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ARBITRARINESS, UNCERTAINTY AND NETWORKS: "FLYING LOW" OVER THE WHOLE WORLD

Néstor García Canclini. 2016.
*O mundo inteiro como lugar
estranho*. São Paulo, Edusp, 176p.

In recent times, we have seen in the media and in social networks news about forced and voluntary migrations, xenophobic attacks, real and imaginary frontiers that are recreated in different ways. At the same time, the media and audiovisual language give us the impression of a more connected and integrated world. We operate as “network actors”, always recreating the forms of association, so that “any description of the social structure” is questioned (2016, 17). Néstor García Canclini, an Argentine PhD of philosophy and anthropologist, leads us to look more strangely at the world before our eyes, at a time when the legitimacy of democracy is checked and the theories that we believed were explanatory of social reality, many times no longer work; a time when we used to face digital media daily and often see this world through and from them.

The most unsuspecting readers may feel a sense of “strangeness” as they read the first pages of *O mundo inteiro como lugar estranho* (The whole world as a strange place), an essay-like work in which the author brings together several writing genres. Alongside the chapters in which Canclini critically analyzes the various topics covered, there are some texts in which the philosopher uses a fictional narrative, sometimes to describe interviews, sometimes to describe speeches in academic congresses as well as the trajectory of a student to complete the thesis. Thus, the attention

of the reader is required, since it is not always possible to identify who is speaking throughout the text. The format of the essay, as the author himself says, has the purpose of “taking any masterly tone”, and giving some fluidity to the reading that would be interrupted by “academic precisions”. We can say, therefore, that the author is more inclined to the questions than to the answers, questioning the rootedness of the academic-scientific knowledge in magisterial certainty. Examining the assumptions of common sense, it is no longer restricted to philosophers and social scientists, but it is also the task of social movements.

According to Canclini, “we are in an uncertain transition that makes any description of the social structure unsafe” (ibid., 17) before the arbitrariness of reality that we face. It is from his contact with anthropology and fieldwork that the philosopher was able to meet empirical realities and to nurture a “transdisciplinary” knowledge, given the insufficiency of his own area of formation. For Canclini, speaking on “transdisciplinary” would not be to return to a moment of Western thought in which the knowledge was little specialized, but it is precisely the movement in which the contemporary researchers, faced with the arbitrariness of the world, “admit the insufficiency of the area itself [...] meets with those of other departments and reformulates their questions” (ibid., 43).

This happens because we no longer find a stable and explicable world based on concepts that derive from a deductive method capable of fixing reality in a theoretical framework. Instead, the author argues that we should study “networked actors” (a clear reference to Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory), showing how actors associate, build an agency, and resolve conflicts from their possibilities and networks they create and choose to connect to.

Throughout the narrative, the author goes through this world as a strange place, throwing in a “flying down” on topics such as being a foreigner; democracy that, in his eyes, earns the adjective of “bastard”; forms of hacktivism; ways of writing science and literature; besides talking about academic congresses and opening space for doubt.

It is no longer possible to think of the contemporary world dissociated from the new forms of communication, writing, circulation of information and artistic productions provided by digital and technological means. By asking “how or how much is read” in chapter three, for example, the author discusses the “reading crisis” by saying that we need to look at how information is accessed and the “new presentations of knowledge” (ibid., 33).

Canclini shifts the issue of reading to looking at crosses of media, formats and languages. The very act of reading is no longer the same: “It is

also knowing how to use navigation icons, scrollbars, windows, menus, hyperlinks, text search functions, images and music, site maps” (Ibid., 34); all within an authoring interface, that is, content set by companies and institutions that can sell information from users or even in environments in which users can modify and produce content such as social networks and e-mails.

Alongside this problem, there is also the question of vigilance and espionage, proper to the world involved by the network, and the protest movements that spread in it, despite the mechanisms of control. Hacktivism, which often acts in the name of the ethics of free movement, sharing and cooperation of information in the network, is then approached. These issues cast doubt on our power of choice on the internet and in social networks, which offer us possibilities for action and subversion of order, although we recognize the collaboration of surveillance and communication companies with governments to obtain access to certain information.

Canclini, in the chapter that gives his name to the work, also looks at the various forms of strangeness that appear in the contemporary world, not only from migratory flows and border policies, but also thinking of the digital world that stands in the “objective world” and constitutes himself as a part of it. “We are invited or pressured to live other ‘homelands.’” The author uses metaphors to refer to “non-territorial” forms of strangeness. “What does it mean to inhabit a digitally interconnected world where it is increasingly difficult to be a foreigner?” (Ibid., 59). To answer this question, the author proposes that we consider at least three notions about strangeness:

a) the nature of loss as a territory; b) the experience of being a native-born foreigner, that is, feeling strange in the society itself; c) the experience of leaving a city or nation that suffocates and choosing to be different or minority in a society or language that we will never feel as entirely our own (Ibid., 59).

Apart from the violence and difficulties faced by migrants and exiles who leave their country in search of employment, economic deprivation or political issues, Canclini sees strangeness not as an individual decision, but as a “family strategy” that favors exchanges of “cultural remittances” between “transnational communities” of fluid communication (Ibid., 60). The author cites the example of Mexican migrants who go to the United States and send objects of social prestige to families, such as household appliances and clothes, while taking from Mexico cultural goods of affective value such as food, music and videos of regional ceremonies.

However, these exchanges can generate distortions, because, as the author points out, to be accepted, migrants often must participate in the game of avoiding certain stereotypes about their nationality.

On the other hand, there is still, according to Canclini, the strangeness linked to the feeling of feeling foreign within society itself, as in the case of indigenous or colonized peoples who are denied the exercise of cultural expression, or whose cultural practices are transformed in goods.

The author also addresses “contemporary displacements”, a concept that evokes the Spanish term *dislocación*, whose meaning is “disarticulation” and “alteration”, and which is commonly used to refer to articulations and geological formations, as pointed out in the translator’s note for this edition. In this sense, contemporary displacements are those generated by “interculturality” and global communications: feeling foreigner in one’s own country by the increase in the number of people who speak other languages and wear other clothes; feel foreign in the face of the difficulty of moving from the analog to the digital in a technology-literate generation.

There are still those who leave their country and, when they return, they miss where they have been, experiencing an estrangement from their place of origin. They are the followers of what Canclini calls “abstract cosmopolitanism”, carried out by the concept of “deterritorialization”, of breaking of borders and of being citizens of the world. The author proposes, however, that we perceive the various ways of modifying the ties with our homeland and recognizes that the “desire to be a foreigner” (*ibid.*, 63) occurs in different ways between geographical migrants and well-born foreigners as among those who need to be exiled for political reasons.

The contemporary world, however, brings a novelty that cohabits with these forms of strangeness, even if arbitrarily: the impossibility of being a foreigner, in the sense that it does not totally belong and has not built the place for itself. Canclini points out that, apart from difference, being a foreigner requires “intimacy”, something diluted in a world where companies have access to our personal information, used in favor of the market and consumption. In this sense, the author concludes that we cannot be foreigners if we are clients or suspects watched always, systematized within consumption patterns and even thoughts and tastes (which does not mean that this generates a standardization).

Linked to these reflections are the author’s questions about democracy: “Is democratization, understood as the recognition and public regulation of social, economic and political rights, an important point still on the agenda of any State?” For the author, “the answer worsens if, as these times of global interdependence demand, we ask about the rights of migrants” (*ibid.*, 109).

The chapter in which Canclini addresses these questions is one of those that appear in the form of fiction, whose protagonist is a PhD student who is doing his field research in an academic congress on “interdisciplinary” and “political decomposition”. The text accompanies several dialog and questions about the controversies surrounding democracy and its legality, mainly from a perspective of the so-called “southern countries”.

This mixture of genres within a book of essayist character, in a genial way, makes the form of writing dialog with the content in the sense in which Canclini speaks of the constitution of the literary object from the “socio-cultural process of its elaboration, its traffic and the modulations in which their meaning is altered” (Ibid., 96), as well as the questioning of the cultural practices disseminated by digital media connected in network. In dealing with the sources of his book, for example, the author states that a quick “Google” in the cited passages lead to bibliographical references and, therefore, abstain from certain formalities that interrupt the fluid reading of the text. The Internet and the digital networks allowed not only a modification of the writing in its links with the audiovisual, modifying the autonomy of the literary field, but

Also, the predominance of the text about the context, that marked the literary theory of the twentieth century, diminishes when we, readers, have access in the net to novels or poems along with links to performances of the authors, blogs in which the readers interpret them, that place in the day by day debate on the fortune of the texts. Bookstore owners who advise and expert critics coexist with trailers on YouTube and Google (Ibid., 97-8).

The work calls into question other forms of thinking about the public domain, democratic practices of production and circulation of culture in a world in which digital network relationships are present. It is from Bruno Latour’s “actor-network theory”, that Canclini thinks of “culture in times of social decomposition” (Ibid., 13) as something more than a place where things are fixed; it is the space where actors find “repertoires” to act in a world in which social structures are always questioned and modified, and one cannot speak of a long-term stability. Therefore, we can say metaphorically that Canclini’s work is a “flying down” on the world: when flying high altitudes, it would have a generalist view of the world, as well as theories that it questions because they are unable to explain the discontinuities of contemporaneity; but, on the contrary, the low flight allows the author to describe how the actors behave in a network.

The reader can guide himself, like the network actors, by this thin network of connections and possibilities that the book offers to think of the

world as a strange place with its arbitrariness and uncertainties. According to Canclini, “recognizing uncertainty is not opening the back door to irrationality” (ibid., 143), but rather accessing discontinuous structures that have been always remade, instead of thinking of a world with stable structures. In addition, it is a Latin American perspective that can think about the contemporary world and, as the book itself says, “the epistemologies of the South makes the Northern ones less deluded” (ibid., 108).

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received

07.07.2017

accepted

10.17.2017

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