

The gaze as a vector of thought and jouissance

O olhar como vetor do pensamento e do gozo

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ABSTRACT

In *A Superindústria do Imaginário: como o capital transformou o olhar em trabalho e se apropriou de tudo que é visível*, Eugênio Bucci worked on the topic for a third of a century, proposing to reconfigure and broaden the imbrication of linguistics and psychoanalysis in communication—transformed into the core of a data-extracting capitalism which circulates them as commodities (especially among advertisers), influencing the information flow so dear in times of unrelenting spread of fake news. Hence, the gaze as an axis acting in secret circuits configures an act of language. In fanciful societies, subjects, as if puppets, have their thoughts replaced by the gaze to, at last, find *jouissance*.

Keywords: Super-industry, imaginary, capital, gaze, *jouissance*.

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RESUMO

Em *A Superindústria do Imaginário: como o capital transformou o olhar em trabalho e se apropriou de tudo que é visível*, Eugênio Bucci se debruçou sobre o tema por um terço de século e propõe reconfigurar e exponenciar a imbricação da linguística e da psicanálise na comunicação – transformada em centro do capitalismo extrator de dados, circulando-os como mercadoria, sobretudo entre os propagandistas, influenciando no fluxo da informação, tão cara em tempos de um espalhamento desmedido de *fake news*. Assim, o olhar, como um vórtice que atua em circuitos secretos, é um ato de linguagem. Afinal, em sociedades fantasiosas, o sujeito, como uma espécie de brinquedo, tem seu pensamento substituído pelo olhar para, ao final, encontrar o gozo.

Palavras-chave: Superindústria, imaginário, capital, olhar, gozo.



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WHEN OUR EYES or our ears linger onto something—whether text, audio, video, etc—, the dutiful invisible algorithm inside our gadgets scans, captures and records data to reinforce the cast of our former profile, continuously analyzed, moves and shifted to bubbles, indefinitely. Time spent gazing, reading or listening is counted. If applications that, when installed, places us in front of where we stopped so that we can resume gazing from that point, without losses, the monitoring teams of platforms, portals, websites and applications know exactly if we reached the end or if we abandoned it halfway. One can ‘circumvent’ them by opening something and leaving it on the background while doing another concomitant activity, especially when we are in listener mode and experience the following reproductions as listening *flanêurs*; however, ‘they’ count on this probabilistic flaw.

That is why, nowadays, we are concerned with quickly scrolling through our networks’ timelines, channels and pages that we open daily. Are we pushing the issue? No. If we arrest our gaze to admire a beautiful body (as we do on the streets); or when tired of our miserable routines we click on a cute animal video (as we relax by caressing our pets); or even waste time reading or watching a livestream about another government atrocity (as when we stopped at a newsstand to leaf through the newspapers)—we are done for. Cyberspace offers no escape: we will continue to receive more and more of the same to entice our gazing. Birds of a feather gaze at something together. Such experience is evident even for those who do not investigate Internet user behaviors when ads and advertisements for things related to our daily searches begin to abound. Some people even stop ‘googling’ to avoid receiving an avalanche of related advertisements—what is worse, for endless months. We thus end up seeing ‘sponsored material’ of what social networks think we want or need to see, and the algorithm often gets it right.

Eugênio Bucci needs no further introduction. A full professor at the School of Communications and Arts, University of São Paulo, Bucci has books published in the field of communication and is considered a reference in Journalism studies. Known to the newspaper-reading public for his column in *Estadão*, the journalist makes blunt criticisms in his appraisals of the political state of the art, all written in painstaking prose whose power of attraction captivates even those who least interested in the subject.

Those who read *Videologias: ensaios sobre televisão* (2004) [Videologies: essays on television], written in partnership with psychoanalyst Maria Rita Kehl, will have a better understanding of Bucci’s most recent book, *A Superindústria*

do Imaginário: como o capital transformou o olhar em trabalho e se apropriou de tudo que é visível [The Super-industry of the Imaginary: how capital transformed the gaze into work and appropriated everything that is visible], published in 2021 by Autêntica. The work amplifies ideas previously outlined, updates concepts, adds other biases and, at the same time, proves to be a necessary reading so that we are not engulfed by this ‘super-industry,’ this monopoly of capital over the imaginary, and so that we know how to avoid it.

Reading its almost 500 pages is far from a walk in the park, as effort is demanded from the observer’s gaze, but this journey is mitigated by a light writing, illustrated with stories such as that of a headless philosopher or of a Tamagotchi player, with music lyrics and other uncountable examples typical of a teacher, providing all readers (students or not) with parameters to understand. Attention should also be paid to the intertitles: a prime example of condensation proper of someone with mastery over language. From the very beginning, when analyzing and discussing the reasons underlying the power of the trillion-dollar big techs, the author’s style makes it easy to understand complex concepts and terms such as super-industrial spatialities or imaginary temporalities by exchanging and consequently disrupting the communication patterns from the instance of words in favor of the electronic and live image.

Bucci speaks pessimistically about the fragmented, uncertain and disposable subject; a subject cleaved in half. As is befitting the journalist (let us face it, writing easy is hard) and his experience as an editor, the fluid writing pours over the topics and makes the reading of such dense themes not as labyrinthine. This is especially clear in two chapters: one in which he details the 1960s Habermasian public sphere and its transformations into the global public telespace, explaining that it is not technology which expands the public sphere, “the driving force for expansion comes from the social and economic use of technology” (p. 51); and in the last chapter, when redefining the “exchange value of commodity, which under the empire of the image is now composed of the value of labor and also of the value of the gaze to conform the value of *jouissance*” (p. 30), in which he employs intellectual autonomy and enters the thorny field of psychoanalysis, even saying—as if apologizing—that his approach is informed by language and communication studies. Communication also gains a prestigious contribution with this book, with repercussions on the culture, imaginary and economy of the advent of super-industry, the predominant form of contemporary capitalism.

Bucci names this current phenomenon super-industry, but it could also be called hyperindustry, since we inhabit a hyper world in which one thing leads to another; or cyberindustry, as the cyberspace captures and co-opts the gaze. Importantly, as Bucci argues, we are not living in a post-industry reality,

but rather in a super-industry of everything, of what we imagine and will virtually imagine. Bucci's super-industry goes beyond the production of consumer goods and enter the imaginary.

But studies of the imaginary, or even of capitalism as an industry of the imaginary, especially in communication, involve other theoretical references. To focus on just three authors, who address the cultural-social imaginary to which Bucci refers, we first invoke Malena Contrera's diagnosis:

Discussions on how the process by which social media filter from the imaginary, from the noosphere, a series of contents and practices, reworking and re-signifying them to then repropose them to society, must be extended to present more clearly the importance of this relationship between media and imaginary in contemporary times (CONTRERA, 2021).

We can also highlight Byung-Chul Han's sphere of imaginary, when he argues that "digital communication is becoming more and more bodiless and faceless. Digitally restructures the Lacanian triad of real, imaginary, and symbolic. It dismantles the real and totalizes the imaginary" (2018, p. 45).

Cornelius Castoriadis (1991, p. 277) stresses the symbolic: "The social imaginary is, primordially, the creation of significations and the creation of the images and figures that support these significations. The relation between a signification and its supports (images or figures) is the only precise sense that can be attached to the term 'symbolic.'"

EXPLOITING THE GAZE

In *A superindústria do imaginário*, Bucci investigates how and for how long our gaze lingers on things, how we choose what to gaze at, feeding back into what is being gazed upon and what this may entail. How the "labor of the gaze" produces meaning and generates value through the economy's—the data economy, attention economy—nerve center, made up by the core of what the author calls "global monopoly conglomerates" which deal with communication, the major 21st century science turned core of capitalism, using digital media as "a fuel and an extension."

According to Bucci, this super-industrial process has revolutionized capitalism and unveiled a totalitarianism that invades people's privacy without the slightest transparency. When the communicational paradigm shifted from the instance of printed words (mediated by the credibility of printed newspapers) to the instance of chewed-up audiovisual (the moving image, the live TV image),

we arrived, driven by the Internet and everything that stems from cyberculture, at the instance of lives, streaming and ephemeral viral memes.

Bucci outlines how this mutation takes place: since the mid-20th century, the capitalism that extracts our data, systematically and often without consent, and creates a space of control, ended up converting discourse and intimate information into commodities. Sometimes a fetishized commodity, as Karl Marx calls it in *The Capital*, one of the influences on this book, “[a] commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference” (Marx, 1985, apud Bucci, 2021, p. 347). In another passage, to understand the “physical relation between physical things,” Marx writes: “In the same way the light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself” (ibid., p. 353).

Commodity is a sign, an image, and, above all “what took center stage, or the foreground, was another kind of commodity,” Bucci infers, “a commodity that has no tangible physical body: signs, be they images or words. Contemporary capitalism is a sign manufacturer and a sign trader—corporeal things are no longer the center of value” (p. 21). In short, capitalism relegates corporeal commodities, endowed with some instrumental or practical utility, to the background.

For signs (visual or otherwise) to carry meaning, Bucci clarifies that they “need to have been incorporated into the active repertoire of the audience to which they are addressed. For this reason, they cannot only be under the strict control of the manipulator. This is what we mean by stating that, in the ‘culture industry,’ the consumer is the ideology” (p. 265).

Inquiring on how capital transformed and still transforms the gaze into labor is an appropriate and timely deduction to reflect on *what* and *whom* we gaze upon in the digital space, since our gaze algorithmically feeds the databases that platforms (the means of production), especially those obliquely incorporated by big techs, store about us to use in absentia, to pass on to advertising agencies, to sell products we neither need nor want, to direct political campaigns—especially to those still ‘on the fence’ on who to vote for. Bucci’s observation that capital appropriates everything that is visible, is an insightful statement and could also cover everything that is audible (or ‘hearable,’ if we are permitted the neologism), in short, visible, ‘hearable’ and given so freely as to arouse suspicion; but the naive are not suspicious. “This is how, as labor, capital buys social gaze: to construct the meanings of signs, images and visual discourses that it intends to put into circulation as commodity” (p. 23). Here, then, are the crucial points of how Bucci builds his theoretical field.

USE VALUE, EXCHANGE VALUE, JOUISSANCE VALUE

Bucci states that, as of the second half of the 20th century, capitalism underwent an accelerated mutation and the body of the commodity was replaced by its image, addressing the subject by desire rather than necessity. Thus, use value gave way to *jouissance* value. Such *jouissance* is more psychoanalytic than juridical, it has a function of *jouissance* (Lacanian expression), which Bucci involves and bases on a communication perspective. It is thus an imaginary *jouissance*, that is, a *jouissance* provided by the commodity, an industrially manufactured value as exchange value. After all, the *jouissance* value is fabricated by the social gaze, and clearly affords a *jouissance* value to the commodity. We come to *jouissance* habitually, without thinking about the value embodied, to try to appease our desires, fill our void, to have a sense of fulfillment. These are merely attempts because desires are never appeased, as Bucci notes. The super-industry swallows our desires.

The author makes a distinction by stating that it is not simply a super-industry of entertainment or spectacle, basing his argument on Guy Debord and his society of the spectacle. Rather, the imaginary deepens a feeling that triggers the secret circuit of each person's subjectivity and desires, resulting in Lacan's *jouissance* value, even though Bucci argues that the psychoanalyst never fully described the expression "as an economic category" (p. 361). Bucci has been working on this reflection for more than 25 years and, at first, he ignored it came from a Lacanian cogitation.

Bucci's thesis in *A Superindústria do Imaginário* stems from his doctoral research, defended in 2002 under advisement of Dulcilia Buitoni. Although Google has been storing our data since 1998, at that time technology platforms were far from being the tech giants of today. Bucci homes in on this current ubiquity of digital social networks in which users (as if addicted) have their free time exploited by producing signs, thinking they are just passing time or having fun while, deep down, lending their cashable gazes.

Early on, Bucci conceived capitalism as a mode of production based on images (and their fetishes), as discussed in the collection *Videologias*, in clear reference to Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*. In a previous book, Bucci and Kehl (2004, p. 23) searched for the "Lacanian *jouissance*" as a theoretical tool and critical basis to understand the continuities and ruptures of late stage capitalism. The authors already argued then that myths are "myths regarded," thus designating and criticizing television and its imaginary production which steals discourse "(verbal, visual, gestural), all 'natural' discourse, and gives it back to the speakers" (ibid., p. 19). The power exercised by TV at its height allowed us to see it as the decision-making mechanism which allowed "the capitalist

mode of production, transubstantiated in spectacle, is automatic reproduction.” Power, therefore, was the “supremacy of the spectacle.”

From then on, in tracing his trajectory, Bucci takes his investigation to extremes and recovers the step by step of the laborious task undertaken for more than two decades. He excels in transitioning from one thought to another, and we may celebrate this work that retraces his reflections and ideas, which are now available to you, the reader. So, be delighted, because, as Bucci says: “If there is any solution, it will go through politics. There is no way out outside of politics” (p. 417); democratic rules must be maintained, while there are no global regulations to reduce the power of big techs. I’ll stop here, leaving you with a quote so beautiful I would like to punctuate it with a heart eyes emoji, but as the author does not approve of emojis, we can appreciate its poetry: “Public space now resembles a vault, as big or as small as the blue sky that envelops the Earth” (p. 48-49). 🍷

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