replaced by the gaze to, at last, find *jouissance*.

**Keywords:** Super-industry, imaginary, capital, gaze, *jouissance*.

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### RESUMO

Em *A Superindústria do Imaginário: como o capital transformou o olhar em trabalho e se apropriou de tudo que é visível*, Eugênio Bucci se debruçou sobre o tema por um terço de século e propõe reconfigurar e exponenciar a imbricação da linguística e da psicanálise na comunicação – transformada em centro do capitalismo extrator de dados, circulando-os como mercadoria, sobretudo entre os propagandistas, influenciando no fluxo da informação, tão cara em tempos de um espalhamento desmedido de *fake news*. Assim, o olhar, como um vórtice que atua em circuitos secretos, é um ato de linguagem. Afinal, em sociedades fantasiosas, o sujeito, como uma espécie de brinquedo, tem seu pensamento substituído pelo olhar para, ao final, encontrar o gozo.

**Palavras-chave:** Superindústria, imaginário, capital, olhar, gozo.



BUCCI, Eugênio. (2021). *A Superindústria do Imaginário: como o capital transformou o olhar em trabalho e se apropriou de tudo que é visível*. Autentica.

WHEN OUR EYES or our ears linger onto something—whether text, audio, video, etc—, the dutiful invisible algorithm inside our gadgets scans, captures and records data to reinforce the cast of our former profile, continuously analyzed, moves and shifted to bubbles, indefinitely. Time spent gazing, reading or listening is counted. If applications that, when installed, places us in front of where we stopped so that we can resume gazing from that point, without losses, the monitoring teams of platforms, portals, websites and applications know exactly if we reached the end or if we abandoned it halfway. One can ‘circumvent’ them by opening something and leaving it on the background while doing another concomitant activity, especially when we are in listener mode and experience the following reproductions as listening *flanêurs*; however, ‘they’ count on this probabilistic flaw.

That is why, nowadays, we are concerned with quickly scrolling through our networks’ timelines, channels and pages that we open daily. Are we pushing the issue? No. If we arrest our gaze to admire a beautiful body (as we do on the streets); or when tired of our miserable routines we click on a cute animal video (as we relax by caressing our pets); or even waste time reading or watching a livestream about another government atrocity (as when we stopped at a newsstand to leaf through the newspapers)—we are done for. Cyberspace offers no escape: we will continue to receive more and more of the same to entice our gazing. Birds of a feather gaze at something together. Such experience is evident even for those who do not investigate Internet user behaviors when ads and advertisements for things related to our daily searches begin to abound. Some people even stop ‘googling’ to avoid receiving an avalanche of related advertisements—what is worse, for endless months. We thus end up seeing ‘sponsored material’ of what social networks think we want or need to see, and the algorithm often gets it right.

Eugênio Bucci needs no further introduction. A full professor at the School of Communications and Arts, University of São Paulo, Bucci has books published in the field of communication and is considered a reference in Journalism studies. Known to the newspaper-reading public for his column in *Estadão*, the journalist makes blunt criticisms in his appraisals of the political state of the art, all written in painstaking prose whose power of attraction captivates even those who least interested in the subject.

Those who read *Videologias: ensaios sobre televisão* (2004) [Videologies: essays on television], written in partnership with psychoanalyst Maria Rita Kehl, will have a better understanding of Bucci’s most recent book, *A Superindústria*

*do Imaginário: como o capital transformou o olhar em trabalho e se apropriou de tudo que é visível* [The Super-industry of the Imaginary: how capital transformed the gaze into work and appropriated everything that is visible], published in 2021 by Autêntica. The work amplifies ideas previously outlined, updates concepts, adds other biases and, at the same time, proves to be a necessary reading so that we are not engulfed by this ‘super-industry,’ this monopoly of capital over the imaginary, and so that we know how to avoid it.

Reading its almost 500 pages is far from a walk in the park, as effort is demanded from the observer’s gaze, but this journey is mitigated by a light writing, illustrated with stories such as that of a headless philosopher or of a Tamagotchi player, with music lyrics and other uncountable examples typical of a teacher, providing all readers (students or not) with parameters to understand. Attention should also be paid to the intertitles: a prime example of condensation proper of someone with mastery over language. From the very beginning, when analyzing and discussing the reasons underlying the power of the trillion-dollar big techs, the author’s style makes it easy to understand complex concepts and terms such as super-industrial spatialities or imaginary temporalities by exchanging and consequently disrupting the communication patterns from the instance of words in favor of the electronic and live image.

Bucci speaks pessimistically about the fragmented, uncertain and disposable subject; a subject cleaved in half. As is befitting the journalist (let us face it, writing easy is hard) and his experience as an editor, the fluid writing pours over the topics and makes the reading of such dense themes not as labyrinthine. This is especially clear in two chapters: one in which he details the 1960s Habermasian public sphere and its transformations into the global public telespace, explaining that it is not technology which expands the public sphere, “the driving force for expansion comes from the social and economic use of technology” (p. 51); and in the last chapter, when redefining the “exchange value of commodity, which under the empire of the image is now composed of the value of labor and also of the value of the gaze to conform the value of *jouissance*” (p. 30), in which he employs intellectual autonomy and enters the thorny field of psychoanalysis, even saying—as if apologizing—that his approach is informed by language and communication studies. Communication also gains a prestigious contribution with this book, with repercussions on the culture, imaginary and economy of the advent of super-industry, the predominant form of contemporary capitalism.

Bucci names this current phenomenon super-industry, but it could also be called hyperindustry, since we inhabit a hyper world in which one thing leads to another; or cyberindustry, as the cyberspace captures and co-opts the gaze. Importantly, as Bucci argues, we are not living in a post-industry reality,

but rather in a super-industry of everything, of what we imagine and will virtually imagine. Bucci's super-industry goes beyond the production of consumer goods and enter the imaginary.

But studies of the imaginary, or even of capitalism as an industry of the imaginary, especially in communication, involve other theoretical references. To focus on just three authors, who address the cultural-social imaginary to which Bucci refers, we first invoke Malena Contrera's diagnosis:

Discussions on how the process by which social media filter from the imaginary, from the noosphere, a series of contents and practices, reworking and re-signifying them to then repropose them to society, must be extended to present more clearly the importance of this relationship between media and imaginary in contemporary times (CONTRERA, 2021).

We can also highlight Byung-Chul Han's sphere of imaginary, when he argues that "digital communication is becoming more and more bodiless and faceless. Digitally restructures the Lacanian triad of real, imaginary, and symbolic. It dismantles the real and totalizes the imaginary" (2018, p. 45).

Cornelius Castoriadis (1991, p. 277) stresses the symbolic: "The social imaginary is, primordially, the creation of significations and the creation of the images and figures that support these significations. The relation between a signification and its supports (images or figures) is the only precise sense that can be attached to the term 'symbolic.'"

## EXPLOITING THE GAZE

In *A superindústria do imaginário*, Bucci investigates how and for how long our gaze lingers on things, how we choose what to gaze at, feeding back into what is being gazed upon and what this may entail. How the "labor of the gaze" produces meaning and generates value through the economy's—the data economy, attention economy—nerve center, made up by the core of what the author calls "global monopoly conglomerates" which deal with communication, the major 21st century science turned core of capitalism, using digital media as "a fuel and an extension."

According to Bucci, this super-industrial process has revolutionized capitalism and unveiled a totalitarianism that invades people's privacy without the slightest transparency. When the communicational paradigm shifted from the instance of printed words (mediated by the credibility of printed newspapers) to the instance of chewed-up audiovisual (the moving image, the live TV image),

we arrived, driven by the Internet and everything that stems from cyberculture, at the instance of lives, streaming and ephemeral viral memes.

Bucci outlines how this mutation takes place: since the mid-20th century, the capitalism that extracts our data, systematically and often without consent, and creates a space of control, ended up converting discourse and intimate information into commodities. Sometimes a fetishized commodity, as Karl Marx calls it in *The Capital*, one of the influences on this book, “[a] commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference” (Marx, 1985, apud Bucci, 2021, p. 347). In another passage, to understand the “physical relation between physical things,” Marx writes: “In the same way the light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself” (ibid., p. 353).

Commodity is a sign, an image, and, above all “what took center stage, or the foreground, was another kind of commodity,” Bucci infers, “a commodity that has no tangible physical body: signs, be they images or words. Contemporary capitalism is a sign manufacturer and a sign trader—corporeal things are no longer the center of value” (p. 21). In short, capitalism relegates corporeal commodities, endowed with some instrumental or practical utility, to the background.

For signs (visual or otherwise) to carry meaning, Bucci clarifies that they “need to have been incorporated into the active repertoire of the audience to which they are addressed. For this reason, they cannot only be under the strict control of the manipulator. This is what we mean by stating that, in the ‘culture industry,’ the consumer is the ideology” (p. 265).

Inquiring on how capital transformed and still transforms the gaze into labor is an appropriate and timely deduction to reflect on *what* and *whom* we gaze upon in the digital space, since our gaze algorithmically feeds the databases that platforms (the means of production), especially those obliquely incorporated by big techs, store about us to use in absentia, to pass on to advertising agencies, to sell products we neither need nor want, to direct political campaigns—especially to those still ‘on the fence’ on who to vote for. Bucci’s observation that capital appropriates everything that is visible, is an insightful statement and could also cover everything that is audible (or ‘hearable,’ if we are permitted the neologism), in short, visible, ‘hearable’ and given so freely as to arouse suspicion; but the naive are not suspicious. “This is how, as labor, capital buys social gaze: to construct the meanings of signs, images and visual discourses that it intends to put into circulation as commodity” (p. 23). Here, then, are the crucial points of how Bucci builds his theoretical field.

**USE VALUE, EXCHANGE VALUE, JOUISSANCE VALUE**

Bucci states that, as of the second half of the 20th century, capitalism underwent an accelerated mutation and the body of the commodity was replaced by its image, addressing the subject by desire rather than necessity. Thus, use value gave way to *jouissance* value. Such *jouissance* is more psychoanalytic than juridical, it has a function of *jouissance* (Lacanian expression), which Bucci involves and bases on a communication perspective. It is thus an imaginary *jouissance*, that is, a *jouissance* provided by the commodity, an industrially manufactured value as exchange value. After all, the *jouissance* value is fabricated by the social gaze, and clearly affords a *jouissance* value to the commodity. We come to *jouissance* habitually, without thinking about the value embodied, to try to appease our desires, fill our void, to have a sense of fulfillment. These are merely attempts because desires are never appeased, as Bucci notes. The super-industry swallows our desires.

The author makes a distinction by stating that it is not simply a super-industry of entertainment or spectacle, basing his argument on Guy Debord and his society of the spectacle. Rather, the imaginary deepens a feeling that triggers the secret circuit of each person's subjectivity and desires, resulting in Lacan's *jouissance* value, even though Bucci argues that the psychoanalyst never fully described the expression "as an economic category" (p. 361). Bucci has been working on this reflection for more than 25 years and, at first, he ignored it came from a Lacanian cogitation.

Bucci's thesis in *A Superindústria do Imaginário* stems from his doctoral research, defended in 2002 under advisement of Dulcilia Buitoni. Although Google has been storing our data since 1998, at that time technology platforms were far from being the tech giants of today. Bucci homes in on this current ubiquity of digital social networks in which users (as if addicted) have their free time exploited by producing signs, thinking they are just passing time or having fun while, deep down, lending their cashable gazes.

Early on, Bucci conceived capitalism as a mode of production based on images (and their fetishes), as discussed in the collection *Videologias*, in clear reference to Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*. In a previous book, Bucci and Kehl (2004, p. 23) searched for the "Lacanian *jouissance*" as a theoretical tool and critical basis to understand the continuities and ruptures of late stage capitalism. The authors already argued then that myths are "myths regarded," thus designating and criticizing television and its imaginary production which steals discourse "(verbal, visual, gestural), all 'natural' discourse, and gives it back to the speakers" (ibid., p. 19). The power exercised by TV at its height allowed us to see it as the decision-making mechanism which allowed "the capitalist

mode of production, transubstantiated in spectacle, is automatic reproduction.” Power, therefore, was the “supremacy of the spectacle.”

From then on, in tracing his trajectory, Bucci takes his investigation to extremes and recovers the step by step of the laborious task undertaken for more than two decades. He excels in transitioning from one thought to another, and we may celebrate this work that retraces his reflections and ideas, which are now available to you, the reader. So, be delighted, because, as Bucci says: “If there is any solution, it will go through politics. There is no way out outside of politics” (p. 417); democratic rules must be maintained, while there are no global regulations to reduce the power of big techs. I’ll stop here, leaving you with a quote so beautiful I would like to punctuate it with a heart eyes emoji, but as the author does not approve of emojis, we can appreciate its poetry: “Public space now resembles a vault, as big or as small as the blue sky that envelops the Earth” (p. 48-49). 🍷

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