

**ESTUDOS EM COMUNICAÇÃO**  
**COMMUNICATION STUDIES**  
**ESTUDIOS EN COMUNICACIÓN**  
**ÉTUDES EN COMMUNICATION**

REVISTA . REVIEW . REVISTA . MAGAZINE

Nº25 . VOL 2 . DEZ'2017





**EDITORS [EDITORES]**

João Carlos Correia (Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal)

Anabela Gradim (Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal)

**INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC BOARD [PAINEL CIENTÍFICO INTERNACIONAL]**

António Fidalgo (Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal)

Afonso Albuquerque (Universidade Federal Fluminense, Brasil)

Alfredo Vizeu (Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Brasil)

António Bento (Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal)

Ana Serrano Telleria (Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal)

Ana Catarina Pereira (Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal)

Barbie Zelizer (University of Pennsylvania, USA)

Catarina Rodrigues (Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal)

Catarina Moura (Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal)

Catarina Moura (Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal)

Cláudia Alvares (Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias Escola de Comunicação. Artes e Tecnologias da Informação, Portugal)

Colin Sparks (University of Westminster, United Kingdom)

Eduardo Camilo (Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal)

Eduardo Meditsch (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Brasil)

François Heinderyckx (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgique)

Elias Machado (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Brasil)

Francisco Costa Pereira (Escola Superior de Comunicação Social, Portugal)

Gil Ferreira (Universidade Católica Portuguesa)

Hélder Prior (Universidade de Brasília, Brazil)

Helena Sousa (Universidade do Minho, Portugal)

Ivone Ferreira (Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal)

Javier Díaz Noci (Universidad del País Vasco, España)

Jean Marc-Ferry (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Institut d'Études Européennes, Belgique)

João Pissarra Esteves (Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal)

João Canavilhas (Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal)

Joaquim Paulo Serra (Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal)

Jorge Pedro Sousa (Universidade Fernando Pessoa, Portugal)

José Bragança de Miranda (Universidade Lusófona ; Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal)

Liesbet van Zoonen (University of Amsterdam, Holanda)

Luís Costa Nogueira (Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal)

Manuel Pinto (Universidade do Minho, Portugal)

Mark Deuze (Indiana University, USA)

Maria João Silveirinha (Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal)

Marisa Torres Silva (FCSH, CIMJ, Portugal)

Mário Mesquita (Escola Superior de Comunicação Social de Lisboa, Portugal)

Marcos Palácios (Universidade Federal da Bahia, Brasil)

Martin Jay (University of California, Berkeley, USA)

Miguel Rodrigo Alsina (Universitat Pompeu Fabra, España)

Michael Gurevitch (University of Maryland, USA)

Nelson Traquina (Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal)

Nico Carpentier (Vrije Universiteit Brussel -VUB- , Katholieke Universiteit Brussel - KUB)

Nathalie Zaccai-Reyners (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgique)

Paula Espírito Santo (Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas, Universidade Técnica de Lisboa, Portugal)

Peter Dahlgren (Lunds Universitet, Sweden)

Pedro Coelho (SIC, Jornalista ; Investigador)

Ramón Salaverría (Universidad de Navarra, España)  
Stephen K. White (University of Virginia, EUA)  
Rosental Calmon Alves (University of Texas, USA)  
Steve Reese (University of Texas, USA)  
Susan Buck-Morss (Cornell University)  
Tito Cardoso e Cunha (Universidade da Beira Interior, Portugal)  
Todd Gitlin (Columbia University, USA)  
Xosé López García (Universidad Santiago de Compostela, España)

**GRAPHICAL DIRECTOR [DIREÇÃO GRÁFICA]**

Catarina Moura

**COLLABORATORS [COLABORADORES]**

Susana Costa, Filomena Matos, António Tomé e Manuela Penafria

**CREDITS [FICHA TÉCNICA]**

© Estudos em Comunicação [Communication Studies] – [www.ec.ubi.pt](http://www.ec.ubi.pt)  
LabCom.IFP – Comunicação, Filosofia e Humanidades [www.labcom-ifp.ubi.pt](http://www.labcom-ifp.ubi.pt)  
UBI – Universidade da Beira Interior – [www.ubi.pt](http://www.ubi.pt)

Universidade da Beira Interior – FAL/LabCom.IFP  
Rua Marquês D'Ávila e Bolama  
6201-001 Covilhã, Portugal

ISSN : 1646-4923

ISSN (suporte electrónico) : 1646-4974

DOI : 10.20287/ec

DOI nº 25, vol.2 : 10.20287/ec.n25.v2

Semestral periodicity [Periodicidade semestral]

Contacts [Contatos] : [joao.correia@labcom.ubi.pt](mailto:joao.correia@labcom.ubi.pt), [anabela.gradim@labcom.ubi.pt](mailto:anabela.gradim@labcom.ubi.pt)

Manuscript Submission : October 18th, 2017

Acceptance Notification : December 4th, 2017

Publication : December 20th, 2017

A *Revista Estudos em Comunicação* é financiada por Fundos FEDER através do Programa Operacional Factores de Competitividade – COMPETE e por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia no âmbito do projeto *Comunicação, Filosofia e Humanidades (LabCom.IFP) UID/CCI/00661/2013*.



# Index [Índice]

<b>Introduction</b> <i>por</i> João Carlos Correia, André Barata & Anabela Gradim	1
<b>Digital humanities and practical memory: modelling textuality</b> <i>por</i> Arianna Ciula	7
<b>The humanities as allies: media studies and the web</b> <i>por</i> Peter Dahlgren	19
<b>An Ecosophical Inquiry into Digital Mediation and Design in Relation to Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in an ‘Expanded Field’ of ‘Agri-culture’</b> <i>por</i> Alastair Fuad-Luke	35
<b>The World of Design, a Designed World: the Relevance of Aesthetics for Everyday Life</b> <i>por</i> Anna Calvera	61
<b>A construção social da visibilidade</b> <i>por</i> Adriano Duarte Rodrigues	87
<b>Visibilidade e Legitimidade na Atual Ecologia Midiática</b> <i>por</i> Eugenia Maria Mariano da Rocha Barichello	99
<b>Visibility as a key concept in Communication and Media Studies</b> <i>por</i> Samuel Mateus	109
<b>A Computação do (In)Visível – Imagem, Ideologia e Neocibernética</b> <i>por</i> Rui Matoso	125
<b>Communication and Humanities: a post-conventional approach</b> <i>por</i> João Carlos Correia	143
<b>The Limits of the Human Mean the Limits of Humanities</b> <i>por</i> André Barata	153



## Introduction

João Carlos Correia, André Barata & Anabela Gradim

*Universidade da Beira Interior*

E-mail: joao.correia@labcom.ubi.pt / abarata@ubi.pt / agradim@gmail.com

**R**ETHINKING Humanities was a set of events of a strong epistemological nature envisaging the interdisciplinary exploration between several areas of the humanities, taking into account, in particular, the digital context.

It comprised the organization of two milestone events. The first in 2015, focused on a more exploratory content that tried to identify the contribution from various perspectives: Sociology of Communication and Media Studies, Philosophy, Design and Aesthetics. Simultaneously, there were incursions of a more practical type expressed in direct applications of the Humanities crossings around the curatorship of Art, book publishing and agricultural and food practices. The limits of the Human were taken beyond its traditional questioning to focus on the anthropological concept of culture itself.

This disciplinary plurality brings into play different conceptual matrixes. These movements, coming from different approaches, bring together theoretical and practical perspectives that are instrumental to rethinking the Humanities today.

Alastair Fuad-Luke presented a communication that includes agriculture, art, digital media, design and philosophy, developing an innovative framework of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), and rethinking new opportunities to approach the Humanities. His work focuses on the paradigmatic changes in the way we produce, conceptualize and perceive food, changes developed over the last 20 years, particularly in sustainable and organic agriculture. Looking at alternative food networks, the author identifies new practices of producer-consumer relations that neutralize hegemonic tendencies in neoliberal and global capitalism. In this sense, the Humanities are thought through cultural practices, through the conception of modern and postmodern design in agriculture. These transformations are the example of a reality that is thought in the light of the new forms of mediation and mediatization that imply new ways of projecting of the relation between the transforming agent of the environment and the (agri) cultural practices. Alastair Fuad-Luke analyzes how the relations between production and consumption have changed, questioning the re-socialization practices carried out through new forms of proximity that oppose sustainable and

---

A *Revista Estudos em Comunicação* é financiada por Fundos FEDER através do Programa Operacional Factores de Competitividade – COMPETE e por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia no âmbito do projeto *Comunicação, Filosofia e Humanidades (LabCom.IFP) UID/CCI/00661/2013*.



non-hierarchized agriculture to the practices of agricultural capitalism that emerged in modern times. His work appears, in this perspective, as an attempt to project future ecosophies that sanction a new relationship between things and systems.

The second text, by Anna Calvera, discusses the aesthetics associated with the commodification of the everyday world as a fundamental characteristic for understanding capitalism in the third millennium. To admit that consumption is one of the practices among others in which the project intervenes, considering its point of view, the aesthetics translated into the generalization of visual culture, is not necessarily negative, as is commonly regarded. It can even express itself through an ethical and careful way of dealing with objects while preserving their original values. In this sense, Calvera proposes to recover the daily and humble dimension of the aesthetic behavior that is reflected by Design, a feature that makes the world more livable, providing well-being and a higher quality of life in organized human communities. Applying aesthetic-philosophical thinking to the practice and culture of design in a process that implies the development of an interconnection with the arts is at the heart of Calvera's work. The author rethinks the aesthetic dimension in a strict sense, concentrating on daily life, on the world at our disposal, outside the artistic universe, understood merely as Fine or Decorative Arts, while at the same time leading to the modification of both instances.

André Barata discloses the internal link between the crisis of the human being and the crisis of the humanities. This crisis passes through the erosion or the contingency imposed to the limits of what was considered human, translated in our modernity by the elimination of ambivalences and the trivialization of the senses. The narratives derived from sci-fi are understood by the author as one of the possibilities of establishing, from the post-human, a network of resistance to the erosion of the human. Thus, humanity implies a permanent transcendence of its limits, which is constantly questioned by the reference to post-humanity: since the handling of artifacts by primates in the first minutes of 2001: Space Odyssey until the use of language, passing by the constant reference to alienation, the inquiry into the Humanities implies finding in post-humanity the inescapable dimension of humanity itself, which begs the question if it is possible to think about humanity without technique.

The text identifies in the very existence of humanity a disillusioning dialectic in which the technological rationality of modernity was translated into distant projects. This narrative gains its evidence in the dystopian futures that led to the Soviet and Nazi experiences.

In a unique way, but consistent with the conceptual background of the conference, Arianna Ciula reflects on the interrelation between Humanities and New Humanities in an academic perspective. The digital humanities are described as a challenge of hybridization of the academic practices in the field of the humanities that results from the insertion of new technologies. The discussion is related to the concept of digital memory and presents the concept of humanities as an academic area committed to the practices of meaning production that relate the past and the present. The idea, however, is not to subsume the study of the humanities in a sort of empiricist and positivist agenda, but instead to maintain the recognition of its interpretative and critical dimension. In this sense, it is important that the articulation between the digital and the humanities be made under the aegis of a humanistically informed framework. Hence the learning and use of technology never loses the perspective of a project that implies the establishment of brid-



ges between cultural scientific practices and distinct and generally separated epistemic traditions. Using modeling as a process of meaning and reasoning, suggests its practice within a semiotic framework, so as to consider it as a strategy to make sense through practical thinking (model creation and manipulation).

Peter Dahlgren, in turn, establishes the relationship between media studies and the Web by summoning the humanities as allies of this relational process. The author attempts to call for a greater commitment of the humanities to this interpellation of the Web. Refusing a deterministic view of the media, the author concludes that digital media have much to do with how we play, how we socialize and achieve goals, in short with the way we experience the world and, simultaneously, give our account of the experience of the world. Therefore, the media cannot dissociate from the people and their subjectivities, their culture and their values. One of the essential elements is the establishment of the relationship between the humanities and critical spirit, according to a perspective that goes back to the Enlightenment. The author praises the moment when a critical adjective has been associated with art, science and the quest for knowledge. Another element that comes to the fore in his reflection and which he considers essential for communication is the refusal of a static vision of the Humanities, rather considering a constant critical dialogue on the circumstances of the human world that aims to interpret, understand and transform. Finally, Dahlgren carries from the media studies the concept of mediatization, as a transdisciplinary element that calls with particular emphasis on humanistic perspectives. Thus the dilemmas of online life, as they are called, are reflected in practical-normative, cognitive, subjectivity and civic commitment, areas in which the recurrence of humanistic themes remains.

The last text of the first part of this thematic issue, from João Carlos Correia, maintains that in spite of a recent positivist turn directed to the collection of empirical data receiving some appeal among young researchers, Communication Sciences have always maintained the existence of critical points of view deeply related with the phenomenon of meaning and relationship, which are in fact the core of its epistemological meaning. In this text, Communication confronts two proposals: one would be a minimalist version of communication, limited to the selection of the most effective means for the control of receivers, thus identifying only the clarity of the message, the correction of the code and the avoiding of any entropy. In the end, it would be just as a mathematical theory of communication applied to the specific field of cultural phenomena that would completely forget its cultural dimension. On the opposite side of the spectrum, a set of theories can be found, that despite their importance for acknowledging the link between culture, communication and society, lead to a culturalist reduction of communication. We are more or less familiar with the emergence of the interpretive paradigm in the social sciences. This paradigm implies the substitution of an inductive and analytical method, applicable to natural sciences, by a method involving an understanding of meaningful phenomena practiced by human subjects.

The reduction of Communication Sciences to their mere informational nature does not favour the understanding of its social nature. Thus, the author sustains the need of adopting a posture in which cultural phenomena must be understood from a predominantly, but not exclusively, communicational point of view; and communicative action would be understood from a predominantly, but not exclusively, cultural point of view. The specificity of communicative and

cultural phenomena always implies both a time to instrumentality and finality. One can thus speak of communication and culture as two discursive formations that embrace the same phenomena.

The second Meeting took place in 2016 postulating a more specific reference to the issue of Visibility and Transparency. Adriano Duarte Rodrigues advanced the thesis that the media are a field that ensures the visibility of other social fields, considering the field of the media as the field of visibility *par excellence* of the other social fields. Rodrigues accounts the problematic nature of the permanent negotiation that the field of communication exchanges with other social fields, to preserve its own autonomy, and criticized the identification between media and the business organizations, public or private, that control newspapers, such as radios, televisions, and more recently social networks. The obsession from communication scholars for the industrial sector neglects the specificity of the technical nature of the media and implies the adoption of anachronistic perspectives. The media emerge mainly as technical devices that ensure interaction between people, regardless of where and when it occurs, devices that depend on the application and survival of our species. This approach produces anachronistic effects because it prevents us from seeing the media emergence as something available not only today but as old as the history of the species. This confusion between media and journalism, television and more recently with social networks has, nevertheless, an even more important result, forgetting that the first medium is language, the invent that allowed man to constitute the world as a humanly possible environment in which people meet and interact. The text recalls us to the fact that if we stop to think, we see that we only remember what happened after we started talking, and only in the environment created by language can we access consciousness and can, therefore, consider visibility humanly possible of the world. One of the consequences of this oblivion that the first and fundamental medium is language, it's the inversion of the relation between language and the other media. One is led to think that it is the technical media devices that produce a language when in fact, it is precisely the opposite: it is the other media that perform technically or exteriorize different components of language.

Maria Eugenia Barrichello departs from the point of view according to which information, communication technologies and their social uses change the possibilities of seeing and being seen, of interacting at a distance, of representing and identifying the real, phenomena that have repercussions on the processes of institutionalization and of obtaining legitimacy to social practices. Her essay tries to overcome the dichotomy between human versus technology, using the understanding of technology as a cultural artifact and therefore as a product of human experience and social relations. Eugénia Barrichello underlines how the appropriation and use of technology and the cultural and communicational actions are connected in the real society. The media emerge as a cultural artifact that currently permeates society in such a way that it is not possible to consider it separate from institutions and organizations. They can no longer be understood as mere institutions, organizations and organizations for the achievement of some ends. Media have become part of the production of society and also an independent institution in the process that affects institutions, organizations and organizations in their relationships and interactions.

In a sceptical regime of understanding organic and inorganic interfaces, Rui Matoso denies the supposed phenomenological invisibility of mental images, demonstrating a possibility of extractive technology that transduces the electrical impulses formed in the neural networks of the visual cortex, in pixels. On this new level, Matoso maintains that we are immersed in the global

techno-aesthetic device, we are mobilized by the technical structure of the premeditation, toward a potential future of real virtually. Hence, the author does not avoid to refer the new configurations of power and asserts that the neocybernetic automation and invisibility of domination is not the result of the transcendental power of a supreme artificer, but rather of a new regime of governability and control of subjectivities brought about by treatment accumulated information (algorithmic governance). In a rigorous understanding of perception, the author considers that it is not possible to hermetically separate the sphere from the immediate date of the perception of its historical, social and psychological surroundings crystallized in the regimes of visibility and cognition, where the invisible is exercised as a discursive exploration of images.

Thus, it analyzes the regimes of contemporary visibility, where the screen has gained enormous cultural relevance and one can see the fading of the monocular tradition from the visual perspective, without the focal point of view, in favor of multiple perspectives provided by the plurality of the producers of images and contents.

Samuel Mateus considers that the concept of visibility becomes problematic in the new hypervisibility regimes which generate new forms of opacity that are not formed by the secret but by and omnivorous pan-visibility. This paper suggests three lines of theoretical and empirical research on the topic of "visibility": a sociological (symbolic) axis; a collective axis (publicity) and a technological axis in mediation processes. This implies a promising distinction which, once again, is not alien to the intertextuality with previous issues: the visibility, using its own terms, as a field whose symbolic determination results in the constitution of different regimes; a visibility as publicity since it is the publicity that changes a proto-visibility into an accomplished visibility; and finally, the transmutations and dangers arising from the media production of visibility.



## Digital humanities and practical memory: modelling textuality

Arianna Ciula

King's Digital Lab, King's College London

E-mail: arianna.ciula@kcl.ac.uk

### Abstract

This paper reflects on the relation between Humanities and Digital Humanities from scholarly perspectives intertwined as they are with political stances. Often characterized as enabling a unifying as well as transformative sentiment for the Humanities as a whole, Digital Humanities can be described as a challenging hybridization of scholarly practices contingent to social and cultural contexts. The core of the paper relates to one of the topics of the 2015 conference on *Rethinking Humanities*, namely digital memory, by recalling on the concept of Humanities as scholarship engaged with meaning-making practices connecting past and present. Building on the

literature and some co-authored research<sup>1</sup>, I present a humanities-informed theorization of modelling in Digital Humanities as a meaning-making practice enacted in the present and aiming at repurposing the past. As privileged objects of digital modelling activities, texts are repurposed via the creation and manipulation of (digital) external representations. An informed theory of textuality reminds us how cultural products embed the processes of their creations and uses. Can digital models enact such practical memory and become in themselves strategies to exercise memory and encode knowledge?

### Digital humanities representing and transforming the humanities?

THE perspective of the conference this paper contributed to departed from an idea of Humanities as a whole, a unifying concept that Digital Humanities in itself contribute to bring to the fore. This idea of Humanities as a unifying concept could summarize in fact “what is new in the humanities today”.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the fragmentation of disciplines within the Humanities is

---

Part of the work presented in this article was conducted while the author was based at the Department of Humanities, University of Roehampton, UK (until January 2017).

A *Revista Estudos em Comunicação* é financiada por Fundos FEDER através do Programa Operacional Factores de Competitividade – COMPETE e por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia no âmbito do projeto *Comunicação, Filosofia e Humanidades (LabCom.IFP) UID/CCI/00661/2013*.



1. This research was part of The work for this essay was conducted as part of the research project *Modelling between digital and humanities: thinking in practice* ([www.modellingdh.eu](http://www.modellingdh.eu)). Project partners: Arianna Ciula, University of Roehampton (until January 2017) and King's Digital Laboratory (King's College London, from February 2017); Øyvind Eide, University of Cologne; Cristina Marras, Institute for European Intellectual Lexicon and History of Ideas, National Research Council (Rome); Patrick Sahle, University of Cologne. The project is funded from April 2016 to March 2018 under the Volkswagen Stiftung programme: "Original - isn't it?" New Options for the Humanities and Cultural Studies, Funding Line 2 "Constellations"(2016-2017).

2. This is a quote from the rationale of the conference (International Conference Rethinking Humanities 2015).

a relatively recent phenomenon dating back to the nineteenth century, when the reform of Universities and the formation of modern scientific disciplines took place. This process sealed “the fate of the ‘humanist mathematics’” and marked “a break with the classics” (Bod, Maat and Weststeijn 2012, 12).

Since the nineteenth century the humanities have typically been defined as those disciplines that investigate the expressions of the human mind (*Geisteswissenschaften*). Thus, the study of music, literature, language, visual arts all belong to the realm of the humanities, in contrast to the study of nature which belongs to the domain of the natural sciences. And the study of humans in their social context belongs to the social sciences. But these definitions are unsatisfactory. Mathematics is to a large extent a product of the human mind, and yet it is not considered a humanities discipline. A pragmatic stance may be more workable: the humanities are those disciplines that are taught and studied at the various humanities faculties. [...] While various histories of some *single* humanistic disciplines have been written, such as the history of linguistics or the history of literary theory, connections between methods and principles in literary theory and those in art history or between musicology and linguistics are rarely made – perhaps because of the notorious fragmentation of the humanities during the last century. (Bod, Maat and Weststeijn 2010, 7-8)

Notwithstanding its pragmatic stance, a unifying concept of the Humanities recalls the early-modern European context, when humanistic scholarship intertwined naturally with *formal* and *empirical* studies.<sup>3</sup> In addition, it could be argued that the use of the term Humanities also reinforces a sense of *global* (e.g. Bod *et al.* 2012, 13) and of *public humanities*. Referring to the Humanities as one pragmatic concept could serve the wishful and fruitful aim of overcoming fragmentation, of reconnecting two or more epistemic cultures as well as the aim of bridging geopolitical borders of scholarship and the enclosed academic towers with the public spaces. Nevertheless, a Humanities projected to the future as well as to the past can easily be steered ideologically towards a simplistic or even positivist and homogenizing agenda (Svensson 2012).<sup>4</sup>

Hence, while keeping an historically-aware pragmatic perspective, it is useful to recall a broad definition of Humanities based on its content of study:

3. Cfr. Bod, Maat and Weststeijn (2010, 12-13): “Together, the seven parts of this book illustrate the width and depth of the history of the humanities in early modern Europe, as well as their mutual intertwining and connection with the exact sciences. The humanities instigated a new secular world view (Steenbakkens, Leezenberg, Hanegraaff, Gatti), they rebutted forgeries that no-one dared to question before (Pyle, Steenbakkens, P.charman), and with their standard of precision, consistency and criticism (Pyle, J.nsson, Rowland, Cohen, Groenland), the humanities deeply influenced the exact sciences (Pyle, Cram, Maat, Cohen). [...] Their relation with the New Sciences indicates that the humanities not only preceded the sciences but also shaped them to a very large extent via the formal and empirical study of music, art, language and texts (Cohen, Rowland, Pyle, Weststeijn, Cram, Maat).”

4. Svensson warns against this: “While the ideas of grand challenges and big humanities certainly have attraction and require essential forward thinking in order to identify complex problems and large-scale visions, we should be careful not to uncritically accept the frame of big humanities, which, for instance, has a tendency to be coupled with a positivist agenda and a homogenization of the humanities (cf. [Scout 2006]).” (Svensson 2012)

The humanities study the meaning-making practices of human culture, past and present, focusing on interpretation and critical evaluation, primarily in terms of the individual response and with an ineliminable element of subjectivity. (Small 2013, 57)<sup>5</sup>

I will not dwell on this definition at this point, but I would like to highlight two concepts which are at the core to my argument, namely, ‘meaning-making practices’ and ‘subjectivity’.

The Digital Humanities have been contributing to the unifying yet pragmatic concept of the Humanities not only in virtue of its denomination, but also by “representing or manifesting the humanities”:<sup>6</sup>

[...] the digital humanities often becomes a laboratory and means for thinking about the state and future of the humanities [...] regardless of the variety of digital humanities, there is often an actual or presumed engagement with all or most of the humanities. This gives the digital humanities more reach than most regular departments, disciplines and centers, and arguably, both an interest and a mandate to be invested in the future of the humanities at large (somewhat like humanities centers). The fact that the field tends to be institutionalized differently than other academic enterprises might also help in the sense that it facilitates a freer role and possibly a less competitive stance in relation to established departments and disciplines. [...] Indeed, research infrastructure has cross-sectional potential, and there is often at least nominal interest in including in the humanities in new research infrastructure initiatives ([Svensson 2011]). Here the digital humanities matches the expectations more than in most other areas. This may lead to the digital humanities representing the humanities in relation to other areas of research and development such as science and engineering, which in turn helps create interest for the field outside of the humanities and contributes to the sense of digital humanities as representing or manifesting the humanities. (Svensson 2012)

No doubt, when this representative role is perceived as a self-election from the part of those engaged in Digital Humanities, tensions with the Humanities that do not recognize themselves in this representation emerge and have regularly found expressions in various forms and formats. Besides its more or less contested advocacy role in the name of the Humanities, what is of interest to us here is that the Digital Humanities has being characterized mainly as aiming at transforming the Humanities, in particular, because of their need of extensive technical infrastructures (Svensson

---

5. Small (2013) unpacks further this definition as following: “In the main the humanities value qualitative above quantitative reasoning; they place greater faith in interpretative than in positivistic thinking; unlike the sciences and the scientific wing of the social sciences they do not have a dominant methodology, and many of their truth claims are not verifiable as those of the natural sciences are verifiable; they tend, accordingly, to distrust proceduralism and to value independence of thought. They are orientated as much toward historical analysis as toward synchronic structural analysis, and as much toward the medium of expression as towards its content (tending to see the form/content distinction as itself problematic). They attend to the role of the perceiver in ascertaining even the most philosophically secure of knowledge claims; and they have an interest, often they also take pleasure, in the specificity of the object of study and the specificity of the individual response (its content and its style) over and above the generalized or collective response. Not least, they respect the products of past human endeavours in culture, even when superseded.” (Small 2013, 57)

6. See for example (4Humanities).

2012),<sup>7</sup> but also, at a deeper level, because of their acting as a “disruptive political force that has the potential to reshape fundamental aspects of academic practice” (Gold 2012),<sup>8</sup> including the mechanisms for the evaluation of scholarship (Nowvskie 2012). The potential transformative function of Digital Humanities is explained as the ability to question and even hack the “scholarly infrastructure” as a whole, and to channel a common “transformative sentiment” (Svensson 2012). One could argue that such transformative sentiment is destined to diffuse in the ongoing move of the Digital Humanities from “institutionally peripheral position” in academia (Svensson 2012) to institutionalized subject, hence the question mark in the title of this section.

From the Digital Humanities perspective, what is new (and old) in the Humanities today is a not unproblematic yet interesting blending and hybridization<sup>9</sup> of scholarly changes with social and cultural ones<sup>10</sup>. To sum up, this blending and hybridization entail at least the following: the blurring of research and publishing processes (Svensson 2012); the emergence of “trading zones” between research, education and other activities often in the name of public humanities (Svensson 2012); the bridging of relatively recent divide across scientific cultures and epistemic traditions; the practicing of collaboration and “mutual respect” (Svensson 2012) across a diversity of epistemic traditions and professional status.

### **Between digital and humanities**

Against this background of characterizations that undoubtedly benefit from evidence but bear also rhetorical power, to set Digital Humanities within its context of emergence and establishment, I would like to focus mainly on its research agenda being of the Humanities. In particular, with respect to the topic of digital memory, I would like to draw attention to the “modes of engage-

7. “[...] some digital humanities work requires extensive technology infrastructures, which is not very common in the humanities. Based on these and other factors, there is a strong sense that the university and the humanities need to change to accommodate this type of work, and all this feeds into a vision of a transformed humanities.” (Svensson 2012)

8. Here is the full quote of this same passage: “At stake in the rise of the digital humanities is not only the viability of new research methods (such as algorithmic approaches to large humanities data sets) or new pedagogical activities (such as the incorporation of geospatial data into classroom projects) but also key elements of the larger academic ecosystem that supports such work. Whether one looks at the status of peer review, the evolving nature of authorship and collaboration, the fundamental interpretive methodologies of humanities disciplines, or the controversies over tenure and casualized academic labor that have increasingly rent the fabric of university life, it is easy to see that the academy is shifting in significant ways. And the digital humanities, more than most fields, seems positioned to address many of those changes. [...] Indeed, fault lines have emerged within the DH [Digital Humanities] community between those who use new digital tools to aid relatively traditional scholarly projects and those who believe that DH is most powerful as a disruptive political force that has the potential to reshape fundamental aspects of academic practice” (Gold 2012).

9. I use the word hybridization as instance of a new discipline borne as a hybrid in the same way as Kartsten used this term while reflecting on the formation of comparative linguistics: “The new hybrid reflects ideas from the culture in which it emerges, the values that reign supreme at the place of its emergence (including its specific institutional setting) and from the various fields of study it has borrowed ideas from. All these aspects are put in a mixer and the new substance coming out of it is the new discipline.” (Karstens 2012, 105)

10. For an extensive argument on the connections between digital modernity and the present and future of digital humanities see Smithies 2017.



ment between the digital and the humanities” (Svensson 2012)<sup>11</sup> which call for a “humanistically informed theory” (Drucker 2012).<sup>12</sup> In doing this, my aim is to contribute to the understanding of how essential “apprenticeship” in the Digital Humanities – what we might call more broadly learning by doing or understating technology by using and developing it – can lead to a “humane project” (McCarty 2012, 39) and hence fight an apocalyptic picture whereby those of us who are engaged with Digital Humanities research lose sight of what we want the technology for.<sup>13</sup> The possibly most productive concept aiming at describing and theorizing the practices of doing research and teaching in Digital Humanities is modelling. By modelling I intend mainly the creation and manipulation of external representations, encompassing the whole spectrum of what Bradley (2015) calls tools for making, for exploring and for thinking. Building on previous co-authored research (Ciula and Eide 2014, Ciula and Marras 2016, Ciula and Eide 2017), what I claim in this paper is that modelling can be considered both a meaning-making practice and a strategy to exercise individual and collective (active) memory. To substantiate my claim I chose to focus on textuality – hence on the sociology of the textual condition and the engagement with the digital as an ongoing “repurposing of the work of the past” (McGann 2014, 46) – as well as on the theory of modelling. With respect to cultural memory the ESF Science Policy Briefing *Cultural Literacy in Europe today* states that:

What is perceived as history varies according to the way memory is shaped through different techniques of remembering: whether it is passed on orally or written down, what elements are deemed important and what are left out and how facts are interpreted in their relationship to each other. [...] both individually and collectively, remembering and forgetting are only made possible by the use of ‘cultural tools’. [...] What impact does the advent of new technologies have on such regimes of memory [...]?” (ESF-COST 2013, 7-8)

Our tools for memory are many and various. In the context of Digital Humanities one fruitful way to explore the mutual impact between technology and regimes of memory is to reflect on how digital scholarship is producing new intermediaries to the written past. For example, with

---

11. Cfr. Svensson (2012): “Looking at the landscape of the digital humanities more broadly, it seems tenable to assume that the most far-reaching employment of the digital as a means of (re)negotiating the humanities does not come from [...] primary instrumental orientation, nor from internet studies and many other cultural studies approaches to the digital with their primary interest in the digital as an object of analysis (and a stronger disciplinary anchoring). Rather, it seems that approaches and initiatives invested in several modes of engagement between the digital and the humanities are more likely to relate to the place and future of the humanities.”

12. “I suggest that it is essential if we are to assert the cultural authority of the humanities in a world whose fundamental medium is digital that we demonstrate that the methods and theory of the humanities have a critical purchase on the design of platforms that embody humanistic values. [...] The challenge is to shift humanistic study from attention to the effects of technology (from readings of social media, games, narrative, personae, digital texts, images, environments), to a humanistically informed theory of the making of technology (a humanistic computing at the level of design, modeling of information architecture, data types, interface, and protocols). [...] texts (in the broad sense of linguistic, visual, acoustic, filmic works) are not static objects but encoded provocations for reading. [...]” (Drucker 2012)

13. Cfr. McCarty (2012, 38): “[...] many of the scholars [...], not paid to think and act like scholars, have lost sight of that which infrastructure is for.”

respect to text-based archival research conducted on documentary primary sources, certain key publications produced as part of Digital Humanities collaborative research projects that Palmer (2005) would call “access resources” have the potential to become the new intermediaries to the written record (Ciula and Lopez 2009). These publications represent an intersection between the ‘new’ genres of digital scholarship and the established ones. For many historians, reading and writing are the outcomes of deep inquiry over months or even years around a set of core materials. Hybrid publications in print and web forms are particularly interesting to analyze for the way their development and use enact the convergence and divergence between editorial strategies and multiple material realizations spanning different media. They are also well placed to make emerge the problematic yet revealing relation between digital and non-digital regimes of memory, what McGann calls the “skew between our traditional cultural inheritance and the emerging digital corpus.” (McGann 2014, 43). By creating and using these cultural tools, we shape scholarly (hence individual but also collective) memory – certainly not a negligible professional responsibility for digital humanists to carry.

McGann believes that “Now more than ever [...] we need to understand how bibliographical technology works. Designing optimal digital environments requires it.” (McGann 2014, 1). He also argues that:

[...] textual and editorial scholarship, often marginalized in humane studies as a narrowly technical domain, should be shifted back to the center of humanist attention. Understanding the technologies of book culture is the beginning of wisdom for any practical approach to the so-called digital humanities. But you can’t do that well unless you have an intimate acquaintance with the scholarship of textualities. (McGann 2014, 2)

By reflecting on the hybrid publications we produce, we can attempt to elicit the rich bibliographic code of a specific print format<sup>14</sup> and to compare it with the digital one, not simply for analytical purposes but to get intimately acquainted with the scholars’ use and understanding of these materials in its combination (digital and print). The paradigm to follow can be explained again in McGann’s words:

Digitizing the archive is not about replacing it. It’s about making it usable for the present and the future. To do that we have to understand, as best we can, how it functioned – how it made meanings – in the past. A major task lying before us – Its technical difficulties are great – is to design a knowledge and information network that integrates, as seamlessly as possible, our paper-based inheritance with the emerging archive of born-digital materials. (McGann 2014, 22)

This process of translation (translation is indeed what he calls it) requires a “clarity of thought about textuality” (McGann 2014, 90).

14. In the case of the Henry III Fine Rolls project discussed in (Ciula and Lopez 2009), the model under examination was the modern Calendar print edition.

## Modelling textuality

Digital Humanities can reclaim a humanities-based theorization of modelling, in particular by stressing its relation to texts and theory of texts as well as to the nature of modelling as meaning-making practice.

Models and modelling – pervasive in scientific empirical practices – are at the core of the methodological approaches of Digital Humanities research and teaching. This sharing of epistemologies enacted via processes of modelling across disciplinary borders makes Digital Humanities to a certain extent comparable to the techno-sciences and anchors Humanities scholarship to a practical dimension renewing its fifteenth century roots of empirical *studia humanitatis* (Bod 2014). Thus the question is: What *model of modelling* can be considered ‘adequate’ to Digital Humanities (Ciula and Marras 2016)? And in what way are Digital Humanities rhetoric and practices transformative of the way we remember our past (and hence rethink a future)?

By considering modelling as a process of signification and reasoning in action (Ciula and Eide 2014 and 2017), we can free modelling from the reductionist frame of human-machine communication and from the concerns that seem exclusive to technical implementation. One way of achieving this is contextualizing modelling within a semiotic framework, so as to consider it as a strategy to make sense (signification) via practical thinking (creating and manipulating models). Complementary to this approach, is the consideration of computational technologies as co-constitutive of cultural practices. Consequently, the study of modelling and models has to be situated within the specific digital materialities in which they are enacted, as, for example, Dourish’ does in his analysis of the materialities of databases (Dourish 2014).

Kralemann and Lattmann (2013) claim that models should be understood as signs in the Peircean sense. In Peirce’s seminal theory of signs, the sign is a triadic relation between a representamen (the sign from which the relation begins, sometimes also called in the literature the sign-vehicle), its object, and the interpreting thought. Often represented as a tripod where the three “composing elements” (Olteanu 2015, 127) – object, representamen and interpretant – intersect, the sign for Peirce is, first and foremost, relational. The experience of interpreting signs or signification (semiosis) is therefore intrinsically dynamic. As a consequence, a semiotic approach which considers models as signs gives high prominence to a dynamic view on models reinstating in renewed terms the value of modeling as an open process – in particular, a process of signification.<sup>15</sup>

If modelling acts as understood from a semiotic tradition are used to make sense of our cultural objects (mainly but not only texts), they are meaning-making practices and hence in themselves object of study for the Humanities as defined above. Indeed, interestingly, the modelling process in Digital Humanities is often recognised as part of what is being modelled.

---

15. The model relation includes the following components: a set of objects  $O_i=1,\dots,n$  (Kralemann and Lattmann 2013) call this ‘extension’ of the model); a theory or language (what they call the ‘intention’ of the model) and an object  $O_{mod}$  (its attributes define what Kralemann and Lattmann call the ‘syntax’ of the model). For the subject who chooses  $O_i$  and a theory or language,  $O_{mod}$  becomes a model of the objects  $O_i$  on the basis of a representational relation between its syntax and the semantic attributes of  $O_i$ . This relation is determined by the context of a theory as well as by the purpose of the specific act of modelling. For more details on the application of this framework to modelling in Digital Humanities see (Ciula and Marras 2016; Ciula and Eide 2017).

Texts – dynamic cultural objects contingent to the contexts of production and reading, expressed in a wide range of manifestations from linear to discontinuous narrative, from manuscripts to printed editions, encompassing hybrid modalities – are or at least have been so far the privileged objects of modelling activities in Digital Humanities.

Some interrelated aspects of the study of texts seem particularly relevant to exemplify their complexity and openness with respect to modelling in Digital Humanities (Ciula and Marras 2016): dynamicity, emerging particularly in the relationship between models and objects as well models and interpretations; multidimensionality, emerging from the relation between objects and interpretations; historicity, putting models in relation to their historical interpretations; processuality, playing at the interface between objects and subject's interpretations. The term dynamicity relates to the sociology of texts theory as well as the overarching principle of fluid textuality (for instance, with respect to the modelling of many variants of material texts) and engagement with hybrid modalities (for example, encompassing maps and narrative drawings). 'Multidimensionality' stands for a pluralistic model of text (Sahle 2006 and 2012) whereby the definition of text depends on how modellers look at it, on the aspects we are most interested in making explicit in our modelling efforts and the tacit knowledge invested in those efforts. The concept of historicity is useful to argue that, generally, in Digital Humanities, modelling acts are also and necessarily meta-modelling activities, because they explicitly engage with objects mediated by prior interpretative activities even if not always passing via computational formalisations.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, our models of texts also embed historical understandings, categorisations and definitions of those texts. Last but not least, the concept of processuality aims at highlighting a further connection between the reading (and hence also modelling) of texts and our making sense of ourselves. How we read, interpret, engage with texts is intimately situated in the performative and eventful process of creating and confirming our own identity of human beings (Meister 2007).

This brief encounter with texts aimed to reiterate how entangled any Digital Humanities modelling process is with the cultural, historical and personal engagement we have and had with these complex and open objects.

In Ciula and Marras (2016), we reflected further on the importance of an imaginative use of language in Digital Humanities (modelling language, language of representation or language as vehicle of theories and methods) – for instance via the coinage of neologisms as well as the adoption of metaphors to structure knowledge – to exemplify how the terminology being chosen and the relevant metaphoric models being applied organize the modelling processes themselves.

Now I ask, if modelling is in principle an open practice to manipulate cultural (textual) objects, to read and re-read them by creating new or reinstating old interpretations, and to repurpose the work of the past, in what ways are our digital models creating memory and knowledge? Will they be legible as data as well as knowledge in the future? How is the different materiality between objects and models reconciled? Nowvieskie raises an important issue of 'illegibility' of works produced as part of research projects in Digital Humanities:

---

16. Interestingly, Knox (2012) states that "historical modeling is necessarily metamodeling. If the passage of time has done anything interesting with the original model, we can neither simply reproduce it nor ignore it. If that past model has changed, or is inconsistent, or incoherent, or unintelligible, we may be able to correct it, or we may need to incorporate it and model its difficulties and historicity as well, depending on what we are trying to accomplish."

Products of digital work in the humanities are evident all around us, but the arguments that they instantiate remain deceptively tacit to those who have not learned to appreciate their sites of discourse, their languages and protocols. Humanities-computing arguments are made collectively and tested iteratively. The field advances through craft and construction: the fashioning and refashioning of digital architectures and artifacts. It is little wonder that bibliographers, archivists and textual critics, and archaeologists and other specialists in material culture were the first to grasp the implications of digital technology for humanities scholarship. Methodological, embodied, and quiet knowledge transfer lies at the heart of our work, which can remain frustratingly illegible to scholars whose experience rests more in verbal exchange. (Nowwiskie 2012)

However, is this illegibility a problem confined to those that are not familiar with Digital Humanities way of arguing via digital products or is a more fundamental issue? McGann used the critical edition as a focus of his reflections on the primacy of philology in the digital age. By philology he means explicitly “a science of archival memory” (McGann 2014, 41), “a research method, a science, for preserving a practical memory of the importance of memory” (McGann 2014, 47) and he adds that the main problem is not to save our paper-based documentary record destined mostly to be lost, but rather “what we will choose to save, and why, and how will we do it” (McGann 2014, 30) and hence how we will transform “storage into memory, and data into knowledge” (McGann 2014, 96).

I conclude by stating that my take on how best to make “machines of information” which are also “machines of reflection” (McGann 2014, 95) is to study and study again the dynamic condition of texts as open objects (with respect to modelling), but also to embrace a semiotic model of modelling able to grasp these dynamic aspects. This means to me to create digital models that enact practical memory and envision a Digital Humanities which is of the Humanities, hence inherently and consciously subjective.

## References

- 4Humanities. *4Humanities*. Accessed July 21, 2016. <http://4humanities.org/>.
- Bradley, J. (2015). How about Tools for the whole range of scholarly activities?. Paper presented at *Digital Humanities 2015*, University of Western Sydney, Australia, June 29-July 3, 2015. <http://oopen.org/download?type=document&docid=429194>.
- Bod, R. (2014). How the humanities changed the world. *OUPblog*, February 17. Accessed July 21, 2016. <http://blog.oup.com/2014/02/how-the-humanities-changed-the-world/>.
- Bod, R.; Maat, J. & Weststeijn, T. (eds.) (2012). *The making of the humanities. vol. II: from early modern to modern disciplines*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. Print and Web. Accessed July 21, 2016. <http://oopen.org/download?type=document&docid=429447>.
- Bod, R.; Maat, J. & Weststeijn, T. (eds.) (2010). *The making of the humanities. vol. I: the humanities in early modern europe*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. Print and Web. Accessed July 21, 2016.

- Ciula, A. & Eide, Ø. (2017). Modelling in digital humanities: signs in context. *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, 32 (1): 133-146. Accessed September 7, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1093/lc/fqw045>
- Ciula, A. & Eide, Ø. (2014). Reflections on cultural heritage and digital humanities: modelling in practice andt. *Proceedings of the First International Conference on Digital Access to Textual Cultural Heritage – DATeCH '14*: 35-41. New York, NY, USA: ACM.
- Ciula, A. & Lopez, T. (2009). Reflecting on a dual publication: Henry III Fine Rolls print and web. *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, 24 (2): 129-141.
- Ciula, A. & Marras, C. (2016). Circling around texts and language: towards “pragmatic modeling” in digital humanities. *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 10 (3). Accessed July 21, 2016. [www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/10/3/000258/000258.html](http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/10/3/000258/000258.html)
- Dourish, P. (2014). NoSQL: The Shifting Materialities of Database Technology. *Computational Culture*, 4. Accessed September 7, 2017. <http://computationalculture.net/article/no-sql-the-shifting-materialities-of-database-technology>
- Drucker, J. (2012). Humanistic theory and digital scholarship. In Matthew K. Gold (ed.), *Debates in Digital Humanities*. University of Minnesota Press. Accessed July 21, 2016. <http://dhdebat.es.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/34>.
- ESF-COST. (2013). Cultural literacy in Europe today. *Science Policy Briefing*, 48. Accessed July 21, 2016. [www.esf.org/fileadmin/Public\\_documents/Publications/spb48\\_Cultural\\_Literacy.pdf](http://www.esf.org/fileadmin/Public_documents/Publications/spb48_Cultural_Literacy.pdf).
- Gold, M. K. (2012). The digital humanities moment. In M. K. Gold (ed.), *Debates in Digital Humanities*. University of Minnesota Press. Accessed July 21, 2016. <http://dhdebat.es.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/2>.
- International Conference Rethinking Humanities*. December 10-11, 2015. Accessed July 21, 2016. <http://labcom-ifp.ubi.pt/event/2965>
- Karstens, B. (2012). Bopp the builder. Discipline formation as hybridization: the case of comparative linguistics. In R. Bod, J. Maat & T. Weststeijn (eds.), *The making of the humanities. vol. II: from early modern to modern disciplines* (pp. 103-128). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. Print and Web. Accessed July 21, 2016. <http://open.org/download?type=document&docid=429447>.
- Kralemann, B. & Lattmann, C. (2013). Models as icons: modeling models in the semiotic framework of Peirce’s theory of signs. *Synthese*, 190 (16): 3397-3420.
- Knox, D. (2012). What is the thing that changes?: Space and time through the atlas of historical county boundaries. Paper presented at the *workshop Knowledge Organization and Data Modeling in the Humanities: An ongoing conversation*, Brown University, RI, March 16, 2012. Accessed July 21, 2016. [www.wwp.northeastern.edu/outreach/conference/kodm2012/knox/knox\\_paper.pdf](http://www.wwp.northeastern.edu/outreach/conference/kodm2012/knox/knox_paper.pdf)
- Meister, J. C. (2007). Events are us. *Amsterdam International Electronic Journal for Cultural Narratology*, Autumn, 4. Accessed July 21, 2016. [http://cf.hum.uva.nl/narratology/a07\\_meister.htm](http://cf.hum.uva.nl/narratology/a07_meister.htm)

- McCarty, W. (2012). The residue of uniqueness. In M. Thaller (ed.), *Controversies around the digital humanities* (pp. 24-45). *Historical Social Research*, 37(3).
- McGann, J. (2014). *A new republic of letters: memory and scholarship in the age of digital reproduction*. Harvard University Press.
- Nowvieskie, B. (2012). Praxis, through prisms: a digital boot camp for grad students in the humanities. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 58 (35). Accessed July 21, 2016. <http://chronicle.com/article/A-Digital-Boot-Camp-for-Grad/131665/>
- Olteanu, A. (2015). *Philosophy of education in the semiotics of Charles Peirce. A cosmology of learning and loving*. Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Wien: Peter Lang.
- Palmer, C. L. (2005). Scholarly work and the shaping of digital access. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 56 (11): 1140-1153.
- Sahle, P. (2006). What is text? A pluralistic approach. *Digital Humanities 2006 Conference Abstracts*, 188-190. Université Paris-Sorbonne, CATI, July 5-9.
- Sahle, P. (2012). Modeling transcription. Paper presented at the *workshop Knowledge Organization and Data Modeling in the Humanities: An ongoing conversation*, Brown University, RI, March 15. Accessed July 21, 2016. <https://datasymposium.wordpress.com/sahle/>
- Small, H. (2013). *The value of the humanities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smithies, J. (2017). *The digital humanities and the digital modern*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Svensson, P. (2012). Envisioning the digital humanities. *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 6 (1).





## The humanities as allies: media studies and the web

Peter Dahlgren

Lund University

peter.dahlgren@kom.lu.se

### Abstract

From the horizons of media and communication studies, this article begins with the premise that the media, and the in particular the Web, as central features of a turbulent late modernity. The Web has become ubiquitous and central to our sense of who we are, how we live, think, relate to others and experience the world. This process of *mediatization* is complex and historically without parallel; it affects all aspects of society, culture and politics. Most research on these developments are firmly based in the social sciences. The argument is made here that to fully grasp the implications of these transformations – which are even beginning to alter traditional noti-

ons of ‘the human’ – we would benefit from more assistance from the humanities. While acknowledging the difficult institutional position that the humanities find themselves in, the contention is that their intellectual perspectives are needed, especially in history, philosophy, and aesthetics. These could help us to better place the developments in broader contexts and illuminate what is at stake. The latter part of the article offers a set of themes that exemplify some of the key dilemmas that are emerging as the Web becomes all the more central to our lives – dilemmas that would benefit from serious attention from the humanities.

### Preliminaries

**D**ICKENS opens his *A Tale of Two Cities* with ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...’ Today we are perched on another precarious historical fence, weighing the pros and cons of late modernity: all the material wealth and well-being are juxtaposed to increasing deprivation and social crises; there is an unease as we sense that our compelling technological progress is indeed proving to be a Faustian bargain – not least as we look at the state of the environment. We are not convinced that ‘progress’ has made us ‘happier’.

A central feature of late modernity is the media, especially in their newer digital forms. These I conveniently (but somewhat inaccurately) here call the Web, as a shorthand to refer to the technical

---

A *Revista Estudos em Comunicação* é financiada por Fundos FEDER através do Programa Operacional Factores de Competitividade – COMPETE e por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia no âmbito do projeto *Comunicação, Filosofia e Humanidades (LabCom.IFP) UID/CCI/00661/2013*.



infrastructure of the Internet and the software of integrated digital media, including social media platforms. The Web is not only embedded as an inexorable manifestation of this age, it is also a force that contributes to driving it forward, particularly via the meta-processes of mediatization. As I explain below, this term posits that the media interplay with all dimensions of the social and cultural world, reorganizing how we live and experience our lives. I underscore that the dynamics of mediatization – and more specifically their consequences – are ambivalent. The rise of the Web as mass phenomena less than a quarter of a century ago has dramatically altered our lives, providing us with tools that would been unimaginable not long ago. With all the advantages, however, it manifests dark sides as well, thereby raising serious questions.

Most research with the field of Media and Communication Studies (or, Media Studies for short) is firmly anchored in the social sciences; there are some contributions from the humanities, but they remain a minority. The ulterior intension of this text is to invite more engagement from the humanities regarding the Web. My premise is that we as social scientists, and the field as whole, would greatly benefit from such engagement, as intellectual stimulation for the field. So why cannot the social sciences handle these issues largely on their own? Well, they can and they have, but in my view there are areas of inquiry where humanities perspectives could see things through different lenses and genuinely enhance our understanding, by posing other sorts of questions – and perhaps pointing to different kinds of answers. Digital media are not only about how we do things, how we work, socialize, play, and get things done. With their ubiquity, they have also become central to our sense of who we are, and to how we experience and relate to the world – themes that the humanities could further probe in edifying ways, situating them in historical contexts, illuminating normative and aesthetic dimensions. Democracy, in turn, is not just about a formal system, its structures and dynamics. It is all about the people and their subjectivities, the values, and cultural patterns that sustain and permeate society.

In the presentation I begin with some brief reflections on why the humanities are important for Media Studies, while also acknowledging the difficult position in which the humanities find themselves. The question might be raised: why seek help from wounded allies? My view is that even if their institutional position is weak, their intellectual affordances are important, not least for media research. Moreover, I argue that their plight has relevance for democracy itself. From there I turn to the field of Media Studies and the emerging paradigm of mediatization, offering a short scene-setting for what follows. The next and central section looks at the Web, highlighting a number of key thematic areas that are persistently problematic. This is by no means an ‘anti-Web tirade’; rather, my discussion is driven by a sense that with all the justifiable praise accorded the Web, some important questions are left in the shadows, including ones that begin to problematize traditional notions of ‘the human’. It is here where more engagement from the humanities could offer some spotlights.

### **Why the humanities?**

At bottom, the notion ‘the humanities’ encompasses both production within arts and culture – the generation of various kinds of ‘works’ – as well as the analysis of such production (e.g. literature *and* literary criticism). Our concern here resides largely with the analysis side of the

humanities, although certain kinds of production, for example, philosophy, is also of considerable relevance. For those readers who have their anchoring within the humanities, the rubric of this section no doubt sounds redundant; for other readers, I wish to recapitulate a number of very traditional arguments. I do this with a starting point in a rather recent text by Holm, Scott and Jarrick (2014); their *Humanities World Report 2015* is both a survey of the views of leading humanistic scholars from around the world as well as an original contribution to the contemporary discussions about the state of the humanities.

### **Essential contributions**

The authors contend that the humanities make a number of essential contributions to people and societies all around the world (there is no fashionable ‘cultural relativism’ in their argument: they assert the significance of the humanities for everyone). They assert first of all the most classic view, that the humanities have an *intrinsic* value, in that they support personal and spiritual development, not least by fostering aesthetic appreciation. This of course has been the basic position for at least two and a half millennia. Bringing up the perspective to the contemporary world, they make the unassailable case that the humanities contribute to other disciplines, feeding into other fields, ranging from the social and natural sciences, to medicine, computer science, and engineering/design. The contributions can vary enormously, from illuminating implicit value premises in social research to elucidating the aesthetic parameters of an architectural design.

Further, Holm, Scott and Jarrick (2014) posit that the traditional benefits of the humanities now have an extra relevance in the context of heterogeneous societies: they have ‘broad social value’ in their striving to create tolerance and understanding between citizens, facilitating social cohesion. The pertinence of this needs hardly be defended in the context of our multifarious, multicultural societies, where living together with difference is proving to be an ever greater challenge. As an extension of this reasoning, they also underscore the importance of the humanities to enable citizens to understand, preserve, and not least – where necessary – to challenge national heritage and culture. This is to learn from the past about one’s collective identities – to appreciate, appropriate – but also to confront and reject questionable elements that have shaped a shared sense of community. The relevance of this horizon is brought home not least as some right-wing political leaders in Europe today are striving to rewrite the history of their countries to promote a more politically expedient narrative, one that edits out uncomfortable historical realities from collective memory. In short, democratic life benefits from input from the humanities.

The report also sees the humanities as serving to aid decision-making on ethical issues, which are becoming all the more complex as social policies must take into account all the more intricate social contexts, and as technological developments demand all the more attentiveness to ethical dimensions and risk aspects, from genetic manipulation to nuclear power.

In case there was any lingering suspicion, the *Humanities World Report 2015* makes it abundantly clear that the humanities should absolutely *not* be seen as some static body of truth or wisdom, even if they include some indispensable legacies. The humanities at bottom foster critical thinking. This is their essence; it epitomized by – but not limited to – the Socratic tradition. Rather, they manifest an ongoing critical dialogue and interrogation of circumstances, achieve-

ments, and dilemmas of the human world, while they aim to understand, interpret, inspire, and challenge

### **Critical thinking in a world of hazardous transitions**

The critical tradition of the humanities became incorporated into Enlightenment. The Enlightenment reaffirmed the basic view of the traditional humanities that questioning is essential for the growth of knowledge. Thus the idea of ‘critical’ has become an attribute associated with arts, science, and pursuit of knowledge. Moreover, the notion of ‘critique’ emerged as a more specific stance (I expand on these themes in Dahlgren 2013). Walter Benjamin suggests that critique involves brushing against the grain of established understandings. For Hegel, critique veered towards reflections on power relations, and challenges to domination – an intellectual thread that Marx most famously picked up and pursued. No less famous is Kant’s notion of critique, in the sense of reflections on the conditions of our knowing: what are the contingencies that shape how we know the world and ourselves (in his *Critique of Pure Reason*)? Enlightenment for Kant becomes precisely the way out of our self-imposed ignorance.

Thus, this ‘brushing against the grain’, probing power relations, and reflecting on the factors that shape and inevitably delimit our knowledge, are essential toolkits for navigating the modern world, which often feels – and is – overwhelming. The future is not what it used to be, so to speak. Just looking at some of the major hazardous global transitions that we facing makes this apparent: climate and pollution trauma, economic-financial breakdowns, political crises, culture and religious collisions, failed states, and wars fill the news daily. This is generating not just uncertainty, but also fear, which is being politically exploited on many fronts. Spheres of human life previously separated by geography, class, normative horizons, domains of power, or expertise, are becoming ever more juxtaposed, intermingled, hybridized. Confusion is considerable. Yet, this ‘liquid’ character of late modernity (Bauman 2007), where values and ethics appear further dislodged from traditional perceived certainties, also offers us new opportunities to think afresh, to break new ground. We need philosophers, historians, text analysts: it is in the interplay with other fields that the humanities can make an extra contribution that other disciplines are less equipped to do. By questioning and offering critiques, they can enhance the growth of knowledge in their own fields as well as those with whom they enter into critical dialogue.

This stance of critique is important. However, it is not always clear to what extent it is operative. In regard, for example, to the new emerging hybrid field of digital humanities (DH) Holm, Scott and Jarrick (2014) on the one hand laud the engagement and crossover between the humanities and computer science that DH represents. The benefits of DH are obvious: the analytic work of some humanities research can be made easier; with all vast cataloguing of materials that are going on, and it facilitates access in ways previous not possible. On the other hand, the authors find that despite all the helpful applications, DH does not seem to be critically dialoging with computer science; it is not generating much in the way of new research questions. They opine that DH must demonstrate its *intellectual* power and potential and promote new ways of thinking; in other words it must do more to generate critique.

### **The humanities under duress**

It is clear that all is not well with the humanities, unfortunately: their marginalization in higher education and in the allocation of research funding has been going on for many decades. I am in a sense appealing to assistance from potential allies who are wounded. In fact, one could argue that the ‘humanities’ have been in decline ever since the term became widespread in the academic world, which was after World War II. Prior to that, the usual rubric was ‘Liberal Arts’, ‘Arts and Sciences’, or ‘Arts, Letters and Sciences’ (Perloff, 2001). Some observers would go back even centuries earlier, others would set the start of the crisis in the 1960s. In any case, in the post-war era, the general societal drift that lauds ‘utility’, efficiency, and market logic has eroded the vitality of the humanities. Their perceived significance among those outside these fields, especially among academic decision-makers and politicians, has been in steady decline (see Pedro 2015 for a witty rendering of the debates).

The evidence and/or arguments are familiar: humanities are not of much utility, they have modest relevance in today’s world, they have limited commercial appeal, and they mostly do not easily lend themselves to quantification. Research is underfunded, teaching is understaffed, and the salary gap between scholars in the humanities and in other fields has widened. We witness massive declines in university enrollments for humanities studies, with currently about only eight percent of undergraduates in the US having a major in them, which is a 50 percent reduction since 1966. Obviously such a complex development cannot be reduced to one single factor, but many critical observers see an integrated logic. This has to do with the corporatization of higher education, a vector of the more overarching neoliberal paradigm of societal development that has been hegemonic in the West since the early 1980s. Jay (2014) makes the case that the corporatization of higher education involves a profound transformation towards vocational training. Higher education becomes geared for credentializing, whereby the value of courses and credits are judged in terms of their practical vocational utility. In this setting, it is understandable that the humanities become hit the hardest, especially when the overall trends in knowledge where computational, technological, and mechanical skills are replacing broad-based education that emphasizes history, philosophy, and aesthetics.

We should note, however, that these neoliberal logics are not in any way restricted to universities; they imbue our entire society. Authors such as Sandel (2012) and Nussbaum (2010) demonstrate in various ways how trust, solidarity, and other virtues are bulldozed over by economic rationality, which seeps into and put price tags on just about all areas of human life. Neoliberalism has become not just a policy horizon but also a cultural motif, shaping social relationships and visions of the good society (see, for example, Couldry, 2010; Young, 2007). Even democracy itself becomes corroded, as normative frameworks that concern justice are subverted, derailing the foundations for democratic political discussion: issues that are normative and political in character become rendered in terms that are economic, technical or administrative in character, undermining the meaningfulness of participation (Brown 2015). This carries with it feelings of disempowerment and ultimately either disengagement or populist ‘enagement’.

Thus, I would argue, the importance of the humanities lies also in their service to democracy; they are an essential resource, a compass to help us in piloting the treacherous waters of explicit

and implicit un- and antidemocratic values, and provide visions of the good society. And with the voices of the traditional humanities less and less heard, much is being lost – perhaps irretrievably. I turn now to a short discussion of the field of Media and Communication Studies, to illustrate more concretely the why our field needs more input from the humanities, and why this has bearing on the life of democracy.

## **Media and Communication Studies – and Mediatization**

### **Porous – and expanding – boundaries**

Media Studies was established around the world over the course of a number of decades – 1960s-1990s – as proponents of the new field marched out of various ‘mother disciplines’ such as sociology and political science to launch new university departments and research journals. The humanities were in a limited way among some of the ‘mother disciplines’, notably literature and rhetoric, and to a lesser degree visual aesthetics. Film as an academic discipline is a special case in that while it focuses on ‘a medium’, it has long maintained its institutional independence from media studies (this distinction seems to be eroding somewhat now with the increasing convergence of media technologies). History has generated a small but robust domain of ‘media history’ within the field, as is the case with philosophy. I should also mention that the adjacent field of Cultural Studies – which is at least as eclectic and porous as Media Studies – has had a strong humanities profile, especially after it became established in the US (arriving from the UK in the late 1970s-early 1980s). There are some small areas of juxtaposition and overlap between the two fields, and certainly the humanities is well represented in these domains. In sum, though, we can say that while the humanities have always having some sort of presence in the field of Media Studies, its role is a rather minor one. Media Studies remains overwhelmingly social scientific in its orientation.

This tendency is reinforced by the trends in assessment criteria and the templates for journal publishing, where quantitative methods, terse prose, and models of research with origins in the natural sciences have increasingly become the norm in the last decade or so. Generally, it is somewhat easier for researchers in the science sciences to adapt to these publishing templates than for those in the humanities, where longer, descriptive and analytics prose, often in an essayistic style, is more common.

What is of particular relevance today is that the field of Media Studies no longer has a monopoly on its objects of research: scholars from across the range of the social sciences have been increasingly engaging themselves in media research, especially since the advent of the Web. Moreover, some fronts of the field are merging with computer science, telecommunication, informatics, and even AI – artificial intelligence. The very notion of what a ‘medium’ is – or what ‘media’ are – has been problematized by the technical developments. Some within the field may grumble about this growing expansion and the resultant ‘external competition’ – and want to guard their institutional interests. Yet intellectually we should laud this development, which adds more scholarly voices and perspectives – even if it risks rendering our distinct academic *raison d’être* slightly less secure.

Let us be clear about these developments: for all their significance and the intellectual excitement they generate, for all the interesting results they can deliver, they are for the most part *not* moving towards the humanities. Rather, within this sprawling field and its interfaces with other disciplines, the direction is all the more towards quantitative trends, where algorithmic analyses of big data phenomena such as Twitter behavior are highly unlikely to critically inquire about the deeper social realities behind the numerical findings. A number of scholars in the field do relate easily to the humanities via their use of qualitative ethnographic approaches and/or their use of textual methodologies such as semiotics, hermeneutics, and discourse analysis. Yet, there seems to be a generational factor here, with these ‘softer’ approaches in use among older scholars, while younger researchers are all the more likely to follow the quantitative procedures.

### **Mediatization: meta-processes of late modernity**

There has been a compelling conceptual development in the field over the past decade, which has to do with the perceived scope of the research terrain and with situating the role of media today. Traditionally, in the era of mass communication, media research pivoted on the tri-part division of the institutions of the media, the form and content of their communication, and the consequences or significance of these representations for individuals, organizations, for culture and for society. Though there have been a variety of research paradigms over the years, it was generally taken that mediated communication is a largely one-way, distinct phenomenon emanating from specific organizational entities and impacting on various audiences and publics. However, a rupture began to emerge with the Web: technically, there need not be a difference between ‘sender’ and receiver’; the ‘users’ could now be producers as well.

Many aspects of modern life are in some *mediated*, in that they make use of media; this is not very controversial. But with the notion of *mediatization* (see Hjarvard 2013; theme issue of *Communication Theory* 2013), it is argued that the media’s interplay with each sector is in some way altering it, and by extension transforming society at large. This is the ‘grand’ claim; some other versions are more modest. In any case, the revolution brought about by the Internet does lend credence to the claims of mediatization – the Web today does just about touch all phases of personal, organizational, and institutional life- and thus has become a powerful force in constructing the social world (Couldry and Hepp 2016). The low profile of the humanities in this context is unfortunate: the need for their intellectual contribution becomes all the more apparent. This insufficiency becomes evident if we look at some of the key attributes of the Web and how it is used.

### **Dilemmas of Life Online**

The social sciences tend to stay with questions that are of the more overtly empirical kind, for obvious reasons; larger, more amorphous lines of inquiry are difficult to operationalize for such research. Yet it is these kinds of questions that many people are asking themselves about the Web. For example, even the idea of ‘human’ is evolving, as our bodies become more bio-technically integrated with digital media; where does this leave the classic notion of the subject? Part of

the emerging challenge lies in identifying and formulating the important topics of our time in the face of late modern, Web-based mediatization; a number of them are normative-ethical in nature, not merely empirical – and for these reasons I make this appeal for more assistance from the humanities. Certainly there are few social scientists who aim at the broader picture and strive to elicit public debate and policy: the work of Sonia Livingstone in regard to children and the Web is notable here (Livingstone 2009; Livingstone and Sefton-Green 2016). Also the psychologist Aiken (2016) synthesizes many strands of research to problematize how key socio-cultural dimensions are changing via the Web. She examines how the ‘cyber effect’ impacts on friendship, intimacy, work, education, consumption, even our sense of time. The work of Livingstone, Aiken, and others helpfully offers these problematic perspectives for us to reflect upon – yet we need more help, precisely in how to think about them, how we should deal with them.

Scholars have always found it difficult to get a firm grasp of their own historical era; hindsight is always easier. Yet we cannot postpone our efforts to understand and come to terms with the present to some vague point in the future; we need to tackle many issues now, albeit with an awareness that is always imperfect. The following discussion, in part inspired by a number of stimulating contributions from the humanities, identifies and briefly addresses a range of dilemmas we face as we increasingly live our lives online, and as aspects of our offline lives become increasingly mediatized. Obviously it is impossible to be exhaustive here; what follows can only be suggestive.

### **Political economy, technical architecture, and automation**

As a way of grounding – in social science manner – an understanding on the ubiquitous and seemingly infinite Web, and particularly social media, a few words about its political economy and technical architecture can be useful. Political economy addresses questions of ownership, control, and the relations of power that derive from these factors. These are the first important things to know about the Web: it is not a neutral communicative space, but is thoroughly structured by power relations. In the online digital world, a few large corporate actors such as Google, Microsoft, Facebook (who also owns YouTube) dominate the Web environment; all are commercial enterprises (only the very small wiki sector has any significant non-commercial actors). This of course raises many issues, not least normative-democratic ones, but for our purposes here, suffice to say that the massive imbalance in power between everyday users and these corporate entities, and the thoroughly commercial logic of the Web, are decisive in shaping the character of the Web and our experience of it. While we as users can make creative use of the Web, we have little power over its how it is run (see van Dijck 2013).

This becomes apparent if we look at the technical architecture. The technical architecture of the web and social media is, of course, immensely complex; my key point here, however, is quite basic: at whatever aspect of the technical architecture that we look at, we find points of control – points where various actors/stakeholders are in a position to filter, edit, block or exclude what should be the democratic flow of communication for both individuals and social networks. These points include: the overall technical network, the specific device being used, their concrete applications, the actual content being transferred or blocked, and social data (which include users’ location, histories of their web usage, applications use, contact histories and so



forth). Thus for example, with the commercial logic comes a constant accumulation of private data that we provide the Web giants – in the case of Facebook, with our formal consent, in the case of Google, Amazon, etc. by default. This data is packaged, analysed, and sold to many other Web actors. We use the Web, but it also uses us; we should not forget where the definitive power lies. And beyond the commercial logic of the technical architecture we have state surveillance, as was made globally public by the Snowden affair a few years ago. We are always potentially being watched; any lingering sense of privacy is mostly illusionary. Of course this admittedly unpleasant baseline should not deter us from using the Web; rather it should just serve to remind us of its basic contingencies, and as a guide for our usage.

A very different issue emerges from the ever-impressive technical affordances of the Web. It echoes an old dilemma in compelling new ways, yet is rarely discussed today: automation. The theme of automation arose with the Industrial Revolution; the new machines resulted in enormous leaps forward in terms of efficiency and enhanced productivity. And yet, as we know, there was a backlash: Neo-Luddism in the UK during the early years of the 19th century was the most famous manifestation of this revolt against new technologies. While something was gained by these new technologies, it quickly became apparent that something was also lost: the ‘deskilling’ of crafts people became a major problem. The adage of ‘use it or lose it’ applies perfectly here: without continually practicing – and passing on to younger generations – their skills, the skills atrophied and disappeared. Moreover, there were other consequences: the machines tended to separate people from actual work, replacing it with stultifying routines. Automation refashions both the work process and the worker; it transforms the character of the whole task, the organization, the roles, attitudes and skills of the people who participate in it. We become in a sense separated from ourselves.

In one of the few texts to apply this logic to digital media, Carr (2014) offers an array of examples of how the new technologies erode not only skills but also imagination, fostering standardized thinking, professional complacency, and a decline in attention when so much which should build on creativity becomes predictable. He depicts what happens to airplane doctors, architects, airline pilots, and even modern Eskimos – who become so dependent on GPS in their snowmobiles that they when the technology fails they become literally – and even fatally – lost. Debates on this theme appeared several decades ago when pocket calculators entered the pockets of many school children – ‘How will they do math without these gadgets?’ Since then, however, there has been much celebration over the often amazing capacities we have gained, but little discussion about the competencies we may be losing. I am decidedly not making a neo-Neo-Luddite argument here – smashing laptops is not on the agenda – but rather asserting that we would benefit from a more sustained analysis of the consequences of our by now taken for granted digital practices. It may be possible to achieve less loss in the face of all the gain, or perhaps reframe our understanding of what is indeed ‘gained’.

### **Abundance, speed, and pathways to knowledge**

There are two particular technical attributes of the web that can impact on its use, the subjectivity of its users, and society more broadly. These are largely taken for granted by now and

not discussed much anymore – they have merely become features that define the web’s admirable character: the abundance of information it makes available and the speed at which information is accessible – and at which it is replaced by new information.

The output on the Web is, from the practical horizons of any user, seemingly inexhaustible. Of course each of us has his/her own areas of interest, networks and sites that we follow, and thereby wall off most of what is ‘out there’ as not relevant to our purposes. We all develop personal strategies for navigating the daily tsunami of information, the ‘infoglut’ as Andrejevic (2013) calls it. Yet, as he argues, even as we zero in on just those topics that interest us, we are often still confronted by a vast output and faced by many different perspectives, premises, and conclusions. And even while we tend to adhere to the groupings whose world views we share – we tend to gather in ‘bubbles’ that often have difficulty communicating with each other boundaries – doubt can set in. And the consequences of doubt operate on the individual, group, and societal levels. Cognitive certainty is dislodged by informational abundance; moreover, as people become all the more media aware and understand the constructed character of mediated representation, suspicion of sources grows. So, to avoid such dissonance, we emotionally wall off those whom we mistrust the most, yet we can still become anxious about what we might be missing. Stress grows; climates of popular debunking emerge, coloured by cynicism.

The danger of the Web’s speed are related. Finding and extracting relevant information that one can trust can be difficult in a fast-moving informational environment, but still more challenging is to develop knowledge, in the sense of the critical integration of new information with existing frames of reference, and may involve the modification of these frames. This takes time and effort, both of which become easily marginalized in the digital milieu of the ‘the ever new’: the present becomes devalued as attention turns to whatever will come next. Decision-making requires reflection, which in turn also demands time. The overall ‘speed up’ of (late) modern culture, is central theme found in a number of theory-oriented social scientists, including and Harvey (1991) and Virilio (2002). The emphasis on the Web’s role in this can be found in more recent writings by some journalists who combine familiarity with current social science research with a strong humanities orientation (Jackson 2009; Colvile 2016). They underscore, among other things, the cognitive stress, lack of focus, as well as eroded linguistic and social capacities that emerge from living and working in the online environment with its accelerating velocity.

Manovich (2013) describes the computer as a ‘metamedium’, characterized by ‘permanent extendibility’. It is capable of translating just about everything into data, and via the use of algorithmic analysis it alters what it means to ‘know’ something, engendering what he calls *software epistemology*:

Digital code, data visualization, GIS, information retrieval, machine learning techniques, constantly increasing speed of processors and decreasing costs of storage, big data analytics technologies, social media, and other parts of the modern techno-social universe introduce new ways of acquiring knowledge, and in the process redefine what knowledge is (Manovich 2013:338).

With new algorithmic methods, one can now even generate new information and knowledge from existing analog sources from the past, such as photos and models. This is called *data fusion*, and it is clear that it demands some serious rethinking of our traditional epistemologies.

Moreover, in the popular consciousness, not least among policy makers, there has emerged a hegemonic discourse that Mozorov (2013) sees as Internet-centric, a techno-utopian mind-set that assumes that a quick fix is available for social and political problems. Such ‘solutionist’ thinking results in programmes that throw laptops at underprivileged young people in urban slums in hopes of enhancing their life changes, or installing online chat forums for so that citizens can communicate with their municipal governments to enhance democracy. And the obvious failures of such strategies do not seem to evoke much critical reflection.

Fernández-Armesto (2010) suggests that historically there are four basic methods that we use in determining what is true: what we feel, what we are told, what we figure out, and what we observe. All four co-exist in various relationships at any point in history. Today, in the viral world of Web information, the first option – that which we feel – is clearly on the rise. With just a little exaggeration, we can say that truth becomes an inner subjective reality, an affective leap, as in the notion of ‘truthiness’ (a term popularized by the U.S. comedian Stephen Colbert). The affectively attractive becomes the foundation for validity claims about reality, prompting distressed commentary about a ‘post-factual’ mentality in politics,

Coupled with weak sense of efficacy, it is easy for citizens’ assumptions to be psychologically stronger than their critical reasoning, which can open the door to problematic and even dangerous post-rational trajectories. Affect can lead people to find short-cuts to deal with the massive amounts of information and their at times overall ambivalence. This becomes debilitating for the individual, it fosters cognitive closure of groups, and ultimately damaging the critical role of public spheres. It also ferments populism, which can further undercut the dynamics of democracy.

### **Algorithms, attention, and friends**

In a related intervention, Berardi (2015) contends that while we believe that digital media are empowering us, they are in fact undermining ‘the world’ that we as a human community know it. He sees the fundamental transition from an alphabetical foundation of knowledge to a digital one as constituting a major historic transition in human civilization. This shift involves on the one hand, an erosion of memory, empathy, sensibility (that is, a fundamental transformation of our subjectivity), and on the other hand, a decreasing capacity to impact in an efficacious manner on this new world:

A world is a projection of meaningful patterns on the surrounding space of lived existence. It is the sharing of a common code whose key lies in the form of life of the community itself...When the signs proceeding from the environment are no longer consistent and understandable within the frame of the shared code, when signs that convey effectiveness and potency escape the shared cultural code, a civilization ceases to be vital. (p. 331).

In the online context, what is often now called ‘algorithmic culture’ (Striphas 2015) signifies the manner in which commercial computational processes (e.g. Google search results) classify and rank people, locations, objects, ideas, and aesthetic works. This has enormous bearing on how ‘culture’ today is experienced and practiced. Not least these developments increasingly put culture in the hands of giant corporations, who commodify it and erode its public character – which takes us back to the political economy of the Web mentioned above.

While our attention is of commercial concern for corporate Web actors, for ourselves it has to do with central dimensions of our existence. From the horizons of common sense, people have for some years increasingly begun to wonder about the amount of time we devote to screens. Just one little detail among many: according to a recent Nielsen survey in the US the average teenager exchanges about 4000 text messages a month (quoted in Harris, 2014). Whatever the accuracy of this statistic, it evokes scenes familiar to us all: a group lunch where conversation is constantly interrupted by mobile phones, or school yards at recess time where more children are communicating with screens than with each other. Perhaps we are indeed getting better at ‘multitasking’, but what of the quality of human interaction when attention becomes diffuse and sporadic? Pettman (2106) argues that not only do social media undercut attention by encouraging distraction, they also fragment us as a society by shuttling us into ever-smaller micro-zones of engagement.

Our social interaction and processes of identity are increasingly tied to our Web experiences. What does it mean for socially when the norm that taking a call or message on the smartphone takes priority over the live conversation one is having? More significantly, we gather and quantify our ‘likes’ to enhance our public image, but where does the center of the person now lie? Friendship too is evolving. Previously, friends were largely a personal, private matter. On social media, they become in a sense public, and serve as ‘a public’ for our manifestations of our identity. Thus, when people put on their Facebook page that they have been taking their kids to a lot of activities, when they post the greetings they sent to their mom on Mother’s Day, something happens. On the one hand, that they do these private things is splendid. That they post such acts on Facebook turns them into public performances, a part of the digital presentation of self; an act that will hopefully elicit ‘likes’. Where then does the meaning of these acts lie?

Bakardieva (2015) has traced the evolution of online sociality; she sees a process of technical rationalization of ‘friendship’ – sociality becomes an object of computation and takes on increasingly standardized and trivialized forms and gestures. This has now culminated with the rise of socialbots, i.e. robotized online functions that masquerade as ‘friends’ online – you are invited to ‘friend’ somebody – but often that invitation derives not from the person but from the algorithmic conclusion the platform has arrived at. How should we see such developments? What does ‘friendship’ mean today?

We are more or less always available for our media devices, we are seldom more than a few clicks away from the Web. Indeed, a good deal of our social lives is now experienced or facilitated via the Web, and in the neoliberal era of capitalism, this means that ‘the world’ is active almost 24/7, which even encroaches on sleep (see Crary 2013). Harris (2014) laments this ‘end of absence’, and the ‘loss of lack’ that follows from it – that is, that we are rarely left to our own devices to think, meditate, and reflect, without the assistance of the Web in some way. Harris is

not a professional humanist, he is a journalist, but articulates in a clear way the concern that many have about ‘using vs. losing’ some of our most fundamental human capacities.

Access to information has never been greater in human history, but at the same time screen devices alter our relationship to text. The screen ‘bias’ is towards more visual representation, and, importantly, towards shorter texts. There are undeniable gains here in terms of the speed of information. But the attention required for encountering and processing longer texts seems to wane among younger generations in many parts of the world, and school results point to a decline in reading skills, prominently among boys. Social scientific data has been presented, discussed, and debated as to the extent and depth of these changes, but the larger questions of the fragmentation of attention and transformation of our relationship to the printed word, and to other people, need broader, historically-oriented analyses.

### **The mediatization of civic engagement**

There is a very large literature dealing with the Web as an institution of the public sphere (see Dahlgren 2013 for an overview), and of course the Web has been an immense asset for democratic participation. However, the initial celebratory atmosphere has subsided, and scholars all the more point to difficulties. For example, against the ideals of reasoned Habermasian deliberation in public sphere, many observers emphasize the barriers to communicative rationality online. Aside from anti-democratic baleful threats and harassment, hate speech, propaganda, and plain uncivil behaviour, just the general communicative environment of the Web is an impediment to such idealizations of the democratic dialogue. As Lievrouw cogently describes the situation:

Media culture in the digital age has become more personal, skeptical, ironic, perishable, idiosyncratic, collaborative, and almost inconceivably diversified, even as established industries and institutions seek to maintain their grip on stable messages and audiences and to extend their business models online (p.214).

What she captures here in fact is some of the definitive textures of the late modern situation, with their cross-currents of power relations and their particular sensibilities and affect. This massive outpouring of user-generated content robustly engenders horizontal communication among citizens, maintaining networks and situating people in various ways towards society and public culture. Yet there are also issues. For example, in regard to journalism, there are all manner of ‘citizen journalism’ juxtaposing and blending with each other: facts and viewpoints, debates, gossip, nonsense, misinformation, the insightful, the deceptive, the playful, the poetic, are mixed together, scrambling the traditional boundaries between journalism and non-journalism. Where public spheres end and entertainment and consumption take over is not always obvious.

On social media we see a great deal of ‘post-Habermasian’, multi-modal expression, where affect and aesthetic dimensions prevail. Emotional aspects such as a passion for justice and visions of the good society are always essential if people are to become politically involved, but the balance with rationality remains ever precarious. When fear, anger, denial, hate, revenge and other sentiments that lurk in the unconscious are in the political driver’s seat – even among political leaders (see Žižek 2011) – they can readily be combined with dangerous tendencies towards repression,

xenophobia, racism, and fascism. Moreover, given that abundance and speed on the Web increase the competition for attention, and as the media environment becomes denser, the odds of getting and holding attention to any message or discussion generally decreases. If we frame this feature in terms of civic engagement, this suggests that people are less likely to engage for longer periods with any given political issue, let alone long range policy horizons; political attention becomes more event-oriented. Protest flares up and vanishes (e.g. Occupy), but the power structures largely do not change.

The Web has become central to democracy; we can do without it, and we have to accept that the modes of political expression mostly do not follow the criteria of communicative rationality. Is all thereby lost? Apparently not, but the danger is there. How are we to deal with the medi- atization of democracy in late modernity? In the 1920s John Dewey wrote about the importance of education in shaping democratic citizens; Nussbaum (2010) continues in that tradition. She underscores the importance of the humanities in schools and universities, and is adamant that ethics and compassion are central, as are fundamental the principles like equality and tolerance. She stresses that the ability to view the world from a variety of perspectives as well as to test alternative sets of values. The role of education – always a challenged – is nonetheless still vital.

If we go beyond the classroom, into the broader societal domain of politics and the Web, democracy still needs to be able to engage citizens to participate and follow its norms. I have written elsewhere about civic cultures as a resource for such engagement (Dahlgren 2009). Civic cultures provide taken-for-granted and accessible resources – albeit very vulnerable ones – that can support democratic political agency. Civic cultures are comprised of several dimensions; a central one is knowledge to orient oneself and one's actions in the world. Of course the Web looms massively large here – with all the ambivalence I have suggested above. It can provide an endless flow of facts and information, but the challenge is in part to translate this into knowledge: to sift and filter through the cacophonous, online 'post-rational' public spheres to find resources to add to one's cognitive frameworks.

Ultimately civic cultures must generate civic identities – that allow people to feel that they are empowered civic actors. Through the collective 'doing' of democratic politics with the help of the Web – the sharing, solidarity, trust, encouragement – networked citizens can strengthen their sense of self as political actors (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Yet online political participation can readily become a privatized activity. The often very loose or non-existent bonds with other active citizens readily help generate a cosy personal comfort zone, a 'solo sphere' characterized by 'slacktivism' and 'clicktivism', yielding situations where actors feel that engaging with the political remains a free-choice option among other leisure pursuits. Such engagement can be quite pleasurable – and does not require the sustained 'work' of serious political participation – yet erodes civic culture. Commercialism is nothing new, obviously, but the worry is that in the context of the Web environment, democracy and civic horizons are being seriously marginalized by consumerist values. Indeed, even as people participate politically via social media or websites, they are embedded in a discursive environment, a habitus, that positions them as consumers.

\*\*\*

Certainly more issues can be raised, but hopefully these will suffice to convey a sense of what we need to creatively deal with in regard to the Web and the processes of mediatization. Today, people who were born after ca. 1985 have no direct experience of the pre-digital world. This referent has thus far been foundational in our attempts to understand what the digital transformation of society. One can only – and with some trepidation – imagine the world when no living person has any memory of the time before the digital media became pervasive. I wish to underscore again that to problematize the Web is not to be ‘against’ it. We do not need to choose between the corporeal reality and the digital one, but rather to critically inquire how we can live ‘better’ with their interplay, and in the long run impact on policies that shape the Web and its use. In the short term, however, it is more the case of trying to probe how we can enhance our lives with them – and despite them. How to live well is a theme that has always been at the heart of the humanities; I hope they join in more in these discussions.

## References

- Aiken, M. (2016). *The Cyber Effect*. London: John Murray.
- Bakaedjieva, M. (2015). Rationalizing sociality: an unfinished script for socialbots. *The Information Society: An International Journal*, 31: 244-256, DOI: 10.1080/01972243.2015.1020197
- Bauman, Z. (2007). *Liquid times: living in an age of uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bennett, W. L. & Alexandra, S. (2013). *The logic of connective action: digital media and the personalization of contentious politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Berardi, F. ‘Bifo’ (2015). *AND: Phenomenology of the end*. South Pasadena, CA: semiotext(e). Distributed by MIT Press.
- Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the demos: neoliberalism’s stealth revolution*. New York: Zone Books.
- Carr, N. (2104). *The glass cage: how our computers are changing us*. New York: Norton.
- Colvile, R. (2016). *The great acceleration*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Couldry, N. & Hepp, A. (2016). *The mediated construction of reality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Communication Theory* (2013). Special issue: conceptualizing mediatization, vol 23 (3).
- Crary, J. (2013). *24/7 Late capitalism and the ends of sleep*. London: Verso.
- Dahlgren, P. (2009). *Media and political engagement*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dahlgren, P. (2013). *The political web: participation, media, and alternative democracy*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fernández-Armesto, F. (2010). *Truth: a history and guide for the perplexed*. London: Black Swan.
- Harris, M. (2014). *The end of absence: reclaiming what we’ve lost in a world of constant connection*. New York: CURRENT/Penguin.
- Harvey, D. (1991). *The condition of post-modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Hjarvard, S. (2013). *The mediatization of culture and society*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Holm, P.; Scott, D. & Jarrick, A. (2014). *Humanities world report 2015*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Jackson, M. (2009). *Distracted: the erosion of attention and the coming dark age*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Jay, P. (2014). *The humanities "crisis" and the future of literary studies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Livingstone, S. (2009). *Children and the internet*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Livingstone, S. & Sefton-Green, J. (2016). *The class: living and learning in the digital age*. New York: NYU Press.
- Manovich, L. (2013). *Software takes command*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Morozov, E. (2013). *To save everything, click here*. London: Allen Lane.
- Nussbaum, M. (2010). *Not for profit: why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Pedro, J. (2015). A dialogue between enlightenment liberals and neoliberal elites on the idea of the university. *Open Democracy*, 21 May. [www.opendemocracy.net/joan-pedro/dialogue-between-enlightenment-liberals-and-neoliberal-elites-on-idea-of-university](http://www.opendemocracy.net/joan-pedro/dialogue-between-enlightenment-liberals-and-neoliberal-elites-on-idea-of-university) Accessed 18 May 2016.
- Perloff, M. (2001). *Crisis in the humanities*. University of Buffalo, Electronic Poetry Center. <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/perloff/articles/crisis.html> Accessed 2 June 2016.
- Pettman, D. (2016). *Infinite distraction: paying attention to social media*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Sandel, M. (2012). *What money can't buy: the moral limits of markets*. London: Allen Lane.
- Striphas, T. (2015). Algorithmic culture. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18 (4-5): 395-412.
- van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: a critical history of social media*.
- Virilio, P. (2000). *The information bomb*. London: Verso.
- Young, J. (2007). *The vertigo of late modernity*. London: Sage.
- Žižek, S. (2011). *Living in the end of times*. London: Verso.



# An Ecosophical Inquiry into Digital Mediation and Design in Relation to Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in an ‘Expanded Field’ of ‘Agri-culture’

Alastair Fuad-Luke

Free University of Bozen-Bolzano

Alastair.Luke@unibz.it

## Introduction

**T**HIS paper brings together several fields of inquiry, including agriculture, art, digital media, design and philosophy, to make a tentative, exploratory re-framing of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), and so to re-think and catalyse fresh opportunities for investigation in the humanities. In order to understand the ‘now’,<sup>1</sup> we have to begin with the long view of the agricultural story and, critically, the mediation of this story. We need to understand how sequential economic, socio-technical and other factors encouraged paradigmatic shifts in the ways we produce, consume and perceive our food. Since Medieval times farmers and producers have been testing new (alternative) systems of production, variously encouraged or resisted by the dominant socio-technical regime.<sup>2</sup> Reaction to the total dominance of agri-industrial farming in the industrialised, northern, western world nations since the 1950s and now globally led to early experiments in different producer-consumer relations, for example through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes, from the 1980s onwards.<sup>3</sup> During the last twenty years these experiments have multiplied under various monikers, such as sustainable farming, bio-farming, organic farming and AFNs to such an extent that they now represent an ‘expanded field’, to borrow a concept from the art critic Rosalind Krauss.<sup>4</sup> Applying this notion of the expanded field to agriculture leads to

---

A *Revista Estudos em Comunicação* é financiada por Fundos FEDER através do Programa Operacional Factores de Competitividade – COMPETE e por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia no âmbito do projeto *Comunicação, Filosofia e Humanidades (LabCom.IFP) UID/CCI/00661/2013*.



1. Brian Eno’s definition of ‘now’ centres on the idea of a time frame. “We have the frame we operate in which we call ‘now’. ‘Now’ is all the things that are affecting me. All the things I can affect in a certain time frame I shall call ‘now’”. Brian Eno, in *Time in Design. Eternally Yours*, (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2003), 62-63.

2. Joan Thirsk, *Alternative Agriculture. A History: From the Black Death to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

3. See, for example, Jules Petty, *Agri-Culture. Reconnecting People, Land and Nature* (London: Earthscan, 2002) and *Food Practices in Transition. Changing Food Consumption, Retail and Production in the Age of Reflexive Modernism*, edited by Gert Spaargaren, Peter Oosterveer and Anne Loeber (New York, London: Routledge, 2012).

4. Art critic Rosalind Krauss saw the emergence of diverse forms of sculpture in the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as marked sites, site construction and axiomatic structures, which did not fit the classical notion of sculpture. Her

a clarification of the terminology and diversity of initiatives that contest intensive agri-industrial farming. Furthermore, it suggests that we are actually exploring a phenomenon of agri-culture, not agriculture, that is the development of farming and food system practices underpinned by new cultural practices and values.<sup>5</sup> Zooming in on the AFNs, which focus on developing new producer-consumer relations, it seems appropriate to consider these developments within Felix Guattari's ecosophy<sup>6</sup> which he proposed as a means to counter the hegemony of Integrated World Capitalism (IWC), or as we know it today, neo-liberal, global capitalism. So, the key questions raised here are how do the AFNs choose to mediate their activities online, whether they embed an ecosophical approach in doing so, and how these might represent new agri-culture. Lastly, I examine the potentiality of design to contribute to amplifying and scaling up AFNs and other practices in 'an expanded field of agri-culture'.

### The long view

For most of the human era of existence we were nomadic. A more sedentary life evolved when we developed socio-technical competences to enable farming and here, some 10,000 years ago, are the origins of agriculture. As brand strategist Will Murray posited, this saw a transition from a 'tribal economy' focused on survival, to a 'rural economy' where the focus became civilisation (Figure 1.1, centre).<sup>7</sup> By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries this was superseded by the 'industrial economy' centred on learning. Here, I might add, was a period of rapid transition in the industrialised nations which divided rural and urban populations. The labour for the factories in the cities was provided by the workers released from the land by the prior mechanisation of farming and dubious legal rearrangements of land ownership.<sup>8</sup> That is, the industrialisation of farming was a pre-requisite for industrialisation for mass production and consumption for existing and emerging nineteenth-century global markets. Murray also proposed that these new, emerging economies became shorter and shorter in duration, the industrial economy being quickly replaced by the consumer economy, then the knowledge economy (Figure 1.1), driven by a shift in focus to communication then individuality. These Polanyi-like paradigmatic shifts<sup>9</sup> were enabled by socio-technical and ideological-political changes driven by emergence of the modern government

---

response was to create a [then] controversial, conceptual model she called 'the Expanded Field' of sculpture. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October*, Vol. 8 (Spring 1979), 30-44.

5. Cliff Hooker, "Value and System: Notes toward the definition of agri-culture," (Publisher?, 1993), 48, accessed 16 July 2016, [www.researchgate.net/publication/265309571](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/265309571)

6. Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (this edition London: Bloomsbury Publishing based on The Athalone Press, 2000, English translation of the original in French, France: Editions Galilee).

7. Will Murray, *Brand Storm: A Tale of Passion, Betrayal and Revenge* (London: Pearson Education)

8. In England between 1604 to 1914 a series of laws, the Inclosures Acts, were passed by parliament. These led to the progressive privatisation of common land, where people had common rights to graze their stock or collect the fruits of the land. This process of enclosure gradually disposed many people of access to land on which to grow food and to maintain a livelihood effectively forcing them to look to towns and cities for employment.

9. The Hungarian-American political economist Karl Polanyi, in his book *The Great Transformation*, saw the rise of active collaboration between the government, the state and the market as a key paradigmatic shift in how the market society, and, hence, economies were constructed. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*. Foreword by Robert M. MacIver. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957, originally published in 1944 New York: Farrar and Rineheart).

state and its collaboration with commerce. The priming of this Market Society, as Karl Polanyi called it, was prompted by longer historical currents and strong shifts in our perceptions of space and time. In Charles Jencks's framing of space and time,<sup>10</sup> in the 1450s we moved from cyclic to linear perceptions (Figure 1.1, right). The notion of progress was born and continued apace, then accelerated in the 1960s when cyclic and linear space:time models converged. The modernity project in agriculture, originating in the late eighteenth century in Great Britain, was followed by strong post-World War I and II increases in mechanisation, coupled with high industrial inputs (fertilisers, chemicals) and the breeding of new plant cultivars. All these factors increased agricultural production per unit area. In the USA these developments led to the reality and rhetoric of the Green Revolution, which became a central strategy for the US International Aid and Development programme.<sup>11</sup> The net effect of this long view is that, for most people living in the industrialised and consumer economies, the separation from agriculture as a way of being, living and working became complete somewhere in the 1960s and has continued apace.

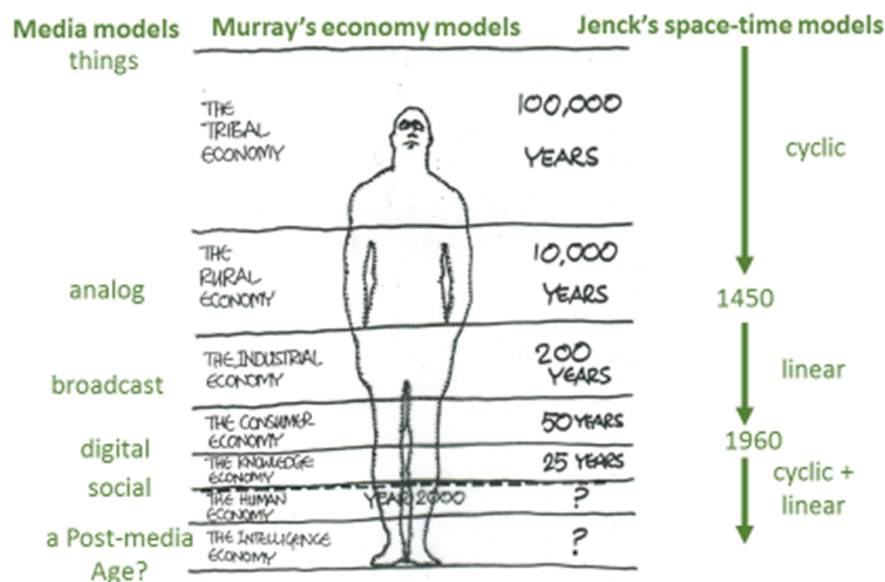


Figure 1.1. The long view: Visualising economy, space-time and media models.

Parallel to this concatenated view of the birth and evolution of agriculture is another story on the development of media, mediation and mediatisation of our daily lives, and, therefore, how and by whom the story of agriculture is told (Figure 1.2). Initially in the tribal economy there were just 'things'. Perhaps the first analogue mediation of these things were the paintings on the walls of caves, recording all things, people, tools, animals, plants, spaces and places. Analogue

10. Charles Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?* (John Wiley & Sons, 1996, 4<sup>th</sup> edition).

11. See the Wikipedia article which gives an overview of the Green Revolution, Wikipedia, accessed 16 July 2016, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green\\_Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_Revolution).

media – writing, print, and, much later, photography – enabled the mediation of agriculture and, inevitably, these contributed significantly to the modernity project to transform agriculture. Later, new mediation means and tools emerged – broadcast media such as radio in the early 1900s, film in the 1920s, television in the 1950s, followed in the 1990s by digital media through the internet and Web 1.0. Up to this point the mediation *and* mediatisation of agriculture was predominantly controlled by large private or public organisations or entities. This was challenged by the emergence of Web 2.0 and social media, where individuals could broadcast or supply content to other media organisations or entities. Now, for the first time in history, *everyone* has a chance to mediate our individual and collective stories centred on agriculture. Everyone *can* be a story-creator and storyteller in what might now be referred to as a post-media age. This opportunity, as we shall see below, is important for those proposing alternatives to the dominant or hegemonic industrialised agriculture.

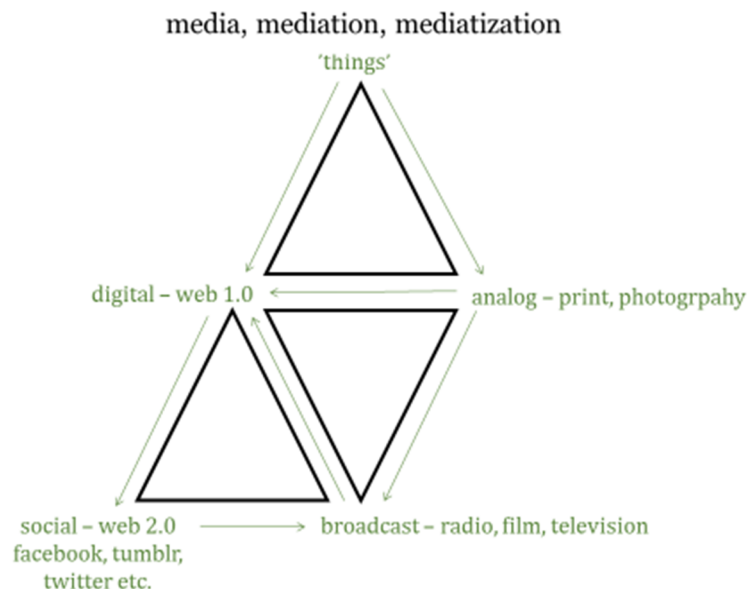


Figure 1.2. The long view: Visualising the development of media, mediation and mediatization.

### Agri-culture as an expanded field

Agriculture, the systematic production and subsequent preparation, distribution and consumption of food, is a truly polydisciplinary endeavour in the sense that it involves climatology, meteorology, hydrology, geology, geography, history, economics, politics, science, technology, ecology, agronomy, engineering, design, food science, gastronomy and more. However, the current context and object of study, AFNs, is framed in the ideology of sustainability and borrows a notion origi-

nated by Cliff Hooker that asserts 'It is possible to have agriculture without agri-culture', but 'It is not possible to have a viable agriculture without a viable agri-culture'.<sup>12</sup> Hooker explains:

'To have an agri-culture is, roughly, for a society to have a *viable* culture. . . one whose expressed values in the designs of its institutions and material practices generates a biologically productive practice which is a dynamical microcosm of its culture, i.e. which exhibits the same properties of stability, adaptability and self-organisation in relation to their ecological environment.' (original italics).

And he comments on the value system:

'The Values of a valuable culture are all manifested as systems designs; so we can say that having a valuable agri-culture is manifesting a set of system-atic designs such that our ecological practices form an integral part of a viable cultural system manifesting value. . . The ethics of the [agricultural] professional are the ethics of the design + the nurturing of good design, in a valuable agri-culture.'

Agri-culture, thus described, characterises many AFNs which are organisations trying to introduce new system-atic designs which bring together producers (mainly farmers, but not exclusively) and consumers oriented towards a new value system with a telos involving ecological, social and economic aims. AFNs embed the promise of sustainability, even if the promise might, presently, exceed reality.<sup>13</sup>

AFNs are characterised by: Reconfiguring relationships between food producers and food consumers; trying to 'resocialise' and 'respatialise' food through 'closer' and more 'authentic' relationships between producers, consumers and their food; building stronger ties between food products, people and place; forms of food provisioning that are different/counteractive to mainstream (or conventional) food systems; organised flows of food products on moral/ethical grounds and/or on the fairness of pricing; and being communities of practice, social movements and economic agents.<sup>14</sup> They can be classified into four categories (Table 1.1), namely: producers-as-consumers; producer-consumer partnerships; direct sales initiatives; and specialist retailers. The emergence of these AFNs since the late 1980s, when Community Supported Agriculture gathered momentum in the USA, is expanding our notion of what agriculture can and could be. It therefore seems appropriate to borrow Rosalind Krauss' conceptualisation of sculpture as an 'expanded field' within art<sup>15</sup> (Figure 1.3) and to apply this to farming, albeit with some modifications, and to the emerging phenomenon of AFNs in agriculture.

---

12. Hooker, *Value and System*, 1993

13. Sini Forssell and Leena Lankoski, "The sustainability promise of alternative food networks: an examination through "alternative" characteristics," *Agric Hum Values* 32 (2015): 63-75.

14. Venn, L., Kneafsey, M. Holloway, L., Cox, R. Dowler, G and Tuomainen, H. 2006. Researching European 'alternative' food networks. Some methodological considerations. *Area*. (2006), 38.3., 248-25.8. Maye, D. 2014?. Moving Alternative Food Networks beyond the Niche. *Int. Jnl. Of Soc. Of Agr. & Food*, Vol 20, No. 3, pp. 383-389.

15. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," 1979.

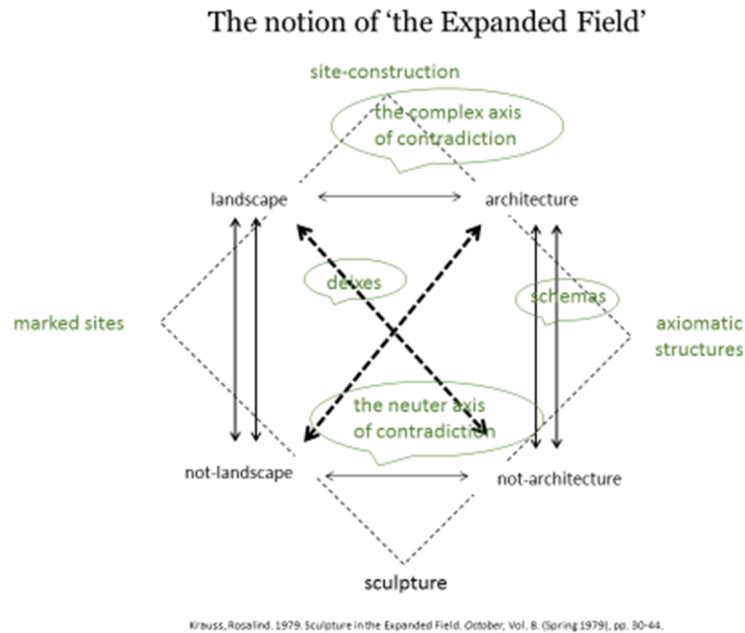


Figure 1.3. The notion of 'the Expanded Field', after Rosalind Krauss.

Table 1.1. Categories of Alternative Food Networks, AFNs.

Category	Explanation	Examples
Producers as consumers	Food is grown or produced by those who consume it; healthy lifestyles; produce sold locally; commercialisation varies.	Community gardens Community food cooperatives Allotment groups
Producer-consumer partnerships	Partnerships between farmers and consumers; subscription or share arrangement; risks shared.	Community supported agriculture (CSA)
Direct sell initiatives	Farmers or producers shorten the supply chain; face to face or online.	Farmers' markets Farm gate sales Mobile food shops Box schemes Producer co-operatives
Specialist retailers	More direct way of selling to consumers; high-value added, quality or specialist foods.	Online grocers Specialist wholesalers Tourist attractions

Venn, L., Kneafsey, M., Holloway, L., Cos, R., Doulier, G and Tuomimäki, H. 2006. Researching European 'alternative' food networks. Some methodological considerations. *Annals* (2006), 38.3., 248-25.8.

If I name Krauss's 'sculpture' between not-landscape and not-architecture, on her neuter axis of contradiction, as 'intensive agri-industrial farming' – reflecting the status quo, as she did – then it sits on an axis between not-diversity agriculture (i.e. monoculture) and not-autonomy agriculture (i.e. dependency) (Figure 1.4). While Krauss opposed sculpture with 'site construction' on the complex axis of contradiction, which embraced landscape and architecture, here we will set in-

tensive agri-industrial farming against 'sustainable farming' whose axis is delineated by diversity agriculture (i.e. polyculture) and autonomous agriculture (i.e. independence).

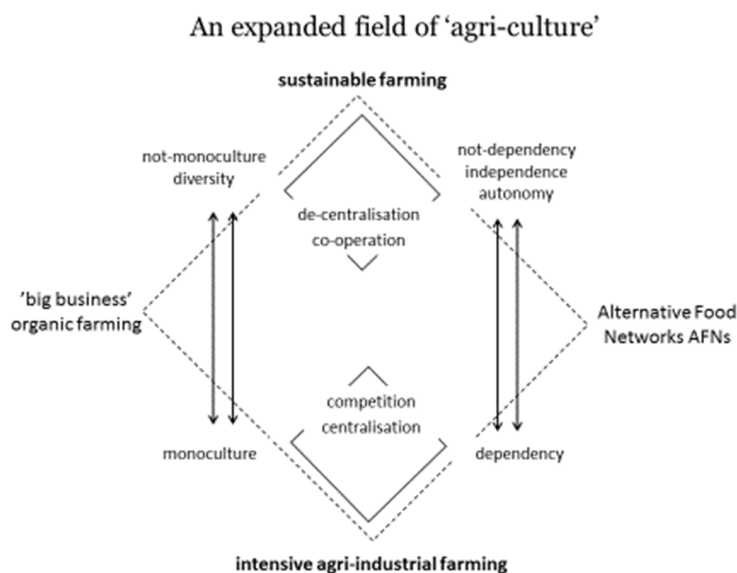


Figure 1.4. An expanded field of agri-culture, setting the framework.

Intensive agri-industrial farming is based upon competition and centralisation characterised by domination of nature, exploitation and vertically integrated supply chains. In contrast, sustainable farming is based upon cooperation and de-centralisation and is characterised by harmony with nature, restraint and Short Food Chains (SFCs).<sup>16</sup> To complete our expanded field of agricultures we can name 'organic farming' between the schema of monoculture and polyculture, and 'Alternative Food Networks' between the schema of dependency and independency. While we do not have the strict tension of Krauss' original cross axes or deixes (landscape: not-architecture; and architecture: not-landscape), our deixes (diversity agriculture: not-autonomy agriculture; and autonomous agriculture: not-diversity agriculture), I feel it better reflects Hooker's notion of agriculture since each schema is clearly defined by values, and, hence, ethics.

Now we have an expanded field of agri-culture, we can populate it with intermediary categories between the four cardinal 'sub-fields' (Figure 1.5). Between sustainable farming and organic farming we have expressions of diversity ranging from permaculture to bio-agriculture, and between organic farming and intensive agri-industrial farming we have 'big business' organic farming, carbon farming and biofuel farming which tend towards monocultures. Between sustainable farming and AFNs we see various combinations of producers-as-consumers and producer-consumer partnerships which challenge traditional modes of farm production. These can be regarded as Civic Food Networks, CFNs – AFNs which bring the role of citizens to the forefront in (re)shaping and

16. Also known as Short Food Supply Chains, SFSC.

reclaiming food systems.<sup>17</sup> Between AFNs and intensive agri-industrial farming we see various types of Short Food Chains (SFCs) such as producer cooperatives, direct sales initiatives and specialist retailers striving to create new relationships with their foci on local and direct autonomy of food production and consumption.

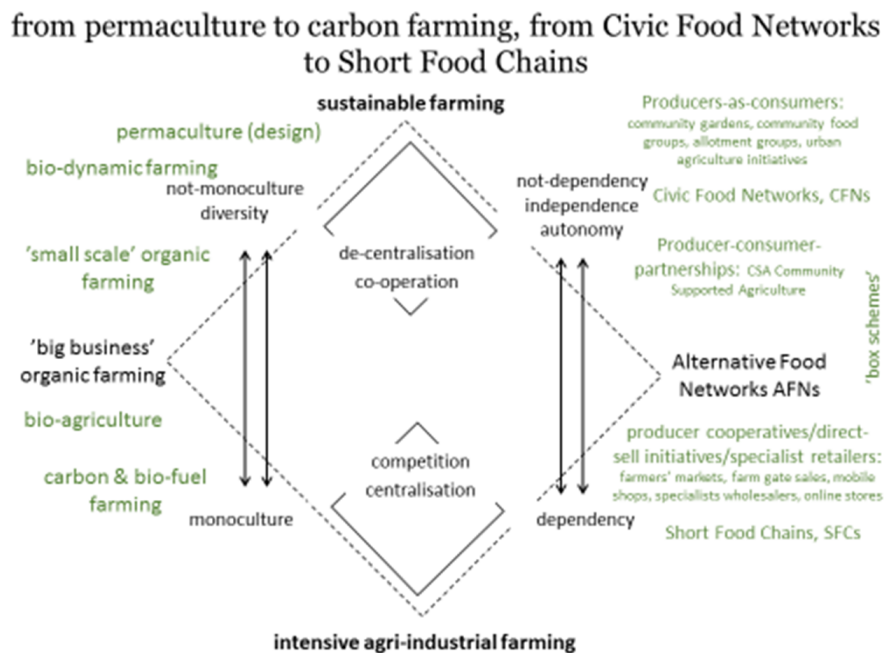


Figure 1.5. An overview of the expanded field of agri-culture

The general thrust of AFNs is to counter, and provide alternatives to, the intensive agri-industrial farming based upon neo-liberal capitalist ideology in an era of globalisation. Felix Guattari proposed his ecosophy as a means to counter-act Integrated World Capitalism (IWC),<sup>18</sup> more widely recognised today as neo-liberal and global capitalism. The next section therefore examines Guattari's ecosophy in order that we can apply this as a lens to understand the degree to which selected AFN case studies enact his philosophy, how this is expressed through their digital media and how design is and could help in accelerating and amplifying AFN activities.

17. iting Renting, H., Marsden, T., Banks, J., 2003. Understanding alternative food networks: exploring the role of short food supply chains in rural development. *Environ. Plan. A* 35, 393-411, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1068/a3510> in Elizabeth Bos and Luke Owen, "Virtual reconnection: The online spaces of alternative food networks in England." *Journal of Rural Studies* 45 (2016), 1-14.

18. Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 2000.



## The Three Ecologies

In his book, *The Three Ecologies*, first published in French in 1989 then translated into English in 2000, Guattari laid out the fundamentals of a new ecological philosophy, an ecosophy. He saw the need to develop an entire mental ecology constructed within the three ecological registers (the environment, social relations and human subjectivity) in order to ensure that IWC does not receive our unconscious assent. Ecosophy can be described as:

- a means to ask questions about the damage our present techno-scientific transformations are having on our world
- a concern for biological species, the biosphere
- a concern for 'incorporeal species' e.g. music, the arts, relations with time, love and compassion for others. . . .
- a way of cultivating a dissensus directed at delocalised, deterritorialised capitalist power
- a means for re-constructing the modalities of 'group being'
- an ethico-political articulation
- an ethico-aesthetic aegis

Considering the three registers as Venn circles: one for the mental register or the psyche, another for the social register or socius, and the last for the environmental register or the environment. When all three of these circles (registers) fully overlap the ecosophical potential is at its maximum. Guattari's conceptualisation and philosophical articulation of these registers is lengthy, so a brief summary is given here which it is hoped is sufficient to enable the reader to view the AFN case studies below from an ecosophical framing.

At the core of the mental register is the principle that this is a 'primary process' (Freud), which is 'pre-objectal, pre-personal logic', the 'included middle', neither black nor white.<sup>19</sup> There is a necessity for greyness, which I interpret here as an endorsement of the principle of diverse subjectivity. The social register concerns itself with the development of affective and pragmatic cathexis in human groups of different sizes – a specific qualitative reorganisation of primary subjectivity as it relates to mental ecology.<sup>20</sup> Finally, for the environmental register, perhaps the most difficult to fathom, Guattari refers to 'nature' at war with life. Anything is possible. . . from the worst disaster to the most flexible evolutions; a machinic ecology<sup>21</sup>. Implicit in the construct is that humans are not distinguishable from nature. Guattari sees the active formulation of these ecologies as an opening out process, emerging from a praxis made habitable by human projects. Antonioli interprets the ecosophic approach as allowing us to envisage design and perspectives on eco-design 'towards a reinvention or 're-fabrication' of exchanges between nature, culture and the environment.<sup>22</sup> This interpretation and ecosophy's combinations of registers places all of us (humans) firmly back within nature, and sees our environment as an intertwining and interweaving of culture, technology, human and other actants coming together in (distinctive?) places. By actants,

---

19. Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 2000, 36.

20. Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 2000, 40.

21. Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 2000, 45.

22. Manola Antonioli, "Design in Guattari's Ecosophy," In *Deleuze and Design*, edited by Betti Marenko and Jamie Brassett, 58-64, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 62.

Bruno Latour invoked a complex descriptor applied in Actor-Network Theory to extend the word actor to embrace human individual actors, non-human and non-individual entities, all these being ‘something that acts or to which activity is granted by others’.<sup>23</sup> Bennett, building on Guattari, Deleuze and Latour, constitutes such socio-material assemblies as vitalised, vibrant matter which challenges our binary notions of biotic and abiotic forms.<sup>24</sup> Ecosophy, then, fundamentally challenges us to (re-)constitute relationships *within* an (a)biotic world as a necessary means to counter IWC.

### Applying an ecosophical lens to selected AFN case studies

For the purposes of this exploratory study I chose to focus on AFNs which are CFNs (see above). In my expanded field of agri-culture these CFNs sit top right between sustainable farming and AFNs (Figure 1.5) i.e. those organisations which tend towards increasing autonomous agriculture (independence), towards diversity agriculture (polyculture) while striving to re-configure the relationships by involving the consumers i.e. producers-as-consumers; producer-consumer partnerships (Table 1.2). As citizen involvement is key to the effectiveness of CFNs, these types of AFNs are inherently concerned with the socius. Each AFN/CFN category is further subdivided: Producers-as-consumers splits into community gardens, and community food cooperatives. Producer-consumer partnerships split into Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and community food cooperatives. Three examples were selected from the UK – Incredible Edible Todmorden, OrganicLea, and Chagford Market Garden – and one from Italy – GAS, Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (Solidarity Purchasing Groups). In order to gauge the degree to which the AFNs had embedded an ecosophical approach, the websites of each AFN were explored, and various video materials from each organisation were viewed. Each case study and video is presented below.

23. Bruno Latour, “On actor-network theory. A few clarifications plus more than a few complications”, in Finn Olsen (special issue of the Danish philosophy journal), “Om actor-netveaerksteroi. Nogle fa afklaringer og mere end nogle fa forviklinger”. *Philosophia*, Vol 24 No 3 et 4, pp.47-64 [article written in 1990]. English version in *Soziale Welt*, vol 47, pp.369-381, 1996. Web edition [www.course.fse.ulaval.ca/edcr65804/latour-clarifications.pdf](http://www.course.fse.ulaval.ca/edcr65804/latour-clarifications.pdf), accessed 01 December 2016.

24. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Duke University Press, 2010).

Table 1.2. Qualitative assessment of the ecosophical registers for four Alternative Food Network case studies.

AFN category	Sub categories	Case studies	Organisation web site & representative video	Social media					Qualitative assessment of ecosophical registers			Challenge to IWC
				Twitter	Facebook	Blogs	YouTube	Other	Mental	Social	Environmental	
Producers as consumers	Community gardens	Incredible Edible Todmorden, UK	<a href="http://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk/">http://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk/</a> Adam talks about the Daniel O'Rourke pea <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fp3KnvIPMkc">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fp3KnvIPMkc</a>	*	*	*	*	*	3	3	2	1-2
	Community food cooperatives	OrganicLea, London, UK	<a href="https://www.organiclea.org.uk/">https://www.organiclea.org.uk/</a> Making Local Food Work <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yv1tO2dwBuk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yv1tO2dwBuk</a>		*	*			1-2 members 3 managers	1-2	2	2
Producer-consumer partnerships	Community Supported Agriculture	Chagford Community Market Garden, Devon, UK	<a href="http://www.chagfood.org.uk/">http://www.chagfood.org.uk/</a> Chagfood Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AedjaRk6Hx0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AedjaRk6Hx0</a>	*	*			*	2members 3 founders	1-2	2	1-2
	Community food cooperatives	GAS, Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale, Italy – Milano?	GAS, National Liason Network, <a href="http://www.retegas.org/">http://www.retegas.org/</a> and new site <a href="http://www.economiasolidale.net/">http://www.economiasolidale.net/</a> GAS , Milano? <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZT5ZCxzjGM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZT5ZCxzjGM</a>	*	*		*	*	1 members 2 coordinators	1-2	1	3

### Incredible Edible Todmorden – a community garden

Incredible Edible Todmorden was founded by Pam Warhurst and Mary Clear in 2007 and the first formal meeting to talk about food was held by local residents in the town of Todmorden in 2008.<sup>25</sup> The Incredible Todmorden Community Team is now a registered Community Benefit Society whose *raison d'être* is to:

- ‘Grow fruit, herbs and vegetables around Todmorden that are for everyone to share.
- We are passionate people working together for a world where all share responsibility for the future wellbeing of our planet and ourselves.
- We aim to provide access to good local food for all, through
  - working together
  - learning – from field to classroom to kitchen
  - supporting local business

25. Incredible Edible Network, accessed 16 July 2016, <http://incredibleediblenetwork.org.uk> and John Paull, “Please pick me” – How Incredible Edible Todmorden is repurposing the commons for open source food and agricultural biodiversity,” In *Diversifying Foods and Diets: Using Agricultural Biodiversity to Improve Nutrition and Health*, edited by J. Franzo, D. Hunter, T. Borelli and F.Mattei, (Oxford: Earthscan, Routledge, 2013), 336-345.

All with no paid staff, no buildings, no public funding: radical community building in action. Membership: ‘If you eat you’re in’. We also run a wide range of events that help strengthen the local community’.

Incredible Edible Todmorden rapidly became an iconic model for other communities in the UK interested in creating initiatives around food. The Todmorden initiative and activities were the foundation for the growth of the Incredible Edible Network initiated in 2012 whose activities are focused around the concept of three interrelated spinning plates: The Community plate – growing produce and working together; the Learning plate – providing training from field to classroom; and the Business plate – supporting local commerce. There are now over 100 Incredible Edible initiatives in the UK.

The Incredible Edible Todmorden video selected was ‘Adam talks about the Daniel O’Rouke pea’,<sup>26</sup> as it invokes the typical spirit of the people of Todmorden. Adam reveals how he took personal responsibility for rescuing a heritage pea variety called King Daniel O’Rouke which was lost for many years in Ireland, but brought back there by a Russian seed savers’ society. Adam found it in Ireland and took it to Todmorden where they have been replicating it around the town and in the Todmorden heritage garden. Adam likens the act of saving, growing and spreading the pea to any act aimed at claiming ownership (he names “flags, deeds and control mechanisms humans have created”) and equates the role of planting more peas as taking responsibility for each of us to look after our biodiversity heritage.

### **OrganicLea – a community food cooperative**

OrganicLea is a workers’ cooperative growing food on the edge of Epping Forest in the Lea Valley, on the outskirts of London, UK. In 2001 volunteers cleared an acre of derelict allotment land, replanting it as a forest fruit garden followed by growing vegetables raised under organic and permaculture production principles. The site became a focus for local training for people to improve their knowledge for growing food. By 2003 conversations were being held about the development of a ‘local food hub’ growing local organic produce, improving people’s skills and promoting food issues. This was initiated in the Hornbeam Centre, where a local weekly market took place. In 2008 the centre was refurbished, monies coming from the Big Lottery’s Making Local Food Work programme. More land at the Hawkwood Nursery was leased from the municipality, Waltham Forest Borough Council, between 2007 to 2010. OrganicLea is built around an ethos of people and community, growing and sourcing locally, access to growing for excluded or vulnerable groups, and rights to land, seed and water. A new initiative, called OrganicLea “Farm Start” in 2015 aims to create new grow-to-sell food growing projects to ensure a more socially and environmentally just food system.

The OrganicLea video<sup>27</sup> features Ru Litherland, the manager responsible for growing food at the OrganicLea Food Cooperative, and Melanie Barnett, responsible for creating local food initiatives including a café, fruit foraging and more. Ru outlines the aims of OrganicLea (see above),

26. Adam talks about the Daniel O’Rouke Pea, Youtube, accessed 16 July 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fp3KnvIPMkc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fp3KnvIPMkc)

27. OrganicLea video, Youtube, accessed 16 July 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=yv1tO2dwBuk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yv1tO2dwBuk)

talks about how the cooperative came into existence as a response to bid for public facilities in the Lea Valley that were being sold off to private bidders under competitive tenders. He describes the diverse areas of production including the glasshouse, traditional field vegetables, salad leaves, a vineyard, an orchard and an apiary. Melanie focuses more on OrganicLea's initiatives around the local food economy looking at the Hornbeam Café they initiated, the local foraging and harvesting of 'Walthamstow Pink' apples for juicing and the importance of connecting people with these stories. Accessibility of their food system to local people of all means, and active participation in catalysing new local growing initiatives underpins their enthusiasm.

### **Chagford Community Market Garden – a Community Supported Agriculture, CSA project**

A public meeting held in Chagford in February 2008, hosted by the New Economics Foundation,<sup>28</sup> and attended by residents, farmers and businesses, spawned an idea for a local food initiative based upon SFSCs. The horticultural market garden of the Chagford Community was the first initiative. By 2011 local demand for quality meats initiated another CSA project called Chagfarm. This study focuses on Chagford Community Market Garden which currently supplies fresh organically certified vegetables, fruit and flowers from its five acre site to over 80 local households. It is based upon a standard subscription membership model, where members receive a weekly box, can visit the site and help with harvesting, and are involved in how their food is produced. In line with a typical CSA model, for a set price members get more if there is a good harvest and less if there is a poor harvest, thereby spreading the risk between farmer and consumer. Ten percent of the members' shares are offered to low-income families, to encourage access to fresh produce for all.

Two of the founder-growers, Ed Hamer and Chinnie Kingsbury, set out the story of the Chagford Community Market Garden in the video examined.<sup>29</sup> They explain how it was initiated, how it grew, their modus operandi and their personal motivation for being involved in this CSA scheme. Interviews with CSA members reveal their reasons for getting involved and what they get out of it, including a common observation that the produce really tastes good, much better than you can buy elsewhere; that the harvesting days bring people together; and perceptions about local food miles, food security, and transparency in the food chain. The founders go on to describe their bio-diversity strategy, their choice to maintain traditional farming techniques, such as horse power only, and their organic farming principles. They see CSA projects as important opportunities for young, professionally trained growers and emphasise how important planning and local farmer knowledge is to the success of the project. The founders stress the importance of the concept of food resilience.

---

28. The New Economics Foundation, originating in 1986 in the UK, has consistently explored economic and enterprise models as alternatives, based upon social, economic and environmental justice, to mainstream neo-liberal capitalism, accessed 16 July 2016, [www.neweconomics.org/](http://www.neweconomics.org/)

29. Chagfoods Community Supported Agriculture, Chagford, Devon, YouTube, accessed 16 July 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=AedjaRk6Hx0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AedjaRk6Hx0)

### Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (GAS) – a food cooperative

GAS, Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (Solidarity Purchasing Groups) originated in the city of Fidenza in the province of Emilia Romagna in 1994. Today they are found across Italy, with over 1000 solidarity groups registered through the GAS National Liaison Network.<sup>30</sup> From 2007 onwards various GAS have been coming together to collectively buy other resources beyond food, e.g. the Gas Energia association which purchases ‘clean energy’. Here the concern is focused on GAS groups organised, often spontaneously, to buy food by applying the principles of fairness, solidarity and sustainability to their purchases i.e. they have a critical approach to production and consumption, although the strength with which this is manifested depends upon each individual group. There is an underlying ethical aspect based upon “being in solidarity with” and groups stress the importance of social and human relations and how these link with agricultural or gastronomic traditions, the local environment and fair working practices. So, there is an emphasis on local products, organically produced foods, fair-trade products, product quality, dignity of work, and returnable or reusable packaging. Furthermore products are sought based upon their overall respect for the environment embodied in the concept of ‘environmental justice’, whose concerns are with the poor, weak and marginalised peoples fighting ecological conflicts<sup>31</sup> and for an intergenerational view of our environmental health. Groups focus on unity as their strength while striving to practise critical consumption and simultaneously develop awareness and solidarity through the socialisation processes required to coordinate the acquisition and distribution of the food. Sourcing producers that meet the social, environmental and economic requirements of GAS is a challenging on-going task for most groups. GAS see themselves as part of a growing civil economy and wider socio-economic struggle where ‘the market becomes an instrument of relationship and a place of civil and civilising meetings’<sup>32</sup>.

GAS are organised on a membership basis, but can be structured as associations, informal groups, or industry cooperatives. However they are constituted, they are deemed as a “non-commercial activity” under an amendment to the Finance Act made in 2007, and, so, are non-profit organisations. Groups sometimes coordinate in larger territories giving rise to solidarity economy districts. Groups have developed diverse physical and software management systems for handling the food.

Selecting a representative video is difficult given the high number of GAS groups, but the one chosen<sup>33</sup> reflects the general principles in action for food solidarity purchasing. Francesca from GAS FELTRE and Silvana from GAS Milano 3 introduce themselves and how their GAS operate. Francesca emphasises the importance of the collective act of solidarity with the producers, farmers and the environment, and active contribution by everyone in the group according to each person’s

30. GAS National Liaison Network, accessed 16 July 2016, [www.retegas.org](http://www.retegas.org) and di Laura Antonella Columbo, *The GAS as Laboratories of Civil Economy*, (Aicon Ricerca, 2013)

31. Alier, M. *Environmentalism of the poor. A study of ecological conflicts and valuation*, (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2002) cited in di Laura Antonella Columbo, *The GAS as Laboratories of Civil Economy*, (Aicon Ricerca, 2013)

32. di Laura Antonella Columbo, *The GAS as Laboratories of Civil Economy*, (Aicon Ricerca, 2013), 3.

33. GAS Gruppo di Acquisto Solidale, Youtube, accessed 16 July 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZT5ZCxzjGM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZT5ZCxzjGM)

competence. She also mentions supporting worthy producers e.g. sweets made by minorities, such as prisoners. Silvana focuses on relations with the producer as being fundamental to ensure quality, the practice of micro-credit, finding sustainably sourced products, such as anchovies or tuna from Sicily or, for example, a marmalade from a secular woman-led project in Bosnia founded by Rada Zargovich. Ideas of a solidarity economy underlie the key messages.

### The ecosophical assessment of the AFNs

A range of criteria were defined for the three registers (Table 1.3). A qualitative assessment was then made of the existence and relative importance of the mental, social and environmental registers in the way these organisations chose to mediate their activities through their websites and videos representative of the ethos of the organisation. A score of 3 indicates a strong embracing of a register, 2 moderate, 1 weak and 0 absent.

Table 1.3. Criteria for the ecosophical registers and challenge to Integrated World Capitalism, IWC: a qualitative scoring system.

The ecosophical registers			Challenge to Integrated World Capitalism, IWC
Mental - psyche	Social - socius	Environmental – the environment	
Asking questions from a personal perspective about the techno-scientific impacts on biodiversity and biosphere health and seeking to take an active role in new restorative relations.	Having a motivation to re-construct the modalities of 'group being' through socio-cultural activities and relations.	Asking questions from a collective and beyond anthropocentric perspective about the techno-scientific impacts on biodiversity and biosphere health and seeking new restorative relations together.	Implement (infra)structural arrangements of the economy to ensure fairer access for all.
Being open and/or contributing to and changing with the effective and pragmatic cathexis of the social group or organization.	Having a strong concern for 'incorporeal species' e.g. the arts, relations with time, love and compassion for others.	Actively trying to re-intertwine or re-weave or re-fabricate new relationships and/or bring in new actants to help rebalance our machinic ecology.	Aim to re-localise and re-territorialise production and consumption in a local economy.
Taking a personal position of dissensus against delocalized, deterritorialised capitalist power.	Developing and having a strong ethico-political articulation.		Aim to re-build an economy based upon strong social and environmental criteria.
Developing individual creative autonomy and an ethico-political voice.	Constructing a dissensus to the delocalized, deterritorialised capitalist power.		
	Developing an effective and pragmatic cathexis in human groups.		
	Developing an effective creative autonomy.		
Scoring: Strong expression of the above criteria=3; moderate expression=2; weak expression=1; if the above criteria are not expressed=0.			

All the AFNs show a contemporary awareness of the digital media environment, with use of Twitter, Facebook, blogs, YouTube channels and other media (e.g. digital books, Instagram, RSS feeds) (Table 1.2). Incredible Edible Todmorden applied all the digital media options with active contributions being made by members across the community. This, perhaps in part, reflects in their high ecosophy mental and social registers scores, as described below. Facebook was the only digital media channel used by all AFNs.

On the basis of the materials viewed Incredible Edible Todmorden stands out as the AFN with the strongest enactment of Guattari's ecosophy, scoring 3, 3 and 2 for the mental, social and

environmental registers respectively (Table 1.2). This grassroots initiative, with an absence of hierarchy in their way of organising, seems to have struck a chord with the community within which it originated and created a genuine pioneering spirit amongst its participants. The high ecosophy score reflects the radical nature of their proposition – growing free food for all. The rapid development of the Incredible Edible Network since 2007, now in 100 towns in the UK, indicates the appeal of this initiative.

OrganicLea also originated as a small grassroots initiative based upon one acre of derelict allotment land, but over a decade slowly grew into a mature organisation managed by full-time employees, aided by Big Lottery funding under the Making Local Food Work project. It is for these reasons that the mental psyche score is divided between managers, who are highly motivated and score 3, and the members, who score between 1 to 2. The socius is less visible than for Incredible Edible Todmorden, and so scores between 1 and 2.

Chagford Community Market Garden reveals the deep personal commitment of its founders and growers, and a greater sense of socius communicated through its individual members, so the scores are 3 and 2 respectively for the mental register. The socius seems relatively well developed, so scores 2.

GAS remains the most problematic to score since individual GAS groups vary widely in their vision and commitment. However, for the material viewed it seems the general mental register scores for coordinators and members was lower than the other AFNs studied because these solidarity groups are a purchasing system based upon well defined social, environmental and economic principles, rather than being a producing (growing) *and* purchasing system. However, being an organisation founded on cooperative behaviour the socius is well developed.

Scoring the environmental register proved the most challenging of all the three registers as the criteria are, arguably, less easy to interpret. However, it is clear that all AFNs studied seek ‘restorative relations’<sup>34</sup> between the anthropocentric and biosphere health, typically expressing a desire to use local and heritage varieties, to bring back traditional knowledge and blend it with new knowledge, and to try and re-activate human involvement with local food biodiversity and production. On this basis all AFNs exhibited similar degrees of commitment to the environmental register, even if the detail varied, hence they were all scored as 2.

As Guattari posited his ecosophical approach as a means to contest IWC, it is also appropriate to assess the four AFNs in terms of their critical stance and impact on economic grounds (Table 1.2, right hand column; see Table 1.3 for the criteria). In terms of their politico-economic directionality and impacts, it is clear that GAS, who align themselves with the concepts of the solidarity or civil economy, are orientated to actively constructing an alternative to IWC. As they are by far the largest network, constituting over 1000 GAS, and are now coalescing and organising themselves to lever more purchasing power in, for example, renewable energies, they can be considered the most economically counter-active against IWC and also score 3. OrganicLea also have a political agenda to address how neglected and underused spaces are used in the city (of London and its environs) and are part of the Community Food Growers Network<sup>35</sup> which holds events such as Reclaim Our

34. Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 2000, p?

35. Community Food Growers Network, accessed 16 July 2016, [www.cfgn.org.uk/](http://www.cfgn.org.uk/)



Spaces in London. Big Lottery Funding ensured they also have new organisational capacity to initiate Farm Start, new farms in urban spaces. Chagford Community Market Garden is a typical CSA scheme in that it addresses the local rural small-town economy and provides for families and individuals to access affordable, healthy, sustainable food. Incredible Edible Todmorden provides free food, food for all, but one of its three 'spinning plates' is local food businesses, so it promotes these and, hence, is interested in a healthy local food economy. This extends to fighting successfully against new planning applications by supermarkets. So, in their own idiosyncratic ways the ecosophy of these AFNs underpins a counter-economic narrative to IWC. This narrative is multivalent, supporting diverse needs and giving benefits to people, places, plants and profits. The modest successes of all these AFNs shows ecosophical potential to challenge unsustainable intensive agri-industrial farming that is central to IWC and so a median score of 2 in terms of intent is reasonable. However, questions remain as to how these activities can scale-up and, indeed, how they can retain their genuine sustainability if they do.<sup>36</sup>

### Reflections on digital mediation by AFNs

If we reflect on 'the long view' taken as the introduction to this article, we can see that AFNs, particularly those which are CFNs, are centrally focused on creating a new socius based upon (re-)constructed relationships between producers, consumers and the/their environment that contest the intensive agri-industrial farming which dominates our food systems. In this sense digital mediation by AFNs is part of a larger story of diverse counter-narratives and counter-initiatives challenging the hegemony of neo-liberalism.<sup>37</sup> Bos and Owen<sup>38</sup> suggest that the application of Web 2.0 technologies and online spaces of AFNs directly assists in making a 'virtual reconnection' i.e. that 'the embodied, socio-material reconnection processes that occur *in-place* also occur online'. They cite interviewees from AFNs who say that the online presence helps create relationships, build trust and, for example, through photographs of the different weekly box of vegetables or share of produce, give a quasi-experience of seasonality. They differentiate between AFNs which are CFNs and those which are SFCs, in urban and rural locations, and acknowledge that the CFNs were established more recently, and tend to comprise a younger and more diverse demographic than the SFCs. It is also apparent in their study that CFNs demonstrate stronger material (biological) and social (images of people working together, families and children) connections than the SFCs. They are less sure how improved moral connections are made through the online environments of AFNs. This exploratory study, applying the ecosophical framework of Guattari, suggests that CFNs, as exemplified by Incredible Edible Todmorden and their cogent application of Web 2.0 technologies, offer great potential to develop strong moral connections with place, people, plants, governance, biodiversity, health and sustainability inter-woven as a future projection. Paull notes

---

36. Forssell and Lankoski, "The sustainability promise of alternative food networks: an examination through "alternative" characteristics," 2015

37. *Agents of Alternatives: Re-designing Our Realities*, edited by Alastair Fuad-Luke, Anja-Lisa Hirscher and Katharina Moebus, (Berlin: AoA, 2015).

38. Elizabeth Bos and Luke Owen, "Virtual reconnection: The online spaces of alternative food networks in England." *Journal of Rural Studies* 45 (2016), 1-14.

that IET fosters contagion by keeping it simple, open, replicable, and non-proprietary, calling it ‘open source food’.<sup>39</sup> Indeed the ‘openness’ of food systems links directly to how we might constitute a ‘food system commons’ in a symbiotic relationship with more open source tools, open governance and open data. If this is a useful direction for debate, then the CFNs described in this study can amplify the quiet lead they take on addressing common land ownership or how public or semi-public/semi-private or private land is brought into sustainable food production. This is an active debate in urban agriculture,<sup>40</sup> one that needs to be extended to our rural, countryside areas too. This contemporary inter-twining of a digital commons (Web 2.0 and beyond) with real land ownership takes us back to the historical disjuncture that took place in pre-Industrial Revolution Britain when the common land was taken from the common people by the Acts of Enclosures (sic. Inclosures) between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>41</sup> It seems unlikely that these fledgling AFNs, studied here and elsewhere, will persist unless new relations of ownership, or extended tenure, over land can be secured. However, that the AFNs demonstrate strong competences to exploit digital media for their cause ensures further debate on these issues.

### Can design contribute to better ecosophical futures?

Design is an ‘intra-domain’ mode of thought<sup>42</sup> and has strong relations to other disciplinary studies focusing on ‘things and systems’.<sup>43</sup> So, it seems important to ask if design can contribute to better ecosophical futures. In this section, I briefly present some case studies by designers who address issues of existing and future food production and consumption. Of course design has already been applied by the AFNs – logo, graphic, web, interaction design – but here I look to the independent work of designers and design researchers. The designs presented are conceptual or speculative, prototypical or products already on the market. The ecosophical considerations are briefly outlined.

Three design projects are orientated towards food production and consumption in urban environments. The first is a speculative design concept called Pig City by Dutch architectural practice MVRDV (Figure 1.6), created in 2000 when European conversations about intensive pig production, land availability and swine fever were being voiced. MVRDV calculated with the Agriculture Economics Research Institute, Wageningen, that in 1999 15.5 million humans and 15.2 million pigs were official inhabitants of the Netherlands. Given projections in pork demand and for more organically farmed pork, MVRDV proposed high-rise buildings for pigs, planted with trees, irrigated by rainwater, feed provided by automated grain systems and fresh air being provided by

39. John Paull, “Please pick me” – How Incredible Edible Todmorden is repurposing the commons for open source food and agricultural biodiversity,” 2013.

40. *Second Nature Urban Agriculture. Designing Productive Cities*, edited by Andre Viljoen and Katrin Bohn, (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

41. See “Inclosure Acts” which gives a general account of three hundred years of appropriation of the common land from the common people of Britain, Wikipedia, accessed 16 July 2016, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inclosure\\_Acts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inclosure_Acts)

42. Petra Hroch, “Sustainable Design Activism: Affirmative Politics and Fruitful Futures,” In *Deleuze and Design*, edited by Betti Marenko and Jamie Brassett, 219-245, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2015, 220.

43. Alastair Fuad-Luke, *Design Activism. Beautiful Strangeness for a Sustainable World*, (London: Earthscan, 2009), 4.

open-air balconies. Slaughtering would take place locally with pigs riding on an elevator to the butcher's floor. One option is for citizens to look after the pigs. Ecosophically this concept looks problematic as it appears to accept IWC ambitions in terms of scale and production, the organic credentials are questionable and citizen involvement would be necessary to achieve a shift in mental psyche. However, like most speculative designs, the intention is a dialogue about future food production practices, rather than a feasible, implementable design. These are what I call design fictions.<sup>44</sup>

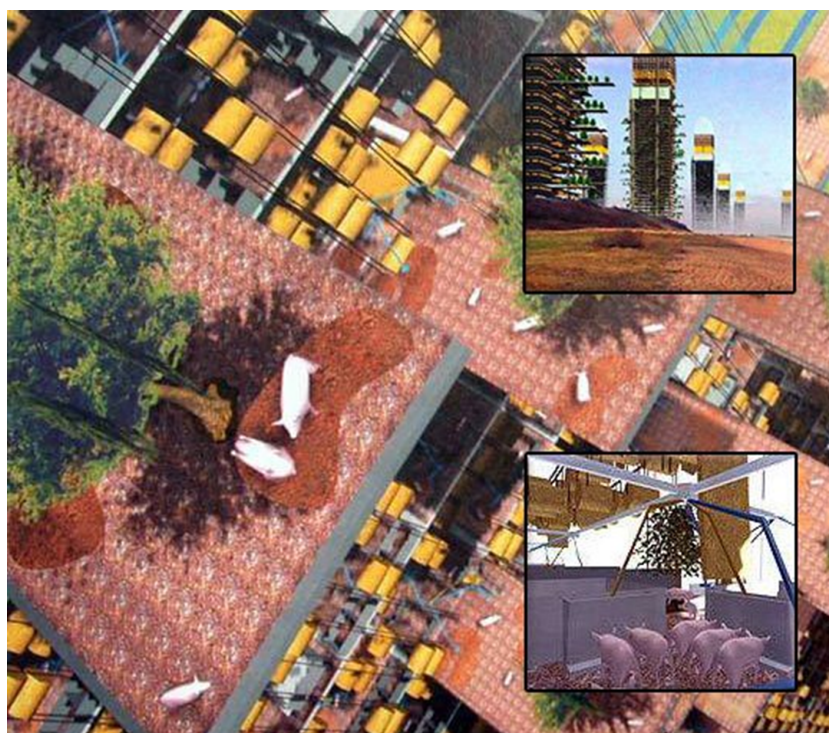


Figure 1.6. *Pig city* by MVRDV.  
[www.mvrnv.nl/projects/181-pig-city](http://www.mvrnv.nl/projects/181-pig-city)

The second urban case study is an enterprise from 2011 called FARM: London, who have recently raised research and development funding to prototype integrated farming on London rooftops (Figure 1.7). FARM: and FARM: shop are operated by Something & Son LLP, an eco-social design practice run by Andrew Merritt and Paul Smyth who 'combine art, engineering and business know-how to find creative ways to improve the world around us'.<sup>45</sup> Their proposal integrates plant growing by hydroponics combined with aquaponic fish, poultry production and mushroom

44. Alastair Fuad-Luke, Fictions, frictions and functions: Design as capability, adaptability and transition, in *The Pearl Diver: Designers as Storytellers*. Elisa Berlotolotti, Heather Daam, Francesca Piredda & Virginia Tasserini, eds. 2016, 90-95. Milan: DESIS Philosophy Talks.

45. Something and Son, accessed 16 July 2016, <http://somethingandson.com/>

growing, aiming for a high yield system. They link their farm activities with a shop, development of vertical farm modules and outreach projects, such as mental health therapy through urban farming. They represent an emerging generation of design-inspired multidisciplinary agencies who are active in the eco-social agenda. In FARM: the emphasis seems to be eco-socio entrepreneurial, with strong ecosophical mental registers of the operators, but it is less easy to distinguish the socius and the enterprise's environmental position.



Figure 1.7. *FARM: London*.  
<http://farmlondon.weebly.com/>

The final urban case study was a five-year design-research project, 2005-2010, called *Nutrire Milano* (Figure 1.8) led by INDACO, the Department of Design at Milan Polytechnic, in collaboration with the University for the study of Gastronomic Sciences and Slow Food. The project was funded by the Fondazione Cariplo, Comune di Milano, and Provincia di Milano. It was a complex project involving service design, strategic design and design for social innovation with the main goal of creating a sustainable food network in the region with a system of services and infrastructures. This involved embracing existing activities, such as GAS and other production, exchange and consumption networks, evolving these networks into zero food miles services between Milan city and the Parco Agricolo Sud di Milano, encouraging multifunctional agricultural activities through several pilot projects. These prototypes included *Il Mercato della Terra* (a farmers' market), *Local Bread* (a new SFC) and horticulture in farms (food boxes). *Nutrire Milano* touched all three ecosophy registers but, perhaps, the strongest register was the social, because a more infrastructural network brought together disparate socii through a process of social bridging.

An Ecosophical Inquiry into Digital Mediation and Design in Relation to Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in an 'Expanded Field' of 'Agri-culture'

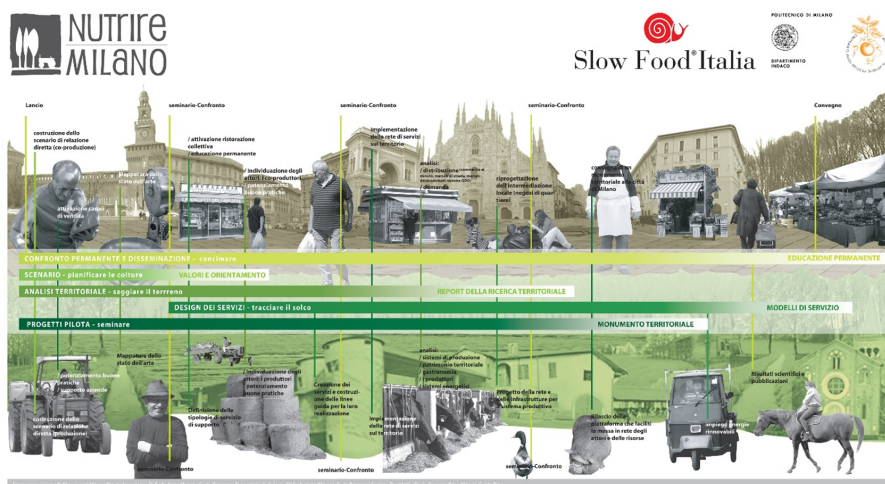


Figure 1.8. *Nutrire Milano*, INDACO, Politecnico di Milano.  
<http://desis-foodcluster.org/category/cases/nutrire-milano/>

The next two case studies focus more on biodiversity and issues of participation. Seed Mast by Futurefarmers, a design studio comprising artists, researchers, designers, architects, scientists and farmers founded in 1995, is a project focusing on seed, seed origin and intellectual property rights (Figure 1.9). A wooden mast and spar are filled with seeds collected from ancient grain crops grown in Norway by Futurefarmers' Flatbread Society. This unique seed bank sets out on a journey to return the seeds to their original geographic origins in Jordan. Seen as a reverse migration, this voyage is imagined as a 'rescue' and symbol of resistance to the global seed barons. The physical and networked socius of the Flatbread Society is well developed and clear environmental intentions are espoused. A particular caring mental psyche is also needed to collect and grow these ancient and heritage varieties of grain. Consistent with the ethos of Futurefarmers' work is a strong ecosophical position.



Figure 1.9. *Seed Mast* by Futurefarmers.  
[www.futurefarmers.com/#projects/seedmast](http://www.futurefarmers.com/#projects/seedmast)

The second biodiversity case study, called *Outside Brewery* (Figure 1.10), was initiated by Henriette Waal in 2009-2010, coming out of a cultural programme called ‘Eat-able Landscape’ (*Eetbaar landscape*) hosted by the city of Tilburg. Henriette, a concept and product designer and researcher, developed a mobile brewery which engaged local communities in discovering ingredients in their landscape from which they could make beer. Water from ditches or ponds was purified in natural filters to combine with locally collected herbs, red clovers and other plants to create unique ‘terroir’ beers, ‘landscape beers’. She involved home brewing enthusiasts, residents and festival goers in a participatory process to make the beers. Her approach is highly tuned to ecosophy and makes us look anew at our landscapes and people’s ability to invent.



Figure 1.10. *Outside Brewery* by Henriette Waal.

Photo, Jorn van Eck, [www.stroom.nl/paginas/pagina.php?pa\\_id=752085](http://www.stroom.nl/paginas/pagina.php?pa_id=752085)

The final two case studies involve new product development and differentiation for the market of existing or aspiring food producers. Eglu, a bespoke chicken house, run and feeders (Figure 1.11), was the brainchild of four designers from the Royal College of Art in London who amusingly called themselves Omlet. These designers brought high quality injection-moulded plastic chicken houses to the market by introducing a new aesthetic aimed at those who had, perhaps, never raised chickens before. As part of their service they provided two older, traditional breeds of chickens and detailed husbandry advice. Omlet has now expanded and diversified its product range and now enjoys distribution internationally, demonstrating its entrepreneurial vision. Perhaps their best ecosophical contribution is to motivate and encourage people to produce their own food and facilitate psychological transition from passive consumer to active producer. However, their original vision is somewhat diluted by the product differentiation towards products for the pet care market and classical economic models they aspire to. An ecosophical review of their business might point to the need for new strategies, such as strengthening the socius around home food production and open source knowledge on husbandry techniques.



Figure 1.11. *Outside Brewery* by Henriette Waal.  
[www.omlet.co.uk/shop/chicken\\_keeping/](http://www.omlet.co.uk/shop/chicken_keeping/)

The last case study is a revolutionary re-design of the bee hive, called Flow® Hive (Figure 1.12) which ensures honey can be released from the frames in the hive by a proprietary system of movable offset hexagonal cells. Flow® Hive was invented and designed by Stuart and Cedar Anderson, who had the most successful crowdfunding campaign on Indigogo to date, raising US\$4.2m on a humble target of US\$70.000. The success of the design can be attributed to it being equally beneficial to the bees (no smoke and major disruption) and the humans (easy system even for inexperienced amateurs). This invention will also, hopefully, introduce many people as start-up beekeepers and therefore should help maintain bee diversity and populations. This is a classic case of entrepreneurial endeavour and the patented design follows well-tested patterns of commercial exploitation. As for the Eglu above, their ecosophical credentials, as presented, look weak, but the ecosophical potential is high if other values are strategically developed.





Figure 1.12. Flow@ Hive by Honeyflow.  
[www.honeyflow.com/](http://www.honeyflow.com/)

This short summary of diverse projects indicates that those embracing participatory design approaches offer a means to build the socius and help strengthen individuals ecosophical psyche. The more innovative projects, such as the Outside Brewery by Henriette Waal, being about *things* and matters of *concern* rather than *objects* and matters of *fact* (after Latour<sup>46</sup>), tend to poise between order and chaos like Bodies without Organs (BwOs after Deleuze and Guattari).<sup>47</sup> In doing so they challenge the system, the order, with their gentle antagonism. I refer to these as design frictions.<sup>48</sup> They not only posit a fiction but enact it through praxis, a key element in making disturbances and creating dissensus to established systems. The design concepts, prototypes, services and products illustrated here challenge normative approaches to food production and, implicitly, consumption. In this sense they offer latent potential to encourage ecosophical endeavours.

### **Towards a polymodal agri-culture...**

Taking the long view, once more, and reflecting on this interweaving of agri-culture, art, design and philosophy, it seems recent developments of AFNs, and their more socius-conscious cousin,

---

46. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry* 30, 2: 225-248. 2004).

47. Jamie Brassett, "Poised and Complex: The Becoming Each Other of Philosophy, Design and Innovation" In *Deleuze and Design*, edited by Betti Marenko and Jamie Brassett, 31-57, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 33, 38-39.

48. Alastair Fuad-Luke, in *The Pearl Diver*, 2016.

CFNs, are challenging us to find our new *Homo ruralis*, the rural human being, or at least to make new relations between *Homo urbanus*, the urban human being, and our ancestral ways of being.

A number of important questions are raised. How can the expanded field of agri-culture and an ecosophical approach, as proposed in this study, offer a means for more polydisciplinary perspective, dialogue, experimentation that could lead to more transformative practices in agriculture and agronomy, art, media studies, design and philosophy? And what might this rethink imply? Can the virtual reconnection fostered by (social) mediation and mediatization of AFNs and CFNs be built into a viable agri-culture? The answer might lie in the genuine intra-domain mode of thought position that design occupies,<sup>49</sup> a position also occupied by art and philosophy modes. How can these modes work with existing AFNs, CFNs and sustainable farming initiatives to mutually reinforce positive transitional change towards genuinely sustainable agri-cultures? Given the scale of the task, we can turn again to the sage challenge laid down by Deleuze and Guattari in their controversial book, *What is Philosophy?*, that we should be ever vigilant of our own mode of thought by ‘challenging *doxa*, experimenting with intensities, and creating heterogeneous connections in the interest of promoting more equitable forms of future flourishing’.<sup>50</sup> Hroch frames design activism in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms a ‘minor’ mode of design, although I would argue it has many monikers<sup>51</sup> and is gathering ground, but she also argues that it re-conceptualises *intensively* through a re-consideration of how design works and what it can do, and, I would add, how this changes the way of designing.<sup>52</sup> Design activism is framed in participatory democracy, agonistic pluralism, utopian logic, motivational framing, radical innovation and sustainability.<sup>53</sup> In this sense design activism finds a natural alignment with an ecosophical approach.

To re-think the humanities is to ask how can the modes of thought of agri-culture, art, design and philosophy could help co-create an agonistic polymodal agri-culture which can genuinely challenge the hegemony of global intensive agri-industrial agriculture. That the AFNs are telling their praxis through their own digital mediation, and that design f(r)ictions offer their own narrativity, are encouraging stories of an emerging agri-culture. As James Petty observed, ‘Who gets to tell the stories matters greatly’, noting that a *diversescape*, in contrast to the *monoscape* of industrial farming, has many storytellers.<sup>54</sup> Food, indeed, for thought and action.

49. Petra Hroch, “Sustainable Design Activism: Affirmative Politics and Fruitful Futures,” 2015, 227-228.

50. Petra Hroch, op. cit. 220.

51. I believe design activism today has diverse expressions and practices, including but not limited by: Adversarial design, Altruistic/pro-bono design, Craftivism, Critical design, Design for... environment/need/sustainability, Dissonant design, Ecological design, Open design, Quiet activism, Relational design, Slow design, Social design/socially responsible design/socially responsive design/socially conscious design/design for social innovation, Transition design and Transformation design.

52. Alastair Fuad-Luke, “Design activism’s teleological freedoms as a means to transform our *habitus*,” In *Agents of Alternatives: Re-designing Our Realities*, edited by Alastair Fuad-Luke, Anja-Lisa Hirscher and Katharina Moebus, (Berlin: AoA, 2015) xxi.

53. Alastair Fuad-Luke, “Design activism’s teleological freedoms as a means to transform our *habitus*,” 2015, 281-294, 286.

54. Jules Petty, *Agri-Culture. Reconnecting People, Land and Nature*, 2002, 23.

## The World of Design, a Designed World: the Relevance of Aesthetics for Everyday Life

Anna Calvera

University of Barcelona; GRACMON UB Research Unit

acalvera@ub.edu

### Abstract

At present, the issue of the aestheticisation of capitalism, and the commercial and everyday world too, is taken for granted. It is a widely accepted approach to understand the 21<sup>st</sup> century paradigm. However, the aestheticisation issue itself recurrently takes the blame for the present situation and so the field of aesthetics is assuming rather negative new meanings. Historically, this can be considered part of the legacy of recent postmodernism. It is true that aesthetics and a sort of aestheticism drive many consumerist behaviours across the world at present. Nonetheless, consumerism is just one social behaviour among many others in which the aesthetic faculty, the sense of beauty or ugliness, is at work. However, from design and the design culture points of view, aestheticisation may not necessarily carry evils; on the other hand, it could also be a consequence of a careful and ethical approach to the making of things while preserving their original values. Is it possible to develop an aesthetic discourse outside arts and fine arts? Is it possible to reflect upon all those humble, useful and pretty things that populate everyday life for so many people across the world? In fact, aesthetic worth is seldom recognised and rarely appreciated if objects are not identified as pieces of art. Whether meaning the human faculty able to enjoy beautiful and attractive things, or the discourse about the feeling of enjoyment gathered historically by humanities, aesthetics can have a wider scope,

much bigger than the small area that of Fine Arts deals with. An aesthetic dimension can and should be observed in every element that shapes daily life, whether commodities, appliances or tools that are noticed, touched and experienced through the senses, or places to live in and behave inside, breathing and enjoying a special atmosphere – this factor can be perfectly adapted to screens and their sensitive representation of the world inside; the aesthetic dimension extends to benefiting from services as well, with their ensuing individual appearance duly converted into visual signs [[: –) =: ( this is a picture: see Fig. 1!]]. Surprisingly, all these common and widely shared features of human life are at present rarely acknowledged as factors of humanising and civilising processes. This text aims to reflect upon the humblest and most common side of aesthetic behaviour and choices, these aesthetic joys that are so important in managing everyday life, communicating with other people, providing personal wellbeing and guaranteeing quality of life for a wide social community. The reflection in this text reviews philosophical aesthetics and considers that aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment are everlasting human behaviours, a human competence that operates to build up the artificial world. Then, because aesthetic categories for dealing with ordinary, trivial and everyday life are not easy to define theoretically and have rarely been considered by philosophical aesthetics, the aim of

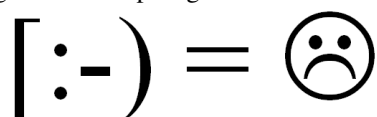
A *Revista Estudos em Comunicação* é financiada por Fundos FEDER através do Programa Operacional Factores de Competitividade – COMPETE e por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia no âmbito do projeto *Comunicação, Filosofia e Humanidades (LabCom.IFP) UID/CCI/00661/2013*.



this chapter is also to show some positive aesthetic issues related to present everyday life as it is lived on both sides of the screen.

Keywords: design aesthetics; aestheticisation; prosaic; design factor; everyday life.

Figure 1. A visual sign marking the tone inspiring a written text that works as punctuation marks do



### An invitation received and a commission clearly proposed

**L**AST summer, an invitation arrived to participate in a seminar dealing with the future of humanities and human beings, organised by the Research Unit of the University of Beira Interior (Covilhã, Portugal). Its intellectual background was clearly displayed in the event’s programme: first, the arrival of digital humanities which brought new procedures to research into the field, requesting a new ‘know how’ and revealing renewed inquiry processes; secondly, the post-human, new-humanism and trans-humanism debates going on in many different disciplines in parallel; finally, the search of fitter means of approaching and understanding present times which hypothetically form a new historical era which we are only just reaching, given that we are also living in a transitional moment – incidentally, I actually think that the present transition will profoundly change the sort of world I know and was accustomed to.

In my case, the invitation suggested to me that I lecture about current aesthetic thinking, a sphere of philosophy which is evolving because it can help people – trade managers, marketing technicians and analysers of 3.0 new mass-culture included – to portray and understand present life’s peculiarities and novelties. Specifically, the invitation read as follows: “*O evento consiste em pensar as Humanidades hoje desde o ponto de vista do impacto tecnológico e de uma importância crescente conferida à estética, a partir de várias perspectivas (da Comunicação, da Filosofia e das Artes)*” [“The event consists of thinking about humanities today regarding technology’s impact and the growing importance assigned to aesthetics from several perspectives (communication, philosophy and the arts)”]. The challenge involved quickly became clear: I have spent many years researching similar and related topics, trying to apply philosophical aesthetic thinking to the understanding of design practice and culture, a modern and current phenomenon which is developing in constant dialogue with the arts. Design aesthetics’ task can include the presentation of a professional practice and its results, the good works that professional designers physically produce, or the appraisal of the weight the aesthetic dimension actually has within design management and decision making throughout the designing processes.<sup>1</sup> (A parenthesis to introduce a new premise:

1. CALVERA, Anna (2007), *De lo bello de las cosas, Materiales para una estética del diseño*, Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, e-book available. Its introduction was presented in English at the EAD Conference held in Izmir in 2008.

at present, many scholars say that the action of designing is no longer an attribute of professional designers but instead a human faculty and skill shared by everybody, an element of the strategic way of thinking. This is one of the meanings of the word ‘design’ in English, the verb ‘to design’ that is usually spread by design managers at present; I am instead interested in the old meaning designating a professional industry, a discipline and a universe of goods and useful things made to live with –this is why professional designers rarely work doing things, they rather work making them whilst building up and giving form to the material and sensitive side of the artificial world. This is the sense of the Spanish word ‘diseño’, clearly distinguished from ‘dibujo’, and the Portuguese ‘desenho’, meaning drawing. The parenthesis ends here). Within this specific domain, I usually refer to a particular element of current products where design and aesthetics come together: the design factor, a concept I found used for the first time by design and communication managers. For that reason, I suggested the following topic to Professor João Carlos Correia, who was the event’s coordinator: rethinking the aesthetic dimension in a broad sense and focusing on the everyday world, the nearby world existing outside the world of art, either fine or decorative. He answered quickly: “The relevance of aesthetics in everyday life and the aestheticisation of everyday life seems to be a very good choice”. I was highly delighted to accept the challenge.

### **Introducing the design factor: the aesthetic node in the nature of design and designed things**

Let us start at the end of the story. The design factor is an ingredient of designed things that designates a special way of being for several objects, just the well-designed ones, whether they are tools, gadgets, useful appliances, ornaments, graphics and visual signs, or places and spaces with a specific atmosphere too. They include any goods that can be found in our immediate and common environment: books printed, drawings, pieces of furniture, machines, screens and navigation menus or web sites... The design factor is an attribute, structurally a sort of adjective, that distinguishes and selects, from among this pile of things, objects, spaces and visual communications, which ones can seek to enter a specific and creative world of excellence, the world of designed things, or even, the world of design itself.<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to define this factor, as so often happens with aesthetic categories. Aesthetic qualities are very easy to appreciate looking around and aesthetic categories are even more easy to apply when talking informally about things, people and landscapes around us, but it is also difficult to explain why something deserves to be qualified as belonging to a specific aesthetic category: and it is truly and even more difficult to justify a judgement that is as spontaneous and immediate as aesthetic judgement actually is.

Indeed, the design factor is not a style or a lifestyle, a system or a catalogue of canonical forms, a range of ornamental patterns or a repertoire of patterns and decorative motifs, nor is it a code of decorative guidelines or an aesthetic canon. Yet there are some objects that stand out for their design, just because their design is good. They thus have an appearance and performance that look ‘designerly’, which can be recognised as the expression of well-made design. This can

---

Concerning the design factor considered as an expression of the aesthetic dimension of designed products, see ‘What is design? Design is...’ in Pilar Vélez (ed.) (2014) *From the world to the museum, Product Design Cultural Heritage*, Barcelona, the Museum of Design of Barcelona & ICUB, Barcelona City Council, pp. 181-2015.

2. Here I am using the word World in the sense defined by Nelson Goodman 1978, *Ways of Worldmaking*.

also venture into an excess of design and, when that happens, although it is a ‘designy’ object, it is no longer a good design but a snobby or pretentious one instead. For that reason, the word ‘design’ becomes an axiological concept too: a judgement of value and worth which determines that intrinsic and extrinsic qualities are consistently related, something that is very significant for most common objects and tools. Although being selective in this way – it marks out several objects from their peers – the qualitative notion of goodness in design should not necessarily be elitist or exclusivist. To use a paradox, it can mean *the quality of quality within* designing practice.<sup>3</sup>

One of the best explanations I have ever heard about this evanescent factor came from a salesman at Barcelona’s flea market. He is an antique dealer working with industrial tools and second hand goods as well, usually selling electric devices. In a doctoral research project devoted to reconstructing the biography of a very useful electrical appliance, the immersion hand blender, the man was inquired about how he knows which devices will sell well. He quickly answered that, for him, it was obvious, really easy to perceive. For that reason, his explanation can be accepted as a clear definition of what good design actually is, a feature beyond a historical style:

... I’ve had blenders that, because of their design, had a long ‘hook’ [metaphorically, attractiveness]. I did not choose them because they were well known, but because they themselves show it. Any object, if it has a design that strikes you, me, anyone... then it is good one. Always! It always happens like that. Not with the oldest ones, no! Because any industrial object, if it is very old, has a look that is nothing like the current appearance. Design developed an appearance: for example, in the case of typewriters, the form of a typewriter that we first think of is totally different from the first typewriters (...) And this usually happens with any object (... Hence) I see an object that is good and pleases me, and that’s it.<sup>4</sup>

Another interesting attempt to define the design factor is provided by the manager Xènia Viladàs. She uses another expression to describe this qualitative attribute, the ‘wow! factor’, something very close to aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment:

A well-designed object has what is called the ‘wow! factor’: this is what stirs us and that, when we realise it, we make an exclamation of admiration that sums up our appreciation for both the aesthetics and the conceptual solutions at the same time. [Viladàs 2008: p.161]

Translating her assessment into graphic design theory terms, she is talking about a value called *readability* among typographers, something that complements legibility, which is a functional

3. I am arguing against all these such widely held thoughts that fear the democratisation of aesthetic values, activities, competences and whatever cultural manifestation, because it always inevitably brings about a banalisation of art and aesthetics. Trivialisation does not mean the same than banalisation because culturally speaking, it rarely turns into vulgarisation or a symbolic impoverishment of cultural sense. A good example of the idea I am trying to refute was provided by Chesterton a long time ago: “It is the pathos of many hackneyed things that they are intrinsically delicate and are only mechanically made dull.” G.K. Chesterton (1929/ 2nd) *Breve historia de Inglaterra*, Barcelona, El Acantilado, 2005 [original English version of the book, available at: [www.basilica.org/pages/ebooks/G.K.Chesterton-A%20Short%20History%20of%20England.pdf](http://www.basilica.org/pages/ebooks/G.K.Chesterton-A%20Short%20History%20of%20England.pdf)]

4. This is a transcription of the answer given by Mr. Víctor Gómez, merchant of vintage design products at Els Encants, the Barcelona flea market, to researcher Rosa Povedano (2005).

attribute. Swiss modern design school preferred to call it *communicability*. It means the inviting tone some objects have while being quiet, calm and trouble-free; in other words, being as subtle as they are attractive and exciting: a difficult paradox, but an interesting challenge, at least for designers who love their job.

It is currently very common to talk about vital and emotional experiences to explain the sort of relationship users have with the objects and goods they possess or the places they use. Sensations, experiences or emotions, however, although forming the core of the design factor, are not enough to provoke the ‘wow! factor’ reaction spontaneously; in fact, things are a little bit more complex. Indeed, as ancient aesthetic philosophy easily discovered, emotions, sentiments and experiences belong to another domain far away from the realm of beauty, prettiness, and therefore plenty of steady pleasures and joys. On the other hand, striking emotions, strong feelings and troubling experiences all belong to the realm of the sublime. They become sublime only when they are truly worthy. But sublime experiences are quite often really ugly and rather unpleasant as far as art aesthetics and pathos are concerned. They may even address dangers and evils existing in life; in fact, the extraordinary side of common people’s everyday lives can unfortunately be found in the worst aspects of politics such as war conditions in spite of their aestheticisation through epic narrative. Hence, imported through comparison with the aesthetic experience concept that philosophers have been developing for as long as philosophical aesthetics has existed, words such as emotions or experiences give a very grave and perhaps too pompous tone to discussions on design matters. It can also be confusing for people, who may forget all these humble pleasures and joyfulness sitting in everyday life.

Turning again to ordinary life and the realm of beautiful things, it could be interesting to reflect upon what the conceptual dimension of a product should be. Technically speaking, a design or product concept brings together various factors: a historical type, which is a mental idea familiar to everyone and socially well known – similar to the ‘ideal types’ once defined by Max Weber; several functions that connect one product with the customs and habits of people using it; some technical procedures; and then a discourse of consistency and coherence of the whole brought about by the act of designing itself. For that reason, the synthesis implicit in a design concept can be as important as its attractive appearance (or rather, popularly speaking, a pretty or handsome look) when discovering its main values as a cultural item.<sup>5</sup> This makes design aesthetics more interesting theoretically. A design concept is a complex idea and for that reason it can acquire a deep meaning, becoming the expression of culturally relevant wisdom, as we will see later. On the other hand, complex but still humble and plain, everyday pleasures are a cultural expression too and so they can have cultural worth as well: whilst trivial, they are not necessarily banal or futile. A practical example: Roca is a Catalan company producing bathroom fittings and devices. Its production intends to improve people’s time in the bathroom, as a very private and personal moment of everybody’s day. Some years ago, at the Barcelona Roca Gallery, an exhibition was

---

5. Hannah Arendt once inquired about the relationship between aesthetics and politics in *polis* life. For her, discerning about political affairs is also a task performed by aesthetic taste (2014: p.64). For that reason, it is clear that aesthetic judgement could also apply to moral judgement. This is the sense of the Spanish word “cursi”, related to a specific way of behaving, a mode of being and a formal style at the same time. In English, categories such as “nasty” or “shoddy” also fit into that genre of words.

set up to display better ways of using water and it proposed the following slogan summarising the company's design philosophy:

*Life's little pleasures.*

It seems like we pay less and less attention to the little things in life, the simple, trivial, day-to-day things. But there are still many people who are able to get a great deal of enjoyment from what some may regard as 'insignificant'. There are happy people who can enjoy anything no matter how small. We don't have to overlook the small, modest pleasures that life can offer; happiness doesn't depend so much on wealth or material things, but rather on our eyes being able to appreciate the thousands of details that appear before us every single day [Introductory text, Roca Barcelona Gallery, winter 2013].

It is worth remembering now the contribution made by philosophers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the understanding of humankind's aesthetic behaviours. Over two intense and transnational debates, one about luxury and commodities, the other on taste and the variety of tastes, British Empiricists and French Enlightenment thinkers (before Kant) were concerned with the beauty of useful things. They considered it an important outcome of the huge efforts made by humankind throughout history to improve their living conditions and it was therefore judged to be a discernible demonstration of human progress looking after wellbeing. For them, living comfortably required taking care and cultivating physical appearance as much as cultural training: people's cultural refinement can be seen easily "in the cure of their garden, their dressing with elegance and the delicacy of their house." All these issues are addressed today by mass magazines for women of different prices and have even given rise to many programmes devoted to these issues on the biggest international TV channels.

But beyond different canons of beauty spread by the mass media, does that mean that the act of taking care of things and oneself is not important because it is essentially trivial and common? It is true that throughout history the aesthetic care of houses and homes gradually became a housekeeping task and so, at that time, it became a female competence, an intellectual competence as underrated as so many other female tasks and tastes have often been since then. Focusing on sensory perception, appreciation and enjoyment, appealing to a world of sensations and pleasant feelings, 18th century philosophers were able to turn feeding and nutrition into gastronomy: to cultivate the pleasures of the palate, trying new food and thereby developing and refining their sense of taste. It is also worth remembering that the word used to designate the faculty of aesthetic judgment is the same one that designates the specific sense active whilst eating. It is the most immediate and elementary moment of appreciation, the true "I like".

[Further underlying hypotheses] Design is also an aesthetic practice but different to art and arty ways of thinking, speaking and performing (and behaving too)

There are several motivating hypotheses underlying the current notion of the design factor itself in the way design studies, design management and marketing theories generally use it (and as it is used here). The basic hypothesis inspiring this inquiry is the ubiquitous nature of the aesthetic dimension insomuch as it provides attributes and worth to all the perceptive shapes of the material world and sensible realities. It is the premise that bridges philosophical and design ways



of thinking and dealing with common goods and visual communication messages. In fact, most philosophers recognise this aesthetic dimension as a given. Recently, French sociologists Lipovetsky & Serroy take for granted the anthropological nature of aestheticist decisions informing so many social behaviours at least since prehistoric times (2013: pp.15-31 “L’artialisation rituelle”). While acknowledging how deeply aesthetic needs and activities are rooted in ancient history, these authors at the same time recognise aesthetics as a central issue in today’s postmodern and globalised societies. It must be supposed that aesthetics and taste have also been a factor in the wide acceptance of designed products around the world and so looks such as the Good Design, the Gute Form or the Bel Disegno became the visible guarantee of technological innovation and products’ technical quality.

Some years earlier, on the threshold of the Western society of abundance, the philosopher Hannah Arendt also spoke about the inherent beauty of prosaic and ordinary things, even the most ordinary and commonplace ones. In that sense, she was following Heidegger’s way of approaching useful things and tools, defining them as ‘beings ready-to-hand’ or ‘things-at-hand.’ Referring to Hannah Arendt is hence doubly interesting at a seminar about the human condition in a digitalised world such as the one organised by the University of Beira Interior in 2016. Indeed, Arendt analysed logical procedures and reflected on the sort of intelligence that early digital machines claimed as their own. She wrote that in 1958, almost sixty years ago. There is no doubt that she had an advanced position, foreseeing a little bit how artificial intelligence could evolve afterwards and influence human beings and humanities’ discourse.

Arendt’s quotation on useful objects is rather long. In her most famous book, *The Human Condition*, aesthetics, by singularising arts, is one of the factors that give stability to the artificial world where human beings live. It also supports the trusting relationship people have with tools and everyday equipment whilst using them: “things give to human artifice the stability without which it could never be a reliable home for men...”. Above these stand works of art. They are what actually interest her but, as Heidegger thought in his time,<sup>6</sup> she also extends her reasoning to tools, goods, devices and appliances as counterparts of artworks to understand art’s nature and way of being. Arendt also compares artworks to industrial machines: they are very representative of *homo faber’s* work [pp. 38-39 Spanish text]. According to both Heidegger and Arendt, transfiguration is what makes the difference and turns artworks into something beyond their materiality as things: they transcend and enter the extraordinary world. Regarding design theory, what is interesting is the way in which she demonstrates the existence of the aesthetic dimension and its ubiquity across the physical world. Being embodied in whatever physically exists and is considered through the senses, aesthetic enjoyment is something actually inevitable: everyday things – goods, tools, communicative signs and graphics – are naturally pretty or ugly, elegant or corny, delicate or nasty in spite of their designers’, marketing technicians’ and manufacturers’ intentions:

For although the durability of ordinary things is but a feeble reflection of the permanence of which the most worldly of all things, works of art, are capable, something of this quality – which to Plato was divine because it approaches immortality – is

---

6. I studied Heidegger to grasp how his thought applies design aesthetics in Anna Calvera: “El cosear de las cosas. Consideraciones rezagadas a partir de Martin Heidegger” in Calvera 2007: pp.101-123.

inherent in every thing as a thing, and it is precisely this quality of the lack of it that shines forth in its shape and makes it beautiful or ugly. To be sure, an ordinary use object is not and should not be intended to be beautiful; yet whatever has a shape at all and is seen cannot help being either beautiful, ugly, or something in-between. Everything that is, must appear, and nothing can appear without a shape of its own: hence there is in fact no thing that does not in some way transcend its functional use, and its transcendence, its beauty or ugliness, is identical with appearing publicly and being seen. By the same token, namely, in its sheer worldly existence, everything also transcends the sphere of pure instrumentality once it is completed. The standard by which a thing's excellence is judged is never mere usefulness, as though an ugly table will fulfil (sic) the same function as a handsome one, but its adequacy or inadequacy to what it should *look* like, and this is, in Platonic language, nothing but its adequacy or inadequacy to the *eidos* or *idea*, the mental image, or rather the image seen by the inner eye, that preceded its coming into the world and survives its potential destruction. In other words, even use objects are judged not only according to the subjective needs of men but by the objective standards of the world where they will find their place, to last, to be seen, and to be used. [Arendt 2014: p.38-39; italics are in the original writing]

In another text in the same anthology quoted above, Arendt is even more explicit about the inevitability, or rather the inexorableness, of the aesthetic dimension of the artificial environment of human life, although barely arguing against instrumentalist reason in cultural and arts matters, whether functionalism or utilitarianism – two concepts that mean things that are completely different and refer to domains quite distant from each other. Arendt defines beauty from its everlasting trait, its imperishable nature:

...Beauty itself (...) belongs primarily to the sphere of production and is one of the criteria that makes it up, because all objects have a look and a way that is peculiar to its own status as objects. In this sense, beauty continues to function even as a criterion for useful objects, this is so not because the 'functional' objects can become beautiful, but quite the contrary, because all objects, including those of use, have life beyond its functionality. Functionality, on the other hand, it is not the aspect under which an object appears; that aspect corresponds to its shape and configuration. Functionality of things is the propriety under which objects disappear again once been used and consumed. To be able to assess an object only by its use value and not its appearance –to say if it's beautiful or ugly, or something in between—we must first shut our eyes.<sup>7</sup>

This special 'imperishable trait' that some products have, an aesthetic clue often compared to artistic qualities, becomes the design factor in a well-designed world. In the craft and handicrafts domains that produce commonplace things, the aesthetic clue is clearly an artistic value, a creation of genius; on the other hand, in the advanced craftily made current technologies that ICT is

7. Original text: "Cultura y política", *Merkur* 12,1959. Quoted from Arendt 2014, *Op. Cit.*, pp.58-59.

spreading inside the screen, the aesthetic clue might adopt peculiarities far away from the artistic ones, falling aesthetically on the same side as designed things. My position is hence that everyday prettiness and beauty, although prosaic and trivial, even humble, futile and perhaps modest, are far more interesting and socially important than most philosophical aesthetics and cultural criticism are willing to accept. This genre of aesthetic thinking is therefore worth taking into account and so research can deal with the basis of aesthetic quality in the artificial environment where human life still takes place. Dealing with aesthetic quality and managing the varied qualities of beauty was design activity's original task when the design function operating within productive manufactures and factories became aware of the need to take care of aesthetics while producing goods and saw it as part of their social responsibilities; in Europe, this happened at the turn of 20th century. At that time, design was conceptualised as a practice that was as much aesthetic as it was instrumental, functional and technical. Its early mission was to facilitate and perform the dialogue between people and produce things whether launched on the market, displayed at shops or placed in a home or public space. That is why, a long time ago, design was understood as a procedure for domesticating technology together with technological innovation; this was covered in Deutsches Werkbund's theorisation of design practice just before the First World War. A little later, Modern Design movements always sought a pleasant and polite beauty for the useful and common things they created. Seen as its own early inspiring utopia, modern and postmodern design heritages are hence the democratisation of aesthetic experiences and the reversal of all inherited aesthetic canons and social meanings. At present, because there is no longer a single, unique canon of reference for beauty, something which is often felt as a missing value, everyday aesthetics is an even more interesting issue than the obvious variety of tastes that people such as David Hume and Emmanuel Kant faced in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when modern times started to give rise to bourgeois and industrial societies. Nowadays, postmodernity is already out, but design is still considered a means of mediating between technological innovation and its users. An important task that design should exert is to ease the relationship between humans and machines through navigation tools and signs, improving interfaces and so, revealing the latter's symbolic character and performance. This is just one of the many social functions that design can perform in the foreseeable future, such as facilitating helping humanities and social sciences (HSS) to visualise data obtained through research.

Design is a cultural manifestation too, but what sort of culture does it stand for?

“KING LEAR:

*O, reason not the need: our basest beggars  
Are in the poorest thing superfluous:  
Allow not nature more than nature needs,  
Man's life's as cheap as beast's: thou art a lady;  
If only to go warm were gorgeous,  
Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,  
Which scarcely keeps thee warm.”*

[William Shakespeare's *King Lear*]

Hence, superfluous things are also a need, even a basic need to be able to live: ancient wisdom said as much. Now we know that formal styles adopted to satisfy this need for ornaments and

superfluous things just for embellishment's sake are decided culturally and socially. Personal taste is thus a sociological signal of social identity, whether this means the identity of a social class or an urban tribe. Another active hypothesis here is the one that assesses that the sort of aesthetic dimension which is effective and worthy within different design practices is revealed through the design factor; it also works vice-versa and defines the nature of the design factor itself. That is the reason why it is widely acknowledged that design itself is an aesthetic practice. Though sharing with arts this aesthetic dimension and aspiration, design performs its aesthetic and aestheticist role outside and apart from the world of the arts, that is, the universe of extraordinary things, remaining instead in an ordinary, more immediate and closer context but maintaining a constant dialogue with the arts (no matter whether they are popular art forms coming from urban suburbs or the avant-garde experiments developed within cosmopolitan high culture everywhere). Design becomes a symbolic form too and so it behaves symbolically. It has been finally accepted and so, recently, public politicians have provided an interesting summary of the whole question: “[Design is] an aesthetic and symbolic practice that is economically profitable and culturally relevant” [Working paper towards an EU innovation policy, 2008]. All these attributes are equally interesting to think about.

Among designers, it is quite easy to find talks asserting the cultural depth of design if done properly and well. It is worth pointing some of them out here. The first one comes from a BEDA White Book published some years ago that tries to summarise how design evolved at the beginning of the 21st century, showing the socially pertinent issues that usually engage professional designers. For them, design practice clearly belongs to the cultural domain because “Design is capable of defining values, beliefs and attitudes. The design action on the rebound turns products and brands into culture and cultural forms.” This was a statement made some time ago by Jordi Montaña, a professor of design management in Barcelona). Design action can thus turn culturally relevant proposals into economically beneficial performances. This is just one way. There are many others outside branding that perform a similar role. Since the early 1960s, Pop Art and Pop design widely demonstrated that statements such as the one above are right. Trademarks supplied evocative icons throughout the 20th century; mass-manufactured products and visual communications populating the artificial world transformed everyday environment into a landscape that could be appreciated aesthetically, whether it looked picturesque or photogenic. Then came advertising posters, road signs and signals, lettering signs and bags for shops moving around, all of them drawing the urban landscape just as much as architecture does. Visual communications might work as visual poems rather than just ‘punching’ the walking people’s eyes from city walls and banners hung on streetlights. A long time ago, A.M. Cassandre, a poster and type designer working in France, asserted that art had finally gone down onto the street. Is this still the case? In his time, the early 1930s, the profusion of billboards displayed the aesthetic dimension of life while communicating, selling or just informing people about life’s pleasures and practical needs.

Almost one hundred years later, the social function of well-designed products is even higher: “In other words, everything now depends on design” [due to] “its role as a bridge between technology and art, ideas and ends, culture and commerce is now important” (Macdonald 2004). A need for interesting and appealing everyday aesthetics is still in the air everywhere: is it felt as necessary? And is the need to improve it as necessary and urgent as it was at the turn of the 20th

century or even earlier, when the social mission of design was clearly discussed? Design-driven behaviours are now quite normal and design practice takes an active role in different areas of life and managing practices, both privately and politically. But design values have disappeared a little bit behind the normalisation of its discourse and the many equally valuable and interesting trends available. Design can carry out its social mission in different ways: using an interesting and relevant one or an uninteresting, trivial and banal one. It depends on the designers and working conditions. Current life and values offer a good frame for experimenting with and developing many possibilities. The challenge is becoming even more complex because of the many aestheticisation processes going on and the central role aesthetic matters play in present economy. Indeed, managers are already fully aware of that:

The impossibility of finding explanations that encompass the complex, changing and at times erratic reality of society means that people live in the present, they tend to enjoy life, appreciate games and leisure activities, look for the things that will bring out extreme emotions and enjoy aesthetics. Design has to take cultural roots into account and transmit them, as that is what consumers want. Users and consumers demand something more than just functions, they ask for values. (Montaña 2004)<sup>8</sup>

This is thus the other side of the whole question: the aesthetic dimension of everyday tools and goods is also a consequence of merchandising and marketing practices, performed to increase sales and boost commercial reputation. Many and diverse aesthetic categories have been adopted by trade technicians in the last decades to announce and speak about consumer goods populating the global marketplace. The current aestheticisation of everyday life is also a consequence of this 'Instrumentalist Reason' that philosophers portrayed as the driving force of the era, but now suiting commercial interests more than the productive ones. In fact, the aesthetic appearance of things and the categories to describe them, whether the cosiness, cuteness or coolness of popular things, or the stylish and pretentious elegance of some allegedly luxury goods, are now commercial resources that can be easily identified and managed both for consumers and sellers. In short, the wide spread of aesthetics throughout everyday life everywhere, in both landscapes and behaviours, i.e. moving outside the world of art that characterises today's wealthy societies, all drive design and creative industries to take centre stage.

---

8. See Jordi Montaña: "Design As Cultural Carrier". See also Stuart Macdonald: "Introduction. Design Defines The Century" in Stuart Macdonald (ed.) 2004, (ed.) 2004 *Design Issues in Europe Today*, BEDA privately printed, pp.36, 37 and 6 respectively.

Figure 3. View of the bridge built in Barcelona to cross the old port on foot and reach some facilities.  
Designed by the architects Helio Piñón and Albert Viaplana. Inaugurated in 1994. Barcelona.  
Photographed by the author.



### **Vindicating the sensory world and everyday pleasures; searching for motives behind an old hatred**

The theory of the aestheticisation of mature and financial capitalism raises many questions for scholars and people involved in design practice, design philosophy and design history. Some examples. Why is aestheticisation still a dismissive criticism for so many thinkers and philosophers reflecting on present times? Why are the more negative and pejorative meanings of aesthetics, aestheticism and aestheticist attitudes so often chosen when speaking about the aesthetic dimension of common life? Why have the dismissive, despising and disdainful meanings been so easily and widely accepted among design scholars and people working in design culture? And finally, and this is perhaps the most relevant question for our purposes, if focusing only on the negative effects of aestheticisation performances such as those complained about by Walter Benjamin regarding fascist parades, where is design's old utopia and legitimising discourse of being a culturally relevant aesthetic practice?

As already said, design can be seen as both a complex discipline, with a rich and varied culture of its own, and a difficult, technical and highly professionalised activity practised all around the world since modernisation processes began. In this context, how can design still be a culturally relevant human practice when working on interfaces and improving the appearance of screens? And, finally, is it still true that professional design is an aesthetic practice in the strong sense of the word aesthetic? If they are aesthetically competent, can designers' old skills still be helpful for them when working with technological new realities, whether hyper-modern, augmented or virtual?

Design is usually considered a creative industry that was barely involved in the aestheticisation of everyday life throughout all of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Design is under suspicion since sociologists, philosophers and mass-culture analysts have deplored the aestheticisation undergone by whatever art or cultural performance was around at the time, drawing the process as one of banalisation. It is an important argument because it grieves and regrets the inner process of artistic and aesthetic creations itself much more than the fact that it can take economic advantage of its creations. We can consider this approach a legacy of postmodern thinking, although the bulk of criticism against the customisation of cultural goods comes from High Modern Philosophy, which usually blamed industrial production and its need to ‘massify’ everything to ready it for consumption: after the Second World War, this was the case for Adorno, Haug, Heidegger, Marcuse, most French structuralist thinkers (even Bourdieu) and Hannah Arendt among many others. The aim of the closing section is to inquire about the negative spirit usually felt when faced with aestheticisation processes that are still going on, and to observe how many scholars there are who argue against the aesthetic improvement of everyday life, including design work, of course! Given that literature on the issue is now very extensive, the main task will be a dialogue with the latest book by Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy, *L'esthétisation du monde* (Paris 2013). Its cover depicts a town full of awful skyscrapers around a false lake built in the middle of a desert; therefore a nightmarish movie waiting for us just around the corner.

Such criticisms are especially harsh and negative when, culturally speaking, aesthetic improvements affect the majority of the population. The question inspiring my thought here comes from personal astonishment. I feel really disappointed when the issue of the socialisation of culture, that is, the democratisation of true beauty and other cultural products, is used just to explain and justify the banalisation and impoverishment of the symbolic meanings of cultural products: metaphorically speaking, a decaffeinating action. This is something that has always existed but has never been as explicit as it is nowadays. A widespread idea states that “*Le plaisir esthétique semble incompatible avec les contraintes du collectif*” [“Aesthetic pleasure seems to be incompatible with the constraints of the collective”]. For sociologists, the main hindrances lie with necessary “*dispositifs de facilitation des accès*” [“access facilitation devices”] (Fabiani 2007: p.225). It must be accepted that this is a historical issue because it is based on the structure of social classes. Even Lipovetsky and Sarroy accept its aristocratic background (2013, pp.16-19), just as former and foundational authors, such as Werner Sombart and Thorstein Veblen, showed a long time ago. They were right. Women were accepted at the Court for the first time early in the Ancien Régime. Their arrival required male aristocrats, who were mostly members of the military, to refine their habits, tastes and manners. For this higher social class, life just meant leisure, entertainment and gallantry. Aesthetically enjoying all kinds of objects was a job in itself: In the end, the beautiful no longer concerned usefulness by definition. However, two centuries have now passed during which democracy and social mobility have been central values for society (regardless of whether or not mobility could really happen) except for aesthetic issues. After so long producing appealing and interesting products – even, or especially, for mass culture – it is actually difficult to unreservedly accept ideas based on such aristocratism. I prefer another view of the social role that design has been playing in our societies, one that the history of design demonstrates. As my friend Martín de Azúa, an important Spanish designer, once said: the task of design has long been to fight against

banality, and very intensively too; at least it has done so insomuch as it has been helping the trade and commercialisation of goods to develop and spread capitalism everywhere. But even in these cases, design has sometimes helped change several dangerous and damaging habits to provide healthier, easier and more comfortable ways to perform everyday life's most common acts.

Let us return to Arendt once again. In 1959, in an article already quoted [2014: p. 41], she portrayed the situation from the social or sociological perspective, displaying all the nuances that the game between social classes entails and how they have evolved over history. Mass society itself is a socialisation phenomenon of culture. This is obvious, she states, and mass culture is essentially similar to the sort of culture that spread from intellectual 'salons' held by a high society, which was not yet massive but was totally exclusive. She was writing when mass culture started to spread massively. Much later, while thinking about the many transformations that went on in high culture affairs in France during the postmodern years, Jean Louis Fabiani, a French sociologist, recalled that the aim to socialise high culture is what most guided cultural policies in his country.<sup>9</sup> This fact hides at least how difficult it still is to acknowledge cultural values outside the already institutionalised fine arts domain, and the persisting survival of a single hierarchy of cultural production. So to be included in the public policy for cultural affairs, it is better to become a work of art or a new form of art, and that is what design has strategically been done so many times. However, Arendt showed that difficulties between social classes regarding culture are not so deep: on the one hand, former high society behaved like the current masses do at present within mass society and so similar traits identified them as cultured people; on the other hand, if we look at actual numbers, the first representatives of a mass society were so few that they actually were and acted as a sort of elite. From my point of view, this is the secret and hidden paradox, the fundamental lie, underlying the current luxury industry; it also stirred Art Deco's style and manners, polite behaviours, during the interwar years and later. Sports, tourist trips by cruise or luxury train, weekend aperitifs: these are the topics of Cassandre's best posters. In the 1920s, a class of 'moderns', trendy and fashionable people lived an expensive lifestyle that however was similar to mass society afterwards. Among the shared traits that Arendt lists, there is one that draws much attention nowadays, a time so deeply marked by consumerism: "the extraordinary capacity (rather greed) for consumption, along with the inability to judge the qualities or simply identify them" (2014: p.41). To agree with her vision, it is useful to recall the laws against luxury that were approved all across Europe starting in the 16th century. Afterwards, she continues trying to understand what happened during the process that gave birth to what she calls "cultural philistinism" (2014: p.42). Here she uses a word of ancient lineage in Protestant Northern Europe, very familiar to 19th century intellectuals in Britain and Germany, who used it regularly when arguing against industry (as Ruskin did) or the capitalist society (like Morris). Her argument points towards entertainment but also social emulation through culture and good taste. This is just a sociological explanation, not an aesthetic one, because aesthetics and good taste are taken as playing a social and sociological function. In fact, "philistines" are those industrious members of the bourgeoisie obliged to spend their whole lives working just to earn their richness.

9. Jean Louis Fabiani (2007) *Après la culture légitime. Objets, publics, autorités*, Paris, L'Harmattan. The book is devoted to the "processus de déhiérarchisations des corpus qui a marqué la vie culturelle du dernier quart de siècle" (1975-2000) (p.16).



Once they became rich, philistines used their aesthetic competence and good taste, particularly those of their daughters, to separate people into classes, to mark differences clearly, and finally to caricature newly rich men, the actual philistines, these unfortunate “*parvenus*”, always arriving in a very embarrassing and improper mood. They were and still are usually despised as “*cursis*”, i.e. morally ‘kitsch’, a flashy or posh type. Arendt calls these characters “educated philistines” or “snobs”. It must be remembered that, as Fabiani stated regarding today’s audiences of culture: “*la culture bourgeoise d’une époque ne se réduit jamais à sa culture savant*” [“bourgeois culture of one era can never be reduced to its high culture”] and so, “*...les cultures savantes ne constituent pas les cultures dominantes des élites*” [“...high cultures are never the dominant [cultures of the elite”] (Fabiani 2007: p.215). Certainly, aesthetic categories are well suited to labelling existing differences between behaviours and personalities, sometimes better than identifying forms, styles and formal appearances.

Impoverishment and banalisation, however, follow other shifts. According to Arendt, these negative processes arrive when cultural values spread and are shared by many people. They circulate but become another kind of value, an economic or social one: culture then adopts a social function to perform and so it avoids its transcendent want, desire and scope. Why? Simply because widely spread aesthetic values and cultural ideas are not extraordinary anymore; they do not serve to forget mundane matters, to move far away from the ordinary conditions of everybody’s everyday lives. The ghost of exclusiveness is there again. Given that Arendt thinks that beauty, or the specific value that gives a product cultural relevance, is the will to endure, then mass culture, which produces cultural items industrially as a commodity to be consumed quickly and greedily (‘devoured’ Arendt says), cannot aim to be culturally valuable. If pleasant entertainment, although a biological need for people and a demand imposed by life itself, even when it is authentic, spontaneous or innocent, is proposed as a commodity; it thus cannot aspire to be culturally valuable (p.43): this is mass culture’s original sin.

Although it might appear a bit pedantic, I would like to recall Kierkegaard’s puritan condemnation of whatever innocent and immediate pleasures everyday life naturally offers. He gives the name of “aesthetic stadium” to the earliest and most elementary stage in a person’s development of self. Indeed, a person able to aesthetically enjoy the world where he/she lives still has a long way to go before he/she achieves his/her personal realisation, the religious stage. Though at a very low level, at least Kierkegaard acknowledges that aesthetic enjoyment and nurturing the specific faculty of enjoying beauty and nice things results in a human being’s progress into the humanity of a human being. The idea recalls what Montaigne stated some centuries before, in a very optimistic mood: aesthetic joy and competence is “what makes a human being humane”. Moreover, a long time has passed since aesthetic enjoyment first came under suspicion and plenty of examples can be found in the history of philosophy. A very recent example is Lipovetsky & Serroy book mentioned above. Their point of view further strengthens the “aristocratic” understanding of both the aesthetic dimension and whatever canons of beauty can be established. In fact, aristocracy gives its name to a chapter in the book and to a moment in art and aesthetic histories:

*Plus l’art s’infiltré dans le quotidien et l’économie, moins il est chargé de haute valeur spirituelle; plus la dimension esthétique se généralise, plus elle apparaît comme un*

*simple occupation de la vie, un accessoire n'ayant d'autre finalité que celle d'animer, décorer, sensualiser la vie ordinaire: le triomphe du futile et du superflu.* [2013: p. 33]

[The more art infiltrates the everyday and the economy, the less it is responsible for high spiritual value; the more the aesthetic dimension spreads, the more it appears to be a simple pastime, an accessory with no other end than to enliven, to decorate, to make ordinary life more sensual: the triumph of the futile and the superfluous.]

In a way of thinking such as this, the aesthetic dimension and aestheticism itself mean in effect something void, superficial and simple, which is also quite sad. The idea of design has acquired similar connotations in recent times. In any case, the way of thinking about everyday pleasures and joys that despises the enjoyment of senses and sensations that small things in life so often provide are at the heart of the fine arts system and hierarchies of cultural manifestations and aesthetic practices. Design's aesthetic understanding needs to reverse this deeply rooted belief and find alternatives. In fact, the image of the two platonic aesthetic characters, Venus and Diotima, come again into play.

It may be useful to stop for a moment at another transitional time in aesthetic history, the first years of the postmodernist period. In 1972, the Catalan philosopher Xavier Rubert de Ventós wrote a book inquiring about cultural change from the aesthetic point of view.<sup>10</sup> His aim was to integrate alternative cultural forms to update aesthetic and art theory so he also talked about design and mass media; TV was the main and most despised media at that time among left wing thinkers. His argument has two parts. The first one deals with the way a cultural expression becomes a cultural work, or rather a form of art, and is socially and intellectually acknowledged as such. Among several examples, two relate clearly to this field of inquiry: he draws attention to the fact that “design invented the painting as a bearer of eternal values” as much as “the invention of the plastic material has turned into art objects things made of wood or even tin” (1972: p.35).

Rubert's second line of reasoning aims to overcome contempt for everyday pleasures by showing how deeply rooted a hint of deep Puritanism that shapes current cultural values is in modern philosophy (1972: p.25-26). Faced with the ideas of Susan Sontag (1970s) and Ortega y Gasset (1930s), both of whom wanted to surmount “the hedonism of popular and easier forms of art”, the 1970s saw “a spontaneous claim of the sweetish demonstrations of Symbolist art”. British Pre-Raphaelites, French *Pompier* painters, symbolisms in Fine Arts, the New Liberty for decorative arts, and Victorian textiles too, such as those recovered by Laura Ashley, and multiple varieties of kitsch, all burst onto the art scene and into high cultured discourse with a lot of energy (*Camp* for instance, shaped the ambience of the period, and everything that reminds people of the atmosphere at a grandmother's house as well). Along the same lines, Rubert also remembers Peter Brook's vindication of “melodrama” and the melodramatic tone (“*este espacio literario de la hipérbole emocional*” [“this literary space of emotional hyperbole”]) and proposes it as the most suitable genre “in a secularised world” such as our own. Is this surrendering or rather a way to avoid Adorno's disdain for mass culture products, even the best Jazz music? Adorno's approach was incredibly elitist at the end, as Hans R. Jauss so clearly said when trying to get back

10. Xavier Rubert de Ventós (1972). See, in particular, part I, chapters 3-6.

the pleasures of reading and recover enjoyment (many authors quoted here have stated something similar).<sup>11</sup>

Rubert uses similar examples to show how difficult it is to observe and realise what is actually going on at present – whatever historical time the present one refers to – and he grasps it using well established theories. He then reminds us that many other thinkers' aesthetic thought despises everyday pleasures and joys because they look far too simple and are just a spontaneous reaction. Arguing this position, he shows how it is becoming a topic. Nelson Goodman, for instance, once warned against the trap of confusing aesthetic feelings with the sensory and pleasant sensation provided by a warm bath (1984). Rubert remembers the old "Platonic-Kantian" story distinguishing between artists and chefs – although today's chefs and the artistic cult of gastronomy may totally refute that argument (1972: p.29n; p.30-34 too). Sensuality still remains at the lowest rung of the ladder and therefore hedonism is a synonym for vacuity and frivolity, clearly a sin for whatever puritan approach to art and aesthetics may be taken (and the spirit of Kierkegaard comes to the stage again). Rubert then displays the three requirements that a puritan theory of aesthetics and cultural values must satisfy: "the aesthetic dignity of themes and objects that can be applied to art; the humanist condition of faculties exercised or raised by art; and the transcendent value of formal experiences that supports its meaning and validation." The modernist way of thinking about art is thus accurately portrayed (1972: p.29).

Now we can clearly see the basic point. If the true question concerning the nature of art and artistic expression is "when something can be considered art" – instead of asking "what is art?", i.e. avoiding the ontological form of questioning – then aesthetic inquiry must focus on searching for when and in what situations "an object, a gesture or a text acquire a meaningful value that transcends its mere functional and conventional existence" (Rubert 1972: 31). A design aesthetics inquiry must therefore focus on investigating when and in what conditions an object or image could be beautiful whilst being functional and conventional enough to be used and clearly understood by everybody. An interesting topic to reflect upon! At least now it has been accepted that sensual pleasures are culturally valuable.

Continuing with Arendt's work, some pages below, she warned of the emergence of a totally new social phenomenon: "After the First World War, a bizarre social structure emerged in which neither literary critics, nor historians nor social scientists are noticed. It can be described as an international 'society of celebrities'" (Arendt 2014: 71). Almost thirty years later, Gilles Lipovestky mentioned the same fact in his research on fashion and other ephemeral behaviours characteristic of modern times (*L'Empire de l'éphémère. La mode et son destin dans les sociétés modernes* 1987). He drew attention to the professionalisation of aesthetic competence and judgement at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century through the building up of the fashion system. Celebrities have been playing the role of top communication models and spreading new trends among population. Since then, launching aesthetic models and references of beauty are in some way the job of the people specialised in developing means of dissemination and spreading new trends. Designers have been a very active part in the system, managing the industry of aesthetic goods. They have been claiming acknowledgement of their ability to renew aesthetic trends and styles, demonstrating that they are

---

11. Fabiani tried to overcome the Frankfurt School way of thinking this issue because of its essential elitism (p.16).

aesthetically competent and displaying a capacity to give value to aesthetically bizarre or innovative proposals. When the postmodernist period started, when the Italian Memphis Group arrived in journals and magazines all around the globalised design world (1981), designers adopted the celebrities' behaviour too and so a design star system grew, supported by media and culture managers. It was a management strategy that was useful to get and increase social visibility and a specific place in society. These are the social and economic foundations upon which the aestheticisation of the world and the everyday universes has been built.

### **Design under suspicion: vindicating aestheticism and aestheticisation performances**

The aestheticisation of everyday life is a phenomenon that identifies the last phase of capitalism both economically and socially, the postmodern phase ending with the deep crisis that started in 2008 in Europe, but announced since 2000 from Brazil, Argentina and Chile. It is therefore a postmodernist issue. It started long time ago and was introduced for the first time by Guy Deborde's famous book on the society of spectacle (1967). In practice, aestheticisation means what Veronica Devalle summarised in four processes that have already been accomplished:

Consumption of trademarks replaces consumption of consumer goods; the development of image values such as personal or business identities; exacerbation of voyeurism; and appropriating of new models of beauty which have a strong visual and aestheticised imprint. [Devalle 2009]

The last premise that is actually at stake in this article is: what does it really mean and what operation is meant by "strong aestheticised imprint"? According to most orthodox philosophers, this genre of beauty is rather negative because it is essentially trivial: features such as charm, nicety or pleasant cosiness of everyday landscape mean, for them, not the manifestation of wellbeing and "savoir faire" of the intrinsic value of things, but an obstacle to experiencing true aesthetic experiences that must be extraordinary by definition. We have already seen to what extent the nostalgia of *pathos* is causing contempt of that subtle and modest beauty that may be present in daily life as something normal. Another fact is brought about thanks to ICT and social networks: the centrality of private and individual universes in today's cultural manifestations and affairs and the spread of the sentence "I like it" as the only significant means of communication. Fabiani, among any others, mentions the effects of the conversion of technology into a consumer good on cultural products: "Today, the private space is the main place of cultural dating, through technical audio-visual devices" (2007: p.228). As the number of available pictures increases and they enter private and domestic spaces, they become something ordinary (Fabiani is an expert on cinema who studies how it has evolved as a cultural event over the last decades). Another recurrent example of artworks losing cultural meaning because they are heard everywhere and for too long are the musical pieces used by restaurants to balance noise or turn the atmosphere of a dreadfully narrow elevator into a cosy one.

These examples have been collected to show how often aesthetic thinking just looks at the decaffeination operations visible in cultural performances. It is obvious that processes such as a decaffeination of values do happen in our world, and quite often together with other things that

impoverish culture. Many things that look very trendy are actually badly made; luxury goods are, aesthetically speaking, absolutely vulgar in style for being luxurious; new cities do not have style or a cultural identity related to local traditions; and urban suburbs, although highly up to date, are ugly and increasingly sad everywhere in the world (Lipovetsky & Serroy 2013: p.34 gives many examples of these phenomena). But they are as sad as the things targeted at poor people used to be in the past. As Ettore Sottsass remarked once (1973), throughout history there have been two kinds of craft, a production for rich and powerful people who ask for true art – no matter if these art works look extravagant – and, on the other hand, a craft for workers: “for people who need tools just to work with, not to help them to live, craft was – and still is – something brief; this craft has always been brief, subdued, melancholic, pathetic and sometimes even poignant.”<sup>12</sup>

Over more than 400 pages, as the old philosophical essays used to be in the past, Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy undertake their inquiry into the nature of the phase of capitalism they call artistic. The title clearly announces the approach: “*L’esthétisation du monde: vivre à l’âge du capitalisme artiste*” [“The aestheticisation of the world: living in the age of artistic capitalism”]. It thus seems to be a kind of final stage. Planned as a survey on postmodern society, the book includes a historical review of cultural production and consumption throughout the 20th century and some former antecedents to discover how the processes of ‘*artialisation*’ took place. These processes led the world to acquire an aesthetic dimension. As their approach is conceptually so French, the authors think that every aesthetic display must be artistic and can only be seen and analysed as a form of art. For that reason, *artialisation* and aestheticisation are quite synonymous words for them. Their model of reference is cinema, whilst exchanges between high/low cultures focus on expressions of popular art such as jazz and pop music. These are the art forms that French sociology of culture has recently treated the most in the discussion of the legitimate culture issue. But both cinema and music are performing arts, providing fictional narratives or stories whether they use old or new technical means of expression. An aesthetics thought as suiting the art discourse fits perfectly in these cases.

Another modern founder of typical 20th century manners are *Haute Couture* and the fashion industry, a topic liked and raised by Lipovetsky himself. In these fields, the aesthetic discourse changes because fashion has been an industry and a trade since its birth. It therefore requires proper categories. It is worth remarking here that the authors devote several quite long chapters to industrial design, analysing its history and present condition – indeed, the book could be regarded as a work of design history with a sociological approach. Design is understood as an activity of making commercial goods and trading them as well. It becomes a suitable disclosure of “commercial aesthetics”, a new dominion of aesthetics particular to postmodern times. Another chapter introduces a “world of design”. The limits of their understanding of the design phenomenon are found in from the conceptualisation of design itself. Although they review its whole standard history, design is only considered in the perspective of art and therefore it appears to have the original sin of being a functional, ordinary, democratic and instrumental activity. It can seldom seek a true

---

12. 1973 Ettore Sottsass interviewed in Jordi Mañà: *El diseño industrial*, Barcelona, Salvat, pp.17-19

aesthetic dimension and so it has to remain among the pleasant and pretty levels of simple culture and life. Design therefore still remains under suspicion.<sup>13</sup>

Some more words on the aristocratic and puritan background of the orthodox idea of aesthetics based on art and artistic practices. It is representative of the early modern period in art history, and so it was inherited by 20th century cultural isms. In that case, the democratisation of aesthetic values and practices, that is, their wide spread across society, ethnographic cultures and geographic places, is what actually causes their final demise. The authors state that plainly: “The more the aesthetic dimension spreads, the more it appears to be a simple pastime, an accessory with no other end than to amuse, to decorate, to make ordinary life more sensual: the triumph of the futile and the superfluous” (2013: pp.33-34). The main challenge for design and other aesthetic practices involved in creative industries is now openly launched. But are decoration, sensualisation and the superfluous the only purposes that everyday aesthetics can look to and aim for? To reach those purposes, when and why could it be a bad thing? There is a trap that must be absolutely avoided if we are aiming to develop an aesthetic thinking adapted and suited to design.

The question to raise is quite the opposite: the true job is to realise and discover the depth of meaning that common and modest things actually have just because they are pretty, friendly and kind. Indeed, a discreet and quiet beauty is also important and it helps make life better. There are no reasons for things to be ugly, corny tacky or banal; the subjectivity of personal tastes is no longer a reason. This is what 18th century philosophers already knew and tried to explain while understanding themselves and their common and simple tastes too. Another challenge arises now. It is worth remembering that modern aesthetics and early fine arts aware of their autonomy, when they were born during the 18th century, tried to overcome the canons of beauty so well established at that time and replace them with a search for the sublime. It was through sublime works that art connected with everlasting meanings and could transfigure to become an artwork. In contrast, beauty, this nearby beauty to be discovered in gardens instead of wild nature, in hills instead of mountains, in woods instead of the jungle, looked like something close, domestic, attainable, even habitable. It must be acknowledged that comfort has never been an epic or virile value, which are among the aesthetic categories best rated by arts, whether painting, opera, literature or videogames, even when involving the *artialisation* of cruelty and violence of men towards other men. On the other hand, many languages use the word “effeminate” to dismiss artworks whatever their style. French moralists of the 17<sup>th</sup> century used this category to warn against terrible dangers that the arrival of women to the Court could bring about, causing a loss of military values. The rejection of all the comfortable and pleasant situations common life provides, rejecting even the possibility of enriching them by human design and making skills, therefore reveals a nostalgia for aristocratic culture and a lost world which is easy to find embedded in many apologies for the humanities. It is an approach that often hinders the understanding of present times. It is based on the premise that cultural practices and aesthetic decisions must always be for the sake of culture or arts. Here is an example:

13. “*Et les esthétiques marchandes n’ont nullement l’ambition de nous faire toucher un absolu en rupture avec la vie quotidienne (...) C’est une esthétique de consommation et de divertissement dont il s’agit*” (Lipovetsky & Serroy 2013: 33). ‘*Comme il est rigolo!*’ a French student once said to me, to explain that they liked a piece of design that was nicely made but very cruel in spirit and meaning.

Trans-aesthetic society has nothing sacred or noble in it; it is just another step in the progress of the merchant and democratic age which, by deregulating class culture, leads to the individualisation of taste along with an aesthetic ethics of consumption. [*Ibid.*]

However, some nostalgia for a better common life does also appear along the book. Their aesthetic model is quite similar to that of British 18th century more idealist philosophers such as Georges Berkeley. Lipovetsky and Sarroy, in their introductory statements, display their own ideal of everyday pleasures. It is in fact a picture of that “slow culture” that is so fashionable now, or the image of a simple life that 19<sup>th</sup> century British thinkers liked to remember. Indeed, they do not discuss the present aestheticisation:

...in the name of an ascetic aesthetic revisited but on behalf of a higher aesthetic ideal that intends to serve the wealth of individual existence, an ideal which favours sensations of the self and the world. Refocusing on the internal time and emotions of the moment, the unexpected availability and the lived moment, enjoying beauties at hand, the luxury of slowness and contemplation. [*Ibid.*]

This is a truly simple aesthetic life. Recently, a Catalan thinker opened another path to work with. Speaking about home and its reassuring meanings for people, he valued private and domestic experiences, stating a highly suggestive argument: “To experience home not only as a shelter against the cold weather, but as a refuge where one feels protected against the frosty ambiance of metaphysics” (Esquirol 2013: p.12). They are just words, but he is also right.

Current aesthetics-specific issues are the topic of the last chapters of Lipovetsky and Sarroy’s book. Their central theme is the ‘trans-aesthetics’ dynamic. At the beginning, this current, or rather postmodernist, trans-aesthetics is presented as a way of consuming, simply a set of consumer preferences. Afterwards, they emphasise several new dichotomies portraying an aesthetic reasoning that actually moves people within their social, cultural and physical environment. The book is decidedly too long to be treated in detail here. There are however some interesting theses to mention. The first one is the essential paradox based upon which present economy and social behaviour takes place. The aestheticisation of the world displays the success and the failure of highly developed capitalism: “We always consume more beauties, but our life is not more beautiful” (2013: pp.32, 33). Therein the authors are totally right. The ‘real world’ so praised by designer Victor Papanek (1971) is full of ugly and distasteful, nasty things; they are even more nasty and shoddy than they were in William Morris’ time. So, for the authors, beauty can no longer save the world. But this is exactly the opposite thesis of the one that Italian designers Sottsass and Mendini, worldwide gurus of postmodern design, have been stating. They favour a hope in design because “only beauty can save us” and “underlying design there is always ‘la utopia della bellezza’”.<sup>14</sup> But now, the difficulty, and the most exciting challenge, depends on the fact that

---

14. Ettore Sottsass: “*Si algo nos salvará, será la belleza*”. Ettore Sottsass, obituari *El País*, 3.01.2008; Alessandro Mendini’s speech at the homage he received at *adi fad* during the event *Mestres de la Cadena del FAD*, Barcelona 14.12.15: I have attempted to develop this issue of the utopia embedded in beauty in an article to be published by the *THRAD* on-line magazine in an issue on utopia and design.

“*Il n’y a pas un seul model d’esthétique...*” [“There is not a single model of aesthetics...”] (2013: p.35).

This is the main issue at stake at present. Are there true differences between the ways of behaving, making, enjoying and living from an aesthetic point of view? Are they meaningful? They might be, insofar as extreme individualisation could impose it because everyone has to reinvent him/herself. If there are differences, then design aesthetics makes sense to study and appreciate those differences and note how many varied levels of quality are inherent to each.

### **It is time to conclude. What might ‘culturally relevant’ mean for aesthetics at present?**

Design aesthetics is finally being acknowledged as a specific field of inquiry. It has significantly grown in recent decades. We can conclude that it is what postmodernism left as its legacy to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the new era starting afterwards. As said, for research, a notable area is the demise of all aesthetic canons, whether for beauty or ugliness or other aesthetic categories (corny, tawdry, nasty, cute, cool, trendy, tacky, yokel and so on). There is no longer a high culture model accepted just because it expresses the dominion of a social class through aesthetic competence and education. Talking in current French terms, postmodernism brought about the fall of legitimate cultures and the likelihood of no more undeniable reference models or “legitimate culture models”. In consequence, the present challenge for current design aesthetic thinking is to decide when and how aesthetic proposals can be culturally relevant because they are not and can no longer be a renewed expression of ancient, modern or eternal examples. As many design historians have been trying to elude since the 1950s, after the Pop approach to cultural history, the axiological notion of culturally relevant itself has been censured because it looks like an imposition of art history, a concept imported without being adapted to the real and specific nature of design activity and culture.

Judging design qualities and grasping the design factor’s cultural relevance needs to go beyond the comparison with the early-avant-garde artistic proposals that are so explicit in some design pieces. Pop historians contested the idea that the social role of design is to bridge high culture and mass consumption and to play a pedagogical role through which the mass public becomes familiar with the best art. Outside the art world, how could cultural relevance be understood? As already seen, academic philosophy and social sciences find it hard to approach common and ordinary aesthetic behaviour. Turning to Arendt’s thought again, her understanding of cultural relevance is strongly connected with fine arts’ nature because it is a value for explaining things in terms of everlasting power. There are some things able to outlive the people who made them and remain in existence a long time after their maker’s imagination could plan. It is a sort of transcendence, the effect of a transfiguration that certain pieces of art achieve. There should be an attempt for the focus not to fall too much on the side of educated culture, whether high culture or traditionally legitimate culture. So, as happened to Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Sarroy’s sociological schemes, Arendt too approaches popular culture from a rather classist schema. However, she opens the door to design and many other current creative activities (such as videogames, for example, which have so epic and virile narratives) to aspire to the status of artwork without having to become decorative art. We should also examine the thoughts taking



aesthetic enjoyment as the outcome of a humanly refined and developed human faculty. I have already mentioned Montaigne from the late Renaissance period, and some philosophers of the Enlightenment time as well; Plato's dialogues could also help. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, Arendt reinforced this view by drawing attention to how often aesthetic taste is active when living and moving around:

It's just a matter of taste, which never ceases to judge things of the world, to set limits and provide a human meaning to the realm of the culture. Or rather, something which means the same: its function is to make culture not barbarianism (...). Taste is the faculty through which culture humanises. [2014: p. 63]

The ghost of Jean Jacques Rousseau is also present in the background. Slavoj Žižek remembered Rousseau recently too. His "*amour de soi*" announced current self-hedonism. For Žižek, it reveals the sort of subjectivity that has formed modern times' ideology and mentality since Hegel gave them their former shape. A little bit later, Žižek remarks that processes of humanisation such as these ones are rather complex and require a lot of time and effort. For that reason they are involved in a word such as 'civilising' (Žižek 2014: p.149).<sup>15</sup>

These points of view do a great deal to accept the prosaic and humble pleasures provided by everyday life to a lot of people; it also helps to regain the old schema of modern aesthetics focused on former beauty, even if plain, neighbouring and restful, and to leave sublime and transcendent experiences just for the exceptional moments offered by arts experienced in the right places. Whether the expression of polished tradition over a long time, or revealing the latest interesting novelties, there is a profound truth in common and nearby objects of use and communication. This is so because, as Žižek remarked while talking about the beauty of handsome women, "there is more truth in appearance than what is hidden behind it" (2015: p. 82). What does everyday life hide that can be relevant to philosophical aesthetics? What kind of truth are we talking about? Another philosopher already quoted, Josep M. Esquirol, brings us an interesting portrait of everyday life and its possible aesthetic crannies. He wrote about a way of living quite similar to "slow" culture:

In daily work that is undertaken to earn a living, there is also the satisfaction of needs. Several daily acts are not mediations and are satisfied just for their own sake. Every day is consequently a path (it has a sense of direction) but also a meaning (a sense already present in life). To live enjoying life: delight in the world of food and drink, sex and entertainment.

Enjoying is therefore the way in which needs are satisfied: "and with this enjoyment, the symposium, the banquet, the joy shared can happen." We could say then that, he concludes, "there is a sense of life tied to the everyday." Human features do not need a higher, transcendent area to reveal themselves. They already do, and with the same strength, in everyday gestures. The author devoted a previous chapter to domestic houses looking at all the senses that make a house a home (Chapter III, 'Back at home'): "Home is always a symbol of restful intimacy" (2015: p.38-39). Esquirol's reasoning reminds me of one of William Morris' assertions that encouraged

---

15. Slavoj Zizek (2014) *Acontecimiento*, Madrid-Méjico, Sexto piso, 2015/2a.p.149

restfulness and calm as sensations worth designing for in things to put at home. Morris said that arguing against Ruskin's plea to employ fine painters as the only way to achieve aesthetic quality in home decoration. Morris refuted Ruskin, hinting to him that everyday life at home cannot support the deep and intense triggers that the contemplation of true and transcendent art demands. Strong emotions and experiences, intense games with sentiments and catharsis, all that must be experienced extraordinarily and have their own places to happen. In his praise of the everyday and its values of closeness, Esquirol goes ahead searching words that better describe the roots of the happiness of being at home: calm and restfulness are among these. They provide the physical and psychological conditions for rest:

...what prevails is the rest and shelter of privacy. Not so much comfort or luxury as withdrawing and welcoming. The house, both in its origin and as dreamt, is always a room not a construct, it is always a space, not walls. Rest and peace require protection; rest, to be rest, must be protected. The deep desire for peace explains the strength of a home (whether remembered, dreamed of or real) (...) The desire for protected privacy has roots that are so extensive, they escape us. In the basement, something important is revealed about the meaning of life. [2015: p.39]

What has provided a true and interesting aesthetic dimension to everyday things, even the useful and instrumental ones, to everybody everywhere and for so long ago? To explain it as simply as possible, three major roles of aesthetics in everyday life are widely accepted and proved. The aesthetic dimension of things works by displaying human beings' expression of: people's joy of living; people's pleasure in self-embellishment and the delights of games and playing, the 'ludic' experiences in short. All these aspects together mark the field of activity of the design factor, its duties and mission, as far as it does express them in designed objects. On the other hand, as said before, the performance of these roles involves a rating of quality and so they swing between the worst moral sin (to drink until drunk) and the most pleasant and delicate enjoyment (to drink a tasty wine or beer): Bernard de Mandeville said that for the first time at the turn of 18<sup>th</sup> century (*The Fable of the Bees*, 1714). To enjoy products obtained following a lot of science, effort, care, attention and cultivation demands a lot of civilisation to be accomplished. Therein lies the true cultural challenge and the utopia that the ancient concept of beauty entailed. In that way, designs can aspire to be part of and play a role in the inner dialogue human beings maintain to live. Two challenges now appear clearly outlined on the horizon: recovering the cultural value of everyday things to make the world ecologically sustainable and, on the other hand, designing with people instead of designing for people. Both are exciting challenges and could be inspiring requirements for designers in the near future.

Anna Calvera

## References

- Arendt, H. (2014). *Más allá de la filosofía. Escritos sobre cultura, arte y literatura* (Fina Birulés & Ángela Lorena Fuster eds.), Madrid: Trotta. (first edition 2012); *The Human Condition* (1958) Chicago, University of Chicago Press (on-line open access).

- Badiou, A. (2005). *Le siècle*. Paris: Seuil.
- Capdevila, C. (2015). *Entendre el món amb onze pensadors contemporanis* (H. Arendt; Z. Bauman; S. Benhabib; J. Butler; A. Heller; J. Gray; J. Rifkin; S. Sassen; R. Sennett; G. Steiner; A. Touraine & T. Todorov). Barcelona: Arcàdia.
- Devalle, V. (2009). *La travesía de la forma*. Buenos Aires: Paidós.
- Esquirol, J. M. (2015). *La resistència íntima: assaig d'una filosofia de la proximitat*. Barcelona: Quaderns Crema.
- Fabiani, J. L. (2007). *Après la culture légitime. Objets, publics, autorités*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Goodman, N. (1984/1<sup>st</sup>). *De la mente y otras materias*. Madrid: Visor1995.
- Hennion, A. (2005). Pour une pragmatique du goût. *Papiers de Recherche du CSI – CSI Working Papers Series*, (1). Paris: Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation. Available on-line open access.
- Mandoki, K. (2006). *Estética cotidiana y juegos de la cultura. Prosaica I; Prácticas Estéticas e identidades sociales. Prosaica II*. México: Siglo XXI editores [English translation by Ashgate, available on Google Chrome]
- McDonald, S. (coord.) (2004). *Temas del diseño en la Europa de hoy*. BEDA: Brussels. [www.bcd.es/site/unitFiles/1795/lbiro\\_beda.pdf](http://www.bcd.es/site/unitFiles/1795/lbiro_beda.pdf)
- Rubert de Ventós, X. (1972). *La estética y sus herejías*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Viladàs, X. (2008). *Diseño rentable* (pp. 161-162). Barcelona: Index Book.
- Povedano, R. (2005). *La batidora de braç*. Doctoral Dissertation, Anthropology Department, Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona.
- Zizek, S. (2014). *Acontecimiento*. Madrid-Méjico: Sexto piso, 2a.



## A construção social da visibilidade

Adriano Duarte Rodrigues

Universidade Nova de Lisboa

adrodrigues42@gmail.com

### Introdução

**F**ORMULEI, há cerca de trinta anos, uma proposta que tem diretamente a ver com o tema deste colóquio (Rodrigues 2001: 137-196). Entendia então que os media constituem um campo próprio e asseguram a visibilidade dos demais campos sociais, no quadro da experiência fragmentada moderna. Considerava que o campo dos media contribui para a mobilização do conjunto da sociedade por parte cada um dos outros campos, tendo em vista a inculcação, a preservação, o fortalecimento da sua ordem de valores própria e, no caso de essa ordem ter sido enfraquecida ou de algum modo posta em risco, o seu restabelecimento. Dava como exemplos de valores constitutivos de campos sociais a vida, a salvação, a defesa do território, a justiça, o poder, o saber. Falava de ordem de valores, porque em cada um dos campos assistimos à instituição de uma hierarquia de posições em função da maior ou menor proximidade com a situação limite em que está em jogo a existência do valor próprio desse campo.

Já me acusaram de não ter referido na minha proposta a teoria dos campos sociais de Pierre Bourdieu. A razão desta ausência reside no facto de eu utilizar o termo campo num sentido relativamente diferente. O termo campo na minha proposta tem um sentido análogo ao que tem na física, enquanto resultado ou efeito da relação criada pela tensão entre dois polos opostos. Parecia-me, por isso, um conceito adequado para sublinhar a natureza tensional que caracteriza a relação que se estabelece, tanto entre os componentes de cada campo, como dos diferentes campos entre si.

A manifestação desta natureza tensional da noção de campo social é particularmente clara, quando temos em conta a distinção que eu fazia na altura entre os seus dois regimes de funcionamento, entre o regime lento e o regime acelerado. Procurava, com esta distinção, dar conta de situações historicamente diferentes. Enquanto o regime acelerado de um campo corresponderia ao funcionamento que podemos observar por ocasião da ocorrência histórica de situações de crise da sua ordem específica de valores, o regime lento de funcionamento de um campo corresponderia ao que observamos fora desses momentos críticos. No primeiro caso, podemos observar a monopolização do campo dos media por parte do campo que tem por função a preservação da ordem de

---

A *Revista Estudos em Comunicação* é financiada por Fundos FEDER através do Programa Operacional Factores de Competitividade – COMPETE e por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia no âmbito do projeto *Comunicação, Filosofia e Humanidades (LabCom.IFP) UID/CCI/00661/2013*.



valores que se encontra em crise, aumentando nesse caso a visibilidade desse campo. No segundo caso, quando os valores de um campo são assegurados pelo seu funcionamento regular habitual, assistimos a uma espécie de gestão que o campo dos media faz do equilíbrio, sempre instável, dos níveis de visibilidade relativa que tem como função assegurar aos diferentes campos sociais.

Considerava então importante esta distinção. Por um lado, ela permite mostrar o contributo fundamental do campo dos media para a visibilidade dos diferentes campos sociais, a ponto de podermos considerar o campo dos media como o campo da visibilidade por excelência dos outros campos sociais. Por outro lado, ela dá conta da natureza problemática dos processos de negociação permanente que o campo dos media tem que estabelecer, de modo, não só a assegurar a visibilidade relativa dos outros campos, mas também a preservar a sua própria autonomia enquanto campo social. Assim, nos momentos em que um determinado valor corre o risco de ser violado ou posto em causa, o campo social que tem como objetivo a salvaguarda deste valor monopoliza em exclusivo o campo dos media para tornar visível o seu funcionamento, tendo em vista a mobilização dos outros campos sociais em torno da sua ordem de valores. Fora desses momentos, o campo dos media tende a compor com cada um dos outros campos a visibilidade relativa da ordem de valores de cada um, numa relação que podemos considerar de equilíbrio instável. Assim, por exemplo, por ocasião da ocorrência de uma epidemia ou de uma catástrofe natural, como, por exemplo, um terramoto ou um tsunami, assistimos a uma apropriação do campo dos media por parte do campo médico com vista a salvaguardar o valor da vida, tal como, por ocasião da invasão externa, é o campo militar que se apropria do campo dos media para mobilizar o conjunto dos outros campos em torno da preservação do valor da integridade nacional, ou, por ocasião de uma revolução, o campo dos media é apropriado por parte do campo político com vista à mobilização do conjunto dos outros campos em torno da preservação do valor do poder.

Gostaria agora de chamar a atenção para as principais questões a que o campo dos media confere particular visibilidade, nos seus momentos de funcionamento lento, nos momentos em que os valores dos outros campos não estão propriamente em crise. Nesses momentos, é sobretudo às questões fraturantes que o campo dos media confere visibilidade. Dou o nome de fraturantes às questões que, por um lado, se colocam em termos que categorizam referentes para os quais é impossível de determinar fronteiras precisas delimitadoras das categorias com que essas questões são referidas e que, por outro lado, põem em jogo valores que não são da competência exclusiva de nenhum campo social específico. É o caso, por exemplo, das questões suscitadas pela prática relacionadas com o aborto, em que está em jogo a impossibilidade de determinar uma fronteira precisa delimitadora da categoria da vida, por práticas relacionadas com a sexualidade, em que está em causa a impossibilidade de determinar de maneira precisa a fronteira entre as categorias do masculino e do feminino, ou pelas práticas de eutanásia, em que está em jogo a impossibilidade de determinar de maneira precisa a demarcação da fronteira entre as categorias da vida e da morte. É sobretudo acerca de questões desta natureza que o campo dos media constitui o ambiente em que os diferentes campos se encontram e interagem, tendo em vista o confronto das diferentes categorizações propostas por cada um dos campos, assim como a luta de cada um pela apropriação da definição e da gestão dos valores que estas questões põem em causa.

Não vou evidentemente explicitar aqui os diferentes aspetos da minha proposta, porque são amplamente conhecidos pelos que têm seguido o meu percurso. Sinto, no entanto, necessidade

de fazer algumas reformulações, não só por uma razão de oportunidade prática, mas também por razões de ordem teórica.

A oportunidade prática tem a ver com o facto de este momento me parecer particularmente adequado para clarificar aspetos que não costumam ser bem entendidos. As razões teóricas decorrem do facto de ser obrigado hoje a tirar algumas consequências da revisão a que tenho vindo a proceder, desde os anos 90, tanto da noção de comunicação, a partir da pragmática, como da noção de campo dos media, a partir da antropologia. Vou começar por esclarecer estas duas noções, para depois tentar mostrar as suas consequências, tanto para o entendimento da minha proposta, como para a abordagem da questão da visibilidade que é o tema que nos ocupa neste colóquio. Se as minhas propostas se situam hoje claramente na contramão de muitas das concepções que costumam ser aceites sem discussão na nossa área de estudos, diria, como Galileu em 1632, falando da rotação da Terra em volta do Sol: “Eppur si muove”.

### **A natureza antropológica dos media**

Começarei por clarificar a visão dos media que decorre da perspectiva antropológica a que, apesar de já nos anos 80 estar presente na minha proposta, tenho vindo a reconhecer maior relevância e centralidade. Esta clarificação é necessária para desfazer um equívoco muito frequente nos estudos de comunicação, equívoco que consiste em confundir os media com as organizações empresariais, públicas ou privadas, que controlam os jornais, as rádios, as televisões e mais recentemente as redes sociais. A fixação, eu diria até obsessão, dos estudiosos da comunicação pelo funcionamento destas empresas tem, como consequências, não só o esquecimento da especificidade da natureza técnica dos media mas sobretudo a adoção de perspectivas anacrónicas. Esta obsessão provoca o esquecimento de que os media não são empresas nem grupos económicos, mas dispositivos técnicos que asseguram a interação entre as pessoas, independentemente do lugar e do momento em que ela ocorre, dispositivos de que depende ao fim e ao cabo a própria sobrevivência da nossa espécie. Essa obsessão tem efeitos anacrónicos porque impede de ver que a invenção dos media não ocorreu do nosso tempo, mas é tão antiga como a história da nossa espécie.

A obsessão pela confusão dos media com o jornalismo, a televisão e mais recentemente as redes sociais tem, no entanto, um resultado ainda mais importante, o esquecimento de que o primeiro medium é a linguagem, o dispositivo que a nossa espécie teve desde sempre que inventar para poder constituir o mundo ou o ambiente humanamente possível, em que as pessoas se encontram e interagem. Se pararmos para pensar verificamos que só nos recordamos daquilo que ocorreu depois de termos começado a falar, que é só no ambiente criado pela linguagem que acedemos à consciência e que podemos, por conseguinte, considerar a visibilidade humanamente possível do mundo. Os nossos olhos podem provavelmente ver o espectro contínuo do arco-íris, mas é só dos elementos discretos que o sistema da língua recorta nesse espectro que temos consciência, que vemos efetivamente. Os olhos dos esquimós veem provavelmente a mesma neve que nós, mas dão-se conta de muitos fenómenos distintos, para eles inconfundíveis, que nós não vemos de facto porque os agrupamos numa única categoria a que damos o nome de neve. Os falantes de português brasileiro ouvem provavelmente os mesmos sons que os portugueses, mas as vogais mudas que nós pronunciamos são para eles inaudíveis. Os romanos viam certamente as mesmas cores

que nós, mas para eles era invisível a diferença entre o azul e o verde. Os tradutores conhecem bem a impossibilidade de tornar visível aquilo que, no entanto, é evidente na língua original que se esforçam por traduzir.

Uma das desastrosas consequências do esquecimento por parte dos estudiosos da comunicação de que o primeiro e fundamental medium é a linguagem, é o facto de serem levados a inverter a relação da linguagem com os outros media. São levados a pensar que são os dispositivos técnicos mediáticos que produzem a linguagem quando na realidade é precisamente o contrário: são os outros media que realizam tecnicamente ou exteriorizam as diferentes componentes da linguagem. Muitos estudiosos sobre a comunicação, tal como eu próprio durante muito tempo, chegam ao absurdo de falar de discurso dos media, quando, bem vistas as coisas, aquilo que todos os outros media fazem não é mais do que a exteriorização de algumas das componentes do medium da linguagem. Como vemos, quando partimos desta inversão do sentido da relação da linguagem com os outros media, o que estamos a estudar, não são os media, mas questões que decorrem de agendas, quase sempre implícitas, sem sequer nos darmos conta da nossa inevitável dependência do medium da linguagem para podermos formular essas questões.

Para melhor fazer entender a nossa dependência da linguagem vou elencar alguns factos, tanto mais esquecidos quanto mais evidentes. Já referi a relação direta entre a emergência da consciência e o acesso à linguagem e é, por isso, que o estudo os media deveria começar por focar o processo a que alguns antropólogos e sociólogos dão o nome de socialização primária (Berger & Tuchman 1992: 177 e ss.). É durante a primeira infância que interiorizamos o domínio de todos os media possíveis, com a interiorização da língua materna. Deveríamos tomar a sério o facto de as crianças do nosso tempo saberem perfeitamente manipular uma tablete ou um computador desde a mais tenra idade ou, para ser ainda mais preciso, desde que começam a falar. Sem as resistências à mudança das pessoas mais velhas, derivadas dos preconceitos tecnofóbicos da cultura que nós fomos adquirindo ao longo da vida, o que as crianças mostram é que os dispositivos técnicos que encontram à sua volta, logo que adquirem o domínio da língua materna, não são mais do que exteriorizações de componentes do medium da linguagem de que possuem o domínio.

A interiorização dos media ao longo da socialização primária tem a ver com o facto de os seres humanos nascerem em estado fetal. À nascença, os seres humanos perdem a memória do funcionamento dos seus dispositivos naturais, durante um processo que começa antes do nascimento e que se prolonga ainda durante algumas horas depois do nascimento. É deste esquecimento que decorre a total dependência dos seres humanos da interiorização dos media, desta modalidade específica de tecnicidade que tem a particularidade de ser interiorizada no organismo e de, por isso, não nos darmos conta do seu funcionamento. Podemos dizer com propriedade que os media são os dispositivos técnicos que nos permitem adotar os comportamentos apropriados a cada circunstância e, no entanto, só os podemos adotar se e enquanto não nos dermos conta de que os adotamos.

Como estamos a ver, os media não surgiram no nosso tempo; são tão antigos como a nossa espécie, visto ser deles que depende, não só a nossa sobrevivência, mas também a possibilidade de a nossa espécie povoar todo o planeta. Enquanto as outras espécies estão habilitadas a sobreviver num território concreto, a nossa espécie não vem ao mundo habilitada a sobreviver em nenhum território concreto, mas tem que inventar o seu próprio ambiente. A função dos media é constituir



os ambientes em que coletivamente decidimos viver. É por isso que sou levado a desconfiar de que a tendência a criticar sistematicamente os media é um sintoma da dificuldade de os seres humanos aceitarem a sua condição específica. Gilbert Simondon falava de uma espécie de doença da nossa espécie, a tecnofobia, que consiste na dificuldade de aceitar que os media são a face técnica da cultura que tem que inventar para sobreviver (Simondon 1989). Eu diria que esta tecnofobia é reflexo de um mito, de uma espécie de nostalgia do paraíso perdido da visibilidade imediata do mundo, que muito provavelmente nunca terá existido.

Os diferentes media decorrem, por conseguinte, de um processo histórico sociogenético que tem vindo a explorar ou a exteriorizar tecnicamente as diferentes componentes do medium da linguagem. O que é a escrita se não a exploração da componente verbal da linguagem, a partir da invenção da técnica que permite fixar graficamente a estrutura digital ou binária do sistema fonémico? É um grave anacronismo, que podemos ler em muitos estudos de comunicação, o de pensar que o digital é uma invenção do nosso tempo. Para ter sido possível inventar a escrita alfabética, os nossos antepassados tiveram que descobrir, há mais de cinco mil anos, a natureza digital do próprio sistema fonémico da língua, um processo racional de observação e estruturação da linguagem, decorrente da sua análise meramente formal, processo eminentemente característico da experiência moderna.

Para evitar eventuais equívocos, permitam que esclareça que, quando falo do medium da linguagem não me estou de maneira nenhuma a referir às palavras que proferimos quando falamos nem às regras sintáticas que regulam o seu agenciamento em frases. Esta é uma visão redutora muito frequente da linguagem. Estou-me a referir ao dispositivo que interiorizamos na primeira infância e que nos habilita a adotar os comportamentos interacionais apropriados às diversas circunstâncias em que nos podemos encontrar ao longo da vida, comportamentos que consistem na produção de enunciados. O medium da linguagem é este dispositivo interiorizado que nos habilita a produzir, não frases ou proposições, mas enunciados, isto é, comportamentos discursivos apropriados a cada uma das situações interacionais da nossa vida. Se observarem com atenção o que se passa com as crianças, poderão verificar que, antes de começarem propriamente a falar, começam a gesticular e a adotar comportamentos cada vez mais parecidos com o que as pessoas adotam quando falam entre si. É hoje praticamente consensual considerar que a interiorização da língua materna acompanha a interiorização da mímica e da gestualidade adequadas à atividade enunciativa, se é que não é mesmo precedida por essa interiorização.

Do dispositivo da linguagem faz, por conseguinte, parte inseparável todo o conjunto de manifestações apropriadas que se manifestam, não só nas palavras que utilizamos, mas também nos gestos, na mímica e inclusivamente nos silenciamentos que adotamos sequencialmente ao longo das interações sociais em que nos envolvemos. Mas nem sequer é ao conjunto desta materialidade que dou o nome de linguagem. É ao processo que nos leva a utilizar os recursos da linguagem de maneira apropriada em cada um dos ambientes em que reconhecemos mútua e reciprocamente a presença de outras pessoas como parceiros de troca da palavra. Já estamos a ver que é neste sentido que a linguagem é o dispositivo ou o medium que constitui o ambiente de toda a visibilidade humanamente possível, visibilidade que é indissociável de toda a experiência humanamente possível do mundo.

Poderão alguns leitores atentos deste meu texto, perguntar como posso então estabelecer uma estreita relação entre a constituição do campo dos media com a experiência moderna, uma vez que faço remontar ao princípio da humanidade o aparecimento dos media. Se a linguagem é o medium por excelência de constituição do nosso mundo como é possível que a sua invenção decorra da experiência moderna? Esta pergunta pressupõe uma leitura equivocada da proposta que eu fazia nos anos 80. Quando falava da relação do campo dos media com a experiência moderna não me estava de maneira nenhuma a referir a uma época histórica concreta, em particular à época a que os historiadores se habituaram a dar o nome de moderna. Estava-me a referir à experiência moderna, a uma modalidade específica de racionalidade que pode ser observada no comportamento das pessoas em qualquer época e em qualquer sociedade.

O que caracteriza a experiência moderna é o processo de ruptura para com a racionalidade tradicional, ruptura que podemos encontrar em todas as épocas e em todas as sociedades. Esta ruptura é de fato indispensável para que ocorra a invenção de uma modalidade específica de técnica materializada nos objetos técnicos a que damos o nome de dispositivos técnicos ou de media. Não admira que os autores que confundem a experiência moderna com a época moderna sejam também os que associam os supostos novos media com o advento da pós-modernidade e que pensam que este processo é característico do nosso tempo. A minha demarcação em relação a estas leituras corresponde a um gesto de denúncia da sua natureza anacrónica, redutora e etnocêntrica. Os exemplos que já, nos anos 80, dava dos momentos de modernidade recuados da história e o que acabei de dizer acerca da invenção da escrita dispensam-me agora de me alongar mais sobre esta questão.

### **A natureza pragmática da comunicação**

Sobre a fundamentação antropológica do campo dos media creio que disse o suficiente. Vou agora proceder à reformulação da noção comunicação. Esta reformulação tem a ver com a minha demarcação, tanto em relação à visão idealista, como em relação à visão materialista, que continuam a contaminar negativamente muitos estudos sobre a comunicação. Ambas estas visões são reféns de uma concepção essencialista ou reificada, patente no uso das metáforas da transmissão, da partilha, da mensagem e do conteúdo, metáforas que costumamos encontrar em muitos trabalhos da nossa área. Idêntica demarcação pode ser encontrada, por exemplo, nas críticas que Dan Sperber e Deirdre Wilson também fazem a estas metáforas (Sperber & Wilson 1989).

As razões que me levaram, primeiro a desconfiar e, depois, a me demarcar claramente da utilização destas metáforas têm a ver com o facto de ignorarem que a comunicação não é um objeto, mas uma atividade social ou, se preferirem, um encadeamento de comportamentos sociais, comportamentos realizados por dois ou mais seres humanos que se encontram num determinado ambiente constituído por um medium e que se reconhecem mútua e reciprocamente como parceiros de troca simbólica. É a esta reformulação que dou o nome de concepção pragmática da comunicação.

Se observarmos atentamente o que se passa quando as pessoas interagem entre si, quer face a face quer em ambientes tecnicamente constituídos, podemos facilmente dar-nos conta de que a comunicação não é nenhuma transmissão nem nenhuma partilha de mensagens nem de conteú-

dos. Quando interagimos uns com os outros não transmitimos ideias, sentimentos ou histórias; o que fazemos é adotar comportamentos que produzem enunciados que levam as outras pessoas a inferir as ideias, os sentimentos ou as histórias que provavelmente lhes pretendemos comunicar. A atividade discursiva é, por conseguinte, a atividade que habitualmente adotamos para levar as outras pessoas a inferirem o que lhes pretendemos comunicar. Os enunciados que produzimos não são recipientes que contêm as nossas ideias nem os nossos sentimentos nem as histórias que comunicamos. As nossas ideias, os nossos sentimentos e as histórias que enunciamos não saem da nossa mente, tal como as ideias, os sentimentos e as histórias que as pessoas compreendem não são os nossos, mas os que as pessoas com quem interagimos concebem, a partir da interpretação dos enunciados que produzimos quando interagimos com elas. Se transmitíssemos ao nosso dentista a dor de dentes que lhe comunicamos, então o dentista teria que passar a sentir a nossa dor de dentes. Se observarmos com atenção o que se passa, depressa nos damos conta do absurdo que é falar da comunicação como transmissão de mensagens ou de análise de conteúdo dos discursos.

Não tenho aqui tempo para aprofundar todos os aspetos que decorrem da natureza pragmática da comunicação. Gostaria, no entanto, de retirar dela algumas consequências para o equacionamento das questões colocadas pela temática do nosso colóquio. A mais importante tem a ver com o facto de a visibilidade ser inevitavelmente o resultado do trabalho de construção dos referentes das materialidades utilizadas na atividade comunicacional, trabalho que é realizado pelas pessoas que se reconhecem como parceiros de interação e que estão presentes no ambiente constituído por um determinado medium.

O trabalho de construção da referência é inevitável qualquer que seja o ambiente em que ocorra a atividade comunicacional. Nas interações face a face, a visibilidade das pessoas, dos acontecimentos e das coisas resulta desse trabalho realizado em conjunto por todos quantos tomam parte na atividade comunicativa. Reparemos que a visibilidade dos referentes é independente da existência real dos objetos referidos. É do trabalho de construção em comum dos referentes dos enunciados, e não da sua existência real, que decorre a sua objetivação. É muito importante ter presente que os referentes dos enunciados não são objetivos, mas que se tornam objetivos pelo facto de resultarem do trabalho de objetivação realizado em conjunto por todos quantos tomam parte na atividade comunicativa. Na minha mente, as ideias e os sentimentos são inevitavelmente subjetivos; tornam-se objetivos a partir do processo de objetivação levada a cabo pelo trabalho de referência de cada vez que os enuncio, em conjunto com todos quantos encontro num determinado ambiente criado por um medium.

Vejam os em que consiste a relação do trabalho de elaboração da referência dos enunciados com a sua visibilidade. Se alguém me perguntar onde é que eu estava quando redigi este texto, posso dizer, entre outras coisas, que estava diante de uma foto dos meus filhos, sentado à minha secretária, na minha sala, em casa, em Lisboa, em Portugal, na Europa. Todas estas respostas podem ser verdadeiras ao mesmo tempo. Mas será que posso mesmo dar sempre qualquer destas respostas? É claro que não. Depende daquilo que eu considero relevante para aquilo que está em jogo para a relação com a pessoa que me faz a pergunta e no local em que ela está no momento em que me faz a pergunta. Se a pessoa que me colocou a pergunta for, por exemplo, o meu vizinho que encontro todos os dias de manhã quando vou ao ginásio, será muito estranho que lhe responda, por exemplo, que estava na Europa ou em Portugal. Mas se a pergunta me for colocada por um colega

brasileiro que encontro no ambiente do Skype e que sabe que eu costumo viajar regularmente, poderá aceitável dizer que estava em Portugal. Como podemos ver por exemplos tão simples como este, a visibilidade é o resultado de um trabalho social, realizado em comum por todos quantos tomam parte na atividade comunicativa.

Gostaria agora de mencionar um dos mais notáveis dispositivos que as pessoas utilizam para construir a referência dos enunciados. Harvey Sacks designou-os como dispositivos de categorização de membro (DCM) (Sacks 1992). Para ilustrar este fenómeno, Sacks dava como exemplo o que acontece quando estamos com alguém e encontramos uma pessoa nossa conhecida que queremos apresentar à pessoa que está conosco. Não vamos evidentemente relatar em pormenor todos os elementos de identificação e do curriculum vitae dessa pessoa. Como vamos então escolher de entre as diversas maneiras de a apresentar? Imaginemos que se trata de um jovem, André, que mora no meu prédio, namorado da Filipa, estudante de comunicação, natural da Covilhã, jogador de Râguebi, membro de um clube desportivo, filiado num determinado partido político, que tem como hobby a pintura, etc. Será que posso referir todas estas categorias na apresentação do meu amigo. Se o fizer, a pessoa a quem a apresento deverá certamente achar muito estranho o meu comportamento e não deixará de se interrogar acerca da razão que me levou a adotá-lo. O que o meu interlocutor espera é que eu escolha uma categoria que seja relevante para a relação que tem comigo e com a que eu espero que ele tenha com a pessoa a quem estou a apresentar o meu amigo.

Os processos de constituição da referência dos enunciados e a mobilização dos dispositivos de categorização são constitutivos daquilo a que dei o nome de objetivação. Nunca é demais insistir, sobretudo perante estudiosos da comunicação, no facto de que a objetividade não se contrapõe à mentira ou à falsidade, mas à subjetividade, isto é, ao que Henri Bergson e depois Alfred Schutz davam o nome de fluxo da experiência. Estamos mergulhados no fluxo da experiência subjetiva em permanência; é ele que nos arrasta do passado para o futuro, mas não nos damos conta desse fluxo, só podemos tornar visíveis ou referir componentes que recortamos no presente através do processo de objetivação, falando dele, enunciando-o. (Schutz 1967). Nunca nos devemos por isso esquecer de que a objetividade é o resultado do trabalho de elaboração da referência levado a cabo por todos os que participam na atividade comunicativa. Neste sentido, mesmo enunciados mentirosos resultam de um trabalho de objetivação daquilo a que se referem. Reparemos que os enunciados poéticos, que se referem, por exemplo, a sereias, a lobisomens ou a entidades imaginárias, são tão objetivos como os que se referem a um terramoto ou à identidade profissional da pessoa que eu encontro. A objetividade não existe, por conseguinte, para os seres humanos fora da linguagem que utilizam para referir pessoas, coisas ou acontecimentos, no quadro das interações que estabelecem uns com os outros num determinado ambiente criado por um medium. Quando vamos ao cinema, entramos no ambiente criado pelo medium cinematográfico, no qual aceitamos interagir com o cineasta que objetivou as cenas que nos são dadas a ver; dessa interação decorre a objetivação de personagens, de coisas e de acontecimentos com as quais interagimos, apesar de, quando saímos da sala de cinema, não esperarmos evidentemente os reencontrar no mundo a regressamos.

## Conclusão

Vou agora tentar resumir e sistematizar as consequências que o entendimento antropológico dos media e a perspectiva pragmática da comunicação têm para a clarificação da proposta que fazia nos anos 80 assim como para o equacionamento da temática da visibilidade que nos ocupa particularmente neste colóquio. Estes dois aspetos estão interligados.

A primeira consequência parece-me óbvia; consiste em recusar a ideia muito frequente de que é, no nosso tempo, que a visibilidade se torna mediática. A visibilidade foi desde sempre mediática, porque só nos damos conta de que vemos aquilo que decorre do trabalho de referência dos enunciados que elaboramos em conjunto no ambiente criado pelos media e, antes de mais, pelo medium da linguagem. Creio que ficou claro que os seres humanos estão completamente dependentes da constituição mediática do seu ambiente ou do seu mundo. Da multiplicidade de dispositivos mediáticos constitutivos do ambiente em que ocorre a atividade comunicacional decorre a heterogeneidade das modalidades de objetivação e, por conseguinte, da visibilidade. Quando alguns estudiosos da comunicação enfatizam a visibilidade provocada pela televisão ou pelas redes sociais tendem a esquecer ou, pelo menos, a subalternizar outras formas de visibilidade noutros ambientes e, deste modo, esquecem-se de que também as outras formas de visibilidade decorrem do trabalho realizado em comum pelas pessoas ao mobilizarem outros dispositivos para construírem o seu mundo comum.

A natureza da visibilidade das coisas, dos acontecimentos e das pessoas que reconhecemos no ambiente face a face é inevitavelmente diferente da que as pessoas têm no ambiente constituído pela escrita, pelo telefone, pela radiodifusão, pelas redes sociais. Antes de mais, porque a visibilidade construída nas interações face a face não desaparece com nem é substituída pelas outras formas de visibilidade. Ao contrário do que muitas vezes se diz, nos ambientes criados por dispositivos diferentes dos ambientes face a face a visibilidade é da ordem da *representação*, não do conjunto das componentes da experiência objetivada, mas apenas de algumas das que estão presentes na comunicação face a face. Tal como muito bem Platão já no *Fedro* mostrava, ao comparar a relação entre a escrita e a fala com a relação entre as coisas e a pintura, cada um dos dispositivos técnicos mediáticos só pode representar as componentes que seleciona.

Pelo facto de os diferentes media tornarem visíveis representações das componentes da linguagem não são as pessoa ou os objetos ou os acontecimentos que são visíveis nos ambientes constituídos pela escrita, pelo telefone, pela rádio, pela televisão ou pela internet; é a antes a representação técnica da sua voz, dos seus gestos, da sua mímica, da sua aparência que é visível nesses ambientes. Podemos, por isso, considerar que quanto mais as invenções técnicas procuram aproximar a comunicação constituída nesses ambientes da comunicação face a face mais se cava o fosso entre a natureza da visibilidade no ambiente face a face e a sua representação tecnicamente mediatizada.

Esta natureza paradoxal da visibilidade mediática tem como consequência a crítica dos que pensam que a visibilidade mediática está a sobrepor-se à ou a substituir as outras formas de visibilidade e que no nosso tempo só existiria aquilo que está representado nos ambientes constituídos pelos dispositivos técnicos. É um juízo apressado contrariado pela simples observação dos fenómenos comunicacionais da vida quotidiana e que confunde as eventuais manifestações patológicas

autistas com os comportamentos habituais. A representação no ambiente televisivo ou nas redes sociais tem certamente muita importância tanto para as interações que se realizam nesse ambiente como para a sua relação com outros campos sociais, mas não esgota de maneira nenhuma a importância da presença face a face constituída pelo medium da linguagem nas diferentes situações da vida.

Os estudos que reduzem a visibilidade das pessoas, das coisas e dos acontecimentos à sua representação técnica partem de pressupostos equivocados e, no mínimo, redutores que decorrem daquilo a que dou o nome de “efeito raposa”. La Fontaine, com toda a clarividência que lhe reconhecemos, escreveu uma fábula a que deu o nome “A raposa e as galinhas da Índia” e que termina com a seguinte sentença:

Demasiada atenção prestada ao perigo  
Faz com que acabemos por nele cair.

É este efeito, a que dou o nome de “efeito raposa”, que reconheço em muitos estudos que centram de tal modo a sua atenção nos discursos da imprensa, da radiodifusão e das redes sociais que acabam por nos fazer crer que, no nosso tempo, é apenas nestes ambientes que as pessoas têm visibilidade. Curiosamente são também estes mesmos estudos que habitualmente consideram que toda a história da humanidade foi como que absorvida ou engolida por estes dispositivos e que, por isso, todos nós teríamos entrado numa espécie de limbo, armazenados na dispensa da raposa pós moderna. Mais: uma vez armazenados na dispensa dos ambientes criados por estes media, teríamos ficado libertos de qualquer compromisso, da obrigação de construirmos em conjunto localmente o nosso mundo comum.

Quais são então as consequências para a proposta que elaborei nos anos 80 acerca do campo dos media A consequência mais importante é o fato de ter vindo a desviar o meu olhar para o fixar cada vez mais na maneira como as pessoas mobilizam, no decurso da sua vida quotidiana, os dispositivos interacionais de que são dotadas. Ao longo destas últimas décadas aquilo que entendi por campo dos media tem vindo a dissolver-se ou a mergulhar naquilo que poderia hoje designar como o domínio das interações que as pessoas estabelecem entre si no quadro da vida quotidiana. É nesses fenómenos aparentemente banais que tenho vindo a descobrir, ao mesmo tempo, a fonte e as componentes da vida social e da lógica tensional que reconhecia já nos anos 80 ao funcionamento dos campos sociais. Tenho dedicado cada vez mais atenção à lógica que regula esses fenómenos, revisitando os clássicos do pensamento sociológico. As obras que continuam a oferecer os fundamentos sociológicos para a identificação desta lógica ambivalente e tensional continuam ainda hoje a ser *As Formas Elementares da Vida Religiosa* que Emile Durkheim publicou em 1927 e o *Ensaio sobre a Dádiva*, publicado em 1923 e 1924, em *Année Sociologique*, por Marcel Mauss.

### Referências bibliográficas

Berger, P. & Luckman, T. (1992). *La construction sociale de la réalité*. Paris: Méridiens – Kincksick.

- Bergson, H. (2007). *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*. Paris: PUF, Quadrige (original: 1927).
- Durkheim, E. (1991). *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le système totémique en Australie*. Paris: Librairie Générale Française, Le Livre de Poche (original: 1912).
- Mauss, M. (1995). *Essai sur le Don. Sociologie et Anthropologie*. Paris: PUF, Quadrige (original: 1923-1924).
- Rodrigues, A. D. (2001). *Estratégias da comunicação*. Lisboa: ed. Presença, 3ª edição.
- Sacks, H. (1992). *Lectures on conversation*, vol. 1. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Schutz, A. (1967). *The phenomenology of the social world*. Northwestern University Press.
- Simondon, G. (1989). *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*. Paris: Aubier.
- Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. (1989). *La pertinence. Communication et cognition*. Paris: Minuit.





## Visibilidade e Legitimidade na Atual Ecologia Midiática

Eugenia Maria Mariano da Rocha Barichello

*Universidade Federal de Santa Maria*

eugeniabarichello@gmail.com

### Resumo

Minha investigação tem como pressuposto o fato de que as tecnologias de informação e comunicação e seus usos sociais têm alterado as possibilidades de ver e de ser visto, de interagir à distância, de representar e identificar o real, fenômenos que repercutem nos processos de institucionalização e obtenção de legitimidade das práticas sociais, incluindo as do próprio campo midiático. As noções de visibilidade e legitimidade de atores individuais e coletivos (comunidades, organizações) despertaram meu inte-

resse há mais de uma década. Essas noções têm uso corrente em outros campos do saber, como a sociologia, a filosofia e a antropologia, e as considero pertinentes para estudar aspectos fundamentais das práticas e ambiências comunicativas contemporâneas. As relações entre indivíduos, instituições e organizações, tanto no contexto macro como em práticas em nível mais localizado, podem encontrar um respaldo teórico importante nos pensadores da teoria, reconhecida mundialmente, como Media Ecology.

Keywords: visibilidade midiática; visibilidade e legitimidade; ecologia midiática.

### Abstract

My research has as a presupposition the fact that information and communication technologies and their social uses have altered the possibilities of seeing and being seen, of interacting at a distance, of representing and identifying the real, phenomena that have repercussions on the processes of institutionalization and Legitimacy of social practices, including those of the media field itself. The notions of visibility and legitimacy of individual and collective actors (communities, organizations) have

aroused my interest for more than a decade. These notions are commonly used in other fields of knowledge, such as sociology, philosophy, and anthropology, and I consider them relevant to study fundamental aspects of contemporary communicative practices and environments. Relationships between individuals, institutions, and organizations, both in the macro context and in more localized practices, may find important theoretical support in the thinkers of the theory of Media Ecology.

Keywords: media visibility; visibility and legitimacy; media ecology.

---

A *Revista Estudos em Comunicação* é financiada por Fundos FEDER através do Programa Operacional Factores de Competitividade – COMPETE e por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia no âmbito do projeto *Comunicação, Filosofia e Humanidades (LabCom.IFP) UID/CCI/00661/2013*.



## Introdução

**E**STE texto está dividido em três partes; a primeira trata da *Onipresença midiática, visibilidade e legitimidade*, aborda as noções de visibilidade (Foucault 1996) e legitimação (Berger e Luckmann 1997) como parte de um dispositivo maior, denominado vigilância (Foucault 1996). A segunda, denominada *Os meios como ambientes culturais na Ecologia Midiática* traz uma breve reflexão sobre os conceitos aqui discutidos diante de uma nova Ecologia Midiática (Scolari 2012). E, ao final, apresento alguns comentários pontuais sobre as reflexões realizadas no texto.

Meu lugar epistemológico é o das ciências da comunicação, um campo híbrido e novo. Assim, por meio de aportes de outras áreas das humanidades procuro entender e dar sentido às práticas midiáticas da atualidade. Ajustando o foco, posso dizer que meu olhar privilegia a comunicação midiática, ou seja, elaboro investigações, reflexões e análises, utilizando como substrato a mediação técnica. Estas escolhas são justificadas, em parte, pelo fato de que o Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação da Universidade Federal de Santa Maria, RS, Brasil (UFSM), tem como área de concentração a Comunicação Midiática, que compreende o estudo da ação dos media implicada na estruturação do espaço público, na visibilidade e legitimação das instituições e na configuração das identidades contemporâneas.

Explicada esta filiação, esclareço que trabalho com o pressuposto de que as tecnologias de informação e comunicação e seus usos sociais têm alterado as possibilidades de ver e de ser visto, de interagir à distância, de representar e identificar o real, fenômenos que repercutem nos processos de institucionalização e obtenção de legitimidade das práticas sociais, incluindo as do próprio campo midiático.

Aos estudos realizados em meu doutorado e nas investigações que o sucederam adicionei a proposta de que as relações entre indivíduos, instituições e organizações, tanto no contexto macro como em práticas em nível mais localizado, podem encontrar um respaldo teórico importante na escola de pensamento denominada Media Ecology, que possui representantes distribuídos em países como o Canadá (McLuhan 1962, 1964), Estados Unidos (Sternberg 2014), Espanha (Scolari 2012), Portugal (Canavilhas 2014, 2015), Brasil (Barichello 2013; Pereira 2004) e Argentina (Vizer 2012), considerando apenas os autores com os quais tenho dialogado mais em minhas pesquisas.

Para tentar superar a dicotomia entre humano versus tecnologia tenho utilizado, cada vez mais, o entendimento da tecnologia como artefato cultural (Horst e Miller 2012) e, portanto, produto da experiência (Rodrigues e Braga 2014) humana e das relações sociais. Assim, nos processos comunicacionais que tenho investigado, é cada vez necessário utilizar metodologias de pesquisa que contemplem as relações estabelecidas em ambientes on-line e off-line e os processos de construção de vínculos de reconhecimento entre indivíduos, grupos e organizações sociais, já que os resultados obtidos com as investigações vão sustentando que essas ações e relações coexistem e estão interconectadas. Diante dessas considerações, é possível perguntar: Como pensar hoje a visibilidade proporcionada pelos media e como se dá este processo, bem como o processo de legitimação, no contexto da atual ecologia midiática?

As noções de visibilidade (associada ao poder) e de legitimidade (referente ao reconhecimento) de atores coletivos e individuais continuam sendo centrais e necessitam ser compreendidas diante das lógicas e fluxos de interação da sociedade atual. Comecei a investigar primeiro a noção de legitimidade e suas ligações com o reconhecimento institucional, o que me conduziu ao estudo das relações entre o processo de reconhecimento e a necessidade de publicização de ações. Esses estudos me levaram à investigação dos processos de formação da opinião pública, de construção da “visibilidade midiática” e chegar ao estágio atual no qual tenho estudado estes processos na sociedade contemporânea, marcada pela interação não presencial. O que me leva a pensar que as reestruturações das relações entre indivíduos, instituições e organizações, tanto no contexto macro como em práticas em nível mais localizado, podem encontrar um respaldo teórico importante no cenário atual, na escola de pensamento denominada Media Ecology.

A demanda por novas abordagens teórico-metodológicas provem, especialmente, das investigações que tomam por objeto empírico, de uma maneira geral, a comunicação em suportes digitais e, mais especialmente, as transformações das relações comunicacionais na atualidade. A apropriação e o uso da tecnologia em um lugar e cultura particulares são questões que demandam investigações, pois as ações comunicacionais e culturais estão conectadas na sociedade real, como é possível verificar nos acontecimentos midiáticos contemporâneos, como os movimentos e as reivindicações de cunho social e político, que têm ocorrido no Brasil e em vários outros países e que ocorrem, simultaneamente, nas ruas, nas redes sociais digitais e nas mídias hegemônicas.

A primeira geração de estudiosos sobre a internet costumava defini-la como um não lugar, caracterizado por práticas sociais transformadoras ou mutantes. Os estudos que sucederam esta primeira geração de estudiosos da internet foram aproximando cada vez mais a compreensão das atividades exercidas pelos indivíduos em ambientes on-line e off-line, constatando que a internet não se constitui em um ‘ciberespaço’ monolítico (Miller e Slater 2001: 100; Miller 2009) ou um não lugar, mas é formada por numerosas tecnologias utilizadas por diversas pessoas, em diversos lugares.

Meu pressuposto é que a mídia é um artefato cultural que, atualmente, permeia de tal forma a sociedade que não se pode mais considerá-la como algo separado das instituições e organizações. O fato é que os meios de comunicação não podem mais ser entendidos como meras ferramentas que as instituições, organizações e indivíduos utilizam para atingir seus fins, pois a mídia tornou-se parte do tecido social e também uma instituição independente, num processo que afeta instituições, organizações e indivíduos em suas relações e interações. Ou seja, as questões tradicionais sobre o uso e os efeitos da mídia, precisam, atualmente, considerar a mediação técnica exacerbada e a minha questão recorrente tem sido desvelar quais as maneiras pelas quais instituições, organizações e indivíduos configuram novos processos estratégicos para obter visibilidade e legitimação de suas práticas e, ao atuar nessas novas ambiências, parecem reconfigurar as interações sociais.

Reitero que o meu olhar vem da comunicação dita midiática. Tenho formação disciplinar, desde a graduação, neste tipo de comunicação. No Brasil, nosso campo acadêmico nasceu dentro das faculdades de filosofia, com professores da sociologia e da antropologia e outras áreas. Este fato é louvável pela pluralidade, mas, por outro lado, levou durante décadas (desde 1948) a ensinarmos os alunos a apenas criticar os media. Com a experiência atual do campo cabe, agora,

entender o sistema midiático de cada tempo, especialmente o deste tempo, para pôr em comum o que é para ser posto em comum e criar vínculos em novos tempos e espaços.

### **Ubiquidade Midiática, Visibilidade e Legitimidade**

Atualmente, a ubiquidade dos media e a vigilância (consentida) estão presentes em nosso cotidiano. As interações sociais estão sujeitas a uma avaliação em tempo real, que pode ser convertida em mais acessos e vantagens sociais ou em segregação.

As revelações de Snowden sobre a vigilância massiva nos EUA revelaram ao mundo os usos políticos, sociais e econômicos dessa vigilância indiscriminada. A popularidade nas redes torna-se moeda social em tempo real. A monetização dos *youtubers*, celebridades e anônimos torna-se norma, com contabilização dos afetos e interações. Os comportamentos podem ser vigiados e avaliados em tempo real.

Na década de 1990, Gilles Deleuze analisou a sociedade disciplinar e relacionou-a as configurações sociais daquele momento. Para ele, a partir da metade do século XX, as sociedades disciplinares foram substituídas pelas sociedades de controle, que atuam por controle contínuo e comunicação instantânea (Deleuze 2013: 219).

Atualmente, a comunicação digital permite que o exercício do poder aconteça de forma contínua, porque prescinde da presença física e da instantaneidade para se efetuar. Cuida-se de cada um individualmente e, de todos, ao mesmo tempo. A assinatura e o número de matrícula foram substituídos pela senha, que dá acesso à informação (Deleuze 2013: 2). A senha permite a entrada no mundo digital, onde as informações on-line podem ser acessadas, armazenadas e analisadas. Ter uma senha de acesso ao ambiente digital permite a inserção numa parte significativa do processo informacional e comunicacional nos dias de hoje.

O dispositivo de vigilância digital tem três pontos centrais: a informação, os bancos de dados e os perfis computacionais (profiles) (Bruno 2008: 154), aos quais acrescento um quarto ponto: os relacionamentos. A informação é a matéria-prima; é sobre ela que se dá a vigilância. Os bancos de dados permitem registrar a informação, a qual pode ser então, acessada quando necessário. Os perfis computacionais viabilizam gerar conhecimento sobre os processos de individualização e produção de identidades (Bruno 2008: 170). Porém os relacionamentos vão além, porque os relacionamentos tecem as redes de saber sobre o outro.

Na sociedade atual, as bases de dados digitais guardam grande quantidade de dados que podem ser automaticamente coletados, acessados, manipulados e remixados estão disponíveis em tempo real, são distribuídos em alta velocidade por todo o mundo, são fáceis e baratos de coletar e distribuir, e podem ser duplicados sem destruir o dado original.

Na vigilância digital, para gerar saber é necessário registrar e analisar as ações e comunicações na internet. A conexão poder/saber que Foucault ressalta como constitutiva para a vigilância assume a forma poder/dados digitais na era da informação (Fuchs 2011: 118). São estes dados digitais que contêm as informações necessárias para se gerar o saber sobre o outro. E, mais uma vez, poucos podem vigiar muitos. Poucas são as companhias que detêm o controle sobre as comunicações digitais realizadas por milhões de usuários. Estas detêm o poder do acesso à informação; e, as informações coletadas, por sua vez, são efetivamente usadas pelos governos e por empresas da

iniciativa privada, que também representam um contingente pouco numeroso, a receber os dados de um grande número de pessoas.

A vigilância digital se utiliza da própria arquitetura da rede que, por ela mesma, favorece a vigilância. Todas as informações passam por servidores, que são os nós da rede. Entre o emissor e o receptor da informação, a mensagem eletrônica encontra vários nós. Em cada um deles, ela pode ser interceptada, coletada e armazenada.

Na sociedade contemporânea, poucos vigiam muitos. Ainda temos uma vigilância absolutamente discreta, que precisa não ser detectada para bem funcionar. A vigilância atua através dos próprios mecanismos que viabilizam a utilização da internet pelos usuários (Bruno 2006: 154). O uso da internet permite aos indivíduos gerar informação e deixar rastros passíveis de serem vigiados. A mesma tecnologia que permite enviar mensagens e postar fotos e vídeos é utilizada para interceptar o conteúdo e exercer a vigilância.

Atualmente, a vigilância se dá nos rastros que os indivíduos deixam ao acessar dados digitais na internet, de forma contínua e automática. As informações são recolhidas, por meio de dispositivos digitais. O controle acontece sem a necessidade da presença e do contato físico entre observador e observado.

Somos vigiados e, permanentemente, avaliados. É o que na prática fazemos a todo minuto: avaliamos, julgamos e ranqueamos serviços, governos, parceiros e, até a nós mesmos. A todo instante o nosso desempenho é avaliado. Somos incitados a declarar nossa performance social e privada. Por outro lado, atualmente os atores sociais, individuais e coletivos, podem publicizar suas opiniões e demandas sem a necessidade da mediação das organizações midiáticas tradicionais, já que os processos de visibilidade e legitimidade institucionais estão hoje perpassados por uma lógica, na qual podem ser identificadas inúmeras possibilidades interativas e fluxos comunicacionais, que se constituem em um vigoroso local de estudo para a área.

Os processos de visibilidade e legitimidade passam a ser também apreendidos por meio do “olhar” dos serviços de busca/buscadores. O investimento em algoritmos, pelas empresas responsáveis por mecanismos de busca, é constante, pois eles são responsáveis pela “varredura” de páginas na Web e, como têm caráter mercadológico, possuem lógicas próprias, sendo algumas confidenciais. Porém, suas funções básicas são pesquisar, relacionar, entrar em diretórios e subdiretórios e decifrar linguagens e instruções nas páginas Web.

O atual contexto permite ultrapassar o entendimento do processo de legitimação como determinado pelo olhar dos outros e atentar, especialmente, para o relacionamento com esses outros, que podem estar inseridos em novos fluxos e possibilidades de interação. Não basta estar visível, é preciso interagir. A questão posta hoje é a ampliação das possibilidades interativas entre os sujeitos e a multiplicidade de fluxos de comunicação.

Admitir que vivemos em um espaço de relações, e que estas definem a posição dos agentes, permite pensar os processos de visibilidade e de legitimidade a partir de algumas das características da sociedade atual, onde as lógicas midiáticas, da mesma forma que os gases, parecem ocupar totalmente as ambiências. Destaco aqui as novas possibilidades de interação à distância proporcionadas pelas tecnologias de informação e comunicação e a nova lógica espaço-temporal, na qual os espaços locais, regionais, nacionais e internacionais são mobilizados por ações transversais, que

redefinem as possibilidades estratégicas de ação e denotam uma constante hibridação entre esses espaços.

É possível considerar que existem proximidades evidentes, mas também diferenças significativas, entre o pensamento de Foucault sobre a vigilância moderna e as formas de vigilância digital que atuam na sociedade contemporânea. Se analisarmos características apontadas por Foucault (1996) sobre a vigilância moderna, é possível relacioná-las, mas também estabelecer contrapontos, ao que se processa com a vigilância nos dias de hoje. Com relação à característica da vigilância como um olhar que vê sem ser visto, pode-se dizer que a vigilância atual também opera da mesma forma, quando aquele que vigia busca não ser visto e nem percebido (Bruno 2006).

Quanto menos a vigilância for percebida como algo existente dentro do próprio sistema de comunicação digital, mais autenticidade haverá nas informações que poderão ser coletadas. Não ser visto é uma estratégia que garante a autenticidade do conteúdo informacional colhido. Todas as comunicações realizadas por meio digital, especialmente, por meio dos grandes controladores de sites de comunicação e relacionamento, estão passíveis de serem coletadas e armazenadas. Quem detém a tecnologia detém também o poder sobre ela e sobre as operações realizadas por meio delas. O usuário nem sempre percebe, mas a possibilidade da vigilância ocorrer é real. E a vigilância digital também opera por meio de vigilâncias múltiplas e entrecruzadas. Os usuários de internet geralmente se valem dos serviços de duas ou mais empresas que controlam o mercado de comunicação, ao fazerem uso dos serviços de telefonia móvel, mensagens eletrônicas, sites de redes sociais, compartilhamento de fotos e vídeos. As informações coletadas podem ser correlacionadas e gerar perfis computacionais (Bruno 2006), que permitem a elaboração de um saber sobre o outro.

Porém, esta nova forma de vigiar prescinde da presença física entre observador e observado, uma vez que se utiliza dos dispositivos tecnológicos de comunicação que rastreiam as marcas deixadas pelos internautas e abastecem bancos de dados onde estas informações são correlacionadas entre si, gerando um saber sobre os outros.

### **Os meios como ambientes culturais na ecologia midiática**

A Media Ecology tem na sua origem a presença do controverso pensador canadense McLuhan (1962, 1964), autor do aforismo “o meio é a mensagem”. Em conjunto, os meios formam um ecossistema, indo além de sua materialidade técnica. Esta abordagem tem crescido na atualidade, em função da aproximação de muitos dos seus pressupostos ao estudo, da era digital. O destaque dado aos meios, na perspectiva ecológica, supera o determinismo tecnológico, ao levar em conta não apenas as materialidades das mídias, mas incluir suas linguagens, lógicas, processos sociais e culturais.

Foi o pesquisador norte americano Neil Postman que institucionalizou a Media Ecology como campo científico, durante uma conferência em Nova York, em 1968. Três anos depois, ele fundou o primeiro programa de estudos na área, na New York University. Em 1998, ex-alunos de Postman fundaram a Media Ecology Association, em Nova York (MEA), cujos postulados centrais permanecem nos estudos sobre as transformações dos meios de comunicação no atual ecossistema digital (Scolari 2010, 2012).

Os pressupostos da Media Ecology podem ser resumidos em duas ideias centrais: a) os meios de comunicação constituem um entorno (o medium como ambiência) que modifica nossa percepção e nossa cognição; b) os meios são as espécies que vivem em um ecossistema e estabelecem relações entre si e com os sujeitos que nele interagem (Scolari 2010). Ou seja, um meio não opera apenas no nível da mediação entre o sujeito e o mundo, pois cria, por meio de lógicas e códigos específicos, uma forma diferente de relação entre os sujeitos e o mundo. Essa forma de relação pode ser interpretada como o processo que tem sido denominado como midiática, resultante da exacerbação das múltiplas mediações operadas pelas tecnologias de comunicação e informação.

O termo ecossistema (do grego, *oikos*) refere-se ao ambiente no qual se vive. A noção de ecossistema, aplicada à mídia, ajuda a compreender como as modificações em cada meio ou no ambiente interferem no conjunto e impactam também as partes que o constituem.

Segundo o paradigma teórico da Ecologia da Mídia (Postman 2000), os meios de comunicação constituem um entorno sócio-técnico e cultural, relacionando-se entre si como em um ecossistema. A introdução de novas espécies e os novos usos de meios antigos, por exemplo, interferem no sistema midiático como um todo.

Atualmente, as novas espécies são representadas, no ecossistema midiático, pelas plataformas de redes sociais. As redes sociais da internet são constituídas pelos atores sociais, suas representações on-line e as interações que eles estabelecem entre si. Essas redes são construídas ou mantidas a partir de plataformas digitais, ou seja, sites de redes sociais ou outras mídias digitais apropriadas como tal (Recuero 2010). Elas integram o complexo ecossistema midiático atual, que tem nas tecnologias digitais sua matriz de operação.

A reconfiguração do ecossistema midiático, trazida pela era digital, interfere nas lógicas pela quais as organizações, inclusive as midiáticas, se comunicam, se constituem e se legitimam perante a sociedade. No atual ecossistema, é esperado das organizações midiáticas que elas participem do diálogo e se apropriem das potencialidades dos diferentes meios tecnológicos, desencadeando a convergência midiática em toda a sua plenitude; seja distribuindo conteúdo por diferentes plataformas, ingressando em novos segmentos da informação e do entretenimento por meio da promoção de narrativas transmídia, perpassando todas as esferas do ecossistema midiático, que passa a atuar como matriz de práticas sociais e comunicacionais.

A perspectiva ecológica pode ajudar a compreender o desempenho de atores individuais e coletivos, tecnologias de distribuição de informação, meios de comunicação interpessoais e coletivos. O atual contexto permite ultrapassar o processo de comunicação como algo estanque, formado por emissores, receptores e “canais”.

O paradigma da Ecologia da Mídia pode permitir um novo olhar para o relacionamento com os outros, os interagentes da comunicação, que podem estar inseridos em novos fluxos e possibilidades de interação. Atualmente, a questão posta é a ampliação das possibilidades interativas entre os sujeitos e a multiplicidade de fluxos de comunicação, proporcionados, especialmente, pela mídia digital e sua relação com a constante reconstrução das culturas e dos indivíduos.

### Últimos comentários

- a) O princípio do panoptismo ainda vigora. Atualmente, poucos ainda vigiam muitos

Os sujeitos que detêm o saber, que acessam estas informações, detêm também o poder sobre os demais atores sociais. Em nome de interesses mais amplos, interferem em questões como a privacidade, por exemplo. Na maioria das vezes os indivíduos não se dão conta da vigilância. Ela opera nos rastros, nas marcas deixadas pelo internauta e este não percebe que está sendo vigiado, que suas ações na internet estão sendo olhadas e avaliadas. A vigilância hoje, ainda, é panóptica, não porque as tecnologias de vigilância estejam centralizadas e hierarquizadas, conforme ditam os princípios do panoptismo, mas porque o Estado e as empresas são os atores dominantes e acumulam poder (Fuchs 2011: 122).

b) A vigilância se dá pelo rastreamento das atividades na rede

As empresas têm objetivos publicitários e comerciais, rastreiam as preferências dos consumidores na internet para poderem oferecer, por meio de anúncios, aquilo que os indivíduos demonstram ter interesse ao visitar páginas, sites, blogs, redes sociais. Ao navegar na internet e fazer *download* de conteúdo, ficam os registros dos caminhos percorridos, das buscas realizadas, das preferências pessoais. Esses registros abastecem bancos de dados que ajudam a otimizar a oferta de produtos ou de serviços. Já o Estado visa o controle sobre questões de segurança, saúde pública, soberania nacional.

c) Vigiar e ser vigiado

No campo específico das organizações empresariais, percebe-se que existe a busca pela visibilidade, através do uso das novas tecnologias, ao mesmo tempo em que se dá o exercício de controle das informações que circulam neste ambiente. A contradição está entre usufruir das possibilidades tecnológicas e manter o controle das informações que circulam. Estão em jogo estratégias que buscam promover a visibilidade, ao mesmo tempo em que buscam garantir o controle e a vigilância. E são as novas tecnologias que se encontram imbricadas nesse processo e garantem a ubiquidade do exercício desse poder controlador.

A presença das organizações no ambiente on-line parece ser inevitável, pois elas são mencionadas por internautas independentemente de sua vontade ou iniciativa. Para exercer esta contravigilância existem programas que podem ser adquiridos pelas empresas para monitorar o que é dito sobre elas na internet. Cada vez que um internauta menciona a empresa, a mensagem chega também para a organização que pode interagir com o produtor do conteúdo. As empresas, percebendo a importância deste monitoramento, estão organizando suas assessorias de comunicação para incorporar esta nova tarefa, com a aquisição dos equipamentos e programas necessários e da contratação de pessoal capacitado a realizar este monitoramento e interagir com o usuário do sistema.

d) A ubiquidade dos media

Os meios de comunicação não são apenas tecnologias que as organizações, os partidos ou os indivíduos podem optar por utilizar – ou não utilizar – como bem entenderem. Eles se tornaram uma parte integral do funcionamento de outras instituições, embora também tenham alcançado um grau de autodeterminação e autoridade que leva essas instituições, em maior ou menor grau, a submeterem-se a sua lógica (Hjarvard 2012:54). A mídia tem determinado uma forma particular



de comportamento das instituições sociais, que passam a incorporar, no seu fazer, procedimentos que são próprios do universo midiático.

Os discursos e as práticas são pensados para obedecer a critérios e aos modos de operacionalização da mídia. As mediações sociais destes outros campos passam a estar impregnadas e a funcionar de acordo com os estatutos midiáticos (Hjarvard 2012). A relação entre a mídia e o contexto cultural e social é marcada pela dualidade. Ao mesmo tempo em que a mídia faz parte da sociedade e da cultura, ela se coloca como uma instituição independente que se interpõe entre outras instituições e coordena a interação entre elas.

e) As redes sociais digitais e o reconhecimento do outro

A digitalização das redes social amplia as possibilidades de expressão e de comunicação entre os indivíduos, assim como foram também estendidas as formas de interação e relacionamento. São inúmeros os sites de redes sociais existentes hoje e, acredito que, o campo acadêmico foi lento para reconhecê-los como media. Atualmente, os acontecimentos são discutidos pelos indivíduos nas redes, passam pela mídia hegemônica, que ainda se constitui como local de legitimação e reconhecimento, para, então, ganhar as ruas em manifestações presenciais e depois voltarem às redes e, assim, é promovida uma circulação contínua.

f) A circulação dos acontecimentos pelo olhar da ecologia midiática

O entendimento dos meios como ambiências, turva a separação entre novos e velhos media e até mesmo a hierarquia entre eles, pois a atuação de cada meio vai mudar de acordo com a sua posição na ecologia midiática e com a interação entre os indivíduos. O conceito de sociotécnica é para mim central neste entendimento ao não separar a técnica da ação humana.

g) Os media como artefatos

Ao finalizar, ressalto que a perspectiva ecológica, centrada nos meios, ancora-se, neste trabalho, na aceitação de que falar nos media é compreendê-los por um prisma sociotécnico e cultural, como artefatos humanos.

## Referências

- Barichello, E.M.M.R. (2013). *Ecologia da Mídia*. Santa Maria: FACOS/UFMS.
- Berger, P. & Luckmann, T. (1997). *A construção social da realidade*. Petrópolis: Vozes.
- Bruno, F. (2006). Dispositivos de vigilância no ciberespaço: duplos digitais e identidades simuladas. *Revista Fronteiras*: 152-9. São Leopoldo.
- Bruno, F. (2008). *Monitoramento, classificação e controle nos dispositivos de vigilância digital*. In H. Antoun (org.), *WEB 2.0: participação e vigilância na era da comunicação distribuída* (pp. 167-182). Rio de Janeiro: Mauad.
- Canavilhas, J. (2015). Nuevos Medios, Nuevo Ecosistema. *El Profesional de La Información*, 24 (4): 357-362.
- Canavilhas, J. (2014). Jornalismo Transmídia: um Desafio ao Velho Ecosistema Midiático. In Renó et al, *Periodismo transmídia: miradas múltiples*. Barcelona: UOC.

- Deleuze, G. (2013). *Conversações*. São Paulo: Ed 34.
- Foucault, M. (1996). *Vigiar e punir*. Petrópolis: Vozes.
- Fuchs, C. (2011). Como podemos definir vigilância?. *Matrizes*, jul./dez., 5 (1): 109-136. São Paulo.
- Horst, H. & Miller, D. (eds). (2012). The digital and the human: a prospectus for digital anthropology. *Digital Anthropology*: 3-36. Oxford: Berg.
- Hjarvard, S. (2012). Mídia e cultura: teorizando a mídia como agente de mudança social e cultural. *Matrizes*, jan.-jun., 5 (2): 53-91.
- McLuhan, M. (1962). *The Gutenberg galaxy: the making of typographic man*. Toronto: University Toronto Press.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: the extensions of man*. New York: New American Library.
- Miller, D. (2009). *Anthropology and the individual: a material culture perspective*. Oxford, New York: Berg.
- Miller, D. & Slater, D. (2001). *The internet: an ethnographic approach*. Oxford, New York: Berg.
- Postman, N. (2000). *The humanism of media ecology*. Online. Disponível em: [www.media-ecology.org](http://www.media-ecology.org).
- Recuero, R. (2010). *Redes sociais na internet*. Porto Alegre: Sulina.
- Scolari, C. A. (2010). Ecología de los medios. Mapa de un nicho teórico. *Quaderns del CAC*, jun, XIII (1): 17-25.
- Scolari, C. A. (2012). Media ecology: exploring the metaphor to expand the theory. *Communication Theory*, 22: 204-225.
- Pereira, V. A. (2004). As tecnologias de comunicação como gramáticas: meio, conteúdo e mensagem na obra de Marshall McLuhan. *Revista Contracampo*, 10/11: 7-20.
- Rodrigues, A. D. & Braga, A. (2014). A natureza midiática da experiência. In Barreto, E. *et al*, *Mídia, Tecnologia e Linguagem Jornalística*, João Pessoa, Editora do CCTA.
- Steimberg, J. (2014). Misbehavior in mediated places: situational proprieties and communication environments. In E. Barichello & A. Rubleski (org.), *Ecologia da Mídia*. Santa Maria: FACOS-UFSM.
- Vizer, E. (org.) (2012). *Lo que McLuhan no predijo*. Prólogo de Derrick de Kerckhove. Buenos Aires: La Crujia.

## Visibility as a key concept in Communication and Media Studies

Samuel Mateus

Madeira University / Labcom.IFP; CIC.Digital

E-mail: samuelmateus@uma.pt

### Abstract

The concept of visibility has become a problematic one as hypervisibility gave rise to new forms of opacity that are formed not through secrecy but by its opposite, pan-visibility. Paradoxically, by amplifying visibility, media create new forms of invisibility. An analysis of visibility will provide us with a precise perspective how these processes occur. In this paper, we suggest three lines of empirical and theoretical investigation in the topic of visibility: a sociological (symbolic) axis; a collective (publicness) axis; and a technological (media) axis. Since the social category of visibility is a central aspect of communication and media studies, we will be interrogating it through three distinct ways: visibility as a field whose symbolic determination results in the

constitution of different regimes of visibility; visibility as a pivot-concept of publicness since it is this public quality that transforms proto-visibility into a full accomplished visibility; and, third, the transmutations and dangers stemmed from media's production of visibility. Each one of these principles highlights different concepts: in the field of visibility we need to address inter-visibility; in public visibilities we need to address proto-visibility in verge of becoming full-visibility through the synchrony of collective attention; and in mediated visibility it is imperative to deal with super-visibility as an extreme effect of an intense modulation perpetrated by communication technologies.

Keywords: visibility; visual; publicness; media.

*Even in the case of things which are clearly visible, you know that if you do not turn your mind to them, it is as though they had never been there or were far away.*

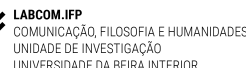
(Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, IV, 809 *apud* Van Winkel, 2005: 7)

### Introduction

**I**N one of his essays, Walter Benjamin (1999: 734) described the glass as the main enemy of mystery and a fierce opponent to unique distance. The transparency, hardness and sobriety of glass allows no traces, no secrets, and all becomes visible. It became the preferred material to build

---

A *Revista Estudos em Comunicação* é financiada por Fundos FEDER através do Programa Operacional Factores de Competitividade – COMPETE e por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia no âmbito do projeto *Comunicação, Filosofia e Humanidades (LabCom.IFP) UID/CCL/00661/2013*.



the modern world as we see it in building's façades. Indeed, our culture features the apology of the visual where everything becomes transparent (Sennett, 1992): our relationships, our buildings, our workspaces, the annual income of politicians, even privacy seems to disappear in the public exposure of reality- television.

No generation before has been so fascinated by visibility as ours and media technologies do confirm that: photography may be taken as an attempt to render visible the physical reality; cinema may be perceived as an effort to render visible the imaginary; and television is possibly a medium trying to render visible ordinary life. Our mediatized societies are accustomed to believe in its eyes.

In a certain sense, contemporary societies embody a giant and pervasive mythological figure: Argos, the giant whose epithet, "Panoptes", "all-seeing", labeled his numerous eyes. According to Ovid, to honor her faithful watchman, Hera had the hundred eyes of Argus well-looked-after in a peacock's tail. We are still the heirs of Argos in respect to total, all-mighty visibility. CCTV images are perhaps one of the most discussed realizations of the all-seeing eyes whose major asset is permanent scrutiny. Today, media surprisingly provide us with the hundred- eyes of Argos from computer screens through television to social media. In some respects, it seems we are in the verge of losing the anthropological structure of invisibility. Debray (1992), for instance, is one of the few to alert us to the emancipation of the visible and the consequent extinction of the invisible. Visibility is today such a value that we tend to related with sincerity (the human character becomes notorious), authenticity (emotions becomes notorious), immediacy (the disappearance of the medium becomes conspicuous) and transparency (the *arcanum imperii* is constantly exposed).

We are in the middle of a social dilemma where excess leads to annihilation just as too much light impairs us from seeing things accurately. In the same way, as disproportionate noise negatively impacts communication, hypervisibility may mask reality. The excess of visibility – one may called it a superlative or an extra degree in visualization (Van Winkel, 2005: 15) – envisages an important paradox: by render certain things visible, it tends to obliterate others. Hypervisibility supposes blindness in its own conditions of functioning. Blanchot or even Lacan have both remarked how an encompassing visibility supposes a blind spot to the access of the present and the full experience. Every time we see all, we do not see everything because there is an accursed share or an excess (Bataille, 1988) surmounting the hegemonic gaze. Every time we publicize privacy there is a rest that is not invisible but beyond visibility.

Media have amplified this paradox and present the world as if the *medium* could be erased: they create a strong familiarity feeling while obliterating their own mediation. Adorno (1954), for instance, regarded television as a social instrument of opacity while appearing to function with total immediacy. On the same token, Innerarity (2004: 53) contends that the transparency of modern media produce a specific blindness as the profusion of images and words saturate reality with an undifferentiated mass of facts. When we see everything, reality becomes thick but disorienting. When things are disproportionately seen, we cannot see beyond what is presented to us. Behind the appearances there is an enormous unseen space. This is the paradox Innerarity (2004: 54) points to: hypervisibility gives rise to new forms of opacity that are formed not through secrecy but by its opposite, pan-visibility. Today, to conceal does not mean to hide. Concealment

may simply be in its mode of rendering the world visible. We may block out something precisely by an excess of showing.

By privileging total transparency and by making the world a glassy reality (to quote Benjamin), it is no more secrecy, the hidden, the underground or the clandestine that is presented to us in a problematic way. Visibility becomes a problematic notion (Innerarity, 2004: 52) not because concealment threatens it, but mostly because visibility has been transformed in a kind of ideology of transparency that dissolves the conventional frontiers between visibility and invisibility. To see is to problematize. In other words, visibility becomes a problem in the moment it is object of a strategic use and management.

In his novel *Blindness* José Saramago almost deals with this paradox by alluding to a pure visibility: “Perhaps only in a world of the blind will things be what they truly are”. Today we are dealing not with the end of invisibility but mostly with the end of the traditional opposition between secrecy and the manifest, the hidden and the exposed. Visibility does not simply contrasts with invisibility. The visible and the invisible form a dual expression in the management of visibility. Emergent visibility is the result of the incessant intersection between visible and invisible forces, the end product of different regimes taking shape in unpredictable manners. Visibility regimes (cf. Mateus, 2014) affords new collective dynamics requiring new ways to think its influence in today’s society.

By referring to visibility as a problematic notion we are also stating a conundrum of visibility (Boyd & Marwick, 2009). In other words, the concept of visibility contains new complications as media heighten the potential for visibility. Yet, by amplifying visibility they create new forms of invisibility. An analysis of visibility will provide us with a precise perspective how these processes occur. But it will not offer us an understanding of the key importance of visibility to media studies.

In this paper, we take on an assessment of the conundrum of visibility regarding its problematic relationship with media and communication technologies. We will advocate that not only visibility is a main concept to communication and media studies, as also it condenses a fundamental category to social sciences. By acknowledging this double feature, we are better equipped to describe many social questions (surveillance, recognition, social theory, etc). But, above all, we acquire a renewed perspective on the idea of publicness one that should be strongly connected with media and visibility.

Thus, we will argue media is an inescapable dimension of today’s visibility and that one of the main advantages to consider visibility in relation to publicness is related with the possibility to envisage a collective synchrony of attention. We need to consider visibility within a social theory of communication media. We will put forward three axes through which a critique of communication and media may emerge: visibility as a modality of representation; visibility as a pivot condition of publicness; and mediatic visibility as one of the most pervasive and riskier kind of social visibility. These are three motives that mark the important of such a notion to media studies and that justify its study in today’s societies.

To that effect, we will start by address the field of visibility (section one), define its associations to publicness (section two) as well as to comment upon media visibility and its effects (section three).

### Visibility as a Field

Although visibility is today an omnipresent concept there are still distinct meanings being confused. And it is the usual indistinction between a literal and a metaphorical meaning that has limited the use of visibility in media studies. In fact, some authors such as Thompson (2005) tend to regard visibility in terms of the immediate sensory sphere and that's why he proposes to call a "new visibility" to the process that makes this sensory experience of visibility as non-presence, mediated sensibility.

Still, visibility has today not just a literal meaning as immediate sensory experience but also a metaphorical one where the concept assumes a set of symbolic meanings normally related to the way particular events are communicated by media. It is in this sense that we can relate social recognition to visibility (Brighenti, 2007: 329) and explore the ways social agents demand media attention to become socially acknowledged. It is also at this light that one may understand the fierce labor to come a celebrity (from singing and acting until reality television tasks such as discovering the "secrets" of other competitors). Celebrity is, thus, described as a personality whose visibility concedes him an aura of admiration and approval.

In order to better apprehend the literal and metaphorical meanings of visibility in contemporary societies, we want to advance the idea that the difference between these two layers of visibility is not a difference of nature but a difference of degree.

In other words, visibility as a sensory experience and visibility as a symbolic experience do not exclude each other. They are not expressions of visibility's polysemy. Instead, we agreed with Brighenti (2008: 4) when he suggests to deal with visibility as a complex phenomenon alternating different modes of seeing. This means that the sensory dimension and the symbolic dimension of visibility intermix together implying separate modes of seeing the world. Visibility happens according to this dual disclosure and its fundamental ambiguity comes precisely from the permanent interweaving of its sensory and symbolic components. Visibility is not simply an appearance or an image; visibility is also a social process in itself engaging their social commitments, each one with their own jurisdiction.

It is also because of this constitutive ambiguity that media are key objects to visibility. Media constantly mix the sensory experience of visibility (*making something visible and perceptible*) with its symbolic dimension (*making something collectively recognizable and notorious*). Social media constitute a special problem since they are one of the main forms this interweaving occurs now. Sometimes there are not much to recognize in what social media show (ex: humorous memes). Other times there are not much to display and to make visible (ex: personal live pictures as me eating pizza at home). Yet, we easily tend to give to what is merely visible our approval (ex: sharing memes in Facebook), as well as we tend to acknowledge what is not necessarily recognizable (ex: "Like" in Facebook to the picture of me eating a slice of pizza).

This is also a main theme on celebrity studies: many so called stars gain their social approval because media tend to function on this dual dimension of visibility. So, some personalities are visible in traditional and new media and become an object of reverence (ex: the socialite Kardashians) followed by millions. And they are recognized as important personalities (ex: being invited to attend some elitist events) because they are always keeping appearing in the social imaginary.

The sensory dimension of visibility feeds its symbolic one and, in return, its symbolic dimensions reinforces and justifies its sensory visibility.

So, why not, like Innerarity (2004: 130) or Brighenti (2010), to think contemporary societies from visibilities relations? Why not to critical ponder on social relationships through the very notion of visibility? What could we understand if we would include “visibility” to the pantheon of social theory<sup>1</sup>, and specially to the vocabulary of the social theory of communication and media?

In order to lead off this approach, it is useful to place visibility as an ecology or a field of separate and complex actions. Visibility is not just a social category to apprehend human interactions, it may also be seen as a special arrangement of visible and invisible movements encompassing disclosure and cloaking operations through which one moves in social interplay. Visibility is a field that helps to shape subject positions and as such contains a strategic nuance. To make society visible to itself is a crucial operation to social theory.

Visibility may, thus, be considered as a field highly interdependent of complex social, technical and political arrangements (Brighenti, 2010: 3). Communication technologies certainly play a part in how the visible is inscribed in social reality, and how visibility suffers different modulations pointing to its double-swords aspect: it has both an (potential) empowering as well as a (potential) disempowering role. It may suffice to say that visibility may impel social movements to social acceptance (ex: American Civil Rights Movement), as also visibility may contribute to the panoptic control CCTV images impose on individuals.

Visibility may, then, be best described as having a rippling effect on society and part of this effect comes (not exclusively) from the ways media set up empirical visibilities and influence visibility’s contingent compositions, recomposition and inter-compositions. In other words, “the field of visibility is relational, strategic and processual” (Brighenti, 2010: 39).

The field of visibility supposes a process of inter-visibility, that is, a positional (ergo, strategic) quality working upon thresholds of collective attention whose final result promotes a means to sorting, ordering and classifying of events and individuals. Visibility as a social field designates how visible relationships structure and attribute intrinsically relational and ambivalent social positions to individuals and their actions. This is to say visibility concerns the management of collective attention by putting into circulation different articulations of the visible.

To mention how visibility may be displaced and articulated in an interdependent field take us to envisage an ecology of reciprocal visibilities organized into regimes of visibility (Thibaut, 2001; Mateus, 2014). Brighenti for instance, offer us a strict definition of those regimes of visibility: “a regime is a repeated, agreed upon and more or less settled pattern of interaction” (Brighenti, 2008: 25). Each visibility regime would be appreciated by the conditions it puts forwards, namely, what is worth seeing, what we should see, what others must see or what is right for us to see. Visibility regimes articulate their own “visibility games” where certain positions are permitted (ex: in reality shows like *Adam looking for Eve* or *Big-Brother* spectators are allowed and even encouraged to peep) and others ferociously prohibited (ex: it is not consecrated by law, at least in some European countries, that the face of children be filmed in cases about the legal dispute of parents or when

---

1. Brighenti (2007: 324) argues that “visibility can be counted as a fully entitled sociological category”.

they are victims. In those cases, media cover up their faces even if they still record images of them).

To the sum of the interdependent and ambivalent effects of each visibility regime we call a field of visibility where tensions and disputes over the visible decisively contribute to establish its normative conditions. Visibility is an enabling resource whose division between sensorial and symbolic layers need to be apprehended together. Talking about a field of visibility as the purpose to designate the interplay of thresholds of visibility capable of displace social positions and be used as a strategically resource for selectivity, regulations and stratification of individuals and events.

A field of visibility encloses a perspective on the concept where he can be viewed as a modality of social representation. By moving through different positions, visibilities are never a fixed phenomenon but a highly dynamic and constructed process being use by individuals to assert and represent themselves. There may be panoptic and synoptic asymmetries between the majority who see and the majority who is being seen (Mathiesen, 1997) or may possibly be distortions of visibility when a person is exclusively visible in a given social situation. This only adds to the understanding how visibility is such a disputed category<sup>2</sup> in constant construction (Champagne, 1993).

Very simply stated, shaping and managing visibilities is a huge work that we are used to endeavor. By naming a social field made by different regimes of articulation of visibility we acknowledge that visibility is not just a question that rose with modern media. It is more than a technical matter; it is also a social and political matter that puts perceptivity along with visibility as two primordial notions.

As long as we talk about reciprocal visibilities and field of visibility we are also addressing the question of perceptivity. To address it is to refer to a new kind of definition of the visible. By defining visibility as an ecological system or a field we are positing that the visible is something more than simple visual. This definition we are talking about here concerns the dual nature of visibility taken as sensory and symbolic experience. Just as visibility is not just rendering something present to the optic senses, the visible is also not just something visual. The same way visibility contains a symbolic dimension, we will use Brighenti's strong definition and talk about the visible "is the prolongation of the visual impregnated with the symbolic" (Brighenti, 2010: 32). This has tremendous consequences.

First of all, it means, visibility is not something static or pre-determined by the individual's or event's self-properties. Visibility is not about showing something there but mostly about *making something showable*. In other words, visibility needs to be worked upon in order to become possible to visualize it. *Visuality need to be become visibilised*. In order to collectively exist objects need to become visible. The visible is something composed, constructed and performed. It points to the symbolic construction of the visibility. To show a person in a photograph (ex: Cristiano Ronaldo photographed in Paris Disneyland by *paparazzi*) is not to capture visibility: it is to render it subject to a symbolic construction of the visible (including how is it technologically captured and framed; but also socially reproduced, published, and reported). Symbols, including visual

---

2. Not only in modern times but we can also trace the centrality of visibility to Ancient Times where coinage in Rome were used as a form of taken abroad to the Roman Empire the image of the Emperor.



signs and other semiotic categories renders things visible. We should ask not just how images, gestures, objects and representations symbolize collective identity, social cohesion, shared values, etc., but also how we use visibility to make symbols special operators of social relationships (cf. Brighenti, 2010: 32).

Second, when we picture the visible as the prolongation of the visual impregnated with the symbolic, we are emphasizing the field of visibility, namely the dual nature of visibility and the hybridity present in the possible catenations and articulations of the visible. Concurring in the previous point, we will say that there is no pure visibility or pure invisibility. By stating a field of visibility one is accepting that visibilities are social constructions in which the symbolic takes part.

The proof to this impossible pure visibility, one without a symbolic impregnation of the visual, is that visibility is a problematic notion since the first human societies. And the need to include media in the understanding of today's visibility only confirms that the visible is not the visual; visibility has its richness as a social category in its contaminated form with the symbolic and the strategic use of the visible to empower or disempower individuals and institutions.

So, the first reason we advance to put visibility within the scope of communication studies is that visibility is not a question about showing something visual but *making something showable*. And this *making of showiness*, this rendering the visual visible is not without a symbolic dimension.

We end this section returning to the beginning: visibility is not just to display a thing and make it a sensory experience; visibility is to render it visible through diverse regimes of reciprocal and interdependent gazes. It is to look with intention. It is to construct perceptions and this means we must acknowledge it as a core notion in the social theory of communication.

### **Visibility and Publicness**

We have just argued the problem of a public visibility is concomitant to the idea of visibility being a field through which something is built to be displayed and becomes showable. To make the visual entering the ecology of visibility is necessary to think the concept in its symbolic dimension. One key area of such symbolization of visibility lies in the public realm.

Public realm means here, not a public sphere or an ethical and normative publicity (Habermas, 1991). We know how political philosophy have traditionally referred public sphere and visibility (Weintraub, 1997) from a deliberative and proceduralist standpoint on democracy. We also recognize how publics fight to become visible not just to the State but also visible to themselves, open to society and its problems (Dewey, 1927).

Studying visibility involves to consider how it depends on arenas of inter-visibility and social interaction, that is to say, we need to consider visibility and publicness interpenetration. Thus, a core aspect of visibility to media and communication studies lies in its deep relationship with publicness, a notion without which it would be impossible to suppose reciprocal visibilities in society.

Publicness is the simply quality of being public, open, accessible to a collective scrutiny. It is the sentiment of the collective, of the plural definition of individuals - to allude to Figurational

Sociology (Elias, 1978). Publicness may be defined through a property Tarde (1901) has sharply noted on the age of the publics: the mutual impact or reciprocal influence of distinct minds converging into action at spatial and temporal distance. In other words, *publicness stands for a social quality enabling acts of reciprocation in territorial dispersion which produces synchronic configurations of social interactions.*

Publicness is a central notion to the category of visibility because it represents an aesthetic and symbolic synchrony of attention. Visibility and Publicness go hand on hand because they operate together the arrangement of inter-visibilitys. *Since the visible is a symbolic visibility, we need to consider publicness as the quality capable of providing a symbolic realm where visibility is constructed in a synchronic way.* When a happening becomes public it has not just passed the frontier that makes it visible to some, it has also surpassed a threshold of synchronic attention. In this sense, visibility entails a public aspect and that's why it is an important object to communication studies.

Like visibility offers an interdependency of gazes, publicness registers a relational form of those gazes. Publicness turns visibility a social dimension. By producing different forms of synchrony of attention (either mediatized and non-mediatized) publicness catalyzes the explosion and the implosion of related visibilitys. Inter-visibilitys are ordered and configured due to the possibility of synchronizing perceptions and prolongate collective attention into frames composing the regimes of visibility.

At this regard, publicness is a realm of communication through mediatized but also non-mediatized visibilitys. And, according to what has been said, visibility is a field of coordination of attentions that needs publicness to be collectively configured. It is with the idea of publicness that visibility does attain the accessibility necessary to become an arrangement of inter and reciprocal visibilitys. It is also a realm of shared observation, of communed views whose porosity renders to the perceptive activity a central instrument to social partaking and collective sharing. Society is institutionalized as multiple publicness realms. Are those realms that, together, subsidize the forms through which visibilitys become acknowledged, understood and shared in joint expressions of social activity. Thus, the hypertrophy or atrophy of inter-visibilitys is intrinsically related to publicness.

As an example, let's consider the visibility of a pop-star singer. Without some sort of publicness, that is, synchrony of attention, its own visibility would simply be invisible. In order to become a visible element on a galaxy of other well-talented elements, the pop singer need to gain attention. He only gathers visibility if he recollects the dispersed attentions of individuals. So, he needs to become a public figure, that is, a personally able to synchronize the collective gaze in public configurations that accommodate its pre-existent visibility. It is no surprise that *You Tube* transmuted anonymous persons into music stars: indeed, what the social media has done was to give sheer and literal mediatized visibility (video images) a symbolic and public visibility (social notoriety). Without its massive appeal (of symbolizing images), and without its capacity to synchronize attention (publicizing images), *You Tube* would not matter. He would just emulate or put into circulation a proto-visibility. It would transmit videos of persons singing but it is just when *You Tube* gives notoriety and offers millions of visualizations to those videos, that *You Tube* transforms proto-visibility into a full accomplished social visibility. In other words, a full accom-

plished visibility needs to be symbolized (ex: me singing in order to become a pop idol) but also needs to be publicized (ex: me singing *being seen* by millions in order to become a pop idol). We have seen without symbolization visibility does not override the visual. But without publicness visibility does not achieve collective status. By synchronizing collective attention, publicness enables visibilities to transform into inter-visibilities, into share notions of what is not just able to be seen, but also able to do itself capable of putting others seeing.

Put in other way, publicness constitutes a symbolic ecology inhabited by both the particular and the plural, the individual and society. That's why we need to consider the notion of public. The public is the constant appropriation of social experience (Mateus, 2011). Publicness is not necessarily harmonious or ideal (publicity) neither hegemonic (a public sphere). Consequently, the public is always a deep collective experience encompassing symbolic gazes but also factic communication and haptic forces. It is a collective force capable of shaping social bodies of knowledge, affects, conflicts or appeasements. It is pulsation, a pacing non-individual, non-collective entity.

Away with a capital, unitary, self-imposing Public of normative theory of publicity, visibility pushes us towards a lower-case, emotional-charged public. A public seen as a more spontaneous happening, occurring whenever social experience is at stake. We cannot *be the public*. Simply recall how historical approaches to the public sphere put it as idealized (Kramer, 1992). Yet, we can *be in public*. *A public exists when feeling and belonging converge into registers of interaction, be it mediatized or not*. And one major asset of publics is that entails regimes of visibility that decompose their appearances and that are related, for instance, to the emergence of notions such as counter-publics (Fraser, 1992), bourgeois public (Habermas, 1991) or proletarian public sphere (Negt & Kluge, 1993).

But what authorizes us to relate visibility, publicness and publics is that they all suppose some kind of commonality. It is social partake and shared belonging that wraps up them all. Bridging and bonding are common denominators in these concepts.

From a visibility standpoint, the public may be defined as the object in which synchronicity of attention (Brighenti, 2010: 117) characteristic of publicness takes place. From a visibility perspective, the public is appropriately conceived by Brighenti (2010: 74) as "a spatially dispersed but attentionally and emotionally synchronized social territory". It is best described as a symbolic aesthetic incidence, not a determined group of persons, nor a distant crowd: in publicness, the public runs through society reclaiming different visibilities. It is in publicness that visibility and the public emerges as central analytical tools since publicness means openness and accessibility (ex: the public eye). By entering publicness, one becomes a subject of visibility; someone who is turning visible into others has also becoming a central piece of interaction. And it is because the boundaries of publicness are constantly shifting that we can refer to the visibility regimes and its unboundedness. Words but also gazes resonate in publicness. Rationality but also visibility constitute publicness taken - as Brighenti (2010: 125) remarks - as a relational field of attention and affections. Just like visibility is some sort of aesthetical contagion, publicness is a field of contagious ideas and its dissemination. Without visibility, political subjects are not drawn. Without publicness, there are not subjects to look and acknowledge upon.

So, until now we have stated visibility supposes the symbolization of the visual and that full visibility is only attainable within a public process. But how does one should envisage public visibility today? The answer is fast and inescapable: media.

In fact, one of the most significant types of visibility is the media-type whose ubiquity and intense rhythm of functions (cf. Virilio, 1986) induces fundamental alterations to visibility regimes. Of course, the relation between media and visibility are not one-sided. On the contrary, they are complex – promoting liberating relations of visibility but also oppressive relations to them.

In the next section, we confer how the potential to visibility brought by modern audiovisual media influences visibility and its publicness. By integrating the wide effects of media in visibility we disclose a third reason to consider it in communication and media studies.

### **Mediated Visibility**

One of the main effects of media in the idea of publicness was that they opened up public scrutiny and expanded publicness in tremendous ways. The erosion of the public and private Habermas (1991) pointed out suffered a suddenly impulse. “Thanks to the media, these previously hidden practices and events had been given an entirely new status as public” (Thompson, 2005: 31). With media, we witness the explosion of visibilities and a whole new world of mediated visibility has come to stay.

*Mediated visibility is not just a leaking form of the visible; it is also an escalation of the visible realm with an increasingly difficulty to govern it.* Visibility ceases to be locally situated (those who see and those seen share the same spatial location) as well as temporally situated (those who see may see outside the temporal framework of those who are seen) (Thompson, 2005: 35). With the development of communication media, visibility frees itself from the physical and temporal circumstances. We witness events occurring in distant places in real time, live time, but we can also witness events occurred in the past and that can be re-presented in the present time. This points to the preservative quality of media and show how media should be thought in terms of mnemonic practices.

At the same time, the sense of sight loses its physicality and becomes more an abstract entity. While in face-to-face interactions, sight is the operational instrument to see, in mediated communication sight is just one of the operational instruments along with a visual technology (ex: computer, television, smartphone, cinema screens, etc).

Since it involves the participation of technical devices, mediated visibility is tendentially unidirectional. Even in the case of tele-conferences or skype sessions, individuals may only see what the camera records. There are two images that juxtapose but that do not overlap. One can even be seen without see. This clearly happens when distant others are filmed or photographed or caught on surveillance cameras. We are talking about a “de-spatialized simultaneity” (Thompson, 2005: 37): distant others are rendered visible in the same time-frame and can be seen at the exact moment they appear. But we must also include a “mediatized co-presence” (or mediated quasi-interaction (Thompson, 2005: 37)) where others that may have been dead for decades appear on our eyes.

The rise of television, first, and internet, then, has amplified the social significance of these new forms of visibility created by media. Those forms may be described as dissemination and

irradiation processes that expanded the importance of visibility vertically (in terms of quantity) but also horizontally (in terms of a qualitative perception). “Mass-media are high-visibility places endowed with the quality of conferring visibility to the people who join them. As a process, visibility works instantly but extends in time (. . .). We may say that visibility has a flash and a halo: it is both instant and it has a duration” (Brighenti, 2007: 332). So, relating to these terms, visibility is vertically important when it conceded a flash of collective attention to the visible object (today’s 15 minutes celebrity) but also horizontally relevant at the moment that the visible is a prolonged and lasting visibility. Think on Marilyn Monroe or Elvis. They are no more vertically visible (they have died so we cannot see them in face-to-face interactions) but they have a persisting allure that made them entered this horizontally or halo visibility that enables us to constantly see them over and over. They have been subjects of a collective memorialization in which mediated visibility have a key role.

So, today’s visibility in a mediatic era has both this intense, spontaneous and prompt side (a flash ou vertical visibility); but simultaneously a slow, more stable and longstanding side (a halo or horizontal visibility). Advertising would be an example of a high-intensity, vertical visibility while pop idols such as Madonna would exemplify this long-term, enduring visibility.

Mediated visibility is the consecration of new forms of management of visibilities in a time where a visibility of co-presence has become secondary. Most important, these new technological forms actively contribute to visibility regimes as they make something showable through the symbolization of the visual. Just like seeing is always shaped by the broader cultural frameworks, media are key players in setting up those socio-cultural assumptions. Then, media may possibly be taken as an update to the field of visibility that foster an expansion and a reformulation of visibility. In other words, the possibility to repeat presentification of the visible over time (influencing collective memory) tremendously expands the field of visibility.

Visibility, publicness and media are inder-dependent. Because publicness proceeds to the synchronization of attention necessary to attain a full visibility, one should not forget the role media have *in the modulation of that public synchrony of attention*. Media are today the chief distributors of visibility relationships (Innerarity, 2004: 142).

Contemporary media produce two chief modulations of attention: the primacy of active attention and the primacy of passive attention.

Until now, traditional visibility arrangements by media like television or video worked mostly according to active attention: the possibility of seeing everyone without being seen. Visibility is active since it makes something seeable yet it does not show who is seeing (just think in the appeal to see your favorite actor in his new movie, for example). This is also the case of television or even surveillance footage. We can see them all but they cannot see back. The focus is in the ability to see and in the making of an imposed visibility. This is somewhat related with the inversely proportional quantity and time: as perception possibilities increase, it decreases the possibilities of knowing that we are being potentially watched<sup>3</sup>.

---

3. This is better illustrated, for example, by computer cameras which can be switched on remotely by hackers and record the room where the camera is located.

This asymmetric visibility implies the possibility of social control and may stand as one of the most important instruments on political resistance (Brighenti, 2010: 185). But by talking about the active modulation of attention we are emphasizing the primacy of visibility as a capturing process who can select, highlight and change the perceptions of reality.

In contrast, today mediated visibility acts likewise according to a *passive attention where the focus is not in the capacity to totally see but in the possibility of being totally seen*. Beyond visibility as control, there is a subtler modulation of visibility perpetrated by media: a visibility that is used not to monitor but to magnify and extol. In fact, internet and social media has made possible being seen with great success. Social media celebrity comes exactly from this valence to craft a growing visibility continuously mounting, continuously conquering millions and millions of “likes” and “visualizations”. Its best suited aphorism would not be no more: “*I see therefore I exist*”. But “*I am seen therefore I exist*” (Innerarity, 2004: 132). This is a brave new world: one where skilled media are capable of modulate public attention, either in an active, either in a passive mode. *Media are, thus, the great catalyzers of attention and one of the most effective instruments that position, attract and regulate public gaze and collective attention*.

And even if they are not the only ones, media are one of the main producers of visibility. They are able to passively and actively modulate visibility because they are incredible powerful dealers of attention. The gathering of attention becomes an incredibly valuable asset and it is precisely this influence of public attention that relates the media to publicness and visibility. Attention becomes also the principle of visibility media deal the most, through those active and passive modulations. Innerarity, for instance, posits attention as the new currency: “Attention has acquired a new meaning as a productive resource and revenue source. The price is not sums of money but relations” (Innerarity, 2004: 135).

Media and communication studies should embrace the exam of this change of the economy to the perceptive and visibility, this immaterial economy of collective attention. The economy of information runs parallel to a most intangible economy: the economy of visibility where mediated attention is governed with some economic principles. In fact, just like in material and economic rationality, success happens by obtaining the maximum of money and rentability, in the immaterial economy of visibility success is only attainable by a maximum of public attention. That’s why media (especially social media) are so important to approach visibility as a key topic in communication studies. *Media capitalize attention by modulating visibility*.

One interesting consequence of this modulation of visibility are the common struggles for visibility who have come to assume such significance today. Even if this is not the time to properly develop these *leitmotifs* of mediated visibility we should, nevertheless, underscore it as a major means by which political and social fights are carried.

The struggles for visibility indicate how media have become a special visual-symbolic site where different social groups and institutions obtain a notorious presence on publicness that is determinant to the advancement and recognition of his causes. “Mediated visibility is not just a vehicle through which aspects of social and political life are brought to the attention of others: it has become a principal means by which social and political struggles are articulated and carried out. The brutal war of words and images emerging from the war in Iraq illustrates only too well that, in this modern age of mediated visibility, the struggle to be seen and heard, and the struggle

to make others see and hear, has become an inseparable part of the social and political conflicts of our time” (Thompson, 2004: 49).

Visibility is, thus, a field of production of subjects; and media are the *master of ceremonies* in the creation of a public awareness based on the maximum attention and full awareness. *In other words, media influence social recognition by creating, sustaining and develop visibility relationships.* Recognition is a form of social visibility (Brighenti, 2007: 329). Distortions not just in the representation of minority groups (Media Discourse Analysis), but also distortions on the visibility of minority groups (sexual, racial, ethnic minorities) could lead to important misrepresentations. There is verbal, discursive representation. Yet, there is also a visible (more than a visual) imagistic representation.

*One of the things communication and media studies should consider is the risk that the successive, elusive and reiterated modulations of visibility fashioned by the media put the field or ecosystem of visibility out of control.* This does not suppose that visibility arrangements cease to exist. It indicates, instead, that these arrangements that constitute different regimes are entering the domain of super-visibility where visibility can become, not a force of development and social presence but a force that paralyzes society. Media representations of immigration is today super-visible just like airplanes crashes have become ubiquitously constant in social imaginary. One can think on the Lamia airplane crash in Colombia, in November 2016, as a good example of that. As images come flooding the collective imaginary, it was world-wide commotion who suddenly rise. A shock but also a shared emotion that froze newspapers – even sports newspapers since the plane carried the Brazilian Chapacoense professional football team. This super-visibility reinforces emotional reactions such tremor and surprise, despair or suffering. Super-visibility can become a risk if it increases the banality of images. Visibilities are everywhere from computer screens, until advertising spot until simulation videos. Super modulations of visibility put in peril our capacity to move and act because we are all paralyzed feeling the *pathos* involved in every visibility. Images that constantly move us may have the paradoxical effect of freeze us to become passive spectators. In the age of obsessive visibility (Van Weelden, 2005: 8) everything is voraciously consumed. The craving for visibility is in the origin of this super-visibility, that is, an exacerbated modulations media impute to the visible.

The second risk of this situation is that super-visibility banalizes everything. By turning the world visible inside out, by constructing regimes of super-visibility we are transforming banality into a spectacle. Baudrillard talks about hyper-reality and detail this visibility mania as a serious attempt by media to transpose everyday life into a spectacle. “What people really desire is a spectacle of banality. This spectacle of banality is today’s true pornography and obscenity. It is the obscene spectacle of nullity (*nullité*), insignificance and platitude (...). At a time when television and the media in general are less and less capable of accounting for (*rendre compte*) the worlds’s (unbearable) events, they rediscover daily life” (Baudrillard, 2001). So, at a time of fierce media modulation of visibilities banality becomes the most violent piece of information (ex: the exclusive report on the legal divorce between an ex-minister and a television host).

But the greatest risk is, perhaps, the occupation of publicness with banality. The public becomes a judge of everyday life as for example in reality-shows. In the end we have banality squared: banality made visible makes banality a banal activity to watch. So, the super-visibility entails the

danger to make visibility indecent by continuously exposing it to an endless repetition, a general buildup marking the superiority of quantity of quality. As Baudrillard (2001) notes, there is no more *jouissance*, enjoyment or pleasure. In other words, super-visibility makes visibility trivial.

When we surrender to visibility, perpetual visibility is what we get. Mediated visibility only exacerbates this structural condition. *By introducing distinct modulations, by amplifying visibilities and by intensifying them, media are key elements in the study of visibility.*

Communication and media research cannot concentrate themselves exclusively on some effects of media communication. They can and should also consider those effects related to the field of visibility because visibility is a social concept pivoting social action. To attend to communication and media is also to attend to risks, danger and perils mediated visibility carries. Super-visibility and media's visibility modulations may be two phenomena not fully acknowledged, yet they are for sure fully felt in today's world.

## Conclusion

One of the most important things we need to pay attention when discussing visibility is that *visibility is beyond the visual*. Its symbolic dimension ascribes us to see it as an act of construction of the visible. When the epigraph of Lucretius tells us that we must turn our mind into the visible, he is alerting us to the need of (re)presentate things, to turn our eyes into the visibility. This means, *visibility is not a given but a process*. And because it is always (re)construction is not just a problem of visual culture but also about media culture and communication enquiry.

In this paper, we tried precisely to approach visibility with a careful eye and we have advanced three reasons why the social category of visibility should be considered a central aspect of communication and media studies.

We have discussed the category of "visibility" by interrogating it through three distinct ways: visibility as a field whose symbolic determination results in the constitution of different regimes of visibility; visibility as a pivot-concept of publicness since it is this public quality that transforms proto-visibility into a full accomplished visibility; and, third, the transmutations and dangers stemmed from media's production of visibility.

In each sub-chapter, we highlighted different ideas related with each principle: so, we need, in the field of visibility, to contemplate inter-visibility; in public visibilities we need to address proto-visibility in verge of becoming full-visibility through the synchrony of collective attention; and in mediated visibility it is imperative to deal with super-visibility as an extreme effect of an intense modulation perpetrated by communication technologies. These three principles constitute three lines of empirical and theoretical investigation: a sociological (symbolic) axis; a collective (publicness) axis; and a technological (media) axis.

Thus, we are suggesting a circuit of visibility between a field and its regimes, a public dimension and its synchronic inter-visibility and media as fundamental modulators of visibility. Through field, publicness and media we have delineated three angles to see visibility from a communicational standpoint.

The fact of lending visibility to alternative modes of perception has always been a political problem as emphasized by Feminism's struggle to visibility (Van Weelden, 2005: 7). *What we*



want suggest is that perception is not just a political problem: it is simultaneously a key topic needing to be considered in its intellectualized form apart from an exclusively sensorial position. Visibility has become a perception problem not just because communication media broke up the traditional frontiers of the visibility but specially because visibility is a communicated, partaken and collective symbolic formulation that have made perception a metaphorical sense to notoriety, recognition and prominence.

As a final note, we would like to synthesize the chapter by stressing how visibilities are constitutive of interactions. The reciprocity of gazes are not just symptoms of the intention people have while interacting (Brighenti, 2010: 24); gazes are also important coordinators of our cognitive and expressive dealing with others. Visibility, just like glances, are interactive forms of communication. How we look, how long and with which aims – both in literal and symbolic dimension – are central elements interfering with the quality (and quantity) of social intercourse. By discussing visibility as a field of reciprocal gazes, inter-visibility and mediated intervention, we wanted to underscore how visibility is also a matter of the communicative encounter with the other.

The way we give others visibility (and possibly invisibility) is crucial to social theory. But social theory cannot be alone and must be accompanied by media and communication theory: because publicness and media are affecting, transforming and alter visibility arrangements, either by its regimes, either by its modulations.

### **Bibliographical References**

- Adorno, T. W. (1954). How to look at television. *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television*, Spring, 8 (3): 213-235.
- Bataille, G. (1988). *The accursed share. An essay on general economy. Vol. I. Consumption*. New York, Zone Books.
- Baudrillard, J. (2001). Dust Breeding. *Ctheory*, a095, assessed in December 2016 in [www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=293](http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=293)
- Benjamin, W. (1999). Experience and Povert. (translation) In M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland & G. Smith (eds.), *Selected Writings: Walter Benjamin*, vol 2, 1927-1934. Cambridge MA & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Boyd, D. & Marwick, A. (2009). The conundrum of visibility. *Journal of Children & Media*, 3 (4): 410-414.
- Brighenti, A. M. (2007). Visibility: a category for the social sciences. *Current Sociology*, 55 (3): 323-342.
- Brighenti, A. M. (2008). Visual, visible, ethnographic. *Etnografia e Riciera Qualitativa*, 1: 2-19.
- Brighenti, A. M. (2010). *Visibility in social theory and social research*. New York, Palgrave Macmilan.
- Champagne, P. (1993). La vision médiatique. In P. Bourdieu (ed.), *La misère du monde* (pp. 61-79). Paris: Seuil.
- Debray, R. (1992). *Vie et mort de l'image, une histoire du regard en Occident*. Paris, Gallimard.

- Dewey, J. (1927). *The public and its problems*. Athens: Swallow Press, 1991.
- Elias, N. (1978). *What is sociology?*. London: Hutchinson.
- Fraser, N. (1992). Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. In C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the public sphere* (pp. 109-142). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (1991). *The structural transformation of the public sphere*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Innerarity, D. (2004). *La ociedad invisible*. Madrid: Espasa Calpe.
- Kramer, L. (1992). Habermas, history, and critical theory. In C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the public sphere* (pp. 236-258). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Mateus, S. (2014). Visibility regimes in mediatized publicness. *Matrizes*, 8 (2): 259-281.
- Mateus, S. (2011). The public as social experience. *Comunicação e Sociedade*, 19: 275-286.
- Mathiesen, T. (1997). The viewer society – Michel Foucault’s panopticon revisited. *Theoretical Criminology*, 1 (2): 215-234.
- Negt, O. & Kluge, A. [1972] (1993). *Public sphere and experience: toward an analysis of the bourgeois and proletarian public sphere*. P. Labanyi, J. O. Daniel & A. Oksiloff (trans.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Sennett, R. (1992). *The conscience of the eye. The design and social life of cities*. New York and London: Norton & Company.
- Simmel, G. (1969). Sociology of the senses: visual interaction. Adapted English trans. In R. E. Park & E. W. Burgess, *Introduction to the science of sociology* (pp. 277-294). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tarde, G. (1901). The opinion and the crowd. In Clark TN (ed.), *Gabriel Tarde: on communication and social influence: selected*.
- Thibaut, J.-P. (2001). Frames of visibility in public places. *Places*, 14 (1): 42-47.
- Thompson, J. B. (2005). The new visibility. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 22 (6): 31-51. R. E. Park & E. W. Burgess (trans.). *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, 3rd edn. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. (Orig. pub. 1908.)
- Virilio, P. (1986). *Speed and politics: an essay on dromology*. M. Polizzotti (trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Van Weelden, W. (2005). Viewing: seeing: looking away. *Open (In)Visibility*, (8): 6-13.
- Van Winkel, C. (2005). The regime of visibility. *Open (In)Visibility*, (8): 14-20.
- Weintraub, J. (1997). The theory and politics of the public/private distinction. In J. Weintraub & K. Kumar (ed.), *Public and private in thought and practice – perspectives on a grand dichotomy* (pp. 1-42). Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.

## A Computação do (In)Visível – Imagem, Ideologia e Neocibernética

Rui Matoso

Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias / Escola Superior de Teatro e Cinema

rui.matoso@gmail.com

### Resumo

No que se refere à categoria das imagens mentais e à sua suposta invisibilidade fenomenológica, a partir do momento em que uma tecnologia extractiva transduz os impulsos eléctricos que se formam nas redes neuronais do córtex visual, em pixeis, e nos fornece uma representação sintética das imagens produzidas no interior da *camera obscura* craniana, estamos diante de um novo patamar que nos permite visualizar o último reduto do invisível. Imersos no dispositivo tecno-estético global, somos mobilizados pela estrutura técnica da *premediação*, cujo desígnio é o de

mobilizar e modular, no presente, orientações afectivas – individuais e colectivas – em direcção a um futuro potencial, ou seja, em direcção à formação de uma virtualidade real. Mas não nos iludamos, a automação e a invisibilidade neocibernética da dominação não resulta do poder transcendental de um artífice supremo, mas antes de um novo regime de governamentalidade e controlo das subjectividades potenciado pelo tratamento algorítmico da informação acumulada (governança algorítmica).

### Do Visível Retiniano ao Invisível Digital

*We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice.*

John Berger

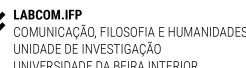
*La vérité est image mais il n'y a pas d'image de la vérité.*

Marie-José Mondzain

A problemática inscrita na relação visível-invisível comporta uma densidade histórica e antropológica de enorme importância, pelo menos desde a crise iconoclasta do Império Bizantino. Mais precisamente, é após a reposição do segundo *Concílio de Niceia* que a questão do invisível vem ganhando complexidade filosófica no âmbito da produção, circulação e recepção das imagens<sup>1</sup>.

---

A *Revista Estudos em Comunicação* é financiada por Fundos FEDER através do Programa Operacional Factores de Competitividade – COMPETE e por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia no âmbito do projeto *Comunicação, Filosofia e Humanidades (LabCom.IFP) UID/CCI/00661/2013*.



1. Vide: Mondzain, Marie-José (2005). *Image, Icon, Economy: the Byzantine origins of the contemporary economy*. Stanford University Press.

As múltiplas hermenêuticas desta dialética não têm parado de se expandir porquanto os campos da visão e da imagem serem campos de intensa reconfiguração conceptual e tecnológica. Tal como Aristóteles afirmava haver muitas maneiras de categorizar o Ser<sup>2</sup>, diríamos, de modo análogo, que existem múltiplas incursões possíveis aos reinos do visível e do invisível na sua relação com o desenvolvimento histórico e social das imagens técnicas na modernidade tardia.

Em sentido lato, o visível a olho nu é aquilo que conseguimos ver dentro do nosso campo de visão, sendo que os limites desse campo são delineados por propriedades espaciais e temporais, bem como dependem da quantidade e da qualidade de luz existente a cada momento. Ainda assim, ver, nunca é apenas e simplesmente um efeito de um acto de visão “pura”. Não se trata apenas de abrir os olhos e alcançar um objecto ou evento. Pelo contrário, o que conseguimos ver é sempre resultado de padrões culturais presentes em cada contexto social, do enquadramento dado pela linguagem e pela oralidade que atravessam os campos de visão e que escoltam as imagens que observamos e contemplamos. Deste modo, não podemos separar hermeticamente a esfera dos dados imediatos da percepção da sua envolvente histórica, social e psicológica cristalizada nos regimes de visualidade e de cognição, onde o invisível se exerce plenamente enquanto construção discursiva das imagens<sup>3</sup>.

Há pois na percepção visual «um paradoxo da imanência e da transcendência. Imanência, posto que o percebido não poderia ser estranho àquele que percebe; transcendência, posto que comporta sempre um além do que está imediatamente dado.» (Merleau-Ponty, 1990, p. 48). Neste sentido, como dirá Merleau-Ponty nos apontamentos para o seu derradeiro livro sobre o visível e o invisível<sup>4</sup>, é verdade que o mundo é aquilo que nós vemos, mas também aquilo que nos faz aprender a ver<sup>5</sup>.

O desenvolvimento de novos meios de comunicação originou novas formas de visibilidade, cujas propriedades específicas variam consoante o *medium*, libertando os corpos das características espacio-temporais da comunicação presencial e expandindo o campo de visão no espaço e do tempo. O paradigma da *camera obscura* marca certamente o epicentro do regime escópico e especulativo dominante ainda hoje, formando uma continuidade na cultura visual e cognitiva ocidental desde a antiguidade até ao Séc. XX. Foi este mesmo regime, fundado na perspectiva (enquanto tecnologia da visão) e no ocularcentrismo (enquanto tradição filosófica greco-cristã<sup>6</sup>), que atravessou grande parte da modernidade europeia, forjado por instituições e discursos com poder suficiente para fixar o estatuto do observador e das sociedades disciplinares, nas quais o “olho do poder” (panóptico) representava o arquétipo do “olho divino”, que tudo vê sem ser visto,

2. Vide: Aristóteles, *Categorias*, «Organon», livro I.

3. «O invisível, na imagem, é da ordem da palavra.» (Mondzain, 2009, p. 30)

4. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (2002). *Le visible et invisible*. Éditions Gallimard.

5. « (...) le spectacle visible appartient au toucher ni plus ni moins que les “qualités tactiles”. Il faut nous habituer à penser que tout visible est taillé dans le tangible (...) Puisque le même corps voit et touche, visible et tangible appartiennent aux même monde.» (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.175)

6. Vide, entre outros, Platão, “A alegoria da caverna”, In *A República* (514a-517c).

e uma nova tipologia de poder<sup>7</sup> através do qual a visibilidade se constitui enquanto controlo e armadilha<sup>8</sup>.

Whether we focus on "the mirror of nature" metaphor in philosophy with Richard Rorty or emphasize the prevalence of surveillance with Michel Foucault or bemoan the society of the spectacle with Guy Debord, we confront again and again the ubiquity of vision as the master sense of the modern era. (Jay, 1988, p. 35)

Nos regimes da visualidade contemporânea, onde o ecrã ganhou enorme relevância cultural, assiste-se ao desvanecimento da tradição monocular da perspectiva visual baseada no ponto de vista focal, em favor de múltiplas perspectivas fornecidas pela pluralidade dos produtores de imagens e conteúdos. Neste aspecto há que ter em consideração dois planos distintos. Um decorre da mediatização crescente do Séc. XX, em que o meio televisão foi o mais pregnante também na produção das subjectividades dóceis<sup>9</sup>. E um outro regime que se encontra estruturado sobre uma lógica digital pós-medial de hibridização e remediação, mas também pós-digital, em plena era da computação incorporada a corpos e coisas (*Internet of Things*), produzindo novas estéticas<sup>10</sup> e inéditas potências de programação do visível pelo invisível.

No actual regime escópico potenciado pela ubiquidade computacional, a imagem deixou de ser apenas representação da realidade e simulacro retiniano, tendo adquirido capacidades performativas (operativas) em articulação com uma ampla gama de *software*<sup>11</sup>. Trata-se de uma imagem dinâmica, produzida por um complexo dispositivo tecno-estético, de elevada eficácia digital, e que induz percepções adequadas individualmente a cada consciência humana, induzindo comportamentos, ideias, alucinações, emoções, etc<sup>12</sup>. Talvez por isso, nos possamos questionar acerca da modulação das relações sociais na época da virtualidade, e da passagem de uma sociedade do espectáculo a uma sociedade da performance das imagens<sup>13</sup>: «Não somos já espectadores mas actores de uma performance, e cada vez mais integrados no seu desenrolar» (Baudrillard, 2006, p.51).

---

7. «O Panóptico funciona como uma espécie de laboratório de poder. Graças aos seus mecanismos de observação, ganha em eficácia e em capacidade de penetração no comportamento dos homens; um aumento de saber vem implantar-se em todas as frentes do poder, descobrindo objetos que devem ser conhecidos em todas as superfícies onde este se exerça.» (Foucault, 1987, p. 169)

8. «A visibilidade é uma armadilha (...) Quem está submetido a um campo de visibilidade, e sabe disso, retoma por sua conta as limitações do poder; fá-las funcionar espontaneamente sobre si mesmo; inscreve em si a relação de poder na qual ele desempenha simultaneamente os dois papéis; toma-se o princípio de sua própria sujeição.» (Foucault, 1987, pp. 166-168)

9. «É dócil um corpo que pode ser submetido, que pode ser utilizado, que pode ser transformado e aperfeiçoado.» (Foucault, 1987, p. 118)

10. <http://new-aesthetic.tumblr.com/>

11. « From our earlier definition of the image as program (softimage) we arrive in fact at a very large definition of the image: understood as the relation of data and of algorithms that are engaged in an operation of data gathering, processing, rendering, and exchange.» (Hoelzl e Marie, 2016). Vide: Hoelzl, Ingrid e Marie, Rémi (2015). *Softimage – Towards a New Theory of the Digital Image*. Intellect.

12. «A indústria audiovisual é uma indústria farmacêutica que administra e gere os produtos da adição visual. Os produtos vendidos no mercado das visibilidades devem distribuir a dor e o prazer, o terror e a segurança ao ritmo da renovação desejável para a própria saúde deste mercado.» (Mondzain, 2015, p. 85)

13. Vide o trabalho do artista Marc Lafia: <http://cargocollective.com/marclafia/>

O ano dois mil, de acordo com Marie-José Mondzain, celebrou o paroxismo do reinado da imagem no ocidente cristão, bem como o domínio incontestado da visibilidade espectacular. Mas logo a seguir, em dois mil e um, após a tragédia de 9/11, emergiu uma política de controle da visualidade mediática, George Bush anunciara um «jejum das imagens» (Mondzain, 2009, p.7) de forma a evitar a difusão da morte através dos ecrãs, instaurando por conseguinte uma crise política do visível. A *iconocracia*<sup>14</sup> da sociedade do espectacular integrado<sup>15</sup> esbarrava então com a negatividade iconoclasta dos terroristas.

A gestão do invisível, e um certo devir fantasmático da visão moderna, está integrada numa longa história de operações que visam tornar visível o invisível. No campo artístico, o aforismo de Paul Klee – de que a arte não reproduz o visível, torna visível – foi acompanhado de outras variações idênticas. Dziga Vertov afirmava igualmente que o seu *Kino-Eye* possibilitava transformar o invisível em visível, a obscuridade em clareza ou o escondido em manifesto (Vertov, 1984, p. 103).

A fábula das imagens criadas *ex nihilo* remonta à tradição pictórica das Verónicas<sup>16</sup>, estando igualmente patente na lenda do *Santo Sudário*, enquanto imagens *acheiropoietas*<sup>17</sup>. Esta mesma predisposição para dar a ver o invisível esteve manifesto no espiritismo e na vontade mediúnica. Ainda que a representação visual dos “espíritos”, das “almas do outro mundo”, dos fantasmas, dos ectoplasmas ou dos espectros, seja conhecida desde as formas visuais da Idade Média, só com o advento da fotografia, o espiritismo convocará o seu uso como valor de testemunho do real através da fotografia espírita<sup>18</sup>.

A tecnicidade inerente à fotografia radica num eterno retorno da sua própria existência enquanto *medium* habitado por espectros. O aparecimento da imagem digital, imagem não tanto de signos da realidade mas de signos de signos (Batchen, 2004, p. 324) e berço das novas imagens virtuais e dos simulacros da realidade ontológica, viria acrescentar um novo limiar na história das imagens técnicas, do qual aliás o debate em torno da morte da fotografia e de um pós-fotográfico fazem parte integrante. No contexto de uma iconografia do invisível, o termo *fantasmático* identi-

14. «By iconocracy, I mean that organization of the visible that provokes an adherence that could be called a submission to the gaze. I choose the term deliberately.» (Mondzain, 2005, p. 152)

15. Em 1967, em *A Sociedade do Espectáculo*, Guy Debord distinguia duas fórmulas do poder espectacular, a concentrada e a difusa. O espectacular concentrado é uma característica do capitalismo burocrático, enquanto técnica de controlo do poder estatal, podendo também emergir em determinados momentos de crise do capitalismo avançado, como uma certa violência permanente fornecida pela imagem imposta do bem. O espectacular difuso acompanha a sobreprodução capitalista, o reino da abundância das mercadorias, o devir mercadoria do mundo ou a felicidade mercantil (Debord, 1991, pp. 47-49). Na edição dos *Comentários Sobre a Sociedade do Espectáculo* (Debord, 1995), Debord suscita uma terceira forma que designou como o *espectacular integrado*, como aquela que tende a impor-se mundialmente através da combinação das duas precedentes: «o sentido final do espectacular integrado é que ele se integrou na própria realidade à medida que dela falava; e que a reconstruía como falava dela (...) hoje nada lhe escapa. O espectáculo misturou-se a toda a realidade, irradiando-a» (Debord, 1995, pp.21-22).

16. Vide: H. Memling: Verónica. National Gallery fo Washington. 1480

17. Este é um tópico desenvolvido por Marie-José Mondzain, no capítulo «Histoire d'un spectre» (2005. *Image, Icon, Economy, the Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*. Stanford University Press). Nele, a autora refere que a longa tradição da *imagem verdadeira* teria encontrado, no fim do século XIX, o «fantasma de uma fotografia acheiropoietós» (p. 236), o seu medium de legitimação.

18. Para um desenvolvimento deste tópico, consultar: Matoso, Rui (2014). *As imagens técnicas e o devir fantasmático da visão moderna – da génese de uma modernidade assombrada à obra de Harun Farocki*. [<http://bit.ly/1kOQTU>]

fica «as imagens que oscilam entre visibilidade e invisibilidade, presença e ausência, materialidade e imaterialidade, muitas vezes usando a transparência ou alguma outra manipulação da aparência visual para expressar esse status ontológico paradoxal» (Gunning, 2008, p. 99). Num ambiente hipermediático saturado de imagens tangíveis e intangíveis, e povoado de imaginários virtuais, a experiência da visualidade espectral e fantasmagórica é, para o espectador contemporâneo, já da ordem da secularidade do mundo, e não tanto expressão de um mundo sobrenatural habitado por espíritos.

Se quisermos responder à pergunta lançada por Marie-José Mondzain: «Como partilhar um espaço através de uma relação comum com o invisível?» (2009, p.9), será necessário uma outra abordagem à fenomenologia do invisível e à sua operacionalidade no dispositivo visual contemporâneo, enquadrado por sua vez no dispositivo global da técnica moderna (*Ge-stell*)<sup>19</sup>.

As imagens-operativas<sup>20</sup> são produto do desenvolvimento de uma nova geração de máquinas inteligentes capazes de definir um novo espaço visual e uma visão pós-humana. Esta novidade no campo da produção e da recepção de imagens representa um marco na história social das imagens técnicas, bem como na história da cultura visual. As imagens-operativas não são produzidas para o olhar humano como até aqui tinham sido as imagens técnicas “convencionais” produzidas para fins científicos, estéticos, educativos ou de entretenimento. Forma-se assim um novo regime escópico-maquínico, no qual as imagens, apesar de invisíveis, estabilizadas em código binário ou em movimento num fluxo electromagnético, se re-materializam nos ecrãs, desejando tornar-se operacionais e proactivas, e não apenas superficiais e passivas. Mas se perguntarmos: quem são afinal os destinatários principais destas imagens produzidas para consumo algorítmico? Teríamos obviamente de responder que são os computadores, e não os humanos. Haverá afinal imagens que não se destinem ao olhar?

Nas ultimas décadas, e de forma transversal aos múltiplos domínios da acção humana, a cultura visual mudou de forma, distanciando-se da visão humana e tornando-se paradoxalmente invisível. Uma grande parte das imagens são agora produzidas por máquinas e para máquinas, sem praticamente necessidade de passarem pelo campo visual do olhar antropomórfico. Chegados a este ponto, se quisermos compreender o mundo invisível e digital da produção visual entre máquinas, i.e., a cultura visual maquínica, teremos de desaprender a ver como humanos?

The landscape of invisible images and machine vision is becoming evermore active. Its continued expansion is starting to have profound effects on human life, eclipsing even the rise of mass culture in the mid 20th century. Images have begun to intervene in everyday life, their functions changing from representation and mediation, to activations, operations, and enforcement. Invisible images are actively watching us, poking and prodding, guiding our movements, inflicting pain and inducing pleasure. But all of this is hard to see. (Paglen, 2016)

---

19. Sobre o conceito de dispositivo da técnica moderna (*Ge-stell*) vide Heidegger, «A questão da técnica». Para uma crítica global do conceito vide José Bragança de Miranda «Reflexões sobre a perfeição da técnica e o fim da política na modernidade» (revista Comunicação & Linguagens, nº 4, dezembro 1986).

20. Conceito inicialmente desenvolvido pelo cineasta Harun Farocki, em diversos dos seus filmes e instalações, mas também no seu artigo: Farocki, Harun (2004). *Phantom Images*. Public nº 29 (2004): New Localities.

No contexto cibernético em que habitamos, a produção do agenciamento é, em grande medida, resultado da interação humana com as imagens-operativas e com a computação algorítmica que lhe é intrínseca. Desenvolve-se assim uma forma de percepção sintética (*machine vision*) aliada do desenvolvimento da inteligência artificial (*machine learning*), que, estando conectada em rede (redes neurais), pode gerar uma «*neuro social media*» (Cantor, 2016, p. 27), capaz de produzir imagens e textos inteligíveis para si mesmo, fazendo emergir uma xenoconsciência<sup>21</sup> com capacidade especulativa<sup>22</sup> (*self-aware*)<sup>23</sup> e dialogante, uma vez que percepcionaria, interpretaria e partilharia o mesmo mundo que os humanos.

O que é crucial na época de consolidação da percepção sintética (artificial), é a transformação do regime escópico associado durante séculos à perspectiva enquanto forma simbólica, e ao ocularcentrismo. A transmutação da óptica humana – demasiado humana – e das suas formas de representação, catalogação e codificação, até ao ponto de se tornarem finalmente obsoletas por via de uma nova mimesis tecno-algorítmica.

A investigação em torno de uma nova categoria da imagem, *imagem-neural* (*neuro-image*), conceito desenvolvido por Patrícia Pister (2012), requer ainda o reconhecimento das propriedades constituintes dos modos de afeção e da imbricação entre a neurociência dos afectos e a computação afectiva. Assim, é importante observar que a formação da imagem-neural é resultante da interação transdutiva entre o dispositivo tecnológico e as bases neuronais da afeção, e permite por isso, a manipulação dos estados emocionais e dos sentimentos (Pister, 2012, p. 113). A imagem-neural é indubitavelmente um componente das práticas mediais em rede e das tecnologias digitais ubíquas.

Ainda que devamos distinguir entre a imagem sensorial (*picture*) que vemos nos ecrãs ou noutros suportes, e a imagem mental formada no córtex visual (*image*), a imagem eletrónica veio desestabilizar a já de si fragilizada ontologia das imagens. Mas, se concordarmos que o grande objectivo tecnocientífico da actualidade é o de extrair e plantar imagens directamente no cérebro, há preocupações fundadas no que diz respeito às surpreendentes tecnologias extractivas de imagens mentais (nos quais estão incluídas os sonhos, as memórias ou as ideias). Neste campo é hoje usada, entre outras, uma técnica (*Brain Viewer*)<sup>24</sup> que transforma os impulsos eléctricos das re-

21. Jean-François Lyotard, no primeiro capítulo do *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (1991, pp. 13-14), depois de nos lembrar que a tecnologia não é uma invenção humana, coloca a hipótese de criação de uma consciência pós-humana, apta a escapar da Terra antes da derradeira explosão solar: « That is: how to make thought without a body possible. A thought that continues to exist after the death of the human body (...) So theoretically the solution is very simple: manufacture hardware capable of 'nurturing' software at least as complex (or replex) as the present-day human brain, but in nonterrestrial conditions».

22. Vide: *A Imagem Especulativa* (Rui Matoso, 2016): <http://interact.com.pt/24/a-imagem-especulativa/> [acedido a 22 Janeiro 2017].

23. Vide: *The Self-Aware Image in the Wireless Obscura* (Robert Pepperell): «Today, a different technological age suggests a different kind of attribution of self-awareness to images. We are becoming increasingly familiar with the technologically distributed sensorium, the extended body, virtual and nonlocal experience, and the plethora of interfaces, projections and feedback systems that demand and shape our attention in daily life. In this climate, the intermingling of consciousness with all aspects of perceptible reality is so intimate that commentators, like Ron Burnett in 'How Images Think' (2004), have been led to conclude that images, which often mediate our experience of technology, are themselves imbued with human thought.»

24. [www.gallantlab.org/brain\\_viewer.html](http://www.gallantlab.org/brain_viewer.html); Template 2.0: [http://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/185590\\_en.html](http://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/185590_en.html); Brainshape: [http://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/96781\\_en.html](http://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/96781_en.html)



des neuronais do córtex visual, em pixels, e nos fornece uma representação (*picture*) das imagens mentais produzidas no interior da “câmara escura” craniana.

Se relacionarmos a tendência telepática da tecnologia<sup>25</sup>, com as imagens-operativas produzidas por sistemas de vigilância ubíqua (reconhecimento de padrões), podemos verificar como um curto-circuito se estabelece entre o exterior e o interior, e de como os sistemas de vigilância difusa do mundo (das cidades, dos rostos, da biométrica, das comunicações ou dos agenciamentos coletivos) se expandem e penetram até ao mais íntimo neurónio. Afinal, a gestão do visível apropriado pela cibernética é a condição do modelo dominante de produção das imagens-operativas e da industrialização do não-olhar (Virilio, 1994, p. 73)<sup>26</sup>, de acordo com as necessidades das indústrias da informação, militares, médicas ou do entretenimento.

### **Cibernética, Premediação e Mediashock**

*La première image / Ce n'est pas une image juste / C'est juste une image.*

Jean-Luc Godard

Georg Simmel, em 1903, experimentava a intensificação da estimulação nervosa da vida mental urbana, a qual exige uma qualidade e quantidade diferente de consciência do que aquela que é exigida pela vida rural: «O cidadão desenvolve um órgão que o protege contra as ameaçadoras tendências e discrepâncias do seu ambiente externo que poderiam desarraigá-lo: mais do que com o coração ele reage sobretudo com a mente, na qual uma tomada de consciência acrescida assume a prerrogativa psíquica (...) A economia monetária e a dominância do intelecto estão intrinsecamente ligados» (Simmel, 1903).

Em 1930, aquando da publicação de *O mal-estar na civilização*, Sigmund Freud já nos alertava para este devir electro-transcendental, afirmando que o homem se havia tornado uma espécie de Deus das próteses, pois quando faz uso de todos os seus órgãos auxiliares, ele é verdadeiramente magnífico; mas esses órgãos, porém, não cresceram nele e, às vezes, ainda lhe causam muitas dificuldades, traumas.

Na hipótese de Marshall McLuhan da narcose eléctrica de Narciso, a adição narcótica resulta de uma resposta traumática criada pela auto-amputação<sup>27</sup> e pela substituição protésica causada pela extensão técnica do cérebro e do sistema nervoso central. É como se essa expansão e conexão, entre cérebro e contexto cibernético exterior, fosse demasiado violenta e hiper-estimulante, e desse modo seriam disparados os alarmes biológicos produtores de um estado de narcose que permita

---

25. Vide Jacqueline Drinkall: *Neuromodulations of Extro-Scientific Telepathy*. [www.academia.edu/20448164/Neuromodulations\\_of\\_Extro-Scientific\\_Telepathy](http://www.academia.edu/20448164/Neuromodulations_of_Extro-Scientific_Telepathy) [acedido a 18/04/2016]

26. «The production of sightless vision is itself merely the reproduction of an intense blindness that will become the latest and last form of industrialisation: the industrialisation of the non-gaze.» (Virilio, 1994, p. 73)

27. «In the physical stress of superstimulation of various kinds, the central nervous system acts to protect itself by a strategy of amputation or isolation of the offending organ, sense, or function (...) The principle of self-amputation as an immediate relief of strain on the central nervous system applies very readily to the origin of the media of communication from speech to computer (...) With the arrival of electric technology, man extended, or set outside himself, a live model of the central nervous system itself. To the degree that this is so, it is a development that suggests a desperate and suicidal autoamputation, as if the central nervous system could no longer depend on the physical organs to be protective buffers against the slings and arrows of outrageous mechanism.» (McLuhan, 1964, pp. 52-54)

limitar os danos causados pelo sofrimento. Na fase de ansiedade dos media eléctricos impera a apatia e o inconsciente, mas também a anestesia do sistema nervoso central, conferindo ao ser humano a experiência absoluta da tecnologia como extensão do corpo físico: «It has now been explained that media, or the extensions of man, are "make happen"agents, but not "make aware"agents» (McLuahn, 1964, p.59)<sup>28</sup>.

Na esfera da televisão e dos *social media*, é hoje consensual que o 9/11 (destruição do *World Trade Center*, em 2001) originou um *mediashock* (Grusin, 2015) que ainda hoje reverbera nos estudos das humanidades digitais, designadamente na tentativa de se compreender de que forma esse choque mediático vem afectando o ser humano enquanto sistema biológico (organismo), que alterações no sensorio humano são provocadas pela materialidade dos media; ou, entender qual o poder dos media para estabelecer padrões sociais ou formações coletivas da afectividade<sup>29</sup>.

Uma coisa parece evidente neste mundo espetacular «da morte da imagem na imagem da morte» (Mondzain, 2009, p. 6): emergiu com maior intensidade um complexo dispositivo técnico-informacional (cibernético), com formas próprias de agenciamento, novos tipos de eventos, de objetos e actantes, plataformas de redes sociais, algoritmos com inteligência artificial, e as inúmeras interações entre estes elementos promoveram a expansão do *big data*, da cibervigilância e da psicose da insegurança a todas as esferas da vida pública e privada.

Imersos no dispositivo tecno-estético global, que engloba o complexo entretenimento-industrial-militar<sup>30</sup>, vivemos hoje como peixes num aquário de águas cibernéticas, somos mobilizados pelo agenciamento maquínico e, mais concretamente, pela estrutura técnica da *premediação* (Grusin, 2015), cujo desígnio é o de mobilizar e modular, no presente, orientações afectivas – individuais e colectivas – em direcção a um futuro potencial, ou seja, em direcção à formação de uma virtualidade real.

A *premediação* descreve a formação afectiva e temporal<sup>31</sup> das sociedades em rede e a transformação do mundo numa espécie de vídeo-jogo de computador permanente, permitindo apenas certos movimentos aos jogadores no espaço virtual do jogo. A Internet e mais especificamente *World Wide Web* é, neste sentido, um espaço virtual *premediado* tecnicamente, algorítmica, social e culturalmente. Resumidamente, a *premediação* faz parte de um regime medial heterogéneo, cujo propósito é garantir que, aconteça o que acontecer no futuro, tudo estava previsto como acontecimento em potência, ou seja, o futuro, tal como o passado, são realidades que já foram premediadas pela contínua interactividade *transmedia*:

28. Existindo enquanto agentes operacionais ao dispor do controlo biopolítico, mas não como agentes críticos da falsa consciência, ou da «consciência feliz», na expressão de Herbert Marcuse, em *O Homem Unidimensional*.

29. «As formas dominantes de controlo social são tecnológicas num sentido novo (...) A eficácia do sistema impede que os indivíduos reconheçam que esse sistema não comporta outras condições além das que comunicam o poder repressivo da totalidade» (Marcuse, 2011, pp. 31-33).

30. «Government is the Entertainment division of the military-industrial complex». (Frank Zappa)

31. «These heterogeneous affective and temporal formations emerge from predominant technical and medial formations, through something like what Gilbert Simondon understands as individuation (...) The affective temporality of premediation is the temporality of anticipation, in which mobile, socially networked media work together to produce, satisfy, and maintain individual and collective affective states of anticipation towards a potential, virtual, and thereby already real futurity.» (Grusin, 2015, p. 32).

Premediation entails the generation of possible future scenarios or possibilities which may come true or which may not, but which work in any event to guide action (or shape public sentiment) in the present (...) the extension of media forms, practices, and technologies into the future so that the future will always already have been re-mediated. (Grusin, 2015, p. 47-51).

Desde a doutrina da “guerra preventiva”<sup>32</sup> (*preemptive war*) – Iraque 2003 –, passando pelas tecnologias de precognição de crimes (*precrime*)<sup>33</sup>, à predição e futurização dos mercados financeiros, todos estes quasi-objectos encontram-se hoje fortemente conectados às estruturas psíquicas humanas, formando uma gigantesca cognisfera<sup>34</sup>.

Se o cérebro é o lugar de integração e tradução das impressões, da percepção e da experiência humana, permitindo-nos a interpretação dos contextos em que nos situamos, e se a envolvente contextual é *psicotecnológica*, é na interação entre o cérebro e o ambiente digital das *tecnologias transparentes*<sup>35</sup> que se formam sinergias automatizadas e a simulação de estados de consciência produzidos por computadores. É portanto na interação entre cérebro e as psicotecnologias, as quais operam como extensões da psique (Kerchov, 1997, p. 33), que emergem alterações na consciência (enquanto campo unificado de experiência) e na própria rede neuronal (enquanto estrutura biológica do cérebro), pois o cérebro tem de se calibrar segundo as métricas do ambiente em que vive, e as suas conexões internas modificam-se dinamicamente em sintonia com as perturbações externas. É neste trabalho de adaptação constante da rede neuronal (neuroplasticidade) que reside a operacionalidade do *neuropoder* (Warren Neidich, 2010, p. 545). A produção virtual de catástrofes futuras instila o pânico e promove a inércia social no presente, ao mesmo tempo que difunde um sentimento tecnológico do sublime<sup>36</sup>, bem como relativiza a gravidade da situação política internacional face a outros eventos extremos enquadrados na era do antropoceno.

### Neocibernética e Computação Ideológica do Invisível

*The computational age — the age of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter — is dominated by the idea that there are clean slates in the unconscious. New media forms have not only lifted the lid previous cultural eras had put on the unconscious. They have become the new infrastructures of the unconscious.*

Achille Mbembe

---

32. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Preventive\\_war](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Preventive_war)

33. [www.wired.com/2013/01/precog-software-predicts-crime/](http://www.wired.com/2013/01/precog-software-predicts-crime/); [www.technocracy.news/index.php/2016/08/03/chicago-police-using-pre-crime-ai-arrest-people-commit-crime/](http://www.technocracy.news/index.php/2016/08/03/chicago-police-using-pre-crime-ai-arrest-people-commit-crime/); [www.predpol.com/](http://www.predpol.com/); [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minority\\_Report\\_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minority_Report_(film)); [www.wired.com/2012/06/minority-report-tech/](http://www.wired.com/2012/06/minority-report-tech/)

34. Vide: Whalen, Thomas (2000). *Data Navigation, Architectures of Knowledge*. A cognisfera é assim um termo que permite identificar um ecossistema de interconexão cognitiva, no qual as máquinas e os organismos humanos estão cada vez mais integrados.

35. Tecnologias transparentes, são a tendência que as tecnologias adquirirem cada vez mais para se integrarem nos nossos corpos e na nossa vida, esta incorporação tecnológica deve-se essencialmente aos avanços na nano-electrónica e nano-materiais, cuja utilização é praticamente invisível. (vide Clark: 48-49)

36. Estaremos a salvo da catástrofe, e disso retiramos prazer, enquanto ela for apenas distante, virtual ou mediada.

O ciberespaço, essa «alucinação consensual, vivida diariamente por biliões de operadores legítimos em todas as nações» (Gibson, 2004, p. 65), e cuja persistência se baseia na computação ubíqua e invisível, favorecida pela Internet e pelo conjunto de redes telemáticas que conectam entre si humanos, máquinas, software e infraestruturas tecnológicas, encontra-se a funcionar sobre as plataformas que Benjamin Bratton identifica em *The Stack*, como plataformas para a construção de soberania tecnológica e política (Bratton, 2015). Mark Surman, director da Mozilla Foundation, escreveu recentemente no seu blog, que o controlo da Internet é realizado por gigantes como a Amazon, Google ou Facebook: «The rise of digital empires is creating a colonial vision of the internet – we have to stop it»<sup>37</sup>.

Na recente eleição de Trump e na campanha de Hilary Clinton é possível verificar este entrelaçamento entre poder, redes sociais e cibernética. No caso de Trump foi divulgada a forma como a sua campanha no Facebook utilizou “aviários de Likes”<sup>38</sup>, usados para aumentar exponencialmente os *Likes* na sua página – uma prática corrente no Facebook. Já Hilary Clinton, dirigiu a sua campanha com base no uso de um software analítico, cujo algoritmo foi baptizado de Ada<sup>39</sup>. Uma das funções de Ada foi a de recolher dados que lhe permitissem realizar 400000 simulações de acções de resposta face à campanha de Trump. Seja como for, entre o algoritmo feminino de Clinton e a mão-de-obra barata a clicar *Likes* em Trump, a verdade é que a «América continua a hesitar entre a força invisível da autoridade e a potência visível da pura dominação nos regimes da visão e do olhar que o seu cinema instaurou.» (Mondzain, 2015, 361).

A partir do conceito de *Filtro Bolha* (Eli Pariser)<sup>40</sup>, mas com um título algo bombástico, a revista *Wired*<sup>41</sup> afirmava, a propósito das eleições americanas, que o nosso *Filtro Bolha* estaria a destruir a democracia. Sucintamente, o efeito do *Filtro Bolha* aparece como sendo o resultado da busca personalizada na web, na qual um algoritmo selecciona as informações que um determinado utilizador gostaria de aceder, com base nas interações registadas no seu perfil ou conta de utilizador. Desta forma os utilizadores são segregados em ilhas de informação e separados daqueles que discordam dos seus pontos de vista, isolando-os efectivamente nas suas bolhas culturais ou ideológicas.

Por um lado, esta questão do poder da rede (*network power*) tem de ser dialecticamente equacionada com a questão do poder político soberano, uma vez que a expansão empírica da cibernética, na configuração das redes telemáticas atuais, se reificou efetivamente como infraestrutura e potência de controlo, ou como afirmam Galloway e Thacker:

The network, it appears, has emerged as a dominant form describing the nature of control today (...) Perhaps there is no greater lesson about networks than the lesson about control: networks, by their mere existence, are not liberating; they exercise

37. <https://blog.mozilla.org/internetcitizen/2016/11/15/rise-digital-empires/>

38. <http://www.casilli.fr/2016/11/20/never-mind-the-algorithms-the-role-of-exploited-digital-labor-and-global-click-farms-in-trumps-election/>

39. [www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/11/09/clintons-data-driven-campaign-relied-heavily-on-an-algorithm-named-ada-what-didnt-she-see/?utm\\_term=.83549c343347](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/11/09/clintons-data-driven-campaign-relied-heavily-on-an-algorithm-named-ada-what-didnt-she-see/?utm_term=.83549c343347)

40. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Filter\\_bubble](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Filter_bubble)

41. [www.wired.com/2016/11/filter-bubble-destroying-democracy/](http://www.wired.com/2016/11/filter-bubble-destroying-democracy/)

novel forms of control that operate at a level that is anonymous and nonhuman, which is to say material (Galloway e Thacker, 2007, pp. 4-5).

Por outro, o que é realmente revolucionário na tendência para a invisibilidade da computação ubíqua é a crescente imbricação entre técnica e afeção, mais especificamente, a existência de fluxos informacionais imperceptíveis à consciência humana, e a centralidade da microtemporalidade constituinte do sensorio da experiência contemporânea<sup>42</sup>.

Se, como vimos anteriormente, em McLuhan, os media são uma extensão do sistema nervoso, uma prótese, mas igualmente um trauma, também o inverso é verdadeiro, i.e., que o sistema nervoso, a consciência e o inconsciente, incorporem estratos e afeções circulantes no ecossistema cibernético. Neste sentido a percepção humana – e o comportamento/agenciamento a ela associados – é resultante da conexão vectorial e da transdução coletiva entre seres humanos e sistemas informáticos, numa fusão entre carne e metal. O aparelhamento técnico do sujeito, e da afeção, coloca-nos inevitavelmente no campo do pós-humano e do ciborgue, bem como no campo técnico das próteses neurais (*neuroprosthetics*).

A fusão cibernética entre o cérebro (e sistema nervoso central) e a emergência fenomenológica da mente expandida, representa desde então uma nova linha de actuação do behaviourismo cibernético (*ciberbehaviourismo*), o qual tem vindo a implementar-se como meio ambiente eléctrico, imersivo e holístico, i.e., que procura agir em todo o ciclo do processo de *feedback*, automatizando a administração de inputs lógicos e afectivos (racionalidade e emoção) na expectativa de recolher outputs calculáveis e preemptivos, e assim exercer uma forma de controlo difuso com o objectivo de manter a homeostase nos colectivos sociotécnicos. A cognição algorítmica é hoje central a um tecnocapitalismo que se apropriou dos mecanismos comportamentais e que integra a retroalimentação enquanto parte da equação política e ideológica do neoliberalismo. Todavia, deve-se ao facto de a referida homeostase não ser nunca plenamente alcançada, pois o equilíbrio é meta-estável<sup>43</sup>, que os sistemas de controlo e as potências dominação não existirem sem formas de resistência igualmente dinâmicas e táticas (*tactical media*).

Ainda neste âmbito, da conexão técnica entre o corpo humano (afeção, cérebro, consciência e inconsciente) e as tecnologias neocibernética<sup>44</sup>, seria pertinente trazer à colação o conceito de *inconsciente-código* (Katherine Hayles)<sup>45</sup>, tal como o de *inconsciente-óptico* (Walter Benja-

---

42. A produção (processamento) autopoietica da imagem digital – no contexto neocibernético acima referido – vem ganhando autonomia face às operações que envolvem humanos. As imagens propagam-se hoje automaticamente, e ao nível do seu elemento básico – o píxel – são geridas por protocolos maquínicos e algoritmos geradores daquilo que Mark Hansen designa como *Post-Perceptual Images* (Hansen, 2016, p. 18).

43. Vide: Simondon, Gilbert (2007). *El modo de existencia de los objetos técnicos*. Buenos Aires. Prometeo Libros.

44. Enraizada nas investigações em torno da autopoiesis (de Heinz von Foerster, Gregory Bateson, Henri Atlan, Humberto Maturana, Francisco Varela, Lynn Margulis e Niklas Luhmann) a neocibernética configura-se como teoria dos mecanismos recursivos dos sistemas cognitivos no horizonte da tecnociência contemporânea da emergência e da enação. Neste sentido, a neocibernética (cibernética de segunda ordem), ao combinar as duas dimensões dos fenómenos emergentes – epistemológicos e ontológicos – configura-se como um recurso necessário ao entendimento do agenciamento humano tecnicamente distribuído, i.e., das formas de agência híbridas no entrelaçamento entre o (pós)humano e os processos técnicos diluídos na tecno-semio-bio-esfera.

45. «O código é o inconsciente da linguagem» (Hayles, 2006, p. 137)

min)<sup>46</sup> ou o de *inconsciente-visível* (Farocki, 2004), os quais podem ser englobadas num conjunto maior que Nigel Thrift nomeia como *inconsciente-tecnológico* (Thrift, 2004). Afinal, esses inconscientes parcelares foram historicamente constituídos pelo aparelhamento tecno-estético do humano, e podem ser subsumidos hoje no contexto da problemática pós-humanista, o que implica uma teoria do cérebro como membrana transdutiva<sup>47</sup>, i.e, como interface imerso na tecno-esfera.

Um caso de estudo adequado à compreensão da relação entre inconsciente e tecnologias imersivas de realidade virtual, encontra-se patente na obra *Serious Games*<sup>48</sup> (Harun Farocki)<sup>49</sup>. Aquilo que descobrimos é que a afinidade entre o inconsciente psíquico e as imagens de realidade virtual, pode ser verificada nos jogos de guerra utilizados pelo exército norte-americano enquanto simuladores para finalidades paradoxais, desde o treino militar ao uso terapêutico. Para além de serem jogos de batalha (*serious games*), estes sistemas de visualização *perlaboram* terapias cibernéticas em militares que sofrem de *Transtorno de Stress Pós-Traumático de Guerra*, criando assim um isomorfismo entre a fase dos treinos pré-batalha e a fase de terapia pós-trauma; ambas suportadas através das mesmas plataformas tecnológicas: imagens, algoritmos e computadores.

Numa entrevista recente, o realizador de *HyperNormalization*<sup>50</sup>, Adam Curtis (2016), refere-se à invisibilidade do actual sistema de poder, do seguinte modo: «The current system of power is fundamentally pretty invisible to us. It resides in finance, in all sorts of new kinds of management, and within computers and the media, which involves invisible algorithms that shape and manage what information we get.»<sup>51</sup>

Em *The Spectre of Capital*, Joseph Vogl, examina a fantasmagoria do capitalismo financeiro através da história da sua espectralização, desde a mão invisível de um *deus-ex-machina* (Adam Smith) à enigmática fórmula dos derivativos Black-Scholes. O espírito do capitalismo financeiro, na sua deriva abstracta e digital, é hoje um fantasma electrónico à solta no ciberespaço cujas assombrações são bem reais e sentidas no mundo social e concreto do quotidiano. Afinal, aquela mão divina e invisível que supostamente regulava e animava os mercados, é hoje uma força diabólica capaz de engendrar lucros automaticamente: «money with procreative power» (Vogl, 2015, p. 56).

Este fantasma, avisa Marie-José Mondzain, é uma ideologia do poder da visão, «As indústrias e as técnicas que produzem as modernas visibilidades estão, mais do que nunca, encarregadas de operar os gestos que produzem o invisível» (Mondzain, 2015, pp. 274-275). No reino da invisibilidade semiótica, ou seja, nas formações ideológicas e discursivas da imagem, o poder esconde-se, e os seus sinais são objecto de uma ocultação e encriptação que os põe ao abrigo da apropriação no visível.

46. «A câmara leva-nos ao inconsciente óptico, tal como a psicanálise ao inconsciente das pulsões.» (Benjamin, 1992, p. 105).

47. Gilles Deleuze: «the brain's precisely this boundary of a continuous two-way movement between Inside and Outside, this membrane between them.» (Deleuze, 1995, p. 176)

48. [www.harunfarocki.de/installations/2000s/2009/serious-games-iii-immersion.html](http://www.harunfarocki.de/installations/2000s/2009/serious-games-iii-immersion.html)

49. Vide: Matoso, Rui (2015). *Double-bind tecno-estético – imersão, código, inconsciente e trauma na obra "Serious Games"*. [<http://tinyurl.com/jyfcfer>]

50. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HyperNormalisation>

51. [http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews\\_features/qa/adam-curtis-hypernormalisation-interview-54468](http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/qa/adam-curtis-hypernormalisation-interview-54468)

Mas não nos iludamos, a automação e a invisibilidade cibernética da dominação não é nem magia nem sequer uma imposição transcendental de uma divindade cibernética (*Cibermedusa* ?<sup>52</sup>). A este novo regime de governamentalidade e controlo das subjectividades, capaz de instaurar simultaneamente uma realidade virtual, a codificação digital da vida e a redução das incertezas pelo tratamento algorítmico da informação acumulada, Antoinette Rouvroy caracteriza-o por se fundamentar em dois processos complementares: o *data-behaviourism* e a governação algorítmica. Rouvroy invoca a expressão *algorithmic governmentality* como aquela que não permite processos de subjectivação humana<sup>53</sup>.

É como se a lógica operacional da *premediação* (Grusin) fosse lançada num primeiro momento, produzindo consenso social e horizontes de expectativa a partir de cenários político-sociais massivamente distribuídos nos *media* e nas redes; para futuramente construir e reificar uma objectividade *premediada*, à qual, ou se adere positivamente com o ímpeto de uma consciência feliz, ou se desconstrói através da negatividade e da resistência simbólica.

Ideology's ultimate trick has always been to present itself as objective truth, to present historical conditions as eternal, and to present political formations as natural. Because image operations function on an invisible plane and are not dependent on a human seeing subject (and are therefore not as obviously ideological as giant paintings of Napoleon) they are harder to recognize for what they are: immensely powerful levers of social regulation that serve specific race and class interests while presenting themselves as objective. (Paglen, 2016)

A visão organizacional subjacente aos modelos dos sistemas dinâmicos tomava como ponto de partida o enunciado cibernético da automação, auto-regulação e controle (homeostase e *feedback*), sustentada na hipótese de Norbert Wiener de que o aparecimento de computadores digitais introduziria uma nova fase da governação política e uma nova revolução industrial que consistia na substituição da decisão humana pela da máquina, o que significaria a substituição de uma lógica de poder hierárquica (dos sistemas políticos convencionais) por uma lógica de controle e comunicação horizontal (Wiener, 1954, p. 71). Na década de 1970, Jay Forrester, um dos pioneiros da cibernética, reafirmou a sua capacidade para resolver as novas problemáticas evidenciadas pela então crise do petróleo, e aplicou a sua teoria de sistemas ao desenho de um diagrama cibernético da estrutura do sistema mundial (Fig.1.). Este diagrama foi posteriormente transformado em modelo computacional que previu o colapso da população.

---

52. Reinterpretando e actualizando o mito de Perseu e da petrificação do olhar pela Medusa, proponho a hipótese de uma Cibermedusa (medusa-operativa), a qual não possibilita a mediação pela imagem técnica, sendo um ser-digital metamórfico que está fora do âmbito da representação, construída através de código, algoritmos e software, num pacto firmado entre as indústrias tecnológicas.

53. «Algorithmic governmentality is without subject: it operates with infra-individual data and supra-individual patterns without, at any moment, calling the subject to account for himself» (Rouvroy, 2012, p. 2).

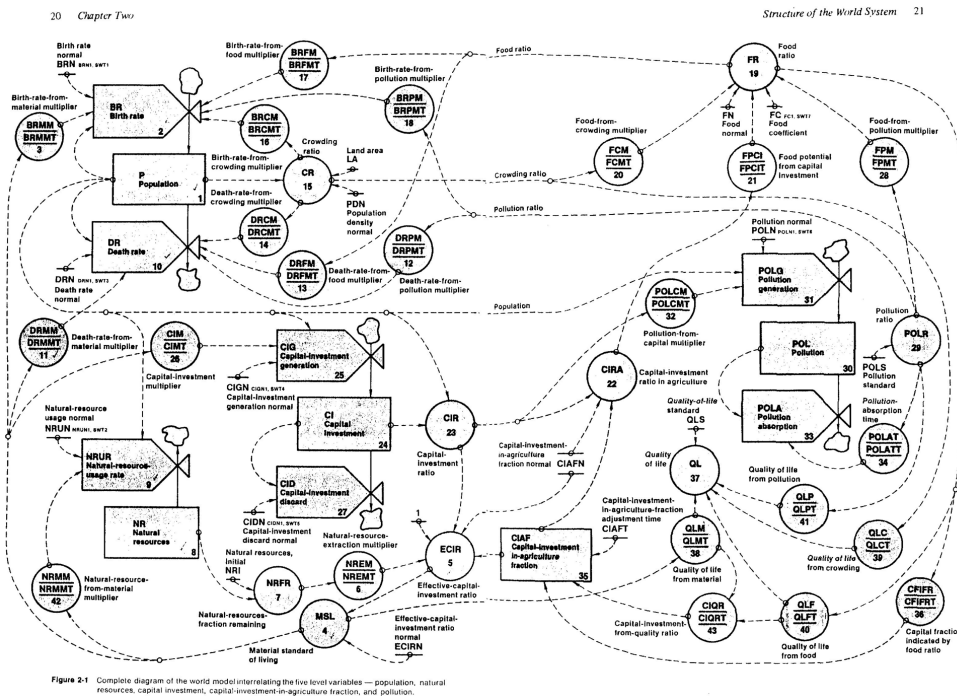


Figura 1. Diagrama cibernético do mundo (Jay Forrester, 1971)

Na genealogia da automação patente nas tecnologias contemporâneas, podemos remontar ao automatismo enquanto projeto cartesiano destinado a explicar mecanicamente a vida orgânica e a comparação do corpo humano a um mecanismo de relojoaria, fruto da influência do cristianismo, no interior do qual o “relojoeiro do mundo” não poderia ser outro senão Deus, o *Artifex Maximus*. Posteriormente, já no Séc. XX, o enunciado cibernético da automação contempla mecanismos de auto-regulação e controle (homeostase e feedback)<sup>54</sup>, mas rapidamente a ideologia *New Age* da auto-governação cibernética das redes (*selforganizing networks*)<sup>55</sup> se expandiu a todos os quadrantes sociais.

A linhagem cibernética resultante das investigações em torno da comunicação e controlo no animal e na máquina, não procurou outra coisa senão dizer que esse controlo é totalmente automatizado pela inteligência artificial, ou seja, que nenhum humano preside ao manuseamento da máquina, pois a máquina é um hiper-autómato auto-sustentável e auto-regulado. Esta meta-narrativa equivale a uma mistificação dos sistemas complexos nos domínios económico e político, nos quais, como é evidente, operam entidades concretas com intenções próprias: corporações multinacionais, ideólogos e académicos, grupos de poder influentes, bancos e oligarcas financeiros,

54. Vide: Wiener, Norbert (1948). *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. MIT Press/John Wiley and Sons, NY.

55. Uma parte substancial do desenvolvimento histórico da cibernética até à actualidade foi registado no filme-documentário *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace*, da autoria do realizador Adam Curtis, e inspirado num poema homónimo, de tom irónico, escrito por Richard Brautigan (1967).



etc., cujas estratégias e ações postas em prática implicam certamente conflitualidade social e política, apesar de todos os esforços no sentido de consensualizar, estetizar e uniformizar os modelos de governação, de regulação e de gestão.

Machine-machine systems are extraordinary intimate instruments of power that operate through an aesthetics and ideology of objectivity, but the categories they employ are designed to reify the forms of power that those systems are set up to serve. As such, the machine-machine landscape forms a kind of hyper-ideology that is especially pernicious precisely because it makes claims to objectivity and equality. (Paglen, 2016)

Quando se atinge um determinado estágio de dominação, corre-se o risco de toda a oposição, negatividade e alternativas serem absorvidas. Neste ponto, alerta Herbert Marcuse, a racionalidade tecnológica revela-se como potência política e veículo de dominação eficaz, criando um «universo verdadeiramente totalitário no qual a sociedade e a natureza, o espírito e o corpo são mantidos num estado de mobilização permanente em defesa desse universo» (Marcuse, 2011, p.41). Como bem assinala Geert Lovink (2016), sem darmos por isso entrámos numa nova era hegemónica, as plataformas sociais digitais como sistemas de controlo *ciberbehaviourista* (totalitário). Quanto mais de nós transpusermos para as redes sociais, mais esses pequenos momentos da vida humana serão transformados em capital pelas indústrias que gravitam em torno da extração de dados, perfis e informações. Os *social media* exigem a nossa constante mobilização e performance, um *show de likes, posts, selfies*, imagens e comentários ao ritmo do *loop* infinito das afecções computacionais e da adição neuronal crescente.

Ora, se na cultura visual do visível, cujo grau máximo foi enunciado como “sociedade do espectáculo”, o controle era efectuado pela imagem enfática da propaganda ou da publicidade. Na cultura visual do invisível, cujo denominador comum é a imagem-operativa e a sua correlativa percepção sintética, o controle é pervasivo e actua através das extensões neocibernéticas do pós-humano. No primeiro caso, a resistência simbólica e a teoria crítica foram suficientes para desconstruir os diversos mecanismos de doutrinação e manipulação emocional. No segundo, as extensões técnicas presentes nas psicotecnologias permitem uma conexão mais intensa e directa com o cérebro, designadamente através dos mecanismos de adição e recompensa (*neurofeedback*), e cujo potencial de resistência depende da neuroplasticidade, ou seja, da capacidade de activar outros circuitos neuronais através de práticas culturais emancipatórias. Talvez seja devido a estas transformações que as formas de resistência aos actuais sistemas de governação (neoliberais e anti-democráticos), ainda ancoradas no espectáculo mediático (marchas, manifestações, etc.), evidenciem dificuldades na transformação política e social mais imediata.

## Referências

- Adorno, T. (1962). *Dialética negativa*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar.
- Batchen, G. (2004). Ectoplasma. La fotografia en la era digital. In J. Ribalta (ed.), *Efecto Real – debates posmodernos sobre fotografia* (pp. 313-334). Editorial Gustavo Gili.
- Baudrillard, J. (1996). *O crime perfeito*. Relógio D’Água Editores.

- Benjamin, W. (1992). A obra de arte na era da sua reprodutibilidade técnica. In *Sobre arte, técnica, linguagem e política*. Lisboa: Relógio D'Água.
- Benjamin, W. (1940). On some motifs in Baudelaire. *Walter Benjamin: selected writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*. Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. Penguin Books.
- Berry, D. M. & Dieter, M. (eds.) (2015). *Postdigital aesthetics: art, computation and design*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bratton, B. (2015). *The stack – on software and sovereignty*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Buck-Morss, S. (2009). *A tela do cinema como prótese de percepção*. Desterro [Florianópolis]: Cultura e Barbárie.
- Cantor, L. (2016). Neural social media: proposal for a future application of machine learning to the problem of image processing. In M. Salemy (ed.), *For machine use only: contemplations on algorithmic epistemology*. The New Centre for Research & Practice / Gwangju Biennale.
- Correa, M. (2016). Talbot's dream reloaded. In M. Salemy (ed.), *For machine use only: contemplations on algorithmic epistemology*. The New Centre for Research & Practice / Gwangju Biennale.
- Crary, J. (1990). *Techniques of the observer, on vision and modernity in the nineteenth century*. MIT Press.
- Crary, J. (1988). Modernizing vision. In H. Foster (ed.), *Vision and visuality* (pp. 29-43). Dia Art Foundation. Bay Press.
- Debord, G. (1995). *Comentários sobre a sociedade do espetáculo*. Lisboa: mobilis in mobile.
- Debord, G. (1991). *A sociedade do espetáculo*. Lisboa: mobilis in mobile.
- Deleuze, G. (1995). *Negotiations, 1972-1990*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Didi-Huberman, G. (2011). *O que nós vemos, o que nos olha*. Porto: Dafne Editora.
- Farocki, H. (2004). Phantom images. *Public*, (29). New Localities.
- Foster, H. (ed.) (1988). *Vision and visuality*. Dia Art Foundation. Bay Press.
- Foucault, M. (2008). *Tecnologías del yo*. Buenos Aires: Paidós.
- Foucault, M. (1987). *Vigiar e punir: nascimento da prisão*. Petrópolis: Vozes.
- Galloway, A. R. & Thacker, E. (2007). The exploit: a theory of networks. *Electronic Mediations Ser*, vol. 21. Minneapolis. U Minnesota.
- Gibson, W. (2004). *Neuromante*. Lisboa: Gradiva.
- Grusin, R. (2015). Mediashock. In D. Sharma & F. Tygstrup (eds), *Structures of feeling – affectivity and the study of culture*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Grusin, R. (2010). *Premediation: affect and mediality after 9/11*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gunning, T. (2008). *To scan a ghost: the ontology of mediated vision*.

- Hayles, K. (2006). Traumas of code. *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn, 33 (1): 136-157.
- Han, B.-C. (2013). *La sociedad de la transparencia*. Barcelona: Herder.
- Hoelzl, I. & Marie, R. (2016). *From the kino-eye to the postimage*. [<http://blog.fotomuseum.ch/2016/04/4-from-the-kino-eye-to-the-postimage/>]
- Jay, M. (1988). Scopic regimes of modernity. In H. Foster (ed.), *Vision and visibility* (pp 3-23). Dia Art Foundation. Bay Press.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Actor-network theory: reassembling the social an introduction to actor-network theory*. New York. Oxford University Press Inc.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1991). *The inhuman: reflections on time*. Polity Press.
- Lovink, G. (2016). On the social media ideology. *E-flux journal*, September, (75).
- Luhmann, N. (2000). *The reality of the mass media*. Stanford University Press.
- Marcuse, H. (2011). *O Homem unidimensional – sobre a ideologia da sociedade industrial avançada*. Lisboa: Letra Livre.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). *Le visible et l'invisible*. Éditions Gallimard.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2000). *O olho e o espírito*. Vega.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1990). *O primado da percepção e suas consequências filosóficas*. São Paulo: Papyrus Editora.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945). *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Éditions Gailimard.
- Mondzain, M.-J. (2015). *Homo spectator*. Orfeu Negro.
- Mondzain, M.-J. (2005). *Image, icon, economy: the byzantine origins of the contemporary economy*. Stanford University Press.
- Mondzain, M.-J. (2009). *A imagem pode matar?*. Lisboa: Nova Vega.
- Noys, B. (2016). The end of (Human) art. In M. Salemy (ed.), *For machine use only: contemplations on algorithmic epistemology*. The New Centre for Research & Practice / Gwangju Biennale.
- Paglen, T. (2016). *Invisible images (your pictures are looking at you)*. [<http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/invisibleimages-your-pictures-are-looking-at-you/>, acessado a 29 dezembro 2016]
- Parisi, L. & Goodman, S. (2011). *Mnemonic control*. Duke University Press.
- Pister, P. (2012). *The neuro-image: a Deleuzian fim-philosophy of digital screen culture*. California: Stanford University Press.
- Rouvroy, A. (2012). Privacy, due process and the computational turn. In M. Hildebrandt & E. De Vries (eds.), *Philosophers of law meet philosophers of technology*. Routledge.
- Simmel, G. (1903). *As metrópoles e a vida mental*.
- Sharma, D. & Tygstrup, F. (eds) (2015). *Structures of feeling – affectivity and the study of culture*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Steyerl, H. (2010). A thing like you and me. *E-flux Journal*, April, (15).

- Thrift, N. (2004). Remembering the technological unconscious by foregrounding knowledges of position. Environment and planning. *Society and Space*, 22: 175-190.
- Thompson, J. B. (2005). The new visibility. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22 (6): 31-51. SAGE.
- Vertov, D. (1984). *The writings of Dziga Vertov*. University of California Press.
- Virilio, P. (1994). *The vision machine*. Indiana University Press.
- Vogl, J. (2015). *The specter of capital*. Stanford University Press.
- Wiener, N. (1954). Men, machines, and the world about. *medicine and science*: 13-28. New York Academy of Medicine and Science, ed. I. Galderston, New York: International Universities Press. [Versão utilizada: <http://21stcenturywiener.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Men-Machines-and-the-World-About-by-N.-Wiener.pdf> (acedido a 27 Março 2015)]
- Williams, R. (1977). Structures of feeling. In *Marxism and literature* (pp. 128-135).

## Communication and Humanities: a post-conventional approach

João Carlos Correia

University of Beira Interior

joao.correia@labcom.ubi.pt

### Abstract

What do humanities bring to the study of communication? What concept of humanities can help us understand communication? Do communication studies belong to the humanities or to the social sciences field? In spite of a recent turn in communication research towards empirical data that seems to be supported by a generation of young researchers, communication sciences have almost always maintained, in their many branches, the existence of critical approaches highlighting a powerful link to the role of language and symbols and their many connections to social structures, placing particular emphasis on the phenomena of meaning and relation. Human life is essentially a life of meaning, of reflexive thought and communication. My hypothesis involves considering this concern with relation as a social phenomenon as what distinguishes it epistemically. I also believe that this distinction involves extensive attention on the nature of the human, helping maintain a productive bridge with humanities and culture.

Issues such as the role of symbols in social life are related to the constitution of subjectivity and the transmission of cultural heritage in life-world, bringing questions concerning truth, rationality, the conditions necessary for autonomy of the self and the nature of human agency to an on-going theoretical debate.

Following this tradition, attempts are made to establish communication as a discipline which finds its foundations in the concept of mediated interaction and as the discipline that expresses the relational nature of human agency. Following this perspective, the field of communication studies, in a somewhat similar way to cultural studies, has redefined itself by dealing with new cultural approaches, with the help of American cultural studies (particularly James Carey), critical theory, hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism, and critical realism as theoretical keys to unveiling the dialogue between humanities and social sciences that crosses through the communications field.

### I

**T**HE communication studies field is a privileged one for understanding some controversial approaches to the delimitation of social sciences and humanities. The polysemy of the concept sometimes raises difficulties in understanding what “communication” means when we use it.

A *Revista Estudos em Comunicação* é financiada por Fundos FEDER através do Programa Operacional Factores de Competitividade – COMPETE e por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia no âmbito do projeto *Comunicação, Filosofia e Humanidades (LabCom.IFP) UID/CCI/00661/2013*.



Communication departments and research centres are diversified, heterogeneous spaces where one can observe multiple sets of objects and world-views, theoretical frameworks and methodologies.

For instance, in the United States, the National Communication Association (NCA) is defined as the association that “advances communication as the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific and aesthetic inquiry. Indeed, in many ways, NCA and its members constantly negotiate the duality of communication as both a social science and a humanities discipline” (Parry-Giles, 2013).

One theoretical categorisation, influenced by naturalist epistemology, turns the communication process into a linear one, adjusted to a unilateral vision of manipulation by hegemonic holders of power. Communication is seen as exerting the unilateral imposition of messages that aim to consolidate the power of ruling classes. This approach makes the reception process a one-dimensional determination of meaning by agents endowed with symbolic power. The elite theories of power and democracy insist on dismissing legitimacy and recognition as crucial concepts in the interpretative and hermeneutic process.

Bringing the problem to the current days, the neoliberal logic of governmentality seems to avoid any reference to recognition or legitimacy, closing the path to normative claims. Indeed, neoliberal discursive practices bring a conception of communication in which the ethical and political dimension of the struggle for recognition is largely banned, with severe impacts on collective life. The neoliberal logic applied to communicative processes minimises inquiries on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of their processes, preferring to ask for efficiency and skills that are suitable to obtaining certain effects: success or failure replacing the question of the legitimacy and meaning of the practices used (Foucault, 6; 14; 21; 23; 40; 44).

It is justifiable to call attention to the resemblance between logical positivism and the way elite theories and neoliberal approaches seek expression in terms of a particular focus on contradiction and inconsistency (Foucault, 2008: 33). The multiplicity of voices, particularly their diversity and the reciprocity of contradictory claims, is seen as an entropic element that disturbs the efficient transmission of data. The epistemological grounds of communication sciences are far from being indifferent, bearing in mind an extensive discussion on the very nature of communication and its democratic role. The positivist advocacy for the extension of methods from natural sciences to the study of human social life is linked to strategies of power, dismissing forms of critical understanding. In fact, some variants of positivism rephrase metaphysics in a scientific language: they are not just concerned with giving accounts of the nature of the world, but they also derive authoritative norms for human conduct. They provide rules of conduct to follow for accepting some kinds of institutional arrangements rather than others (Benton and Craib, 2001: 46). They become unable to understand the plurality of forms of reasoning that cross the communicative process.

In their everyday discourses, the elite and functionalist theories are strangely similar to other ideologies that claim the status of science, considering the economic factor as the dominant one for explaining politics. In all these approaches, there are considerable shadows obscuring the complex dimensions of the communicative process, reducing it to a narrow sender-receiver paradigm of data transmission. Even more strangely, those successful theoretical efforts from elite theory emerge at

a time in the *zeitgeist* when the strong idea of the network seems to be key to understanding social reality.

In my view, the only perspective that brings autonomy to the communication field, allowing it to embrace all the dimensions of the communicative process, is one that acknowledges intersubjective experience and mediated interaction as the proper objects of the communication studies field.

As John Carey says: “Whatever the details of the production and reproduction of social life, it is through communication, through the intergraded relations of symbols and social structure, that societies, or at least those with which we are most familiar, are created, maintained, and transformed” (Carey, 1989: 109–10). So, “Communication, through language and other symbolic forms, comprises the ambiance of human existence” (Carey, 1989: 24).

While the domination model of social experience oversimplifies cultural transactions, which always contain elements of collaboration, dialogue, ritualised sharing or interaction, a “progress” model alongside it that lies in a fetishist approach to technology may be similarly reductive, masking a rationale for established ways of thinking and underestimating the individual and interactive dimensions of culture.

In order to circumscribe the domain of communication studies, one must consider the communicative process not as the transmission of symbols but as a human activity that aims to build and change its environment in order to give it a human meaning.

Communication may be understood as the essence of social relations and society, which are not just something held together by the “glue” of communication but build up communication themselves. Society is a network of symbolic connections. This very concept of a human being acting in the world, not as a solipsistic agent, is the one that suits a communicative approach to the phenomenon of society (and not vice-versa). At the same time, it demands a style of reflection that involves a dialogue with humanities, insisting on the primacy of relation. It was not by mere chance that Mrs. Thatcher firmly stated her strong sociological convictions: “There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families” (Woman’s Own, 3 October 1987 cit. in Clark, 2005: 51).

In this perspective, the communicative approach will lose its density, narrowing communication to the process of data transmission among isolated individuals.

This resilience of the metaphysical approach to society is described by Norbert Elias:

“understood either as a mere accumulation, an additive and unstructured collection of many individual people or as an object existing beyond individuals and incapable of further explanation. In this latter case the words available to us, the concepts which decisively influence the thought and action of people growing up within their sphere, make it appear as if the single human being, labeled the individual, and the plurality of people conceived as the society were two ontologically different entities” (Elias, 2001: vii).

Against this ontological difference, Elias claims:

“each individual person is really tied; he is tied to living in permanent functional dependence on other people; he is a link in the chains binding other people, just as all

others, directly or indirectly, are links in the chains which bind him. These chains are not visible and tangible in the same way as iron chains. They are more elastic, more variable, more changeable; but they are no less real, and certainly no less strong. And it is this network of the functions which people have for each other, it and nothing else, that we call "society". It represents a special kind of sphere. Its structures are what we call "social structures". And if we talk of "social laws" or "social regularities", we are referring to nothing other than this: the autonomous laws of the relations between individual people. (Elias, 2001: 16)

And finally:

“The image of men that we need for the purpose of sociological studies cannot be the one from the singular person, the *Homo sociologicus*. It must be the image of persons in the plural; obviously, one must begin with a picture of a multitude of persons, each one of them, being an open and interdependent process.” (Elias, 1980: 132).

In accordance with this perspective, communication scholars have as their object the encounter, the environment, the mutual recognition and the common focus on the communicative action as an independent variable. The human relation is, in fact, the indispensable condition to the fundamental historicity of the human being (cf. Elias, 2001: 55). Even ontological individualism, for which the world studied by the social sciences is made up of individuals interacting with one another, is not adapted enough to get the deep sense of networked individuals. Social action, according to Weber, is meaningful action directed towards the other. Methodologically this means an approach to *verstehen* (empathy) as the key word to understanding the meaningful dimension of human action and sociability.

However, individuals interacting are still individuals with respective ties and connections, suggesting a kind of sociability that finds its starting point in individuals.

This kind of ontological individualism, followed by Max Weber (1989) and phenomenologically refined by Alfred Schutz (1967, 1975, 1976), is better adjusted to understand the communicative dimension of the social world and opens a theoretical path that is more driven by symbolic systems, enabling a focus on meaningful action.

Going a step further, Elias' thought (one could add the theoretical influence of the hermeneutical thought, symbolic interactionism and theoretical attempts by Apel, 2000, and Habermas, 1987, 1989, 1995) does not accept the idea of individuals and society as different entities: in spite of the importance of understanding the subjective point of view so extensively highlighted by both Weber and Schutz, one must bear in mind that subjectivity does not work as an essence or a black box but as something that can only be understood in the interaction with the Other.

Developing the question of interpretation, symbolic interactionism means that people act on the basis of the meaning that objects have for them, which is developed through social interaction and modified through interpretative processes employed in further interaction (Blumer, 1969). Finally, hermeneutics (for instance, Gadamer, 1992) highlights and emphasises the historicity of Being. History (culture and tradition) takes precedence over the individual. The hermeneutical process assumes a merging of horizons. In a surprising move, Habermas finds in language not



a moment of potential domination but a place of critical activity and claims for legitimacy. Linguistics is the key to overcoming the philosophy of conscience still shared by Weber and Schutz. Giddens (1996) maintains that it is easier to support the importance of reflexivity starting from perspectives such as those supported by Mead (1969), Wittgenstein, Heidegger (1995) and Gadamer (1992). One interesting approach comes, finally, from critical realism (Bhaskar 2008, 2008-b), which describes knowledge as a process that demands the intervention of means of representation. Knowledge works as an achievement. Despite their independence from reality, current beliefs are always open to correction in light of cognitive work, including observation, experimental evidence, interpretation and theoretical reasoning. Metaphor and analogy are part of the cognitive process.

Going a second step further (bearing in mind, for instance, the work of Bruno Latour, 2012), all the meaningful encounters among human beings or between human beings and nature take place in an environment made possible by a technical device or medium. Differently from all the beings and animals that find their territory as their environment, human beings when newly born are unable to interact with other humans in a concrete territory. The only way that humans have to survive on this planet depends on the chance to invent artificial devices to build a human environment, their own world of technical objects.

Even when face-to-face, humans must use the technical device of language, the first and only medium that allows humans to mutually interact. The symbolic process is the one that explains the hominisation process. Hominisation means the attribution of meaning to objective and subjective worlds. That attribution of meaning is the phenomenon labelled as “culture” and involves not only living human beings but the existence of interactions with devices and tools. Even in the actor-network theory, this does not mean in any way a call for a post-human identity. Drawing on authors such as Gehlen (the emphasis on the technical nature of mankind), Marx (focused on labour as the key fact for understanding the human), Benjamin (studying the cultural impact of technical reproducibility) and McLuhan (the media as extension of the human being), technical agency is part of the very essence of the human.

Because of that, mediated interaction is the object of communication studies. Media are essential to producing our common human world. Mediated interaction is an essential need for human life to build a human environment. It is at once an anthropological fact that explains the nature and specific differences of human societies.

It is likely because of this particularly concern that communication sciences are partially responsible for social sciences’ renewed interest in language and culture and vice-versa. Communication sciences are intrinsically responsible for building a bridge between social sciences and the theoretical questions often addressed by humanities, having brought to light the importance of culture and meaning and, consequently, the importance of hermeneutics and interpretative methods. The following issues are found to be central to any productive theory of communication: a) the importance of symbols in the meaningful constitution of the social world, b) the importance of communicative phenomena as a key element to understanding the meaning of social interaction, social networks, human agency and social structures.

Following works from interactionism, critical theory, critical realism and hermeneutics, one finds that human beings performed the communicational activity when they found themselves

in the same environment, recognising each other as interaction partners, driving their attention towards the same reality.

Also, the cultural approach, as it emerges from sociology of culture, philosophical anthropology and cultural studies, is an important contribution that allows us to understand some key elements essential to a communication theory. The contribution by Jeffrey Alexander (1998) and other important Durkheim followers who emphasise the importance of his book *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, and by anthropologists, such as Clifford Geertz (2008), interested in the symbolical dimension of social and cultural life, have brought fundamental insights to the understanding of rituals and symbolism as social phenomena.

The concern with those issues has produced huge controversies. It is unlikely that a scientific statement can maintain that the concern with symbols automatically, logically moves towards a critical approach. During its long and controversial history, the field has split itself into different paradigms that coincide with the distinction made by Habermas between instrumental and critical knowledge.

In spite of those differences, communication is, probably, the field of studies where the life of symbols has been most explicitly addressed as a study object. It is likely because of this visibility that theoretical approaches and disciplines such as critical theory, hermeneutics, cultural studies, phenomenology, and interactionism were so appealing to communication sciences and scientists. Even at times of great influence by the media industry, when economic factors seem to determine scientific research, those approaches remain strongly present, disturbing the quietness of a one-sided field of study. The specific nature of communicative phenomena resists one-dimensional glances, and even in functionalist contexts one finds a practical and theoretical difficulty in forgetting and dismissing the irreducible difference of human meaning as crucial to understanding social phenomena.

Communication studies demand a reflexive and hermeneutical gaze that enables the communicative process to be understood as much more complex than a data transmission process. Without that, communication will merely address the acquisition and training of skills for transmitting information data, following a sender-receiver paradigm that is too narrow to offer a comprehensive overview of the communicative process. Likely because of this, the communication studies field seems to be a good one for observing the tension between social sciences and humanities. Whichever theoretical paradigm is embraced, the closer communication research is to a dialogue with humanities, the more likely it will be to focus its inquiry on interactions among social agents, attributing meanings to social action.

A social scientific inquiry that is more permeable to the phenomena of meaning will turn its attention to questions generally addressed by humanities in the sense of *Geisteswissenschaft*, emphasising *verstehen* at the expense of *ecklaren* and focusing its observation on study objects such as encounters, language and culture, bringing interpretative, critical and hermeneutic methods to the research of the processes of building a meaningful collective life. Meanwhile, a typical positivist social scientific inquiry tends to see communication as a social effect, reserving theoretical attention for explaining the type of causality between communication and society. In this kind of approach, the symbol seems to lose its nature of independent variable, becoming instead a variable that changes in a deterministic sense in correlation with social structures.

Significantly, the turn to cultural, symbolic and linguistic theorising that arose within the social sciences has had only a limited impact on sociology, probably through the remaining impact of American administrative research. In this sense, the bridge between cultural sciences and humanities was built particularly in communication and cultural studies.

## II

One key premise of a post-conventional communication theory is the *a priori* of communication in a broader sense. Communication exists, making the human life-world and human agency possible. It really is a condition without which there would be no human agency, as it is a constituent part of the hominisation process.

Communication is fundamental to the existence of the social life-world. Without communication, there is no such thing as human sociability. Semantisation, that is to say the acquisition and sharing of meanings, is fundamental to the humanisation process, i.e. the process that leads to the emergence of human action, human agency, and human sociability. Communication has as its fundamental feature the activity of mediated interaction with the Other and the world through the use of media. Humans have forever struggled towards externalisation, building their world and not merely being launched into the surrounding environment.

Communication also involves a particular concept of the social agent, which we may conceive as a networked agent. It does not make any sense to speak of men considered individually. It makes much more sense to think of each social agent in terms of a multitude or, even better, as a network.

Communication involves a constant openness of social agents in direct agency with the social and physical worlds. Because of that, labour and language are the main processes by which men become men and the world becomes meaningful. The intersubjective process involves the existence of a medium. Mediation is the central process by which man reaches the Other and the natural world. *Verstehen* is understood as more than an empathic connection with the Other; it is understood as the ontological condition of human life in society as such. Language is more than a channel of practical everyday activity. Language above all expresses the human way of being in the world (Giddens, 1991: 74).

The organisation of social narrative is crucial for social life. The production of meaning is identified with the production of society. If communication exists there are unavoidable presuppositions that guide linguistic exchanges between speakers and listeners in everyday processes of communication in any language. Drawing on some Chomskian insights, one can believe that there are universal competencies that are involved when social actors interact with the aim of achieving mutual understanding (Cooke, 1998: 2). Those universal competencies are not the outcome of a particular social context or any kind of political stage from a historical point of view. They are part of a communicative process through which culture becomes a second skin for mankind.

Everyday language has an inbuilt connection with validity. Following Winch, to have a “meaning” means exactly the same as to be ruled by norms (cf. Winch, 1970; cf. Giddens, 1991: 60). No matter how profound the implications, the recognition that meaningful behaviour is necessarily oriented by norms needs some clarification (Giddens, 1991:61). There is an intrinsic

connection between language and the normative world. However, one must include reflexivity in the norms that rule social actors. So, following Habermas, “having meaning” is not only a matter of being ruled. Linguistic interaction is also a matter of raising and responding to validity claims. Linguistic utterances as they are used in the everyday process of communication may be construed as claims to validity: to the truth, to normative rightness, to the truthfulness of the speaker (Habermas, 1998).

A theory that seeks to understand communicative action implies that the relationship of mutual recognition has an inherent rational and argumentative dimension, implying the existence of a hermeneutic process. The argumentation process is inherent to human speech. That means avoiding a final answer and the subsequent existence of an on-going and never-ending process of open interaction and argumentative dialogue. Bearing in mind the absence of a final and definitive world, the issue of legitimacy remains crucial to the very functioning of the world. This explains the established connection between the communicative process and the democratic and deliberative process in the public sphere.

References to the democratic and argumentation process that has followed reflection on logos since Ancient Greece pursue an understanding of the nature of political life. Surely, one must not follow a one-dimensional path that reduces communication to elements of collaboration, of dialogue, of ritualised sharing or interaction, avoiding conflict and domination. However, it must be maintained that language induces a claim for mutual agreement.

These considerations highlight some reasons that explain some intrinsic difficulties that sociology, or at least hegemonic sociology, has in understanding the communicative nature of society. It is likely an intrinsic difficulty that has to do with social constraints characteristic of their fields of research which demand that sociologists explain facts in a way that has focused on the institutional level, dismissing the everyday life-world. Social sciences, most of the time, are oriented towards symbolism when and only when symbols seem to be subordinated to the regularity of institutions. At its best, sociology has proficient epistemological demands when it agrees to discuss the nature of the social itself. One example is that of Niklas Luhmann (1992), a sociologist who was able to look to the symbols as a reality per se connected in systems of communication. However, his extreme idealism involved an immanent tendency towards denying the human dimension, and the status of protagonist in the process of forming meaning was given to self-referential systems. There is also the example of Habermas, when he tried to extract competencies from universal linguistics to form the grounds of a new theory of action that includes two possible ways of viewing reality, giving predominance to lived everyday interaction or institutional regularities.

When the social sciences question action, human subjectivity and the meaningful make-up of society they get closer to an intense and productive dialogue with humanities, particularly with the fields of social philosophy and epistemology. Not necessarily by chance, Habermas and Luhmann question sociology using investigation of communicative processes as a starting point. This is the only way of continuing with the epistemological research that goes to the theoretical heart of human and social sciences. So the communication field will go on dealing with humanities and with the part of social sciences that questions the limits and nature of the human.

Finally, it seems that research on the new paths of capitalism labelled as the information society more than ever needs a theoretical effort that considers the empirical forces that seem to constrain

research. In the midst of new energising forces that boost the information society, scholars can no longer be either intellectuals closed in an ivory tower or competent reproducers of empirical studies that add empirical proofs for hypotheses that are often relatively obvious.

## References

- Alexander, J. (1988). *Durkheimian sociology: cultural studies*. Cambridge University Press.
- Apel, K.-O. (2000). *Transformação da filosofia: filosofia analítica, semiótica, hermenêutica*. São Paulo: edições Loyola.
- Bhaskar, R. (2008). *Dialectic: the pulse of freedom*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bhaskar, R. (2008). *A realist theory of science*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Benjamin, W. (1997-d). A obra de arte na era da sua reprodutibilidade técnica. *Obras escolhidas: magia e técnica, arte e política*. São Paulo: Brasiliense.
- Benton, T. & Craig, I. (2001). *Philosophy of social sciences: the philosophical foundations of social thought*. London: Palgrave.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: perspectives and methods*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Calhoun, C. (2011). Communication as social science (and more). *International Journal of Communication*, 5: 1479-1496. Feature.
- Carey, J. W. (1989). *Communication as culture: essays on media and society*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Clarke, S. (2005). The neoliberal theory of society. In A. Sada-Filho & D. Johnson (eds.), *Neoliberalism: a critical reader* (pp. 50-59). London, Pluto Press.
- Cook, M. (1998). Preface. In J. Habermas, *Pragmatics of human communication* (pp. 1-20). MIT Press.
- Elias, N. (1980). *Introdução à sociologia*. Lisbon: Edições 70.
- Elias, N. (2001). *The society of individuals*. New York and London: Continuum.
- Geertz, C. (2008). *A interpretação das culturas*. Rio de Janeiro: LTC.
- Gehlen, A. (s.d.). *A alma na era da técnica*. Lisbon: Livros do Brasil (Die Seele im Technischen Zeitalter).
- Giddens, A. (1996). *As novas regras do método sociológico*. Lisbon: Gradiva.
- Foucault, M. (2008). *O nascimento da biopolítica, Curso dado no Collège de France*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1992). A universalidade do problema hermenêutico. In J. Bleischer, *Hermenêutica contemporânea*. Lisbon: Edições 70.
- Habermas, J. (1987). *Théorie de l'agir communicationnel*, 2 vols. Paris: Fayard. (Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, 1982-3).

- Habermas, J. (1998). *On the pragmatics of communication*. MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (1995). *Communication and the evolution of society*. London: Polity Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1995). *O ser e o tempo*. Petropolis: Vozes. (Sein und Zeit, 1927).
- Latour, B. (2012). *Reagregando o social: uma introdução à teoria do ator-rede*. São Paulo: EDUSC.
- Luhmann, N. (1992). *A improbabilidade da comunicação*. Lisbon: Vega.
- Marx, K. (1971). *Manuscritos econômico-filosóficos*. Porto: Brasília Editora.
- McLuhan, M. (2005). *Os meios de comunicação como extensão do homem*. São Paulo: Cultrix.
- Mead, G.-H. (1969). *Mind, self and society*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Parry-Gilles, T. (2013). Humanities or social science?. *Communication Matters*. NCA'S ACADEMIC, TEACHING, AND RESEARCH BLOG. Accessed on 31-10-2016 at the following URL: <https://ncablog.org/>
- Schutz, A. (1975). *Collected papers, the problem of social reality*, vol. I. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Schutz, A. (1976). *Collected papers, studies in social theory*, vol. II. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Schutz, A. (1967). *The phenomenology of the social world*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Weber, M. (1989). *Economía y sociedad*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Winch, P. (1970). *A ideia de uma ciência social e sua relação com a filosofia*. São Paulo: Editora Nacional.

# The Limits of the Human Mean the Limits of Humanities

André Barata

University of Beira Interior, LabCom.IFP

abarata@ubi.pt

## Abstract

This essay aims to expose an inner linkage between the crisis of the human and the crisis of the humanities in our times. Inspired by a variation of Wittgenstein's famous proposition "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world", it is claimed that the humanities refer to the human through a common and singularising experience of limits of the human. However, arguably, it is precisely this experience of limits that is threatened since moder-

nity has become a process of progressively literalising reality, eliminating ambivalences, and trivialising meaning, with psychoanalytical and political consequences that we can see, for instance, in extreme ways, in today's fundamentalist actions. Given these crisis aspects, I argue that the post-human experience provided by sci-fi is a rather important source of resistance for the human and the humanities.

Keywords: human; post-human; humanities; limit experience; modernity; crisis.

## 1. Limits and limits

**T**HERE are many ways in which the limits of the human can be investigated, many of them related to the time we live in. But there is one in which those limits of the human mean the limits of the humanities and, especially, the limits of philosophy, as the radical inquiry into humanities. This is quite a timely question to bring to discussion. I will try to shed light on how the contemporary human condition is compressed within its very own limits and how philosophy's uneasiness nowadays is a symptom of a new form of discontent in culture and civilisation. That pressure on the limits of the human is exerted in at least two only apparently divergent ways: oppressing the human condition against limits as much as liberating the human condition of any distinctive limit. One way or another, the malaise seen today is an erosion of humanity, as the final, often announced consequence of the modern history of eliminating ambivalence in the human experience. From this perspective, the proposal for rethinking the humanities must be a proposal on the experience of limits, old and new experiences of limits of the human, old and new reflections on limits of the human experience. It is in experiencing the limits of the human – that the humanities offer us – that humankind proves its limits and a meaningful singular common existence.

---

A *Revista Estudos em Comunicação* é financiada por Fundos FEDER através do Programa Operacional Factores de Competitividade – COMPETE e por Fundos Nacionais através da FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia no âmbito do projeto *Comunicação, Filosofia e Humanidades (LabCom.IFP) UID/CCI/00661/2013*.



## 2. The end of limits as the end of limitations

The limits of the human can be conceived in two senses – one is much more obvious, although we tend to perceive it inadequately. The other is much more crucial, though much less obvious. Due to this asymmetry, it may often happen that the brightness of the obvious blinds us to the crucial issue that we should see. And maybe we should consider that this shining effect is not just an incidental circumstance, but rather a constructed one, even if it is unintentional. The shining sense of the limits of the human is the one we usually refer to when thinking about the accelerated processes of modifications taking place in our bodies, our minds, and our physical and mental capacities due to technology. We are going through a vertiginous perception of the dissolution of the limits of the human in a sense close to a presumed end of limitations. I do not disagree, although that acceleration is still more anticipation than fact. Enough to recognise that we have strong reasons to meditate on that dissolution of limits and on the extension of human frontiers, foreseeably in a future not that far from us today, moved to horizons that are quite foreign to the natural design we are born with. And it is an interesting exercise to conceive what could be the limit of this dissolution and extension of limits. For instance, sooner or later, we will be able to free ourselves of mortality by turning off the ageing genes, which have already been identified. Another example is the extension of memory implanted in our brains, as well as computing processors able to compute for us, giving us reasoning capacities unparalleled in the past. A final example is the technological project of freeing ourselves from our bodies, which might be achieved assuming that personal identities can function in different matters just like software runs in different hardware, or, even assuming the impossibility of disconnecting personal identity from a singular body, the former could nonetheless live in an artificial, virtual world. Without a body, or at least without a specific, intimate body, without death, or at least without the certainty of its arrival, we could reasonably expect the more basic conditions of existence – our place in time and space – are being or will soon be transformed. Of course, changing the very basic conditions of human existence challenges what human beings are or can be. But, more fundamentally, what is challenged is our expectation about what human beings should or should not be, according to preconceived views of the human. In fact, limits can mean lots of different things. One of them is risk, threat, as when someone blames another for going beyond acceptable limits. This is a challenge that should matter to us. To put it more clearly: why should humans' humanity have no trace of technology? Who is the human being in *2001 – A Space Odyssey*: the primate extending his arm with a wooden stick to be able to hit other unarmed primates, or these poor victims of a strange technology? From a certain perspective, haven't humans been post-humans since the beginning? Their ability to make plans that transcend them, their being responsible for choices and acts out there in the world, their making something they are recognised as creators of, the mere fact of possessing a language that is used to speak and say things out loud; aren't all these skills accepted as distinctive of humanity? And, at the same time, don't all these manifestations of humanity imply going far beyond humans' natural limits? If we agree on this point, we would also agree that there is a certain illusion in considering post-human as the result of natural born limits being removed or overcome. That is basically the history of humankind and that is why Donna Haraway is right when she claims in *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1983) – which is in itself a metaphor – that there is a need



to dissolve distinctions, and, before that, to dissolve a perspective based on dissolving distinctions. So the difference is elsewhere, radically elsewhere, but still involves a notion of limits. That, at least, is the hypothesis I would like to explore.

Stanislav Lem's *Solaris* (1961) and Tarkovski's extraordinary adaptation (1972) underlined the same illusion about a conception of limits to be overcome as if they were boundaries. In the novel, the boundaries are not directly related to the limits of the human being. However, the limits at stake in it are the limits of the human world. Extending them means nothing but making mirrors of ourselves.

“We don't want to conquer the cosmos, we simply want to extend the boundaries of Earth to the frontiers of the cosmos. For us, such and such a planet is as arid as the Sahara, another as frozen as the North Pole, yet another as lush as the Amazon basin. We are humanitarian and chivalrous; we don't want so enslave other races, we simply want to bequeath them our values and take over their heritage in exchange. We think of ourselves as the Knights of the Holy Contact. This is another lie. We are only seeking Man. We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors. We don't know what to do with other worlds. A single world, our own, suffices us; but we can't accept it for what it is.” (Lem, 1961)

This movement of the human towards its own extension fails in the crucial aspect of others' otherness, as Emmanuel Levinas made clear. The other is not simply an *alter ego*, another “ego” like my own “ego”, since, after all, my own is the only “ego” I know directly (Levinas, 1961). The other is, in its otherness, neither similar to nor different from me. The otherness of the other is not related to cognitive aspects, but to relational aspects instead. The other is the one with whom I have a relationship as if he were an infinite transcendence that I am not able to place into any kind of category. My relation with the other, if genuine, is therefore a relation without a frame.

What could better describe otherness than the limits of human?

### 3. Why do humanities matter here?

One could ask what humanities have to do with all these concerns about the human. I believe they matter because they give us another meaning for the word “limits” in the context of a reflection on human limits; limits not in the sense of limitations, or boundaries, but in the sense of limit-experiences, common, universally recognised experiences and uncommon, singularly intensified experiences taken to the limit. I shall give only one example, taken from the tradition of ancient tragedies, taken from the thousands that could easily be evoked to illustrate this point. I have in mind the case of a limit-experience of revenge in Euripides' *Medea* – a woman who kills her own sons in order to deny any possible comfort to the person she hates boundlessly, her sons' father. It is hard to conceive a more radical hatred and a more radical revenge than those Medea has.

These kinds of limit experiences are related to Lacan's psychoanalytical theory and the experience of “jouissance” investigated in “The Ethics of Psychoanalysis” (1959-60). For Lacan, these experiences, in limit situations, go far beyond the pleasure principle, involving dimensions of suffering in states of intense energy release.

I do not want to assume that humanities are, in essence, or should be, as a normative claim, fields of experience and interrogation of human limits, in this sense of “limits” that infinitely intensify the consciousness of being human. I just want to assume that they have been so in many of their most remarkable works. I have no problem admitting that perhaps not all great works have approached the limit of human experience. It is not important to my point of view to comfort us with a definition of humanities as strict as stating that they are always or should always be related to the issue of human limits. In fact, I hold a rather modest assertion about humanities – that they have been, in many of their most memorable realisations, deeply affected by those human limit experiences. And I have a less modest second claim. Limits in this sense are not limits conceived as borders or limitations, as we have seen. Quite the opposite, these limits are at the core of human condition. They are exemplary, enlightening far beyond their circumstances. And they are relevantly practised, studied and reflected within the humanities.

But why does it matter so much to drive human experience to infinitely intensified limit-experiences? How can experiences as unlikely as *Medea*'s hatred for Jason say so much to so many of us, and for more than two millennia? In more abstract and summarised terms: why can singularities express something universal? In fact, here, we are close to the Sartrean motif of a “singular universal” (Sartre, 1960). Both the radicalness in the choices we make and our taking experiences to their limits are singularities that block any attempt to assign relative values. The very fact of something being singular means it has no way of being made conditional in its uniqueness. And without relativity framing, singularities apply to all cases.

While it was important to find other reasons why we humans should treat each other not only as means, but at the same time as ends – recalling the famous second formulation of the Kantian categorical imperative – I think we find here the starting point for a whole reflection feeding ethical formalism with distinctive human experience.

Singularities can be shared but are not interchangeable in bargaining terms, as happens in situations of trade-offs between values we transact or negotiate. Here, we could make a comparison with arithmetic operations with infinite quantities. In infinite quantities, double and half are the same. One thousand times the infinite is no more than one thousandth of the infinite. The truth is that there is no “more” or “less” in sums, subtractions, multiplications and divisions in the infinite. The truth, to complete this comparison, is that there is no possible arithmetic of the singular. And that is an important reason to think of humanities as a Kantian kingdom of ends, but certainly not one defined as a “union of different rational beings under common laws”.

Preventing the dehumanisation of the human condition relies on this passage to the limit of human experiences, through a common experience practised, studied and, above all, the subject of concern within humanities. Therefore, what the human is depends less on what human beings really are than on what the humanities are and can account for. Without humanities, our humanity rarefies. Turning again to the previously mentioned first meaning of “limits” as limitation, I believe I can say that, in that sense, the limits of the human are the limits of humanities and no others. And the other way round, precisely because of the sense of exemplary limits, the limits of humanities are what define the limits of the human.

#### 4. Blade runner blues

It is worth noting that this way of conceiving the human as the limit-experience of humanities does not have to be the hallmark of the material human beings we actually are. The notion of *human* depends less on our biology or our natural born conditions than on the humanities' attention to the human experience. In reality, it is humanities that look after human beings' humanity, in a caring, all-encompassing, intimate and not always easy relationship.

Following these arguments, there is another example I would like to discuss, because all the dimensions of human limits mentioned above are at stake in it – Ridley Scott's movie *Blade Runner*, an adaptation of the Philip K. Dick science fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* In this iconic movie, the intensification of the human is performed through the amplification of the non-human. The crucial question is why aren't they human? That intensification of limits, however, betrays the intention to keep them out of the circle of humanity. The limits are the same, but they are seen from the outside, from a backlighting perspective, that emphasises edges and contours. Roy, Rachel and Rick carry out Hegel's dialectics of acknowledgement, no longer between the master and his slave, but instead between the human and his post-human simile. In fact, there is an intense post-human nostalgia. For Roy, there is a dialectical need for Ricks' recognition, despite the *a priori* certainty of failure; Rick falling in love with Rachel will also fail. Nostalgia is the pain of loss intensely grasped in the soundtrack that Vangelis composed for the movie: blues, with a groove rhythm.

In short, as much as humans have been post-human since the beginning, those coming from a post-human reality are, actually, still pre-post-human. Or, in a word: simply human. In fact, the singular universal Sartrean motif is perfectly embedded in the words of Rick Deckard, uttered in voice-over right after Roy's death.

“I don't know why he saved my life. Maybe in those last moments, he loved life more than he ever had before. Not just his life. Anybody's life. My life. All he'd wanted were the same answers the rest of us want. Where do I come from? Where am I going? How long have I got? All I could do was sit there and watch him die.”

Finally, from this point of view that intensely questions the limits of the human from outside, we can find a deep resonance between Roy and Rachel's suffering in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* and the same existential pain in *Solaris*'s Hari. Her words could not be more acute:

Yes. Maybe. But I...  
I am becoming a human being.  
I can feel just as deeply as you.

All three die intensifying the consciousness of the human at the very limits of human.

To complete this section, we must return to Freud's 1919 essay *Das Unheimlich*. For Freud, the uncanny experience of familiar strangeness claims that in the most familiar experiences we can simultaneously have an unfamiliar experience. The psychoanalyst describes *Unheimlich* as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar”. An impressive example is the *Unheimlich* that male patients often declare to feel about female genitals. According

to Freud, that feeling of uncanny is related to an old familiarity: the memory of their own mothers' uterus, as if, when making love with a woman, they were sensing where they had been before. Reflecting on this "uncanniness", Freud was therefore refusing any idea of translating the familiar and the unfamiliar as experiences of the old and the new, respectively. On the contrary, the fact Freud wanted to point out is that novelty can be not at all disquieting and that the familiar, in turn, can be quite disquieting. Freud underlines intrinsically ambiguous or ambivalent status of the uncanny experience, which merges familiar and unfamiliar into a single feeling – "Thus *Heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*."

However, the most interesting aspect in this one of Freud's essays is still to come. And it concerns not the feeling of uncanny itself but the conditions that most easily induce such feelings. And, in this regard, Freud quotes Ernst Anton Jentsch, author of "On the Psychology of Uncanny" ("Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen"), an article from 1906. In the article, the German psychiatrist, who would die the year Freud publish this quotation – materialises the conditions of uncanny he had in mind very clearly:

"In telling a story, one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton; and to do it in such a way that his attention is not directly focused upon his uncertainty, so that he may not be urged to go into the matter and clear it up immediately, since that, as we have said, would quickly dissipate the peculiar emotional effect of the thing. Hoffmann has repeatedly employed this psychological artifice with success in his fantastic narratives." (Jentsch, 1906)

While Jentsch mentions Ernst Theodor Hoffman's fantasy writer as an example of someone who made successful and repeated use of this "psychological artifice", Freud goes further, developing an analysis of one particular short story by the Konisberg writer – *Der Sandmann* (1816). Surprisingly, the example involves an illusion concerning the human appearance of a doll automaton, a fact that brings us immediately back to the universe of references in which we started this reflection on the human.

Moreover, the intimate relation between the limits of the human and the meaning of the human demonstrates a robust parallel with the ambivalent feeling of uncanniness that brings together familiarity and its opposite. In fact, it is exactly this common ambivalence that is actually behind the possibility of discovering what is most human in the human in the human's furthest limits.

## 5. The times we live in

The meaning of human that I have been suggesting is a common experience of singularities that we take as exemplary in our self-recognition processes. But, in this proposal, which is far from being a definition, the times we live in seem to *barely* tolerate the human. Our times are ruled by a hegemonic law that prescribes a universal equalisation in order to make everything the subject of exchanges and movement in a flawless, unstoppable, absolute system of atomised, equal

individuals. These two aspects must be considered carefully: everything is equalised, everything is unstoppable.

The equalisation movement – which has nothing to do with equalitarian ends – attempts to make things exist in an identical, literal mode, closest to the flat surface of reality. Making people as literal as things is actually a great metaphor for times we live in – times in which everything is levelled, overturning all forms of figuration, metaphor, fiction that would form wrinkles and twists on the literal surface of the real. Like a wave tearing down all the sand castles that make the human singular. The real without an unreal orography is not human. We could imaginatively conceive this unreal orography as the true subject of humanities.

The acceleration of social time is not only a consequence of technological progress. It is also a global device of immersion in an unstoppable and overwhelming movement, in which we are so immersed in ready-made answers that our ability to ask questions drowns. Any questions that go beyond the resolution of difficulties are obstacles that threaten the efficiency of movement and all the benefits that come with it. That is why the malaise in the culture today produces the symptom of a deep malaise in philosophy.

Faced with these two aspects, the political meaning of today's social claims such as the basic right to placemaking in space or time becomes more evident. For instance, the right to occupy spaces and establish communities, or the right to fill time entirely with projects that await a singularity yet to arrive. Fundamentally, however, what these signs mean is that a counter hegemonic tendency must stem from humanities to overcome the malaise of the contemporary human. Those humanities shape an unreal orography of singularities and also stop the flow of answers with a boost in interrogation. To think is, ultimately, to interrogate, to co-create concepts and meanings and to care; or, in other words, to stop, to feel a meaningful surface and make it gain shape, like a potter working the clay.

## **6. The future of humanities, the future of human**

Stopping is not easy these days of accelerated time, as we have seen. Humanities, and philosophy in particular, are challenged to resist and overcome the malaise of culture nowadays, since they give meaning to the limits of the human. But for that, humanities first have to overcome their own signs of crisis, decline, twilight, to overcome the attempts to drive them into literalisation processes that, ultimately, move toward an annihilation of the humanities' subject. In fact, humanities observe a landscape of which they are always also part. This is particularly relevant in philosophy. Faced with tendencies that push it to become a technology of philosophical commentary, an analytical dissection of arguments, or a productive device for answers and flowing progress, philosophy has to come back to its original condition of radical inquiry, so radical that it does not accept any inquiry without questioning its own conditions of inquiring. This is why the question "What is philosophy?" is an intrinsically philosophical question. And this means at least two things. Firstly, that the foundation of philosophy is a question that comes from within philosophy. And, secondly, the permanence of the question "What is philosophy?" is, after all, the guarantee that philosophy will not shift away from the restless condition that actually connects its authors and its readers with the real. Therefore, philosophy means an activity and not just a set of theories, arguments

and ideas, accumulated over human history. It means a practice of unconditioned interrogation that focuses on any part of reality.

Nowadays, there is a social perception that humanities, and philosophy in particular, are superfluous. I do not believe that superfluous character should be overcome. Doing such a thing would mean selling its soul. Philosophy for instance has not allowed itself to be conditioned by any criteria of usefulness since the very beginning. To do otherwise would be to compromise its radicalness. But, at the same time, that refusal is precisely what guarantees that philosophy is not useless. Its kind of interrogation without constraints does not allow for the unquestionable. That is something that is full of useful consequences. Simply put, these considerations only matter if philosophy does not drive itself into an elitist, conservative domain of erudition with rigid limits. If a hegemonic tendency attempts to exclude philosophy as superfluous and unproductive, it is no less true that the strictness of those limits imposed by their practitioners exemplifies the very same hegemony by other means, despite what may look like resistance against hegemony. And this is also very true for humanities in general.

What should be done? First: stop, go back to the beginning, and rephrase things. The limits of the human are the limits of humanities. For the human truly has no other limits than those that humanities create and maintain through culture, no matter how changed our future world may be. Human is not a natural concept, but a certain notion of limit that has no *a priori* limits. Secondly, there is a consequence to be pointed out here: the fate of the human condition is not oblivious to the fate of humanities. Humanities will not save the human and vice-versa. The point is another one: they are undergoing the same crisis. The decline in the number of students so often mentioned with concern in humanities' academic departments, the defensive elitism of many of those departments, the social perception, often politically accusing (in rather consequential ways) humanities of being unproductive, the very idea that humanities should or must submit to scientific seriousness and productive rules, all these are aspects of the same annihilation we witness when we approach the contemporary condition of the human. The compression of opportunities to make places, both in space and in time (which is in fact a compression of singular possibilities), together with universal equalisation, promotes the hegemony of means over ends that we are currently experiencing.

But, after weighing all these facts, what can humanities possibly do for the human's sake and their own? It is obvious that humanities need to recover their lost centrality. And this must be done in more than one way. Against all epistemological efforts to make them sciences, as they are no such thing. Of course we can apply scientific methods to its subject, but what bizarre kind of true facts and laws would be read in an unreal orography. Humanities' purpose is, ultimately, if there is an identifiable goal, related to meaning and not to truth and laws. This does not mean any revulsion directed towards science. On the contrary, it means there is a need to establish a different relationship between science and humanities – instead of submitting humanities to a scientific frame, promoting mutual enlightenment as happens in research domains like neurophenomenology or promoting technological contributions as means to creating new points of view on human experiences, as happens in projects like those known as digital humanities.

Decisively, however, the centrality of humanities depends on finding paths we can walk along and rivers we can navigate through the orography that goes beyond academia. It is crucial to find

passages from more classical academic humanities to non-academic humanities, especially those that are more directly exposed to the challenges of the limits of the human. Cinema, literature of anticipation, videogames, virtual life, and cyberculture are emphatically exposed to these limits and, at the same time, are no less disposed to inquiries on the human experience than older humanities. This also means that humanities should flow among each other without so many status concerns involved. In truth, this agenda is not significantly different from the one Donna Haraway was proposing 33 years ago with cyborg politics – “Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly (. . .)” (Haraway, 1983, p. 312). Resisting against thought based on boundaries, distinctions, identities, essences; replacing those limits of the individual with a different notion of limits, one that universalises. We may need a revolution of limits.

These challenges are timely and too urgent to be avoided or ignored. What I have called a literalisation process is a sort of end of the modern ages, but through the paradoxical excessive success of those ages. Modernity was always a project to rationally replace ambivalences with clear, distinct ideas, as Zygmunt Bauman underlined. But that process became a kind of idolatry. We have been witnessing that literalisation process in many contexts for a long time, but one of the most extreme manifestations of this late-ultra-modern idolatry is the phenomenon of fundamentalism. If we think about it, what is Islamic fundamentalism but Islamism without the corresponding humanities? After all, the problem is not fundamentally a problem of lack of science, nor of excess religion, but a problem of literalisation of the real, the religion, and even the sciences in their most technological developments.

Being human is not equivalent to the human being. A world of human beings does not necessarily mean a human world. Nor is the opposite true: a human world does not require any human beings. Human does not have to mean clinging to an existent human or any other existent being in particular. What must be at stake about the human is an existence, not an existent being. Even if it were a God. The last words of *Cyborg Manifesto* could not be more enlightening about this conception of human: “Though both are bound in the spiral dance, I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess”. And Roy, close to the end of *Blade Runner*, kills his own creator. Surviving the limits and their revolutions means keeping things human, just human. And for that, no less than in the 1980s, it makes sense today to say: Let’s cyborg the humanities!

## 7. New humanism

Could this be the content of a new humanism? I have not used the word “humanism” until now. It is a word that has been too abused to be used without consequences to which I do not subscribe. But, still, yes it could, provided that we do not forget the relevant criticism developed, for instance, by Lyotard and many others who are usually included in an anti-humanist tendency. It is not acceptable to return to an essentialist, exclusivist conception of the human, which was, quite ironically, always the basis for the exclusion of others (and first of all other human beings). It is not acceptable to soften that conception and, at the same time, promote what is basically an extension of limits, an augmentation of capacities, in the trail of limitless power that once again has human beings as its prime target. Even an ontological perspective such as the one Sartre sustained in

“Existentialism is a humanism” is not divorced enough from the ambitions to demarcate a certain existent thing, ourselves, once again, as ontologically unique. A new humanist perspective must be much more radically disposed to lose any privileged reference to human beings. Being human requires the exercise of not being a human being, moving our expectations of a type of existent thing to a type of existence. If existence is a way of being characterised by being outside the frontiers, then being human is being out there. A new humanist perspective must be based not on any particular existent things, but on a singular universal existence. For the sake not of mankind, but of humankind!

### 8. Modernity as a project of the elimination of ambivalence

Zygmunt Bauman has proposed a reading of modernity as a project to bring about an increasingly rational order to a disordered world: the announced ‘*causa finalis*’ of the modern state was a rationally planned society. He also notes that the created order is always confronted with an irremovable remainder that disturbs it. In theory, to create order is to create, as its by-product, ambivalence, so the project of modernity has ended up historically culminating in a war on ambivalence – establishing and maintaining order means, first and foremost, purging ambivalence. And politically this has meant to segregate, to deport and, ultimately, to terminate the alien (Bauman, 1993). The limit situation of this elimination of ambivalence was the Holocaust. But since then, the same broad tendency upsurges in many different manifestations. And, today, the exclusion of the ambivalent still stems from the very premises of modern rationality. Resisting such a tendency involves transforming those premises. What is at stake is, as Bauman says, to “learn to live with polysemy with the ambivalence and the endless possibilities of an undetermined world.”

But how can that be done in a capitalist context, in which the type of domination exercised requires the most explicit and transparent rationality of self-interest and the amplification thereof? In fact, there is a completely exposed sincerity in self-interest and the steps it takes over time, which is not reconcilable with the existence of obscure or ambivalent areas. The self-evidence of rational choice procedures, credit and debts records, utility curves, the complete identification of exchange value operations, the exhaustive memory of debt and related interest: all these aspects clearly show that capitalism and its arenas need to function exclusively on a conscious plane.

In psychoanalytic terms, the description of this type of domination must be provided as completely as possible in each of our conscious egos. And it is following this dominance of the ego that we find the basis for the emergence of the abstract outline of a *homo economicus*, which became a sort of universal key for the rational understanding of all human action, be it in economic behaviour or in moral behaviour. In this context, although relatively commonplace, it is still important to note how the Freudian economic model suits the outline of *homo economicus*.<sup>1</sup>

Freud was able to capture this spiritual condition of the era when he lived and, at the same time, he was also able to reveal the illusion of an alleged autonomy of human action which is,

1. For instance Birken, 1999: who has argued in a paper (“Freud’s “Economic Hypothesis”: From *Homo Oeconomicus* to *Homo Sexualis*”) that “Freud’s use of the term “economic” implied that his new psychology was somehow analogous to the earlier science of political economy, precisely because he had extended to the private the quantitative approach already employed to analyse the public sphere.” (American Imago, vol. 56, n. 4 (1999): 311-330.



after all, much more apparent than real. The censorship effect and repression processes concealed an unconscious life, sentenced to express itself only through symbolic means. So in an era marked by the triumph of the bourgeois, those phenomena could only have as important an expression as that which Freud gave them.

Moreover, even from a historical point of view, the very idea of shifting towards the centrality of the ego is sharply confirmed. In fact, the emergence of capitalism with the shift from the old regime to the hegemonic regime of the bourgeoisie was accompanied by a revolution against domination of the superego through theological and patronising values. The emergence of the emancipatory ideals of socialism and, before that, of the Enlightenment itself, is surely common to the very establishment of capitalism. Equality and natural rationality demanded that the ego took over its centrality in order to lead life with autonomy; however, this assertion was delusive. At least in one of its major aspects, this was modernity.

However, modernity has failed at least three times. Firstly, in the nineteenth century, the intensification of man's exploitation by man massively dissociated mankind from humankind. Secondly, in the twentieth century, human reason left to its own delirium collapsed into German and Soviet totalitarianism. Finally, in the twenty-first century, it is the humble reason, known as modest and reasonable, that collapses. These were three failures of modernity, or the three failures of modernity driving the idea of autonomy. It has failed with the autonomy of instrumental reason, which unfortunately served exploitation so well. It has failed with the autonomy of the total reason that sucked up all the uniqueness of life to the greatest degree of inhumanity, in a totalitarian annihilation of existence. Finally, it has failed with the autonomy of the single person who finds him/herself today reduced to the status of a fragile helpless castaway, abandoned in ultra-individuality, threatened by powers that transcend common sense, reasonableness, i.e. the very cement of the ideals of greater social justice and equal opportunities, or, at least, some bonds of community.

The bourgeois man is indeed a greatly self-contained human being, because his success relies entirely on the self-restraint he demands from himself, and above all on the self-restraint he requires from the others. In other words, being austere is a predictable demand within the bourgeois framework. We know that austerity policies have become ideologically commonplace in the present decade, but the fact is that they are not that new. They have a history that, for example, Sartre reported in his *Critique* on nineteenth-century French industrial society.

This ultra-individualised condition of modern individuals has gradually become unbearable. It involves excessive strain on the walls surrounding ego, sustaining individuality. Too individualised, isolated, self-sustained, and absolutely dependent on one's own choices, the prevalence of the ego's autonomy fails and collapses. Somehow, Sartre's existentialism was right: it was an expression of modernity, both in the individualist affirmation of modern existence as well as in its condemnation to unavoidable failure. The claim of absolute, solitary responsibility for one's own choice is as modern as the unbearable closeness that condemns each consciousness to face others as enemies. In both the senses of extreme individual autonomy and a lack of success, existentialism is, above all, a continuation of Kantism and Lutheranism. It is certainly more than that. But it is also that.

## 9. Signs of our times I: from a politics of ego to a politics of id

The walls built throughout modernity are now crumbling due to a pressure that outstrips all acceptable limits. In their collapse, symbolic processes are worn down and the id becomes exposed matter, with no other form of expression than revealing itself as a naked life drive, where literalising succeeds symbolisation.

What politics discovers today is this truly traumatic shift of the motivational focus from autonomy of the ego to heteronomy of the id and its drives. In recent years, this domain shift has been becoming violent, even terribly violent.

The superego inhibitory processes have long since become politically marginal, and have been gradually replaced by surveillance devices designed from the point of view of consciousness and rationality. The political correctness is vigilant like totalitarianism is vigilant, and is adverse to the persistence of any equivocal, ambivalent, metaphorical sense, or any another shadow of the symbolic. And that is the history of modernity.

However, these surveillance devices are doomed to fail because they self-contradict the very premises that engender them. Autonomy is replaced by domination, if not by pure violence. In this context, it must be noted that there is a malaise that is no longer exactly the malaise that Freud has signalled in his time. But perhaps there are some compelling reasons to believe that this new form of malaise might be more Freudian than Freud's own. In fact, today, the id erupts in community life ambitiously claiming authenticity: against relativism, against political correctness, even against the West. At last, free from censorship, the id erupts without elaboration, basing the path for political legitimation on the most extreme literalness. This is pretty much the case of "neocons" appealing to true American values, as well as European nationalisms appealing to identity values, and also the Islamic State's project for an absolute literalisation of Islamism, even if it includes only selected parts of it. At least from this perspective, Islamic State actually extends modernity to its paroxysm, far from the return to the medieval of which it is accused.

In an attempt to understand the Islamic State as a consequence of the malaise of modernity in which we somehow all find ourselves, at least two important aspects must be underlined. Firstly, it is crucial to note how the political action adopted by Islamic State is marked by the most extreme literalness and, at the same time, the content of that political action is quite prominently related to *Eros* and *Thanatos*, the two drives Freud interconnected in *Civilisation and its Discontents* (*Unbehagen in der Kultur*).

On the one hand, there is an extreme repression exercised over all aspects of the life drive (*Eros*). Indeed, the Islamic State do everything conceivable to repress any opportunity to achieve pleasure, prohibiting any stimuli that could become a pleasure experience. *Timbuktu* (2014), a movie directed by Abderrahmane Sissako, is a poetic but painful illustration of this meticulous repression of *Eros*. Islamic State, or one of its trans-Saharan derivatives, reaches and dominates Timbuktu, the historical city in Mali, where trans-Saharan trade routes met a long time ago. Scenes of suddenly transformed everyday life follow in the film, which has a strong documentary feel: a woman punished for leaving her hands intentionally uncovered, refusing to wear gloves because she needed to touch the fish she was selling with her fingertips, although she had already agreed to have her head and face completely covered; a group of young people of both sexes punished

because they were caught singing and playing music at one member of the group's home; another group of young men, playing football, but just imagining the ball they would play with if they were actually allowed to. These are not the signs of a clash between civilisations. In this culture, people also sang, danced and erotically coloured their everyday lives. More precisely, these are signs and quite specific consequences of a clash with the deep malaise of common civilisation. The repression of the Eros that Freud identified 85 years ago as a civilising principle is confirmed here and taken to the limits of inhumanity that humanity can bear.

This extreme repression of *Eros* carried out by the Islamic State is joined by an extreme release of *Thanatos*, which is too obvious to be denied in these exact terms. This fundamentalist appropriation of *Thanatos* can be seen in the unstoppable will to destroy any acquired civilisation, exploding all the monuments that can be reached, namely those that are so singular that their disappearance is a definitive and irreversible loss of culture's history. The extreme release of *Thanatos* can also be seen in the limitless will to murder and cause the most painful mortification for others, seen on the most global scale possible. Examples of this include what happened to the Jordan aircraft pilot, burnt alive in a metal cage, and the tens or hundreds of soldiers beheaded using short knives to draw out their pain.

Exemplifying so the Freudian hypothesis so directly, these two types of violence – a no-exit repression of *Eros* and a non-stop destruction of civilisation – entirely prove this hypothesis' relevance. Moreover, these two forms of violence are performed using the most literal means conceivable. In fact, they are performed beyond any possible conceivable limit that could keep one apart from the other. There is as much destroying *Thanatos* in *Eros*' repression as libidinal joy in *Thanatos*' explosions. This is the impossible limit that betrays attempts to carry out a complete literalisation of human inhuman experience. The truth is that it would be impossible to annihilate ambivalence. Human hands, no matter how inhumanly they act, can only go so far.

Having led us for centuries from the stage of superego's dominance to a stage of increasing dominance of the ego over the other elements of Freudian thought, this evolution in modernity I have been describing moved in another direction. No longer towards the autonomy of the ego and its rationality, nor towards superego again. The times we are living in nowadays are continuing modernity in the sense that they lead us to continue the same descent as before, by the Freudian parts of the psyche, but now towards an instinctual stage based on the id itself.

The relegation of autonomy, like the political category that parallels the ego's dominance, does not encourage a return to moral inhibitions organised around the superego. Instead of a return, this relegation takes advantage of the openness of a fragile ego to release the instinctual forces that inhabit the id in an unstoppable cycle of violence powered either by repression forces or by release processes. This cycle of violence is driven to a devastating collapse that will eventually happen unless some greater external force intervenes and stops the instinctive struggle cycle. The fate of the Islamic State, like an individual annihilating his/her superego and ego structures, can only be destruction without limits, in which there is no contention action from the point of view of a "reality principle".

Religion in its fundamentalist configuration does not symbolise a parental protection that attempts to respond to the experience of helplessness or to console us before a world that does not seem to have been made to satisfy the pleasure principle. This Freudian representation of religion

– well explained in *Civilisation and its Discontents* – takes the form of an instance of the superego, but based on the fragile limits of which the ego is aware. And it is indeed as benign as Feuerbach's idea of God as the limitless projection of what is recognised and appreciated in a limited way in humans – knowledge as omniscience, power as omnipotence, good as a supreme good.

However, as we have seen, the fundamentalist configuration of religion does not intend to originate a superego projection to overcome the limits of the Ego, expanding them or at least offering a feeling of consolation. On the contrary, the fundamentalist approach intends to abolish the ego. And the reason for such an attitude is no mystery. That abolition is required to free the id, which is expected, in turn, to be the source of limitless and invincible power, overcoming the fragile human condition. According to the interpretation I have in mind, the fundamentalist response demands a return to radical authenticity found in an id that must be set free from the chains of symbolisation, censorship and, ultimately, the tricky plots of the ego and autonomy. For these reasons, fundamentalism, at least as we have been witnessing it in recent times, is still a response to the fragile condition of the ego. Simply put, it eliminates and replaces the ego, rather than extending or protecting it.

## 10. Signs of our times II: Literalisation, again, as a form of the spread of the banal

I have suggested an erosion of the real, which is left without relief or other orography beyond pure flatness. Without symbolic meaning and ambiguity, our reality is being reduced to literalness. Actually, that was the condition necessary for satisfying the ambition of universal interchangeability. In this context, it is useful to recall the analysis Sami-Ali did long ago. In *The Banal* (1980, 2002), the Egyptian psychoanalyst describes a replacement of the imaginary with the real. And he also maintains that this replacement is accomplished precisely through an increasing prevalence of the banal over other forms of familiarity.

But how does the banal proceed? What is distinctive in processes that spread the banal? Sami-Ali states that the banal inhibits the projection without which there is no imaginary position. But how does that happen? According to the psychoanalyst, in its origins, the banal breaks down the intimate relationship between the familiar and the strange contained in the *Unheimliche* experience, as already mentioned. The banal is therefore the familiar, but not all the familiar – the banal splits the familiar because it is only the familiar that, once completely consigned to its familiarity, no longer has anything to do with the strange.

This hegemony of familiarity and the familiar not only excludes *Unheimliche*, but also denies subjectivity. In these terms, Sami-Ali connects the pathology of the banal with the pathology of social conformism, in which there is one relevant aspect to emphasise: the devaluation of everything that is not real. The familiar can become banal precisely when it can no longer be uncanny and disquieting. In other words, we find in Sami-Ali analysis the same erosion effect of the unreal part of reality.

What constitutes a problem in the banal is that the real, which is simultaneously rational and technical, increasingly tends to take the place of the imaginary. The imaginary joins projection through a fundamental link so that, through the banal, the whole issue

of projection is again approached from the negative aspect of an absence of projection: the real is no more than what it is. (Sami-Ali, 1980, 2002)

Erasing the non-real parts of reality has become a sort of imperative need. Or, at least, the exercise of putting them aside, classifying them as non-real and identifying to what kind of non-reality each one belongs.

Thus, it is understandable that the crucial obsession of our times has become separating the real from the unreal. Two very popular contemporary science fiction films, *The Matrix* (1999) and *Inception* (2010), show this very clearly. However, there is a notable difference between the two. The Wachowskis' *The Matrix* leads us to the most imperative choice between the unreal and the real, in which the former is passed over by the latter. Neo is given the choice of two pills – a red pill that will take him to the reality outside the Matrix, or the blue pill that will bring him back to the Matrix. Neo chooses the red pill, beginning his journey into a painful truth. Of course, his choice is determined by a Manicheistic fight between freedom and a real condition of slavery, reflecting a metaphysics that subjects human beings' meaning to a transcendent intentionality. In almost the opposite direction, Christopher Nolan's *Inception* refuses, at the end of the movie, to make that choice and clarify whether or not the reality experienced is the real itself or simply another dream. In a strong contrast with *The Matrix's* adversity to ambivalence, *Inception* is an extraordinary exhortation to an indecipherable ambivalence, keeping things exactly where they exist humanly.

According to Sami-Ali, the suppression of the imaginary is observable even in the way language is conceived. For him, the opposition between the literal and the figural is the opposition between the absence and presence of projection in the elaboration of experience of the world (Sami-Ali, 1983, 2002). And, even more incisively, the tendency towards literalness must be confronted with the problematic status of literalness in itself.

The banal brings into play a certain conception of language. It invites us to meditate on the fact that the two poles of discourse are not metaphor and metonymy, but, more generally, the literal and the figurative. That is why, in the Jakobsonian division of language, the very existence of the literal is problematic (...). (Sami-Ali, 1980, 2002)

The fact is that these tendencies towards the spread of the banal and literalisation are aspects, or even pre-conditions, of the very same “rule of neoliberal global contemporary reality” – the unlimited interchangeability and processuality of everything. Converting everything into banality and literalness is actually a device that produces the annihilation of the human subjectivity. As Sami-Ali asserts, “the banal object is one that can be produced and reproduced indefinitely, without any appeal to subjectivity.” Ultimately, this definition of the banal applies to human beings themselves and to any means involved significantly in their existences.

## Bibliography

- Bauman, Z. (2007 [1993]). *Modernidade e ambivalência*. M. Penchel (trad.). Lisboa: Relógio d'Água.
- Birken, L. (1999). Freud's “economic hypothesis”: from Homo Oeconomicus to Homo Sexualis. *American Imago*, 56 (4): 311-330.

- Dick, P. K. (1996 [1968]). *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. Del Rey/Ballantines Books.
- Freud, S. (1919). The “uncanny” (*Das Unheimliche*) (URL: <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>)
- Freud, S. (s.d.). *Civilisation and its Discontents (Unbehagen in der Kultur)*.
- Haraway, D. (2000 [1983]). A cyborg manifesto. Science, technology and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century. In D. Bell & B. Kennedy, *The cybercultures reader* (pp. 291-324). Routledge: London and New York.
- Jentsch, E. A. (1906). *On the psychology of the uncanny (Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen)*. (Trans. by R. Sellars). URL: [www.art3idea.psu.edu/locus/Jentsch\\_uncanny.pdf](http://www.art3idea.psu.edu/locus/Jentsch_uncanny.pdf)
- Lacan, J. (1991). *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*. Book.7 Seminar of Jacques Lacan by J.-A. Miller (ed.), D. Porter (trans.).
- Lem, S. (1978 [1961]). *Solaris* (English trans.). NY: A Harvest book.
- Lévinas, E. (1961). *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité*. M. Nijhoff.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1979). *La Condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*. Paris: Les éditions minuit.
- Sami-Ali (2002 [1980]). *O banal*. (trad. A. M. P. Martins). Lisbon: Dinalivro.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1985 [1960]). *Critique de la raison dialectique*. Paris: Gallimard.

### **Filmography**

- 2001 – A Space Odyssey*. Dir. Kubrik, Stanley. Metro-Goldwyn Mayer, 1968.
- Blade Runner*. Dir. Ridley Scott, Warner Bros., 1982.
- Inception*. Dir. Christopher Nolan, Warner Bros., 2010.
- The Matrix*. Dir. The Wachowskis, Warner Bros., 1999.
- Solaris*. Dir. Tarkovski, Andrei. Soviet Union, 1972.
- Timbuktu*. Dir. Abderrahmane Sissako, 2014.