

The critical and invisible epistemology of communication

A epistemologia crítica e invisível da comunicação

REGIANE MIRANDA DE OLIVEIRA NAKAGAWA^a

Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação.
Cachoeira – BA, Brasil

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ABSTRACT

This review aims to discuss the precepts of a possible “political epistemology of communication” as suggested by Lucrecia D'Alessio Ferrara in her book *A Comunicação que não vemos*, considering the imponderability of the communication processes built in extremely complex cultural environments and that are not always clear. To do so, it elucidates how the author pervades the thoughts of a few authors in the field of communication in order to indicate different possibilities of knowledge production, which are guided by doubt and by the elaboration of interferences, and the political implications of this process. Finally, it points out the possibilities of studying the political exercise of a city through such epistemological approach.

Keywords: Political epistemology, communication, language, city, knowledge

RESUMO

Esta resenha visa discutir os preceitos de uma possível “epistemologia política da comunicação”, tal como sugere Lucrecia D'Alessio Ferrara em seu livro *A comunicação que não vemos*, considerando a imponderabilidade dos processos comunicacionais edificados em meio a ambientes culturais de grande complexidade, e que nem sempre se mostram com clareza. Para isso, elucidada de que maneira a autora perpassa o pensamento de alguns autores do campo da comunicação, com o intuito de indicar diferentes possibilidades de produção de conhecimento que se pautam pela dúvida e pela elaboração de inferências, e as implicações políticas desse processo. Por fim, aponta as possibilidades de estudo do exercício político da urbe por meio de tal abordagem epistemológica.

Palavras-chave: Epistemologia política, comunicação, linguagem, cidade, conhecimento

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^a Adjunct Professor - Center of Culture, Languages and Applied Technologies (UFRB) and permanent professor of PPG in Communication - Media and Narrative Processes of UFRB. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2039-7610>. E-mail: regianemo@uol.com.br

IT CAN BE said without a doubt that *A Comunicação que não vemos* (The communication we do not see) by Lucrécia D'Alessio Ferrara is a book about the epistemology of communication. However, it is impressive how such discussion was built throughout the nine chapters that compose the book. Ferrara uses authors that are reference in the field of communication but who do not show a discussion directly related to epistemology, such as Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard, Roman Jakobson, and Gilbert Simondon, to elucidate how, through their works, it is possible to build a thought on the possibilities of knowledge production in the field of communication.

Along with the epistemological discussion, the political issue equally permeates the whole book, approached by two absolutely complimentary aspects: the first one regards the understanding of communication processes that are not limited by the transmissive, mediating and linear bias established between sender and receiver; also, their political characterization cannot be only understood by the simple subjection to devices and strategies to reach a specific objective.

On the other hand, this study discusses the paradoxes and complexity that characterize the interactive dimension of communication and the formation of communicative environments, which are not always clear. It is exactly through these communication environments that different forms of “political construction”¹ (Ferrara, 2018, p. 8) are edified, which, as Maurizio Lazzarato points out, lead to the proliferation of distinct “possible worlds”² (2006, p. 217) and their futures, marked by great indetermination. This is, as the author implies, “the communication we do not see”, as indicated by the title of the book.

The second aspect derives from the first, because it is related to the discussion on the “political epistemology of communication”, considering “the epistemological dimension that politics reveals to communication as a scientific area”³ (2018, p. 9), which requires examining the political implications that occur when considering the cognitive bases and type of knowledge built within the indetermination to communicate. In this sense, such epistemology radically opposes the logical/cognitive exercise based on great generalizations aimed at producing totalizing explanations, since it assumes the consideration and recognition of the singularity of phenomena (Bakhtin, 2012), often unrepeatable and unpredictable, whose understanding requires the elaboration of equally specific propositions.

Therefore, it is not possible to disregard the dialogue between the author’s ideas and discussion proposed by Bruno Latour, when he stated that “any epistemology is a political epistemology”⁴ (2008, p. 54), referring not to the separation between science and politics, but to the correlation that can be

¹ Original text: “construção política”.

² Original text: “mundos possíveis”.

³ Original text: “a dimensão epistemológica que a política revela para a comunicação como área científica”.

⁴ Original text: “qualquer epistemologia é uma epistemologia política”.

built between non-redundant science and politics, that is, founded on a “risky effort”⁵ (Latour, 2008, p. 48), implying the articulation of questioning and singular propositions based on phenomena that are also singular and may jeopardize consolidated beliefs, theories and methods.

According to Lazzarato, if politics consists of “testing, experimenting”⁶ (2006, p. 211), then, a political epistemology would equally generate “possible knowledges” through an intellectual exercise, continuously built on doubt and the formulation of questions. Thus, as the author states, it is an epistemology that “emerges uncertain, sneaky and is just possible”⁷ (Ferrara, 2018, p. 79).

Considering the previously mentioned authors, it is noticed that the language was the guiding principle of the exercise to understand different configuration forms of the communication phenomenon and its epistemological and political consequences. Thus, in the very beginning of the book, the author refers to the discussion proposed by Benjamin on the use of language by people, “whose essence would be in the ability and right to name something”⁸ (Ferrara, 2018, p. 14), which would distinguish them from all other species. In the meantime, this use would allow learning how a language can be understood as a mean and, as such, would present two opposed aspects: one from its instrumental character, aimed at reaching a specific goal, and the other from how such communication effectively gains materiality in culture. From these perspectives, two ways of “naming” emerge, as well as two possibilities to build knowledge.

In the first case, the name tries to establish a symmetric relation with what it refers to, since language is liable to exercise an exogenous function to its very essence, which, as Lotman states, is “to structurally organize the world that surrounds men”⁹ (2000, p. 171), and not to merely represent something distinct from itself; in the second case, the materiality of language and “names” serves as the base for the elaboration of inferences, in an attempt to recreate processes and learn possible similarities among distinct phenomena. Therefore, it is possible to notice the bonds that are not always shown in the most immediate visuality of what one seeks to know.

Such differences are fundamental to learn how, in the field of communication, not unusually, names are created to identify concepts that aim to explain the nature of certain phenomena. Through these names, the symmetry between concept and phenomenon is sought to be established, which in fact allows to know nothing, but to only recognize what is already known, or build an explanatory entirety for something with singularities that are often disregarded. As the author states, many names show themselves as “euphoric as a way of saying, but dysphoric as designative capacity”¹⁰ (2018, p. 26), since they only create perceptive

⁵ Original text: “esforço arriscado”.

⁶ Original text: “em pôr à prova, em fazer experimentação”

⁷ Original text: “surge incerta, sorrateira e apenas possível”.

⁸ Original text: “cuja essência estaria na capacidade e direito de nomear”.

⁹ Original text: “organizar estructuralmente el mundo que rodea al hombre”

¹⁰ Original text: “eufóricos como modo de dizer, mas disfóricos como capacidade designativa”.

habits (Peirce, 1990) and re-state ways of speaking and thinking. Somehow, such perspective is consistent with the understanding of a transmissionist and absolutely predictable communication, capable of being explained by a totalizing generalization, in which the mere identification is instituted between the produced knowledge and what it aimed to know.

On the other hand, when addressing the interactive imponderability of communicating, there is the challenge to build knowledge based on inferences that state nothing, but lead to the construction of “diagrams of thought”¹¹ (Ferrara, 2018, p. 32) that are continuously redefined within the movement of the observed phenomenon itself, and that would result in the concern and reconstruction of highly dynamic processes, deprived of teleology. As we pointed out, it is in this imponderability that lies the political dimension of both communication and the epistemology of communication.

¹¹ Original text: “diagramas do pensamento”.

Allied to this discussion, another aspect emerges, which, contrary to what may seem at first sight, is not limited to a merely rhetorical issue, since it regards the subjacent cognitive dimension to any epistemological debate. To support this discussion, the author goes back to the distinction proposed by Roman Jakobson between metaphor and metonymy, to situate how both point to “cognitive tendencies”¹² (Ferrara, 2018, p. 81) that, although distinct, are directly related, considering the movement from metaphor to metonymy.

¹² Original text: “tendências cognitivas”.

Still regarding the inferential capacity that characterizes such epistemological perspective, the author indicates the existence of a possible “policy subjacent to the theory of western communication”¹³ (Ferrara, 2018, p. 39), found in the work by Jean Baudrillard, more specifically regarding the ways of reasoning that can be incited by the concepts of simulation and simulacrum. Contrary to what is often believed, a simulation does not imply pretending, but supposes an image that establishes a mimetic relation with the world, being confused with it.

¹³ Original text: “política subjacente à teoria da comunicação ocidental”.

According to this perspective, a science is built based on a dichotomous order, thanks to the relation of equivalence placed between the image and the world simulated by it.

On the other hand, the simulacrum “points to an image that represents nothing”¹⁴ (Ferrara, 2018, p. 52), so that its self-referential and eminently iconic characterization would allow the emergence of cognitive references that would not be limited to the mere recognition of similarities, as it happens with simulation, but that would result in the formulation of possible hypotheses that eventually would allow to build a genealogy of communication processes that one tries to know.

¹⁴ Original text: “aponta para uma imagem que nada representa”.

Finally, Ferrara especially discusses the “political epistemology of communication” in the scope of the political exercise of the city, which is

the focus of the last articles in the book. In order to develop her point of view, the author presents three phenomenological categories, based on the transformations undergone by the city throughout history. They are: the public sphere marked by the doxa and secondary orality (cosmopolitan city); the space built by the autophagic image (metropolis); and, finally, the mediatised city (megalopolis), continuously dispossessed and repossessed by the connections between spatialities that start acting in resonance and simultaneously in distinct parts of the world.

Regarding the epistemological categories, Ferrara proposes four ontological categories that would be the base for the formulation of hypotheses that, even if fallible, would be able to produce new knowledge on the city. Therefore, based on the constitution of the Greek *polis*, the author situates politics and community as “roots of the ontological categories of the city as scientific object”¹⁵ (Ferrara, 2018, p. 134), that would be allied to another two, interactivity and resistance. In this sense, any study on the city under the epistemological perspective must necessarily correlate two groups of categories, so that, through phenomenological perception, it would be possible to learn the singularities of the observed configurations and, at the same time, how the suggested properties for each one of the ontological categories come alive in the city, surpassing the simple description of its visuality, something quite recurrent in the studies on this topic.

It is through this reasoning that the author points out that, in the city sphere, politics may manifest through “small performances”¹⁶ (Ferrara, 2018, p. 81), which would configure articulated resistance forms through an autopoietic movement. In allusion to the title of the book, these are actions that “we do not see” either, as well as the political dimension of epistemology that they are able to raise. ■

¹⁵ Original text: “as raízes das categorias ontológicas da cidade como objeto científico”.

¹⁶ Original text: “pequenas atuações”.

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