

# MATRIZes

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## DOSSIER

*New Perspectives  
on Communication Theories*

**Renato Ortiz**

**Emiliano Treré**

**David W. Park, Jefferson Pooley,**

**Peter Simonson & Esperanza Herrero**

**José Luiz Braga**

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at the University of São Paulo

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## Between tradition and renewal

**M**ATRIZes has been contributing, since 2007, to the circulation of significant intellectual contributions in the field of Communication, publishing all accepted works in the open-access format in Portuguese, along with versions in other languages (English and Spanish) to promote the dissemination of knowledge. Until now, excluding data from this current issue, we have published 527 articles, predominantly single-authored texts—394 (75% of the total)—followed by those with dual authorship, 101 (19%), and the remaining 32 articles (6%) with three or more authors. This results in a total of 525 authors, 393 (75%) of whom are from Brazil and 132 (25%) from other countries. Most of those who published articles did so only once: 420 (80%); 73 (14%) had two publications; and 32 (6%) published three or more.

This brief authorial bibliometric analysis of the journal helps to understand the importance of **MATRIZes** in the field. However, the coldness of numbers must be counterbalanced by the awareness that, behind these indicators, there are people. We are very much aware of this in our editorial routine, and much could be said about the distress experienced by our committee—and certainly by other journals as well—when sending rejection letters to colleagues or when we struggle to provide timely responses to all decision-making processes regarding submitted works. It's all in a day's work.

Nevertheless, such matters may seem insignificant when sudden and unexpected circumstances confront us with the loss of a colleague. We are, of course, referring to the news of the untimely passing of researcher Igor Sacramento, mourned by the Brazilian communication community. Throughout his career, he maintained a fruitful relationship with **MATRIZes**, having both published and provided thorough reviews for the journal. His first published article appeared in the second issue of 2014, titled *The biography through a communication perspective*, a study directly related to his doctoral research, in which he sought



to discuss the notion of “communicational biography.” His last contribution was published in the first issue of 2020: a coauthored article with Raquel Paiva titled *False news, WhatsApp and vaccination against yellow fever in Brazil*. In this latter work, it becomes evident—without neglecting other concerns—the significance that the interface between communication and health had assumed in his career.

According to Bourdieu’s logic of academic fields, those who publish in scientific journals expect them to be a vehicle for achieving positive visibility, enabling them to attain a more central position with greater authority and significance in the field’s debates. This is related to the dissemination of ideas, the continuity of an academic trajectory, and peer recognition—all dimensions clearly present in Igor’s evolving intellectual journey. Conversely, journals hope that those who publish in them will return or share their prestige with the publication. In this sense, considering that our editorial processes are based on peer review, we must thank those who, at a given moment, did justice to the young doctor who submitted a text to **MATRIZes**, approving it.

That said, we hope that the legacy of Igor Sacramento’s transdisciplinary work—combining aspects of tradition and renewal in the studies of our field—serves as an inspiration for those entering it, as well as for those already involved. The attempt to merge tradition and renewal is also a concern of the Journal, which is reflected in the table of contents of this issue. The goal is for this combination to establish productive tensions and dialogues between consolidated dimensions and emerging perspectives and themes.

This is also evident in cases where renowned intellectuals turn to innovative topics and, conversely, where younger researchers revisit traditional questions in Communication research. Accordingly, this issue brings together a set of themes and original arguments that, on the one hand, reinforce the scope of established intellectual production. It will be up to attentive academic readers to locate, interpret, and evaluate the contributions of this variety of works and perspectives.

The Dossier section of this issue thus begins with the work of Renato Ortiz, *Visibility and public space*. In this article, while addressing the notion of visibility, the renowned sociologist draws on classical literature on the subject—including the role of the concept of visibility in Merton’s Sociology of Science—presented in essay format and offers insights into a conceptual review that is certainly further developed in his newest book *Influência* (2025). In any case, the article at hand will be useful in a variety of analyses of current objects, particularly concerning digital influencers and the sustainability of their professional activities.

In the following text, the Mexican author based in the United Kingdom, Emiliano Treré, reflects on how social movements and activisms intersect today, in the article *Media ecologies, social movements and activism*. The core of his

argument is the assertion of the strength of a media ecology approach for analyzing digital activism practices linked to social movements. This perspective allows for understanding how media and movements are mutually configured in complex, creative, and often unpredictable ways.

*History of communication studies across the Americas: an introduction*, by David Park, Jefferson Pooley, Peter Simonson, and Esperanza Herrero, the next contribution in the Dossier, has the merit of identifying key issues and multiple bibliographies for a historiographic approach to the subject. The section continues with the article *Tracking communication issues*, by José Luiz Braga, in which the author deepens a theoretical-methodological line to which he has contributed in the field, proposing a research program grounded in ten premises relevant to the development of communication research. Following this, the article *The ontology of Blackness in an audiovisual essay*, by Irene Machado, continues the section with a study that excavates the audiovisual language of the multi-artist Arthur Jafa in *Dreams are colder than death*, particularly the composition of testimonies by African Americans, to discuss an ontology of Black lives. Also engaging with audiovisual products, Benjamim Picado, in *The script as a charge: examining dialogue dramaturgy in The Newsroom and True Detective*, explores the specific role of the script in the HBO television fiction series indicated in the title, thus concluding the Dossier of this issue.

The Agenda section begins with the text *LGBTQIAPN+ blackness in advertising: does this rainbow have all the colors?*, in which Pablo Moreno Fernandes adopts an intersectional approach, combined with semiotics, to analyze content disseminated by brands and to discuss the complexities that arise from the intersection of sexual orientation and gender identity with race in relation to the object of study. Next, Ednei de Genaro, in *Critical media theory: Chun, Galloway, Wark*, offers a theoretical and bibliographic engagement with these authors from the North American context and of a critical orientation, each with distinct emphases and horizons, yet sharing a common concern with the archaeological dimensions of media. The decolonial perspective, in turn, is employed by Emmanoel Ferreira in *Distribution of the sensible and decolonial aesthetics in Brazilian games of the 1990s*, in the study of the object mentioned in the title.

Also, from a technological analysis perspective—specifically digital—, the text *Beyond design: algorithmic interfaces as epistemological agents*, by Elias Bitencourt, proposes new concepts for studying the relationships between digital interfaces, communication, and society. Next, Júlio César Rocha Conceição and Rennan Lanna Martins Mafra, in *Beyond sense: objectivity, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity from the perspective of comic book journalism*, analyze graphic narratives by Joe Sacco

and note that this particular journalistic form enabled the author to delve deeper into his investigation when reporting on an event.

Following that, the work of Maiara Garcia Orlandini and Rousiley Celi Moreira Maia, *Politicization and depoliticization: a theoretical-methodological framework for the analysis of communication dynamics*, adopts a propositional dimension for studies in the field—specifically, for the analysis of political discussions in digital environments—aiming to empirically understand the processes of politicization/ depoliticization. The political question is also central to the article that closes the *Agenda* section of this issue. In the article *Polarization on social media: measuring segregation of political communities*, the authors, Márcio Moretto Ribeiro, and Pablo Ortellado, drawing on social media data, address the emergence and development of the phenomenon of polarization in Brazil, beginning in 2014, through a simultaneous process of separation and convergence of political communities.

In keeping with the diverse and fluid nature of the articles in this issue—which are as strongly linked to established theoretical traditions in the field as they are to innovative explorations—we conclude the edition with a review of the work *Muniz Sodré: uma escola disruptiva*, presented by Ribamar Oliveira. A tribute to the 80th birthday of a foundational figure in the field, the publication brings together criticism, interview, chronicle, and testimonial, recognizing the power of reflection of the sociologist, journalist, and Emeritus Professor at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. This is, undoubtedly, a suggested essential reading on the trajectory of an author who has shaped the tradition of Brazilian communication thought. Thus, in yet another edition, **MATRIZes** fulfills its role of positioning itself between tradition and intellectual renewal, seeking to bring a diversity of voices into circulation. Enjoy your reading! ■

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*Richard Romancini<sup>1</sup> and Ana Carolina Escosteguy<sup>2</sup>*

# DOSSIER

*News Perspectives on Communication Theories*



# Visibility and public space<sup>a</sup>

## *Visibilidade e espaço público*

■ RENATO ORTIZ<sup>b</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This article treats the recent transformations on the public space. Particularly, the idea of visibility, important dimension of the contemporary debate, is developed. The author uses two examples (celebrity and luxury) to demonstrate that the notion of “being visible” is ambiguous. On one side, mainly on the case of the celebrities, it becomes a value; on the other side, it is a dilemma for the world of the rich, which frontiers are traced to separate them from ordinary people.

**Keywords:** Public sphere, globalization, culture, elite, visibility, luxury.

### RESUMO

Este artigo tem como temática as transformações recentes ocorridas no espaço público. Em particular é trabalhada a questão da visibilidade, traço recorrente no debate contemporâneo. O autor, através de dois exemplos (celebridades e luxo), procura demonstrar a ambiguidade que encerra o conceito de “ser visível”. Se por um lado para as celebridades ele se torna um valor a ser cultivado, por outro, trata-se de um dilema do mundo dos ricos, cujas fronteiras são desenhadas para se separarem das pessoas comuns.

**Palavras-chave:** Espaço público, globalização, cultura, elite, visibilidade, luxo.

<sup>a</sup> Conference presented at the LUSOCOM/INTERCOM Congress, Universidade do Vale, Balneário Camboriú, September 2024.

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The issue of visibility is recent. The term itself has always been in common use, but it was not a central category for understanding a given social phenomenon. In other words, “seeing and being seen” was a secondary concern within other questions raised in the realm of public space. Generally, when consulting the literature on the topic, one notices a certain condescension toward the past, as if everything there were latent. There would thus be a kind of continuity between what occurred and was addressed by some authors (particularly sociologists) and current reality. Indeed, “seeing and being seen” is part of all social relations; symbolic interactionism has largely dedicated itself to understanding this. The individual who presents themselves before another must be recognized for the interaction to succeed. Visibility and recognition thus emerge as intertwined issues (Goffman explores those who are invisible in his book *Stigma*).

However, when we currently refer to the issue, we mean something else: it is not the interaction itself that matters, but the fact that an individual or object becomes visible within a broad social space. This leads us to two crucial problems: the notion of space and boundaries. That is, concepts that change due to substantive technological shifts and, particularly, with the advent of global capitalism, where the process of cultural globalization takes on new meaning. This is the theme I intend to address: the relationship between public space and visibility in the contemporary world.

There is a history of public space; many authors have sought to tell it (I will not dwell on this point). Habermas often said that the public refers to manifestations that no longer occur in closed circles but are accessible to all. In this sense, the State would aim to safeguard the public good, that is, the general interest of citizens (Habermas, 1978). This is the key dimension: the public sphere only fully emerges with industrial modernity, and within it, two elements are essential: the communal and the individual. Communal is marked by the existence of a shared place where classes and estates, while still historically present, do not directly interfere in defining what is conceived as public—that is, “for all.” The individual dimension is equally decisive: this is the form through which people insert themselves into this shared spatiality. The individual, in their singularity, asserts their “opinion” within something public; opinions, by becoming visible, can thus oppose one another. For this, the existence of communication media is fundamental: they enable images, texts, and information to circulate. In a way, one could say that communication media are constitutive of modernity; they bring together dispersed parts of the same totality. Print, photography, cinema, radio, television, and now the internet fulfills this role. Another aspect of this 19th-century modernity is its foundation on a clear distinction between

public and private. These are separate domains, each with its own logic. Walter Benjamin (1986), in his work on Paris, dedicates an entire chapter to capturing the interiors of bourgeois homes; they are a refuge from the bustle of the street. Using a suggestive allegory, he notes that the bourgeoisie leaves the fingerprints of their identities on their furniture. Another example: the feminine novels of that era (e.g., Jane Austen). They confine women to private space, as if excluded from public engagement. Their emotional lives unfold in houses, castles, parties, balls, and rural estates—a world with barriers, where the outside is perceived as threatening and distant. I also recall Horkheimer (1941), who considered private space the quintessential realm of art; there, it could escape the demands of the mercantile logic outside.

The issue of visibility fits within this context of modernity's expansion: individuals and objects become visible due to the broadening of public space and the existence of appropriate media ensuring their circulation. Photography holds particular significance here: it makes present something that is absent. The shift from daguerreotype to photography illustrates this trait of image reproducibility. While the daguerreotype allowed only a single copy (Benjamin prized its aura), paper photography enabled multiplication. Yet, despite these technical transformations across the 19th and 20th centuries, a problem remains. The category *visibility* was not used to describe the era's changes, nor was it part of debates about communication media. The phenomenon imposed itself without being grasped as such. What explains this gap, this lag between being and being perceived? I revisit an example from the Sociology of Science to clarify my argument. This is perhaps one of the few moments when the concept is used in the Social Sciences. The functionalist school, developed in the U.S. in the 1950s (with Robert Merton as its leading figure), aimed to understand how the universe of science operates<sup>1</sup>. It considered scientific discourse and practice a “world apart,” with specific rules and methods. A trait of this community of agents is its *ethos*—the internalization of a set of values (e.g., universalism) underpinning all scientific institutions. Within this framework, certain mechanisms enable this domain's functioning. Two are key: peer recognition and the merit system. Thus, objective traits revealing academic excellence are identified, such as awards (especially the Nobel) and publications. The notion of visibility emerges precisely to account for the recognition of scientific value embodied in specific individuals. Some authors exemplify this by studying a group of physicists at American universities; through empirically observed visibility, they capture the idea of prestige and recognition (Cole & Cole, 1968). However, the category is short-lived. This is when another statistical tool, better suited for empirical (*i.e.*, mathematical) use in research, is invented: citations<sup>2</sup>. Visibility thus loses methodological promise,

<sup>1</sup> Robert Merton's thesis, *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England* (1970), originally published in 1938, is considered a foundational work in the Sociology of Science.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Garfield established the Science Citation Index in 1964.

being practically replaced. The example is suggestive, but what matters here is not the scientific field itself but understanding the meaning of visibility. It is an indicator revealing the recognition of certain people within a space restricted to the universe of science. The boundaries are explicit and apply to a specific community: physicists. In our case, the issue is different. The notion refers to an individual removed from their context and projected into a media space with its own rules. Here, the visible implies an initial decontextualization, followed by a recontextualization due to expanded boundaries. The logic of “seeing and being seen” in public space does not align with the rules of “seeing and being seen” as symbolic interactionists conceived them (what we call the *presential*).

One way to understand this visibility is through a heuristic example that condenses the characteristics emerging in public space: celebrities. Synthetically, they are singular characters who become visible on an amplified scale. By *singular*, I mean their persona is not confined to the private domain; it must project into public space. Celebrities are marked by the virtue of ubiquity, they are “everywhere.” Thus, they depend on communication media that mediate between the public and what is shown. This distinguishes them from prestige, which historically involved select figures (Rojek, 2011). Renown is a social distinction within a restricted group, like the physicists I mentioned. Here, the merit of the seen is confined to a community. Celebrity implies expanding habitual boundaries, transcending groups and social classes. Yet, as with visibility, the concept itself took time to gain traction. Early studies on “*celebrity culture*” did not explicitly use the term; it became common only in the 1970s/80s. Earlier, the terms used to characterize the extraordinary quality of these characters varied: divas, divos, heroes, stars. Alberoni (1963) employed Weber’s notion of charisma to define public figures (divas and divos) who aroused interest and admiration. In U.S. literature, they were often heroes, like Lindbergh, celebrated for his solo transatlantic flight (Klapp, 1949, p. 53). Edgar Morin’s *The Stars* (1957) is particularly suggestive. He analyzes film stars as modern myths, akin to Hellenic deities—archetypes for ordinary mortals, like James Dean embodying youth. However, treating stars as myths places them in the collective sphere. Celebrities, conversely, thrive on idiosyncrasy; they assert subjectivity in public space. Their professional roles (e.g., artist, politician) are secondary to their personal traits (gossip, opinions, charm). A celebrity is singular and non-transferable, irreducible to collective archetypes.

I return to my earlier question: why do celebrities and visibility now hold new meaning? The notion of emblem helps here. How are we to understand the gap I referenced? To address this, I revisit the notion of emblem<sup>3</sup>. Octávio Ianni (1994) noted that early Sociology privileged emblems like the nation or

<sup>3</sup> I developed this theme in the article “As Celebridades como um Emblema Sociológico” (Ortiz, 2016).

class but did not develop the idea. An emblem is a graphic representation that makes reality evident, reducing it to a sign pointing beyond itself. Unlike allegory, it has materiality that “speaks” of something transcendent. My argument: in 19th-century modernity, celebrities were not yet emblems—mass culture was. Leo Lowenthal (1984) found that early U.S. biographies featured politicians; later, entertainment figures dominated, termed “mass idols,” not celebrities. Mass culture emblemized a new societal configuration: a totality transcending class, a mass market, and media enabling circulation. Television epitomized this “mass” space.

Yet emblems are eroded by time. What conditions drive these changes? I turn to a definition proposed by Daniel Boorstin (1961); it is a sort of aphorism that helps us contemplate contemporaneity: “the celebrity is a person who is known for being well known” (p. 47). The phrase is tautological, referring us to something circular—hence its interest. In it, the intrinsic qualities of someone’s reputation are displaced onto a recognition system based on image circulation. What matters is the efficacy of technical means capable of decontextualizing a persona and redefining it in another context—now a media context.

Another relevant aspect of these changes concerns the separation between public and private established by industrial modernity. In the contemporary world—and celebrities encapsulate this well—this compartmentalization becomes obsolete: the private dimension invades and projects itself into public space. With the advent of digital technologies, particularly social networks, this “blurring” of boundaries intensifies. In this sense, it becomes necessary to redefine the past, to mark transformations so they become evident and explicit. In a way, the debate around the notion of the “post-,” developed in the 1980s/90s, still marks the intellectual field today (postmodernity, post-industrial, globalization, post-truth, post-colonial); these refer to a set of mutations that need to be named and understood.

In this context, mass culture ceases to be a convincing emblem. It becomes associated with a Fordist, rigid society, with a market where individual consumer preferences are overshadowed by what is standardized—that is, mass-produced. Times have changed: we now have a flexible, diversified capitalism where market segmentation is marked by “diversity” (a contemporary value). The television icon declines, giving way to the internet. Celebrity and visibility “speak” of current times, becoming convincing references. The phenomenon and concept thus acquire “citizenship rights.” Sociological studies can now be conducted from a new perspective, exploring previously neglected questions. For example, the work of Nathalie Heinich (2012)<sup>4</sup>. Reviving a concept from Bourdieu, she shows how visibility transforms into symbolic capital; there are

<sup>4</sup> Sociological studies on visibility emerged in the 2000s (Brighenti, 2007; Ferris, 2007; Harmon, 2005; Heinich, 2011).

those who are visible and those who are invisible. There exists, therefore, a hierarchy that classifies and orders individuals into unequal social positions. She further argues that this would imply the existence of a new elite, similar to the group of politicians, bankers, etc. It is not my intention to discuss these points (though I will consider the theme of elites at the end of this presentation); I emphasize visibility emerges as a legitimate value through which someone's recognition occurs in the public sphere. It presupposes, then, the existence of an individual who projects themselves beyond their place of origin. This is the collective expectation shared not just by celebrities; social media participants also want to be seen and recognized.

Within this framework, two questions can be raised: a) how is this visibility realized in public space? Does it truly disregard borders, meaning that with adequate technical means it would necessarily expand? b) would visibility constitute a value capable of imposing itself on society as a whole? I can approach the first question by contrasting celebrities with influencers (Ortiz, 2025). Both figures depend on the same attribute to be recognized in public space. They are also idiosyncratic individuals; influencers, like celebrities, have proper names and interact with their followers as subjects. However, there are substantive differences between them. While celebrities are certainly shaped by the technical media they use, they are not confined to the internet. The movie star appears in newspapers, magazines, billboards, television, radio, gossip columns, advertising. It is this ensemble of media performances that confers upon them their celebrated status. Influencers are products of a specific technical medium: the internet. This is the realm of their definition and consecration; they are thus prisoners of their digitality. Yet the internet does not constitute a system where parts are integrated into a whole; on the contrary, it is the kingdom of diversity, composed of digital ecosystems with their own boundaries. Influencers operate within this constrained space—which is, in fact, the virtue valued by the market. The goal is to mobilize the spatial fringes of ecosystems to maximize advertising exposure. The segmented market is homologous to digital segmentation, and profits from this. Therefore, influencers are not ubiquitous. On the contrary, one needs only look at digital field award platforms (like Influency.me) to see that distinctions are made by segments: activism, hair, travel, fitness, lifestyle, gastronomy, etc. The world is divided into parts where one supposedly exerts certain influence—it is the part that counts, not the whole. This means visibility is nourished by technical means, but is also circumscribed by them. The question of "how to expand your symbolic capital" is thus shaped by specific determinations. The illusion is imagining that the technical medium used—in this case, the internet—would ensure universal reach. This is the mirage of

social networks, the belief that the image projected in public space would have nearly infinite reach (in popular language, “everyone is watching”). In truth, visibility is made of shadows.

The second question is of a different nature. To answer it adequately, we must move beyond the sphere of communication and situate the problem within a broader perspective. For this, I turn to the example of luxury. At first glance, it might seem unrelated to our central concern; however, reflection should not conform to appearances. Consider, for instance, Veblen’s classic work (1953), *The Theory of the Leisure Class*; this text is regarded as a milestone in luxury studies. Veblen considers the concept of “conspicuous consumption” (often translated as “ostentatious”) central to his argument. But what is “conspicuous”? That which shows itself, that which jumps to the eye (“ostentation” derives from the Latin *ostentare*, meaning “to show”). His thesis can be summarized thus: there exists an elite that delights in displaying a luxurious life in public space, thereby affirming its class position; on the other side are those who, through emulation, imitate the upper classes to approximate the prestige denied to them. Ostentatious consumption thus functions to affirm wealth status. Visibility and prestige converge (Ortiz, 2023). What interests my argument is not so much whether luxury is or is not ostentation (that is another discussion), but rather how the idea of ostentation implies exhibition—putting wealth on display. In this sense, luxury shows itself to all, much like advertisements for Chanel perfumes, Ferragamo shoes, Hermès bags—in short, what becomes visible in a globalized world. Global products need visibility to be appreciated. This would seem to be the natural order of things. Yet my use of the conditional tense indicates reality is more complex. Here I return to the notion of “universe” I developed in *The Universe of Luxury* (Ortiz, 2019). A universe is a territory inhabited by a particular way of being and existing in the world; it comprises individuals, institutions, practices, and objects. Luxury objects do not exist in isolation, they are interconnected with other objects and an entire “world” that gives them meaning. A Dior perfume’s relevance lies not in being a luxury brand per se, but in its relationship to Tiffany’s jewelry, Lalique crystals, global corporations like LVMH or Kering, stays at palace-hotels, yacht trips, etc. It is this totality that constitutes a universe with its own rules and norms.

Consider globally sold luxury accessories (shoes, bags, scarves, dresses, perfumes). In principle, being global, they should be found “everywhere” on the planet. But closer inspection reveals a distinct spatial logic: these objects are not available in all countries, and within each country, the market concentrates in specific cities (Paris 76%; London 83%; Moscow 94%). Moreover, within these cities, luxury boutiques cluster in elite neighborhoods—and within these

privileged urban zones, on specific streets: Avenue Montaigne in Paris, Bond Street in London, only certain sections of Fifth Avenue in New York, Milan's "*Quadrilatero della Moda*." Global space appears fragmented into discontinuous points, distant yet interconnected by the same code. Spatially translated, the luxury universe is both global and hyper-restricted.

I emphasize this conjunction of expansion and restriction. To exist globally, boundaries must be drawn; without them, this universe would lack distinct identity. Its defining virtues can be articulated in various ways: its contents and practices must be rare and unique, aligning it with art (art's singularity necessarily implies rarity) (Moulin, 1978). This justifies the claim: luxury objects are not found just anywhere. To be "exceptional," "extraordinary," they must oppose the "vulgar," "banal," "everyday." They cannot be confused with similar but fundamentally different products. The same principle applies to practices: shopping at Avenue Montaigne flagships differs fundamentally from buying the same perfume at an airport duty-free shop. The product is identical, but its location transforms its meaning. The luxury universe maintains boundaries that preserve and differentiate it from its exterior. Luxury must be distinct and elevated; this demonstrates its "essence" and symbolic superiority.

This distinctiveness becomes clear when contrasting luxury with consumption. Jean Baudrillard (1970), in his seminal *The Consumer Society*, argues that what we call consumer society entails a profound transformation of utility. The capitalist ethic that interested Max Weber rested on rational goal-oriented action, where an object's usefulness was decisive. Baudrillard contends that in consumer society, objects no longer have use-value; they become entangled in symbolic systems that confer new meanings. A dishwasher or car does not merely wash dishes or transport—it signifies something beyond itself (a dimension advertisers exploit). Regardless of intrinsic qualities, commodities acquire values projecting them into a symbolic market divorced from functional utility. This applies equally to Nespresso coffee and street market trinkets. Consumer society experiences symbolic inflation. The luxury universe erects barriers against this inflation, controlling the definition of what belongs within it.

Yet to exist as such, it must materialize in concrete practices: shopping, travel, sports, etc. Each activity occurs in "distinct" spaces: skiing in Courchevel, yachting in the Mediterranean, staying at Parisian palace-hotels. More broadly, the luxury universe manifests in the world of the rich. There is a tight correlation and homology between them. The world of the rich is likewise global and hyper-restricted—global because its participants transcend conventional borders, circulating worldwide; hyper-restricted because this mobility occurs within carefully delineated territories (Birtchnell & Caletro, 2014). A heuristic

example: the transatlantic The World. This six-story floating city serves as secondary residence for the wealthy. Each individual or family owns a studio or apartment; the community never exceeds 250 people. Members periodically gather to chart their collective itinerary. The World embodies the ideal of global singularity: traversing the world without leaving one's place. The rich world has doors closed to outsiders; its interior remains scarcely visible, its visibility opaque, controlled by defining rules. Hence a popular literature dedicated to revealing its secrets to the excluded: *The Secret the Rich Don't Want You to Know, Ten Hidden Locations of the Super-Rich, Money: What's the Secret of Rich People?* It specializes in showing the unseen.

When Veblen wrote about the leisure class in late 19th-century America—what we had now call the Fordist era—his reasoning presumed a public space shared by all social classes, where wealth signals were displayed and recognized. Using emulation to understand subordinate positions, he situated social actors in a hierarchical but common theater, to borrow symbolic interactionist terms. Ostentation thus functioned as a technique for affirming inequality; the visible was both desired and unattainable. But times have changed. The configuration of global yet restricted spaces reinforces separation on a global scale; visibility becomes precarious, protected by secure boundaries of invisibility. Or as Coco Chanel said: "Luxury is what you don't see." ▀

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# Ecologias das mídias, movimentos sociais e ativismo<sup>a</sup>

*Media ecologies, social movements and activism*

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## ABSTRACT

Media ecology theory offers a vital lens for understanding the complex relationships between media, social movements, and activism. This article examines how different levels of engagement—from superficial references to deep theoretical applications—have shaped MovAct studies. It explores four ecological traditions: medium theory, information ecology, communicative ecologies, and approaches inspired by Guattari and Fuller, all emphasizing technological materiality and communicative interconnectedness. It analyzes key contributions (overcoming online/offline dualism, stressing old media, critiquing corporate platforms) and areas of disagreement, and advocates a flexible, “impure” understanding of evolving media ecologies and activist practices.

**Keywords:** Media ecology, social movements, digital activism, communication technologies, alternative media.

## RESUMO

A teoria da ecologia das mídias constitui uma lente essencial para compreender as complexas relações entre mídias, movimentos sociais e ativismo. Este artigo analisa como diferentes níveis de engajamento — desde menções superficiais até aplicações teóricas robustas — moldaram os estudos sobre movimentos sociais e ativismo (MovAct). São exploradas quatro tradições ecológicas: a teoria do meio, a ecologia da informação, as ecologias comunicativas e as concepções baseadas em Guattari e Fuller, todas com ênfase na materialidade tecnológica e na interconexão das práticas comunicativas. O texto analisa contribuições centrais (como a superação do dualismo entre on-line e off-line, a relevância das mídias tradicionais e a crítica às plataformas digitais corporativas)

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e áreas de divergência, defendendo uma abordagem flexível e “impura” das ecologias midiáticas e das práticas ativistas em constante evolução.

**Palavras-chave:** Ecologia das mídias, movimentos sociais, ativismo digital, tecnologias da comunicação, mídias alternativas.

### A RELEVÂNCIA DA TEORIA DA ECOLOGIA DAS MÍDIAS PARA O ESTUDO DOS MOVIMENTOS SOCIAIS E DO ATIVISMO

**N**A ÚLTIMA DÉCADA, estudiosos interessados em ativismo digital e movimentos sociais passaram a recorrer ao referencial da ecologia das mídias para compreender as complexas interações entre ativistas e tecnologias midiáticas. A força desse olhar conceitual reside em sua capacidade de reconhecer, explorar e desvendar as complexidades comunicativas das práticas ativistas. Esse arcabouço teórico tem permitido a diversos pesquisadores entenderem como mídias e movimentos se moldam mutuamente de maneiras complexas, criativas e, muitas vezes, imprevisíveis.

Neste capítulo, pretendo lançar luz sobre essa área emergente de estudos, refletindo sobre suas principais forças e limitações, apresentando minha perspectiva sobre o tema e destacando prioridades centrais para investigações futuras. É importante esclarecer que o interesse na adoção da lente da ecologia das mídias parte de disciplinas heterogêneas e áreas de estudo frequentemente interligadas: ciência política e sociologia, estudos de mídia e jornalismo, mídia cidadã e ativismo digital. Além disso, essa área nascente de investigação tem incorporado, de forma crescente, disciplinas tão diversas quanto Estudos de Ciência e Tecnologia, estudos da memória, estudos de dados e algoritmos, artes, humanidades, estudos de *design* e arquitetura ambiental.

Nas próximas seções, utilizarei o acrônimo MovAct para indicar a convergência entre os estudos sobre movimentos sociais e o ativismo. Embora haja muitas sobreposições entre essas duas áreas, os estudos sobre ativismo também englobam manifestações mais individuais de ativismo, que não estão necessariamente ligadas a movimentos sociais ou a formas mais organizadas de ação coletiva. O campo MovAct tem dialogado com a teoria da ecologia das mídias de diversas maneiras, as quais serão abordadas nas seções seguintes.

### NÍVEIS DE ENGAJAMENTO E VARIEDADE DAS TEORIAS DA ECOLOGIA DAS MÍDIAS NOS ESTUDOS MOVACT

As ecologias midiáticas abordadas nas análises do campo MovAct geralmente não são claramente definidas em seus elementos constitutivos, tampouco se

explicita qual tradição ecológica específica (ou quais tradições, em alguns casos) está sendo utilizada. De modo geral, existem três níveis de engajamento com a teoria da ecologia das mídias nos estudos sobre movimentos e ativismo (Treré, 2019, 2020). No primeiro nível, encontramos autores que apenas “evocam” a lente da ecologia das mídias, utilizando o conceito de maneira superficial, sem maiores especificações. No segundo nível, os autores são mais explícitos quanto aos componentes que constituem as ecologias midiáticas, embora ainda não se engajem conceitualmente com as teorizações ecológicas. No terceiro nível, há um reconhecimento explícito e um engajamento mais profundo com as teorias da ecologia das mídias.

Os estudos do primeiro nível incluem as reflexões de Darmon (2013) sobre dispositivos portáteis, como smartphones e redes sociais, que se mesclam com canais de mídia de massa mais tradicionais, criando assim “novas ecologias das mídias” (p. 1). No contexto das revoltas árabes, outros autores apontaram a existência de “ecologias das mídias híbridas”, formadas a partir da combinação entre tecnologias midiáticas antigas e novas (Robertson, 2013; Wilson & Dunn, 2011). Com foco no ativismo midiático durante os protestos do G20 no Canadá, Poell e Borra (2012) abordaram criticamente a formação de uma “ecologia das mídias ativista nas redes sociais” (p. 700). De maneira semelhante, em relação às mobilizações do movimento Occupy Wall Street nos Estados Unidos, Thorson et al. (2013) falam de “uma ecologia midiática frouxamente articulada” (p. 421), na qual materiais digitais circulavam por diferentes plataformas de mídia social. Esses exemplos, via de regra, não oferecem mais detalhes sobre a composição dessas ecologias midiáticas, nem aprofundam as implicações do uso do conceito.

As abordagens de segundo nível demonstram uma apreciação mais articulada dos elementos que definem essas ecologias midiáticas. Por exemplo, Srinivasan e Fish (2011) utilizaram o conceito para descrever as revoltas no Quirguistão em 2010, nas quais uma multiplicidade de plataformas digitais foi combinada com canais midiáticos de baixa tecnologia, inspirando o estabelecimento de redes comunitárias e a coordenação popular “por meio da remediação de mensagens através de cartazes, megafones e boca a boca” (p. 3). A análise dos autores evidencia a habilidade dos ativistas em navegar com destreza por essas ecologias midiáticas, transformando suas narrativas locais de protesto em discursos transnacionais que informavam múltiplos públicos. Isso também foi possível devido ao papel das redes de mídia tradicional, como CNN, Free Speech TV e Al Jazeera, que retransmitiram conteúdos da mídia cidadã produzida por ativistas. Em especial, o papel da Al Jazeera foi crucial, tanto na construção de alianças com ativistas das redes sociais quanto no uso da mídia digital para compartilhar informações por meio de transmissões ao vivo pela

internet e acordos de retransmissão com redes de satélite sem fins lucrativos sediadas nos Estados Unidos.

De forma semelhante, no estudo sobre os protestos na Praça Tahrir, no Egito, Tufekci e Wilson (2012) defenderam a necessidade de ir além de um foco reducionista nas revoluções das redes sociais e em plataformas específicas, sugerindo, ao contrário, que a infraestrutura de conectividade desses eventos fosse compreendida como uma ecologia midiática complexa e entrelaçada. Essa ecologia, conforme ilustram os pesquisadores, é composta por três elementos inter-relacionados: canais de TV via satélite, como a Al Jazeera, com seu papel na formação de um novo tipo de esfera pública no mundo árabe; plataformas de mídia social, como Facebook e Twitter, que reconfiguram a infraestrutura da conectividade social; e dispositivos móveis, com sua capacidade de comunicação dispersa e de fomentar práticas de jornalismo cidadão.

#### **QUATRO PRINCIPAIS TEORIAS DA ECOLOGIA DAS MÍDIAS MOBILIZADAS NOS ESTUDOS SOBRE MOVIMENTOS E ATIVISMO**

Os estudos de terceiro nível se engajam de maneira explícita com diferentes teorias da ecologia das mídias. A variedade de abordagens nesse campo tem sido suficientemente ampla a ponto de justificar revisões bibliográficas dedicadas (Lyle et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2017), cujo objetivo tem sido exclusivamente sintetizar as contribuições, limitações e direções futuras desse arquipélago de teorias. No entanto, em minhas próprias revisões da literatura (Treré, 2019, 2020), constatei que estudiosos interessados em ativismo digital e movimentos sociais têm recorrido, principalmente, a quatro perspectivas conceituais: a teoria do meio, a ecologia da informação, as ecologias comunicativas e a concepção de ecologias midiáticas segundo Guattari e Fuller. A seguir, farei uma breve apresentação de cada uma dessas abordagens e, posteriormente, examinarei estudos do campo MovAct que se fundamentam em tais teorias.

A teoria do meio, também conhecida como Escola de Toronto da ecologia das mídias, está associada a pensadores influentes como Marshall McLuhan, Harold Innis, Neil Postman e — mais recentemente — Lance Strate, Joshua Meyrowitz e Carlos Scolari. Essa vertente entende os meios de comunicação como ambientes constituídos por tecnologias que coexistem, coevoluem e são atravessadas por processos de sobrevivência e extinção. Teóricos da ecologia das mídias se interessam por como as sociedades se transformam a partir da introdução de um novo meio e, por isso, desenvolvem um foco significativo em história cultural e comparada (Clark, 2016). De acordo com Strate (2016), a compreensão dos meios na teoria do meio abrange um espectro muito mais

amplo de fenômenos do que outras tradições de pesquisa. Além disso, essa escola é caracterizada por seu interesse nos vieses, efeitos e ambientes midiáticos. Em sua análise sobre o papel da mídia cidadã, Kahn e Kellner (2004) referem-se à tradição da Escola de Toronto e à sua visão dos meios como ambientes. O objetivo dos autores é expandir o conceito de ecologia das mídias para abarcar novas tecnologias, ao mesmo tempo, em que propõem uma reconceituação crítica e reconstrutiva das ecologias midiáticas. Ambos são críticos em relação ao uso corporativo e hegemônico das tecnologias pelos meios tradicionais e defendem uma abordagem reconstrutiva que promova apropriações tecnológicas voltadas à justiça social e política.

Em contraste com essas macronarrativas sobre as transformações midiáticas — que caracterizam a Escola de Toronto —, a teoria da ecologia da informação adota uma microabordagem baseada nas práticas, concebendo a ecologia como “um sistema de pessoas, práticas, valores e tecnologias em um ambiente local específico”, enfatizando “não a tecnologia, mas as atividades humanas que são viabilizadas por ela” (Nardi & O’Day, 1999, p. 49). Autores como Treré (2011, 2012), Barassi (2015) e Barranquero e Barbas (2022) recorrem a essa perspectiva para conectar as práticas, os imaginários e as culturas dos ativistas às pregnâncias materiais das tecnologias. Suas pesquisas evidenciam como manifestantes escolhem suas tecnologias com base em percepções sobre os riscos de vigilância e de mercantilização inerentes às plataformas digitais corporativas. No entanto os ativistas frequentemente utilizam as redes sociais corporativas de maneira crítica, criativa e inesperada.

Por exemplo, eles recorrem simultaneamente a redes de mídias autônomas *on-line* e *off-line* que, apesar de suas capacidades mais limitadas, podem garantir seu anonimato e proteger seus direitos digitais sem mercantilizar suas ações. Em sua exploração do ativismo de mídias lentas do Movimento dos Pensionistas, Barranquero e Barbas (2022) combinam Nardi e O’Day (1999) e Treré (2019) para destacar a abordagem pragmática e não idealizada das tecnologias de comunicação nas práticas midiáticas híbridas dos idosos espanhóis.

A perspectiva da ecologia comunicativa lança luz sobre a exploração do contexto local da comunicação (Hearn & Foth, 2007) e entende a ecologia como um ambiente de agentes conectados de várias maneiras por trocas de formas de comunicação mediadas e não mediadas, ao longo de camadas tecnológicas, sociais e discursivas (Tacchi et al., 2003), abrangendo a totalidade das tecnologias nas quais as pessoas estão imersas (Ito, 2009). O estudo de Peeples e Mitchell (2007) sobre os protestos em torno da cúpula da Organização Mundial do Comércio de 1999 se baseia nessa lente conceitual (Tacchi et al., 2003). Os estudiosos iluminam as três camadas interconectadas da ecologia das mídias para entender

as dinâmicas organizacionais dentro das redes ativistas e articular os temas de comunicação que emergiram das discussões entre os ativistas.

Inspirado no trabalho de Félix Guattari, Fuller criticou o uso da metáfora ambiental da teoria dos meios, pois sugere “um estado de equilíbrio”, tornando as ecologias midiáticas estáticas. Em contraste, ele as define em termos de “uma inter-relação dinâmica de processos e objetos, seres e coisas, padrões e matéria” (Fuller, 2005, p. 2). Feigenbaum et al. (2013) tomaram emprestada a linguagem da ecologia das mídias para explicar as múltiplas relações entre atores sociais, coisas e condições ambientais no contexto de acampamentos de protesto. O foco de Guattari no valor político das ecologias midiáticas permite a esses autores ir além de uma mera concepção ambiental das ecologias das mídias e colocar o social e o político no centro do pensamento ecológico. Esses estudiosos sugerem que um ponto de vista ecológico pode transformar as maneiras pelas quais os próprios protestantes pensam sobre suas posições e interações dentro da ecologia das mídias. Isso, os autores afirmam, pode permitir que eles “naveguem nas maneiras em que as ideologias dos movimentos sociais são trocadas e levadas à reprodução das infraestruturas e práticas dos acampamentos de protesto” (Feigenbaum et al., 2013, p. 72). Assim, essas ecologias midiáticas aparecem como ambientes multifacetados onde os ativistas são capazes de criar, inventar e experimentar com tecnologias midiáticas.

À primeira vista, pode parecer que existem mais diferenças do que semelhanças entre essas tradições ecológicas. A teoria dos meios, em particular, tem sido amplamente criticada por seu determinismo tecnológico por autores como Williams (1974), pelos proponentes da abordagem da “Construção Social da Tecnologia” (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999) e — mais recentemente — pela teoria da midiatização (Hepp, 2013). Assim, poderia parecer deslocada entre lentes conceituais mais voltadas ao estudo de práticas, envolvimentos e ambientes midiáticos situados socialmente. No entanto uma análise mais profunda revela que a teoria dos meios compartilha com as demais abordagens a atenção à materialidade da tecnologia e um olhar holístico sobre as interações e a evolução dos meios de comunicação. Como argumentei extensamente (Treré, 2019, 2020), em vez de insistirmos obstinadamente nas divergências entre esses marcos ecológicos (ou tentarmos eleger um “vencedor” definitivo que venha a suplantar os demais), devemos nos concentrar em reconhecer de forma produtiva suas intersecções e nos apoiar em suas forças combinadas em nossos empreendimentos de pesquisa. Embora a ênfase dada à macro ou microdimensão e o valor político atribuído às ecologias variem entre essas perspectivas, o olhar ecológico que delas emana nos convida a ir além das manifestações específicas dos meios. Esse olhar nos impulsiona a reconhecer as complexidades e multiplicidades comunicativas dos

fenômenos sociais, culturais e políticos por meio da exploração de constelações variáveis, emaranhamentos, interconexões e evoluções de mídias e pessoas ao longo do tempo e do espaço. Em outras palavras, esse olhar permite que os estudiosos compreendam como os ativistas buscam justiça social e mudança política “por qualquer meio necessário” (Jenkins et al., 2016).

É esse impulso holístico que tem inspirado os estudiosos do MovAct a se apoarem no olhar da ecologia das mídias em suas análises sobre o nexo entre mídias e movimentos. Na próxima seção, revisaremos as principais descobertas dessa área emergente de investigação.

### **PRINCIPAIS DESCOBERTAS DE ESTUDOS QUE ADOTAM O OLHAR DA ECOLOGIA DAS MÍDIAS**

O olhar da ecologia das mídias abriu novas fronteiras para a pesquisa sobre ativismo digital e movimentos sociais, permitindo a inclusão de uma variedade mais ampla e diversificada de práticas, atores e tecnologias. Essa abordagem expande os limites dos fenômenos sociotécnicos considerados parte da conversa acadêmica sobre mídias e ativismo.

Inspirados pelas teorias da ecologia das mídias, pesquisadores têm refletido sobre o papel e as reconfigurações dos documentários independentes no ativismo contemporâneo (Lekakis, 2017), a relevância persistente dos corpos nos protestos recentes (Boler et al., 2014) e chegaram até a conceituar a alimentação como um meio de comunicação (Giraud, 2017). Esse olhar tem contribuído para o avanço de pesquisas sobre o que Feigenbaum (2014) denominou como as “outras mídias” do ativismo. Isso inclui, por exemplo, o papel das barracas nos acampamentos de protesto ou os “atos performativos off-line de memória e protesto” identificados em estudos recentes que articulam memória, ativismo e ambientes digitais (Dufays et al., 2021, p. 71).

A maleabilidade da teoria da ecologia das mídias possibilita florescer pesquisas interdisciplinares que observam o nexo mídia–movimento com um olhar renovado, desafiando as restrições dos estudos convencionais sobre movimentos sociais e estabelecendo conexões ousadas com — entre outras áreas — os estudos da memória e do cinema, as perspectivas feministas e as artes e humanidades.

Outra de suas contribuições tem sido o deslocamento da atenção, nos relatos sobre apropriações tecnológicas por movimentos sociais, de uma fixação nas novas mídias para o estudo das inter-relações entre mídias antigas e novas. Assim, os estudiosos passaram a lançar luz sobre as formas como as mídias tradicionais vêm sendo reconfiguradas pelos ativistas em suas práticas de protesto

e utilizadas em conjunto com as novas mídias, além de enfatizarem a relevância contínua das mídias antigas em contextos sociopolíticos específicos.

Por exemplo, em seu estudo sobre o movimento estudantil italiano *Anomalous Wave*<sup>1</sup>, Treré (2012) analisou a importância política central das listas de discussão por e-mail utilizadas por coletivos estudantis. Enquanto diversos jornais e acadêmicos italianos concentravam-se de forma desproporcional no potencial revolucionário das redes sociais mais recentes, o estudo de Treré ilustra como uma ferramenta digital de primeira geração teve um papel fundamental tanto na organização quanto na construção da identidade coletiva do movimento — muito mais significativo do que plataformas como Facebook e Twitter.

De maneira semelhante, Bonini (2017) evidencia a importância das rádios nos protestos ocorridos na Turquia em 2013. O pesquisador italiano analisou o papel desempenhado pela *Açık Radyo*, a única estação de rádio independente e sustentada por ouvintes em Istambul, durante as mobilizações no Parque Gezi. Ele conclui que o rádio não perdeu seu valor como uma mídia alternativa poderosa, mas teve sua função reconfigurada dentro de uma ecologia de mídias em constante expansão. A *Açık Radyo* integrou-se às mídias sociais para continuar amplificando discursos políticos radicais, ao mesmo tempo que possibilitou o florescimento de redes de ativistas.

Outro exemplo é o estudo etnográfico comparativo das ecologias midiáticas de diversas organizações políticas na Espanha e no Reino Unido, realizado por Barassi (2013). Barassi destacou a relevância política persistente das revistas impressas. Assim como as listas de e-mail e o rádio, nos exemplos anteriores, essas formas tradicionais de mídia alternativa não estão em extinção, mas estão redefinindo seus papéis e competindo com as novas plataformas digitais nas ecologias midiáticas que caracterizam o ativismo contemporâneo.

Como se evidencia nessas análises, os estudos que se baseiam no olhar da ecologia das mídias estão, em geral, interessados em observar transições, deslocamentos, abandonos, ajustes e reconfigurações das tecnologias e práticas midiáticas. Um exemplo claro disso é a análise de Giraud (2014) sobre as transformações ocorridas no *Indymedia*, uma das redes de mídia radical mais emblemáticas surgidas no final da década de 1990 e estreitamente vinculada ao movimento pela justiça global.

Devido à disseminação das mídias sociais corporativas, os centros do *Indymedia* entraram em declínio na década de 2010. No entanto Giraud demonstra que o *Indymedia* não desapareceu por completo e continua a desempenhar uma função arquivística dentro de uma ecologia de mídias em expansão, caracterizada por novas plataformas digitais agora utilizadas para coordenar ações políticas mais urgentes. Essa transição para a valorização das interações

<sup>1</sup> Em português seria “Onda Anômala”.

dinâmicas entre práticas midiáticas antigas e novas também estimulou um interesse renovado pelo conceito e pelas implicações da noção de hibridez, tanto nas formas convencionais quanto nas não convencionais da política mediada (Ardizzone, 2015; Chadwick, 2017; Dahlberg-Grundberg, 2016; Dennis et al., 2016; Iannelli & Giglietto, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2016; Russell, 2017; Treré, 2019; Treré & Yu, 2021).

Estudos que adotam o olhar ecológico podem ser situados dentro do que Iannelli (2016) denominou como pesquisa em “políticas híbridas”. Essa área emergente e multifacetada de investigação critica tanto a fetichização da novidade tecnológica quanto as concepções tradicionais baseadas em uma única lógica midiática dominante na produção de notícias políticas (Altheide & Snow, 1979). Os autores que integram esse campo acadêmico adotam, em contrapartida, uma perspectiva holística, que mapeia inter-relações abertas e, muitas vezes, imprevisíveis entre múltiplas lógicas, formatos, canais e atores, em diferentes contextos sociopolíticos.

Nesse mesmo sentido, outra contribuição central do olhar ecológico foi deslocar os estudos do MovAct do fascínio pela esfera on-line para a análise do entrelaçamento híbrido e dinâmico entre espaços físicos e digitais. Estudos relevantes sobre ativismo no início dos anos 2000 estavam particularmente interessados no potencial do ambiente digital e no surgimento de repertórios de contestação *on-line*. Por exemplo, McCaughey e Ayers (2003), em uma importante coletânea sobre ciberativismo, expressaram preocupação com o possível desaparecimento do corpo nas novas formas de protesto virtual.

Essa reflexão alinhava-se ao enfoque de outros pesquisadores na virtualidade da contestação e a uma concomitante diminuição da atenção aos espaços físicos, contextos sociais e experiências corporificadas dos movimentos sociais. Esse encantamento pela virtualidade, evidentemente, não se restringia ao campo do ativismo, mas ressoava com um contexto mais amplo de fascinação social pela realidade virtual e seu imaginário de possibilidades infinitas, além das limitações impostas pelos corpos e pelo mundo material.

Esse imaginário, moldado por narrativas de ficção científica e discursos corporativos, também permeou reflexões acadêmicas sobre os novos horizontes do ciberprotesto, alimentando aquilo que a pesquisadora de movimentos sociais, Merlyna Lim (2015, p. 118), denominou de “falácia do dualismo espacial”. Tal falácia sustenta que os espaços físicos e digitais são distintos e, portanto, podem ser analisados separadamente. Ela permeou grande parte das análises sobre ativismo no início dos anos 2000, retratando as atividades de protesto e a ação coletiva como práticas que estariam, de certa forma, progressivamente desvinculadas da materialidade dos espaços físicos.

Pesquisas recentes inspiradas pelo olhar ecológico não tratam os domínios *on-line* e *off-line* como esferas separadas, mas buscam, ao contrário, examinar as complexidades do “espaço ciberurbano” (Lim, 2015), isto é, o entrelaçamento entre os espaços digitais e físicos (Barranquero & Barbas, 2022; Farinosi & Treré, 2010; Lekakis, 2017; Lim, 2015, 2018; Treré, 2018). Elas propõem a seguinte indagação: como os movimentos e manifestantes contemporâneos navegam por esse espaço enquanto ambiente socialmente construído, “produzido na interação e dentro de um continuum de relações *on-line* e *off-line*” (Lim, 2015, p. 118)? O foco, nesse caso, recai sobre as formas específicas pelas quais os atores sociais atribuem sentido a essa interação em diferentes contextos políticos, bem como sobre as motivações e fatores que conduzem os ativistas a escolher determinadas constelações tecnológicas (Liu, 2021). Conforme observam Foust e Hoyt (2018), “a ecologia da mídia pode ser compreendida como o entrelaçamento da geosfera (paisagem material) e da infosfera (ação simbólica e fluxos de informação)” (p. 48). Esse enfoque alinha-se ao que Ardizzone (2015) denomina “ativismo matricial”, um arcabouço conceitual que “nos permite explicar a natureza híbrida das novas formas de dissidência e resistência, situadas na interseção entre o alternativo e o convencional, o sem fins lucrativos e o corporativo, o individual e o social, a produção e o consumo, o *on-line* e o *off-line*” (p. 1086).

Por fim, outra contribuição central do olhar ecológico tem sido a de evidenciar as ambivalências e ambiguidades do ativismo digital no que diz respeito à apropriação das plataformas de mídias sociais corporativas. Por exemplo, Harlow (2016), em sua etnografia do grupo ativista Salvadoran e da campanha Todos Somos Água, demonstrou que as mídias sociais — especialmente o Facebook — foram reconfiguradas como uma forma de mídia ativista alternativa em El Salvador.

Harlow ilustra que o Facebook ofereceu um espaço que possibilitou às pessoas com visões não hegemônicas expressar opiniões e compartilhar informações sobre mineração, contaminação da água e outras questões sociais que, de outro modo, não chegariam ao conhecimento do público. Seus entrevistados viam o Facebook como um território midiático reconquistado pelos jovens, cujas vozes são normalmente excluídas das mídias mais convencionais. Assim, sua análise evidencia que, por meio de uma lente ecológica da mídia, é possível examinar de forma mais eficaz como, apesar das persistentes desigualdades digitais, as mídias sociais podem ser (re)apropriadas de modos não hegemônicos.

Esses achados ecoam na análise de Treré sobre as práticas e os imaginários tecnopolíticos do movimento 15M na Espanha (2019), no qual plataformas digitais corporativas, como o Twitter, foram habilmente apropriadas pelos manifestantes para maximizar sua visibilidade e disseminar suas narrativas,

gerando um novo tipo de resistência algorítmica. No entanto, os ativistas do 15M continuaram, simultaneamente, a construir suas próprias redes, softwares e infraestruturas autônomas, que coexistiram com essas apropriações táticas de plataformas corporativas. Por meio de explorações ecológicas, esses estudos revelam as ambiguidades na convivência entre infraestruturas alternativas e hegemônicas, bem como os usos contra-hegemônicos que podem emergir no contexto do protesto digital (para uma análise similar no contexto político mexicano, ver Pool, 2022). Eles desafiam suposições maniqueístas e naturalizadas sobre a natureza das contestações contemporâneas, favorecendo, em vez disso, o exame das contradições historicamente definidas e dependentes do contexto que envolvem o ativismo digital e o poder das mídias sociais.

## DESAFIOS E ÁREAS DE DIVERGÊNCIA

Como podemos definir uma ecologia midiática e quais elementos a compõem? Conforme revelado em minha análise anterior sobre o engajamento dos estudos de MovAct com esse termo, esse ponto, simples, mas fundamental, frequentemente não é claramente articulado — especialmente naqueles relatos que se apoiam em uma leitura mais superficial da metáfora ecológica. Alguns autores incluem uma variedade mais ampla de práticas midiáticas, enquanto outros se concentram mais especificamente em ecologias on-line ou exclusivamente digitais. Um risco evidente das abordagens ecológicas superficiais é o de que a ecologia midiática seja apenas evocada, sem que seus componentes sejam cuidadosamente desvelados. Essa é uma tendência que também observei em ensaios de estudantes ou pesquisadores em início de carreira que recorrem a essa abordagem pela primeira vez.

Por vezes, o olhar ecológico é utilizado apenas para listar um conjunto de tecnologias, sem qualquer aprofundamento sobre as motivações dos ativistas, os entrelaçamentos evolutivos entre atores humanos e não humanos, o papel de uma prática midiática específica dentro da ecologia e em relação a um determinado contexto sociopolítico, as *affordances* e a arquitetura geral das plataformas digitais, entre outros aspectos.

Uma exploração ecológica deve ser sempre densa e profunda; do contrário, corre o risco de se tornar apenas uma declaração de variedade — que, embora represente um passo inicial necessário, não pode substituir uma investigação mais robusta. O risco oposto também merece atenção: enxergar complexidade sociomaterial nas práticas ativistas mesmo quando ela não existe (Rodríguez, 2017). Por exemplo, alguns coletivos podem basear-se exclusivamente na produção de vídeos e utilizar apenas poucos meios de comunicação, como

uma rádio comunitária ou um coletivo de vídeo. Nesses casos, o uso da lente da ecologia midiática pode não representar a melhor opção dentro de nosso repertório conceitual.

Nadler (2019) tem sido um crítico contundente do uso das metáforas de ecologia das notícias e ecossistemas no campo do jornalismo digital. Segundo ele:

A metáfora do ecossistema passou a ser utilizada de forma a sugerir que os sistemas de notícias tomam forma por meio de um princípio espontâneo de auto-organização, associado aos sistemas ecológicos. ... A metáfora pode obscurecer as escolhas políticas que tornam possível às sociedades construir sistemas de mídia digital que refletem valores mais ou menos igualitários e democráticos. (p. 825)

Nos estudos de MovAct, esse risco tem sido, em grande parte, evitado por meio da ênfase na natureza política dessas ecologias midiáticas e do enraizamento de suas análises nos contextos sociais concretos em que elas emergem e se desenvolvem. No entanto trata-se de um perigo que os pesquisadores devem reconhecer e que abordagens ecológicas superficiais podem enfrentar, caso não aprofundem suficientemente as dinâmicas políticas dos sistemas midiáticos híbridos.

### **MINHA REFLEXÃO COMO PESQUISADOR SOBRE O TEMA: UM OLHAR ECOLÓGICO FLEXÍVEL E IMPURO**

Venho desenvolvendo uma abordagem de ecologia midiática aplicada aos movimentos sociais e ao ativismo ao longo dos últimos quinze anos, inicialmente em minha pesquisa de doutorado, iniciada em 2008 (Treré, 2011), e, posteriormente, por meio de diversos projetos em diferentes países. Compreendendo a ecologia midiática como um olhar, um convite para observar de maneira holística as complexidades situadas na interseção entre política e tecnologias da mídia. Cheguei à conclusão de que a variedade de abordagens nesta área (e, por vezes, o caos criativo que dela resulta) é, de certo modo, inevitável — e talvez até desejável. Como pesquisadores, o que podemos fazer é delinear um conjunto de recomendações conceituais e lições empíricas provenientes do campo, mas não creio que devamos ser excessivamente prescritivos. O risco de uma rigidez excessiva quanto aos elementos que devem compor a ecologia e às teorias que devem ser consideradas na análise pode dificultar o desenvolvimento de relatos originais e inesperados — justamente aquilo que a lente da ecologia midiática busca promover e incentivar.

O pesquisador de mídias alternativas Alfonso Gumucio Dagron (2007) criticou aqueles acadêmicos que insistem em focar na suposta pureza das mídias cidadãs, enfatizando, em vez disso, sua impureza e riqueza. Ele acrescenta que uma rotulação terminológica precisa dessas experiências frequentemente serve apenas a propósitos acadêmicos, podendo acabar por excluir outros projetos que não se enquadram nas definições preestabelecidas. Embora alguns autores defendam uma delimitação mais clara de fenômenos como mídia alternativa e ativismo digital, concordo com Gumucio Dagron ao considerar que essa área emergente de investigação tem se beneficiado enormemente de sua flexibilidade e abertura interpretativa, o que tem contribuído para a revelação de novos horizontes investigativos. Um desses horizontes é a exploração das práticas de desconexão e das formas pelas quais ativistas utilizam deliberadamente a desconexão como forma de resistência (Kaun & Treré, 2020; Natale & Treré, 2020) no contexto de nossas sociedades saturadas de mídia. Esse tipo de pesquisa desafia compreensões convencionais que concebem, necessariamente, os ativistas como indivíduos hiperconectados e a conectividade como uma força intrinsecamente positiva. Não tenho certeza de que esse tipo de reflexão teria emergido caso tivéssemos sido excessivamente específicos em relação ao que deveria ser incluído nas ecologias. O que deve ser aprimorado, no entanto, é o nosso engajamento com a teoria da ecologia midiática e o desenvolvimento de pesquisas interculturais nesse campo, capazes de informar e enriquecer essas compreensões. Como e por que devemos comparar diferentes ecologias ao longo do tempo e do espaço, e como dar conta das variações, requer um certo grau de mapeamento e especificação — ainda que devamos permanecer sempre abertos às diferenças e variações, preparados para nos surpreender e nos encantar com novas descobertas.

## **PRIORIDADES CENTRAIS PARA PESQUISAS FUTURAS SOBRE O OLHAR DA ECOLOGIA MIDIÁTICA E O ATIVISMO**

Inspirados na obra de John Dewey, os estudos em ecologia midiática têm considerado as consequências ambientais das tecnologias de mídia (Lopez, 2012; Maxwell & Miller, 2012). Em sua revisão da teoria da ecologia midiática, Clark (2016) demonstra que essas abordagens desafiam o mito das tecnologias “limpas”, revelando problemas relacionados ao lixo tecnológico. A Escola de Toronto, por sua vez, jamais aprofundou verdadeiramente as consequências ambientais dos meios de comunicação, mas novos estudos no campo da ecologia midiática advogam por uma “ecologia midiática materialista” ou uma “ecologia midiática profunda” (Arroyave-Cabrera & Miller, 2017) nas quais as inter-relações

com o mundo natural ocupam posição central (ver também Oricchio, 2021). As abordagens de ecologia midiática nos estudos MovAct precisam seguir esse caminho e começar a prestar atenção, de forma séria, à interdependência entre seres humanos, tecnologias e o meio ambiente. Uma tentativa promissora de combinar tecnopolítica, ecologias midiáticas e lutas ecossociais em um contexto de hibridez comunicativa é representada por um estudo recente sobre a *hashtag* #SOSPuebloShuar no Twitter (Vanegas Toala et al., 2020). Essa é uma área fundamental para pesquisas futuras, que poderia, por exemplo, analisar os movimentos sociais ambientais e suas interações com os meios de comunicação, ao mesmo tempo, em que examina as consequências ambientais (e a consciência ecológica) dessas intervenções. Outra linha de investigação que vem sendo desenvolvida não se limita às ecologias midiáticas criadas pelos ativistas, mas também observa as mudanças que os movimentos sociais provocam na criação, evolução e desenvolvimento de ecologias midiáticas mais amplas — entendidas como interações entre diferentes meios e dispositivos de comunicação. Um exemplo claro disso é o caso do movimento 15M na Espanha. Conforme demonstram Flesher Fominaya e Gillan (2017, p. 391), o movimento espanhol não apenas se baseou em uma ecologia multidimensional de tecnologias,

mas ofereceu uma base de apoio e um impulso para o desenvolvimento de diversas iniciativas midiáticas críticas que buscaram colocar em prática modelos alternativos de negócio em comunicação. ... Embora algumas dessas iniciativas já existissem antes do 15M ..., a oferta e a demanda por mídias críticas independentes aumentaram em um círculo virtuoso ... alterando, assim, a ecologia midiática da comunicação política na Espanha.

Isso abre o campo para a análise das contribuições dos movimentos sociais (e de suas ecologias midiáticas) no estabelecimento e florescimento de novos ecossistemas de mídias alternativas, bem como na posterior transformação de sistemas midiáticos híbridos mais amplos (Barbas & Treré, 2023). Outra área promissora de pesquisa diz respeito às alianças entre atores humanos e não humanos dentro das ecologias midiáticas. Dada a crescente importância do poder algorítmico para os ativismos digitais e de dados contemporâneos (Milan, 2015), o estudo da modelagem mútua entre movimentos sociais e algoritmos (Treré, 2019) deve se tornar uma prioridade tanto para pesquisadores quanto para acadêmicos. Para compreender melhor a complexidade comunicativa dos movimentos sociais e do ativismo, todos os esforços futuros no campo da ecologia midiática deverão desenvolver pesquisas interdisciplinares e multidisciplinares, estabelecendo colaborações frutíferas com disciplinas tão variadas

quanto a cartografia crítica, a arquitetura, as artes, o design, os estudos sobre desconexão, entre muitas outras. A maleabilidade desse olhar precisa ser preservada e incentivada para que se possa capturar os desenvolvimentos tecnológicos futuros dentro dessa empolgante e mutável área de investigação que é a política não convencional. **M**

## LEITURA COMPLEMENTAR

### **Sobre Teoria da Ecologia das Mídias**

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# História dos estudos de comunicação nas Américas: uma introdução

## *The history of communication studies across the Americas: an introduction*

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### Introductory note, by Raúl Fuentes

The Scientific Editors of MATRIZes have decided to include in the Dossier section of this issue the text entitled *The history of communication studies across the Americas: an introduction*, by the American colleagues David W. Park, Jefferson Pooley and Peter Simonson and the Spanish Esperanza Herrero, in its Portuguese translation (*A história dos estudos de comunicação nas Américas: uma introdução*), in the context of an international collaboration explained in the text itself, carried out in recent years, which can be considered of great importance as a joint effort of the academic communities associated with three top-level open access journals on the American continent, which regularly publish communication studies in Portuguese, Spanish, and English, with mutual translations in most cases. The intention is to highlight the common purpose of strengthening the exchange of perspectives and rigorous research results on the histories of communication studies, which have been generated, debated, and projected for a future that is certainly heterogeneous but less fragmented than the current one on the American continent.

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**Nota introdutória, por Raúl Fuentes**

A Editoria Científica de *MATRIZes* decidiu incluir na seção Dossiê deste número o texto intitulado *The history of communication studies across the Americas: an introduction*, dos colegas americanos David W. Park, Jefferson Pooley e Peter Simonson e da espanhola Esperanza Herrero, em sua tradução para o português (*A história dos estudos de comunicação nas Américas: uma introdução*), no contexto de uma colaboração internacional explicitada no próprio texto, realizada nos últimos anos, que pode ser considerada de grande importância como um esforço conjunto das comunidades acadêmicas associadas a três revistas de acesso aberto de alto nível no continente americano, que publicam regularmente estudos de comunicação em português, espanhol e inglês, com traduções mútuas na maioria dos casos. A intenção é destacar o propósito comum de fortalecer o intercâmbio de perspectivas e resultados de pesquisas rigorosas sobre as histórias dos estudos de comunicação, que foram geradas, debatidas e projetadas para um futuro certamente heterogêneo, mas menos fragmentado do que o atual em o continente americano.

ESTA SEÇÃO ESPECIAL investiga a história dos estudos em comunicação e mídia em contextos nacionais e linguísticos nas Américas. Ela mapeia os entrelaçamentos transnacionais que moldaram a investigação em comunicação nas diversas formas que essa investigação assumiu na América do Sul, América do Norte e Caribe. Ao mesmo tempo, os artigos desta seção abordam as dinâmicas políticas, institucionais e culturais que configuraram o campo em diferentes contextos nacionais e locais. Assim, esta edição especial ilumina temas e regiões historicamente negligenciados pela literatura em língua inglesa, além de destacar linhas históricas de hegemonia, exclusão, resistência e tradições alternativas de pesquisa em todo o continente. Nesta introdução editorial, traçamos as origens desse esforço coletivo, conectamos a proposta a projetos paralelos publicados em dois periódicos latino-americanos e apresentamos os notáveis ensaios que compõem esta edição.

A maioria dos ensaios tem sua origem em uma colaboração Sul-Norte iniciada no final de 2021. No início daquele ano, os editores desta revista organizaram uma pré-conferência virtual para os encontros da *International Communication Association* (2021), intitulada *Exclusions in the History and Historiography of Communication Studies* [Exclusões na História e Historiografia dos Estudos em Comunicação]. O encontro estava alinhado à missão da revista de descentralizar os centros que tradicionalmente estruturam a historiografia dos campos de estudos em mídia e comunicação — especialmente em termos de região geográfica, idioma, gênero, raça e os legados do colonialismo. A pré-conferência revelou-se um daqueles eventos típicos da era pandêmica, em que as limitações — como

a impossibilidade de um encontro presencial — abriram novas possibilidades. Pesquisadores latino-americanos e outros acadêmicos que dificilmente participariam da ICA estiveram presentes, e o uso do Zoom facilitou a realização de uma interpretação simultânea entre espanhol e inglês. Esse evento deu origem a uma seção especial desta revista, com ensaios em espanhol e inglês (Simonson et al., 2022a). Também suscitou a questão de saber se seria produtivo investigar a história complexa e politicamente carregada dos estudos em comunicação e mídia no contexto geopolítico mais amplo das Américas. Essa ideia levou à realização de uma segunda conferência virtual, em junho de 2022, intitulada *The History of Communication Studies across the Americas*. Foi um esforço colaborativo entre três periódicos de acesso aberto publicados em três países diferentes: *History of Media Studies* (EUA), *MATRIZES* (Brasil) e *Comunicación y Sociedad* (México)<sup>1</sup>. Participaram do encontro 22 pesquisadores de 11 países distintos, com interpretação simultânea em espanhol, português e inglês<sup>2</sup>.

Um dos principais objetivos da conferência — e, por extensão, desta seção especial — foi promover comunidades de investigação entre regiões e idiomas que raramente estiveram em diálogo entre si. Associações profissionais nas Américas têm facilitado certos tipos de contato, mas também limitado outros. Como discute Raúl Fuentes Navarro em sua contribuição para esta edição especial, a Associação Latino-Americana de Pesquisadores em Comunicação (ALAIC) tem proporcionado fóruns e criado redes que abrangem a América Latina de língua espanhola e portuguesa. A ICA, por sua vez, tem historicamente desempenhado papel semelhante para pesquisadores da América do Norte e da Europa Ocidental que publicam em inglês, mesmo que, frequentemente, tenha reforçado a hegemonia dos Estados Unidos (Wiedemann & Meyen, 2016). Nenhuma dessas organizações, no entanto, incluiu historicamente o Caribe anglófono (ou francófono) em seu escopo. Além disso, associações profissionais nacionais, especialmente nos países maiores, têm exercido suas próprias formas de força centrípeta. Os organizadores da conferência de 2022 propuseram a reflexão sobre se “as Américas” poderiam constituir um espaço intelectual compartilhado — ainda que essencialmente contestado — para pesquisadores provenientes de contextos nacionais que, historicamente, não têm dialogado entre si. Haveria interesse em desenvolver um mapa histórico, multifacetado, do campo, que atravessasse a região de Sul a Norte?

Esse projeto das “Américas” é uma das diversas colaborações recentes voltadas a fomentar o diálogo Sul-Norte sem apagar as especificidades intelectuais e geopolíticas. Há alguns anos, historiadores do campo nos Estados Unidos e na Alemanha editaram volumes com aspirações globais (Averbeck-Lietz, 2017; Simonson & Park, 2016). Mais recentemente, um grupo internacional de

<sup>1</sup> A incubadora inicial do projeto foi um grupo de trabalho em espanhol formado na History of Media Studies com três membros do conselho consultivo (Raúl Fuentes Navarro e Claudia Magallanes Blanco, do México, e Mariano Zarowsky, da Argentina) e um dos editores da revista (Pete Simonson, dos EUA). Fuentes Navarro, decano da historiografia dos estudos de comunicação na América Latina, propôs e facilitou a colaboração com as outras duas revistas e seus editores: María Immaculata Vassallo de Lopes, editora da *MATRIZES*, e Gabriela Gómez Rodríguez, editora da *Comunicación y Sociedad*.

<sup>2</sup> Os participantes eram provenientes da Argentina, Bolívia, Brasil, Canadá, Colômbia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Jamaica, México, Porto Rico e EUA, com interpretação simultânea de Bárbara Barisch e dos seus colegas argentinos.

<sup>3</sup> Veja, por exemplo, um par de pré-conferências vinculadas: “*Media and Communication Studies in a Global Context: A Critical History*”, conferência prévia da ACI, Toronto, 25 de maio de 2023; e “*Repressed Histories in Communication and Media Studies*”, conferência prévia da ACI, Gold Coast, Austrália, 20 de junho de 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Para outros estudos transversais aos estudos de comunicação europeus e latino-americanos, ver Ganter e Ortega (2019), Dall’Orso (2022), e Rodríguez Benito et al. (2023).

estudiosos críticos, muitos deles vinculados ao Sul Global, voltou-se à história como um caminho para descolonizar o campo e recuperar narrativas anteriormente marginalizadas ao redor do mundo<sup>3</sup>. Paralelamente, com o incentivo oficial da União Europeia à realização de colaborações de pesquisa com a América Latina e o Caribe, pesquisadores têm construído pontes entre essas regiões por meio de parcerias entre associações profissionais. Um dos resultados foi um esforço editorial conjunto entre a ALAIC e a Associação Europeia de Pesquisa e Educação em Comunicação, que culminou na publicação de um volume sobre as tradições intelectuais dos estudos em comunicação latino-americano e europeus (Paulino et al., 2020)<sup>4</sup>. Devido a significativas semelhanças socioculturais e linguísticas, também têm surgido diversas iniciativas em redes intelectuais ibero-americanas, dedicadas à investigação de histórias compartilhadas dos estudos em comunicação entre países de língua espanhola e portuguesa. Várias dessas redes têm se concentrado na historicização e nas configurações contemporâneas de gênero na pesquisa em comunicação, como é o caso da FEMICOMI (*Analisis de los Roles Femeninos en la Investigación de la Comunicación en Iberoamérica*, iniciada em 2022) e da IBERFEMCOM (*Red Iberoamericana de Investigación en Comunicación y Feminismo*, iniciada em 2017). Outras iniciativas têm aberto espaços complementares de diálogo sobre a história e o estado atual dos estudos em comunicação ao longo das linhas de interação entre o Norte e o Sul na Ibero-América<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Ver, por exemplo, “*Comunicar [en] la Historia: Panorama científico de la Historia de la Comunicación Social en Iberoamérica; Intersecciones y marcos comparados*”, conferência AE-IC & AsHisCom, 17-18 de junho de 2021, virtual; e “*IV Doctoral AE-IC: Taller iberoamericano de investigación en comunicación*”, conferência de pré-doutoramento AE-IC, Pontevedra, Espanha, 15-16 de junho de 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Esse caso é apresentado de forma mais abrangente em Simonson et al. (2022b).

Essas colaborações recentes inserem-se em um momento contemporâneo de tardio reconhecimento das exclusões, desigualdades e injustiças estruturais que contribuíram para a constituição dos estudos em comunicação. Entre os diversos fronts desse reconhecimento estão as historiografias e as memórias coletivas do campo. Ainda não reconhecemos plenamente — muito menos desenterramos historicamente — todas as formas pelas quais gênero, raça, idioma, colonialismo, localização geopolítica e privilégios institucionalmente sancionados moldaram os relatos formais e informais sobre os passados do nosso campo. Reverter esses processos e recuperar passados esquecidos exige múltiplas metodologias e referenciais teóricos — do feminismo e dos estudos transnacionais à sociologia histórica do conhecimento, à teoria crítica da raça, ao pensamento decolonial/pós-colonial e a outras abordagens críticas informadas geopoliticamente, todas representadas nas contribuições desta seção especial<sup>6</sup>.

## TRÊS PERIÓDICOS EM DIÁLOGO

Esta seção especial da *History of Media Studies* constitui uma publicação complementar às coleções igualmente ricas divulgadas pelos periódicos

*MATRIZes* e *Comunicación y Sociedad* no ano passado (Navarro, 2023). As três seções especiais têm origem comum na conferência de 2022, intitulada *The History of Communication Studies across the Americas*. Assim como a própria conferência, a colaboração entre os três periódicos representa um compromisso efetivo com a cooperação multilíngue e trans-hemisférica na cartografia das histórias interseccionadas do campo. Periódicos amplamente respeitados e consolidados, *MATRIZes* (Brasil) e *Comunicación y Sociedad* (México), são exemplos de estudos em comunicação dentro da tradição latino-americana pioneira de publicação em acesso aberto e gratuito (Babini, 2020). Esses dois periódicos são modelos para os compromissos assumidos pelo nosso próprio projeto com o acesso aberto, diamante e o multilinguismo — e, de forma crucial, com a missão de ventilar o provincianismo estadunidense que permeia grande parte da historiografia produzida em inglês. Neste editorial, identificamos temas compartilhados entre as duas outras coleções, com o intuito de relacioná-los aos seis artigos aqui publicados.

As três coleções estão unidas, em primeiro lugar, pela participação de Raúl Fuentes Navarro, destacado historiador do campo e membro dos conselhos editoriais dos três periódicos. O ensaio introdutório de Fuentes Navarro abre a seção especial da *Comunicación y Sociedad*, que inclui três contribuições adicionais, todas publicadas em espanhol e em inglês (Arroyave, 2023; Colón Zayas, 2023; Fuentes Navarro, 2023; Palacio Montiel, 2023). A edição da *MATRIZes*, apresentada por Maria Immacolata Vassallo de Lopes e Fuentes Navarro, reúne quatorze ensaios de colaboradores provenientes de diversas partes do mundo (Averbeck-Lietz, 2023; Da Porta, 2023; Druetta, 2023; León-Duarte, 2023; Moragas Spá, 2023; Paulino, 2023; Rosa Cicalese, 2023; Rüdiger, 2023; Sandoval García, 2023; Serra, 2023; Simonson et al., 2023; Sodré, 2023; Torrico Villanueva, 2023; Vassallo de Lopes & Fuentes Navarro, 2023; Waisbord, 2023). A coleção da *MATRIZes* apresenta o escopo mais abrangente: o periódico encomendou ensaios de diversos estudiosos que não participaram da conferência de 2022 e organizou a edição sob o tema mais amplo de Histórias da internacionalização do campo de estudos da comunicação/*Histories of the Internationalization of the Field of Communication Studies*. Apesar das diferenças de abordagem, as duas seções especiais convergem em um conjunto de temas compartilhados.

O primeiro tema é o mais complexo de ser delineado, pois está relacionado à moldura fundacional das “Américas” proposta na conferência de 2022. A premissa — propositalmente provisória — era conceber o hemisfério como um espaço simultaneamente compartilhado e contestado. Um número reduzido de artigos nas coleções das revistas *MATRIZes* e *Comunicación y Sociedad* aborda esse enquadramento em uma perspectiva hemisférica plena (Colón Zayas, 2023;

<sup>7</sup> As citações foram traduzidas da versão em inglês do artigo.

<sup>8</sup> Sobre Espanha, Portugal e França em particular, ver Serra (2023), Averbeck-Lietz (2023), Moragas Spà, "Investigar la comunicación"; and Colón Zayas (2023).

<sup>9</sup> No contexto caribenho, duas importantes exceções são Colón Zayas (2023) and Da Porta (2023).

<sup>10</sup> O fato de muitos dos artigos de ambas as revistas estarem traduzidos para inglês é um reflexo da crescente hegemonia global da língua na academia neoliberal "internacionalizada"

— um tema abordado em vários artigos das coleções.

<sup>11</sup> Os autores sediados fora da América Latina são Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz (Alemanha), Miquel de Moragas Spà (Espanha), Paul Serra (Portugal), Silvio Waisbord (EUA) e os autores desta introdução, todos sediados nos EUA. Os dois artigos escritos em inglês são Averbeck-Lietz, "On (Missing) Links between German, Latin American, and French Mediatization Research"; e Simonson et al., "The History of Communication Studies across the Americas".

<sup>12</sup> Vassallo de Lopes e Fuentes Navarro (2023), em sua introdução na *MATRIZes*, mencionam de fato as "Américas" no contexto da conferência de 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Na prosa que se segue, "nós" refere-se aos três editores norte-americanos de History of Media Studies — Park, Pooley e Simonson.

<sup>14</sup> Sobre a história de novas associações e trocas padronizadas nas décadas de 1970 e 1980, consulte, por exemplo, Druetta (2023, pp. 166–167); Moragas Spà (2023, p. 146); e Paulino (2023).

Simonson et al., 2023). No entanto, apenas quatro dos dezessete artigos mencionam as "Américas" de forma direta, e um deles, assinado pela historiadora da imprensa mexicana Celia del Palacio Montiel, adota essa moldura justamente para criticá-la (Arroyave, 2023; Colón Zayas, 2023; Palacio Montiel, 2023; Simonson et al., 2023). "Seria possível, ou mesmo pertinente, realizar uma história dos estudos em comunicação ao longo das Américas?" (Palacio Montiel, 2023, p. 2). Palacio Montiel não descarta a possibilidade futura, mas expressa preocupação de que um "projeto generalizante" centrado no hemisfério possa invisibilizar as características e histórias distintivas da pesquisa em comunicação na América Latina<sup>7</sup>. A maioria dos demais artigos endossa, ainda que de forma implícita, o alerta de Palacio Montiel por meio de suas opções de enquadramento. Eles posicionam a tradição latino-americana como eixo central, situando outras regiões — incluindo Europa, Estados Unidos e o Norte Global de forma mais ampla — em segundo plano ou em contextos complexos. A geografia predominante da coletânea concentra-se na América Latina, com uma linha pontilhada que se estende ao norte, rumo aos Estados Unidos, atravessando o Atlântico até a Península Ibérica e, em seguida, alcançando a França<sup>8</sup>. O Canadá anglófono, Quebec e o Caribe francófono ou anglófono são raramente mencionados<sup>9</sup>.

Há diversas razões plausíveis para que ambas as coleções priorizem a América Latina. A região constitui o foco principal das revistas *MATRIZes* e *Comunicación y Sociedad*, que publicam em seus idiomas predominantes<sup>10</sup>. Ademais, a maioria dos dezessete autores está baseada na América Latina, e todos os artigos — com exceção de dois — foram originalmente redigidos em espanhol ou português<sup>11</sup>. Vale considerar, ainda, que a edição especial da *MATRIZes* foi concebida sob um escopo amplo, com foco na "internacionalização" do campo, sem dar ênfase ao enquadramento das "Américas"<sup>12</sup>. Essa foi, naturalmente, uma decisão editorial, e também se observa uma adesão tímida à formulação "Américas" entre os artigos oriundos da conferência de 2022.

Assim, queremos apontar uma razão complementar, em um espírito de autorreflexividade e com as posições dos editores estadunidenses desta revista em primeiro plano<sup>13</sup>. Um tema que atravessa a maioria dos dezessete artigos, de diferentes maneiras, é a desigualdade estrutural que marcou o desenvolvimento e a recepção da pesquisa em comunicação na América Latina (ver, especialmente, Arroyave, 2023; Serra, 2023; Torrico Villanueva, 2023; Waisbord, 2023). Como mencionado anteriormente, os Estados Unidos aparecem, de fato, em vários dos ensaios das coletâneas, incluindo o nosso. O contexto em que essa presença é tratada reflete, de diferentes formas, o papel dos EUA como potência colonialista, hegemônica no hemisfério e imperialista do ponto de vista intelectual. Alguns artigos se detêm sobre a imposição, nas primeiras décadas do pós-guerra, de

um modelo norte-americano de pesquisa em comunicação — quantitativo, supostamente universalista, mas enraizado (muitas vezes de maneira velada) no projeto estadunidense da Guerra Fria (Colón Zayas, 2023, pp. 2–5; Druetta, 2023, pp. 159–162; Torrico Villanueva, 2023, pp. 65–68; Simonson et al., 2023, pp. 196–199). A resistência latino-americana, nas décadas de 1970 e 1980, ao campo dominante nos EUA, inclusive ao seu paradigma da “modernização”, também é amplamente registrada ao longo dos textos (por exemplo, Arroyave, 2023, pp. 10–11; Colón Zayas, 2023; Druetta, 2023, pp. 163–164; Rüdiger, 2023). Muitos artigos destacam, ainda, o crescimento de coordenadas intelectuais autóctones, enraizadas nas histórias específicas da região e na incorporação criativa do pensamento crítico europeu (Averbeck-Lietz, 2023, pp. 259–262; Rüdiger, 2023; Waisbord, 2023, pp. 296–299). Essa “rica tradição híbrida”, para tomar emprestada a expressão de Silvio Waisbord (2023), floresceu paralelamente ao estabelecimento de associações regionais e de outras formas de intercâmbio sistemático<sup>14</sup>. Diversas contribuições, por fim, abordam as perversões estruturais — silenciamentos e distorções — do “sistema acadêmico mundial” neoliberal, que ganhou força nas últimas três décadas (Arroyave, 2023). Mais uma vez, os Estados Unidos são implicados — como um pilar da formação do Norte Global disfarçado de “internacional” e como ponta de lança da hegemonia da língua inglesa. Ao longo desse período, desde as primeiras décadas do pós-guerra até o presente, a grande maioria dos acadêmicos norte-americanos permaneceu alegremente alheia ao trabalho de seus colegas latino-americanos.

Centramos nossa contribuição a *MATRIZes* nesse tema: o entrelaçamento colonialista entre o imperialismo estadunidense e a indiferença nas relações acadêmicas com a América Latina. Nossa abordagem foi destacar o universalismo não marcado da historiografia norte-americana, tanto de maneira geral quanto em relação à América Latina. “A tarefa urgente para os historiadores dos estudos em comunicação nos EUA”, escrevemos, “é provincializar e particularizar o campo tal como se desenvolveu naquele país, situando-o dentro de movimentos internacionais de ideias, instituições e povos que constituíram o campo em escala global” (Simonson et al., 2023, pp. 190–191). A revista *History of Media Studies* foi fundada com objetivos semelhantes. Assim, organizamos a conferência “Across the Americas” em 2022 com a esperança de que um enquadramento pan-americano pudesse sustentar um acerto de contas há muito necessário com os entrelaçamentos entre Sul e Norte dentro do hemisfério. Ao mesmo tempo, expressamos certa preocupação de que tal projeto pudesse levar à criação de uma “nova narrativa mestra”, inadvertidamente influenciada por nossa posição enquanto acadêmicos estadunidenses, brancos e homens (Simonson et al., 2023, p. 191).

Uma das lições que extraímos das coletâneas *MATRIZes* e *Comunicación y Sociedad* é a importância de escutar essas inquietações — de abordar qualquer projeto historiográfico pan-americano com humildade e à luz das histórias de dinâmicas estruturais de poder e apagamentos no hemisfério. Isso implica, entre outras coisas, valorizar as histórias singulares da pesquisa em comunicação na América Latina, com atenção especial à historiografia produzida por e para os pesquisadores da região. Implica, também, refletir sobre nossas próprias posições — e as dos autores presentes nas três coletâneas — dentro de um sistema acadêmico “global” que continua profundamente ocidentalizado, apesar dos apelos (em grande parte simbólicos) por uma “desocidentalização” do campo. Em outras palavras, qualquer história dos estudos em comunicação nas Américas deve também ser uma sociologia histórica do conhecimento acadêmico — uma que seja sensível, em especial, aos apagamentos epistemológicos, passados e persistentes. Este é um tema que, de forma bastante pertinente, atravessa grande parte das contribuições nas coletâneas *MATRIZes* e *Comunicación y Sociedad* (especialmente, Serra, 2023; também Arroyave, 2023, pp. 13–15; León-Duarte, 2023; Torrico Villanueva, 2023, pp. 59–61).

## SEÇÃO ESPECIAL: HISTÓRIAS ENTRELAÇADAS PELAS AMÉRICAS

Diante dos múltiplos entrelaçamentos que informam a história dos estudos de mídia e comunicação nas Américas, os artigos desta seção especial traçam diversos caminhos possíveis para descrever e refletir sobre seus respectivos objetos.

A seção tem início com o estudo histórico de Nova Gordon-Bell sobre os estudos em comunicação e mídia no Caribe Anglófono — uma contribuição exemplar ao traçar os espaços e ideias compartilhados e contestados que emergem no diálogo Norte-Sul, com atenção especial aos efeitos do domínio colonial. Em seu ensaio, Gordon-Bell comprehende as instituições como ferramentas ideológicas de dominação e controle, uma posição particularmente adequada para uma região onde, como ela relata, o domínio colonial britânico pressupunha que o conhecimento só poderia advir da metrópole. Essa concepção de conhecimento moldou o funcionamento do *University College of the West Indies*, que se tornou a *University of the West Indies* em 1962, no mesmo ano da independência da Jamaica. Embora os legados desse sistema colonial ainda estejam presentes de diversas formas, a narrativa apresentada por Gordon-Bell destaca como os estudos em comunicação no Caribe Anglófono se inspiraram no Movimento dos Países Não Alinhados e na proposta da UNESCO para uma Nova Ordem Mundial de Informação e Comunicação (*New World Information and Communication Order*, NWICO). O primeiro-ministro da Jamaica Michael

Manley engajou-se na causa dos Não Alinhados, e a formação universitária em comunicação passou a enfatizar a capacitação profissional de jornalistas e outros trabalhadores da mídia. A *Caribbean School of Media and Communication* (CARIMAC), então denominada *Caribbean Institute of Mass Communication*, foi criada na *University of the West Indies*, impulsionada pelo clima político favorável ao Movimento dos Não Alinhados e ao socialismo democrático. Aggrey Brown, diretor do CARIMAC entre 1979 e 2002 e figura polímata da mídia com diversas conexões com a imprensa local, desenvolveu um curso introdutório para os estudantes do instituto. Gordon-Bell compara esse curso a um “cavalo de Troia”, cujo título aparentemente inofensivo — *Communication, Culture, and Caribbean Society* — ocultava uma abordagem profundamente crítica, com ênfase em questões de poder, propriedade dos meios de comunicação, identidade e política caribenhas. As leituras do curso incluíam *Pedagogia do Oprimido*, de Paulo Freire (1972); *The Media Are American*, de Jeremy Tunstall (1977); e o Relatório MacBride (*International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems*, 1980). Desde a década de 1970, as reconfigurações políticas globais, as demandas locais e as pressões sobre o meio acadêmico têm desviado os estudos em comunicação na Jamaica de suas inclinações mais críticas, em direção a uma formação voltada ao mercado de trabalho e à conformidade com exigências de certificação norte-americanas. Gordon-Bell conclui sua análise refletindo sobre a importância de que a produção de conhecimento a partir do Caribe Anglófono se concentre na promoção da mudança.

Assim como Gordon-Bell posiciona o Caribe Anglófono como um ponto focal para a compreensão das dinâmicas hemisféricas e globais de dominação e resistência, Yamila Heram e Santiago Gándara elegem uma figura individual — a norte-americana Elizabeth Fox, pioneira na economia política crítica da mídia — como objeto de sua análise. Os autores demonstram como as peregrinações de Fox por onze países a tornam uma figura “transnacional” exemplar, propensa à colaboração com outros intelectuais também transnacionais. Heram e Gándara vinculam essa trajetória ao legado intelectual e institucional de Fox. A partir de uma meta-análise de sua obra e de entrevistas semiestruturadas com a própria Fox, os autores oferecem um retrato revelador do foco emergente da pesquisadora em temas dos estudos de mídia, que parecem ter sido impulsionados por sua propensão a transitar por fronteiras geográficas e epistemológicas. Essa perspectiva se evidencia em três momentos explorados pelos autores na trajetória de Fox: (1) seus estudos iniciais, quando residia em Bogotá, sobre economia da mídia e suas intervenções em favor das Políticas Nacionais de Comunicação e da proposta da NWICO; (2) sua produção mais reflexiva e reconceitualizadora durante a década de 1980, quando viveu em Buenos Aires e, posteriormente,

em Paris; e (3) seus trabalhos mais recentes, muitos deles desenvolvidos em Washington, D.C., voltados à implementação de programas de saúde. Heram e Gándara observam que, assim como ocorre com muitas figuras transnacionais e com inúmeras mulheres no meio acadêmico, Fox sofreu com uma marcante falta de visibilidade tanto nos contextos acadêmicos norte-americanos quanto latino-americanos — uma injustiça que este artigo contribui para reparar.

O objetivo de identificar vertentes significativas de influência intra-hemisférica também pode ser alcançado por meio da problematização das próprias fronteiras e da valorização dessas fronteiras como momentos geradores na construção de significados. Michael Darroch torna as fronteiras e os comportamentos fronteiriços centrais em sua análise das histórias canadense e quebequense dos estudos da comunicação, ao afirmar que as travessias de fronteiras — literais e figuradas — assumiram um papel de destaque em determinados momentos do desenvolvimento do campo da comunicação. Trata-se da “imaginação fronteiriça” que Darroch identifica em ação no contexto dos estudos de mídia na América do Norte — uma imaginação na qual as fronteiras oferecem alguns dos substratos imaginários que moldaram a forma como a comunicação passou a ser estudada. Darroch recorre às ideias e ao exemplo do notório transgressor de fronteiras Vilém Flusser — cuja própria história diáspórica inclui o nascimento em Praga, a fuga para Londres, a mudança para o Brasil e, posteriormente, o retorno à Europa — para desenvolver uma terminologia que centralize os atos de tradução, o pensamento nômade e o diálogo que impulsionam seu artigo. As fronteiras e suas travessias ocuparam um lugar importante na obra de Marshall McLuhan e Harold Innis, desempenhando também um papel fundamental na forma diferenciada como esses dois estudiosos foram recebidos em Quebec e no Canadá anglófono. Darroch volta-se, então, para as travessias discursivas e disciplinares em operação na revista *Media Probe*, que mais tarde se tornaria a *Canadian Journal of Communication*, e na revista sediada na Universidade Laval, *Communication Information*, posteriormente intitulada *Communication, Information, Médiations, Théories*. A mesma produtividade das fronteiras pode ser identificada na fundação da *Canadian Communication Association*. Darroch nos deixa com uma impressão vívida das possibilidades associadas ao que denomina “hábitos multifocais de visão”, nos quais a dualidade comumente atribuída às fronteiras é substituída por uma valorização das camadas comoventes de multivocalidade que podemos recuperar a partir de histórias devidamente contextualizadas dos estudos da mídia.

Raúl Fuentes Navarro, como mencionado anteriormente, foi um dos responsáveis por impulsionar esta seção especial, bem como suas coleções complementares nas revistas *MATRIZes* e *Comunicación y Sociedad*. Seu artigo

apresenta uma perspectiva institucional caracteristicamente vigorosa — ainda que também matizada — sobre a história dos estudos interamericanos em mídia e comunicação. Ele inicia com uma cuidadosa contextualização, chamando atenção para a historicidade da terminologia utilizada para se referir às Américas e, em seguida, vincula essa instabilidade discursiva ao que denomina “internacionalismo desintegrado” — uma dinâmica que, segundo argumenta, opera nas estruturas institucionais que abrigam os estudos da comunicação em todo o hemisfério. Fuentes Navarro concentra nossa atenção em três instituições de destaque com foco na América Latina: o Centro Internacional de Estudos Superiores em Comunicação para a América Latina, a ALAIC e a Federação Latino-Americana de Faculdades de Comunicação Social. Essas três instituições atuaram como agentes do internacionalismo desintegrado que o autor aponta, servindo, por um lado, como canais de influência transnacional e, por outro, como espaços de preservação das tendências intelectuais autóctones latino-americanas, bem como das importantes diferenças nacionais na produção acadêmica ao longo da região. Rejeitando um modelo de soma zero para as relações entre os Estados Unidos e a América Latina no contexto da história dos estudos em comunicação e mídia, Fuentes Navarro afirma que devemos — seguindo o modelo e as palavras de Luis Ramiro Beltrán — reconhecer a complexidade envolvida na organização do trabalho acadêmico, evitando tanto o dogmatismo quanto a ilusão de uma ciência “isenta de valores”.

As conexões interamericanas que Fuentes Navarro evidencia no plano institucional também podem ser observadas no plano discursivo. Em uma tradução de um artigo publicado anteriormente, Erick Torrico Villanueva (2015) mostra como os estudos interamericanos em comunicação se desenvolveram discursivamente a partir de uma abordagem centrada em uma investigação científica positivista oriunda das tradições acadêmicas ocidentais — particularmente estadunidenses. Esse foco estreito em uma única forma de conhecer resultou em um “pensamento abissal”, no qual qualquer outra epistemologia é colocada como algo distinto do verdadeiro conhecimento. Torrico Villanueva explora como essa compreensão das tradições do saber ao redor do mundo se manifesta nos estudos de comunicação nos Estados Unidos, na Europa e na Ibero-América, por meio de uma análise crítica de manuais acadêmicos de referência. Ele identifica uma escassa reflexividade quanto às posições intelectuais adotadas e uma dependência excessiva das ideias provenientes dos Estados Unidos e da Europa Ocidental. Torrico Villanueva conclui que o trabalho que temos pela frente exigirá enxergar a comunicação — e seu estudo — por meio de lentes menos completamente tingidas por ideias e práticas estadunidenses e europeias ocidentais.

O foco nos entendimentos dominantes sobre as relações interamericanas na história dos estudos em mídia orienta a contribuição cuidadosamente calibrada de Afonso de Albuquerque, que aplica a noção de imperialismo intelectual a essas relações transnacionais. Albuquerque inicia a sexta e última entrada desta seção especial com a observação de que o interesse acadêmico pelo imperialismo cultural diminuiu nas últimas décadas — talvez porque o próprio imperialismo cultural tenha sido amplamente assimilado pela cultura acadêmica global. Ele coloca o imperialismo cultural ao lado de conceitos correlatos, especialmente o imperialismo midiático — no qual os meios de comunicação se tornam instrumentos utilizados por potências imperiais para impor sua influência — e o imperialismo intelectual — em que países poderosos impõem suas formas de produzir conhecimento a outras nações. Albuquerque descreve como instituições acadêmicas (incluindo universidades, organizações filantrópicas e periódicos científicos) exercem uma influência coletiva sobre os contornos do trabalho acadêmico (e para-acadêmico), promovendo o modelo estadunidense como referência para os estudos de comunicação na América Latina. Ele ilustra esse tipo de imperialismo intelectual por meio de um estudo de caso sobre o Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas (da Universidade do Texas), particularmente no modo como o centro tem operado por meio da Associação Brasileira de Jornalismo Investigativo. Os modelos estadunidenses de estudo, prática e formação em jornalismo, quando aplicados ao contexto político do Brasil, contribuíram significativamente para a desestabilização da política nacional. O argumento mais amplo de Albuquerque é a permanência do imperialismo intelectual como chave analítica relevante para a compreensão da história transnacional do campo.

Tomados em conjunto, os artigos desta seção apresentam um argumento sólido — ainda que com ressalvas — a favor das “Américas” como um referencial analítico. Sem ignorar os padrões de dominação, sem isolar a região de outras fontes de influência e sem posicionar “as Américas” como um referente estável, esta seção especial da *History of Media Studies* dá voz a modos linguísticos, discursivos, metodológicos e institucionais de influência e estabilidade tanto transnacionais quanto intranacionais. A seção não inaugura essa reflexão, mas retoma fios de atenção acadêmica e influência intelectual para entrelaçá-los sob a rubrica hemisférica. “As Américas”, nos ensaios aqui reunidos, configuram-se como uma provocação para se explorar algo além das tendências nacionais ou globais na historiografia do campo — uma oportunidade para reconfigurar essas histórias herdadas, por assim dizer, do Cone Sul aos pontos mais ao norte. ■

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# Tracking communication issues

## *Rastreando questões comunicacionais*

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### ABSTRACT

The article proposes a research program based on a comprehensive perspective on communication issues to enable a heuristic, critical, or praxiological approach, without depending on a general theory. The program starts from a set of premises to be tested by tracking issues of social praxis that show characteristics of its communication process. The text develops a preliminary exercise on two academic articles which offer analyses and views about different situations. It tracks the specific issues addressed therein, following the proposed perspective and develops inferences about their relationship with the common interactional horizon.

**Keywords:** Research program, comprehensive challenge, research methodology, epistemology.

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### RESUMO

O artigo propõe um programa de pesquisa com base em uma perspectiva abrangente sobre questões comunicacionais, em vista de uma aproximação heurística, crítica ou praxiológica, não dependente de uma teoria geral. O programa parte de um conjunto de premissas a serem testadas por um rastreamento de questões da práxis social que mostram características de seu processo comunicacional. O texto desenvolve um exercício preliminar sobre dois artigos acadêmicos que oferecem análises e reflexões sobre situações diferentes. Faz um rastreamento das questões específicas aí tratadas, na perspectiva proposta, e desenvolve inferências sobre sua relação com o horizonte interacional comum.

**Palavras-chave:** Programa de pesquisa, desafio abrangente, metodologia de pesquisa, epistemologia.



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## INTRODUCTION

**I**NTERACTING IS A problem. How can we act together with others when we are diverse and, moreover, continuously change through existence, altering our actions and gestures as we interact with others, diversifying our experience and learning? Or, often, we do not learn—and, when circumstances change, we fail to realize that others have changed.

Thus, interacting is a problem. Firstly, a practical problem, because we are born and live interacting, in the most diverse and imaginable (but not always predictable) circumstances. Human beings go through life inventing cultures, patterns, and ways of acting to face this problem, diversifying their interactions to survive and create environments where actions more or less work, perhaps ensuring some meaning.

Being a problem of social praxis, it is also proposed as a problem of knowledge about this practice. Given the extraordinary variety of modes, circumstances, and dynamics, is it possible to think of a science of the infinite communicational gestures that exercise this interaction?

It is not about ensuring a general, explanatory, and paradigmatic theory of communication, nor about conceptualizing—it is about generating knowledge that serves, in a heuristic manner, to understand processes and discover their logics: observing social praxis with a research program. The question is: can we discover the processes of communication—varied as they are—with some systematization, sufficient to constitute transversal knowledge across the variety of actions and selective criteria of such processes?

This article is organized in two parts. In the first, we present the program for developing communication research. In the second, we conduct a test of the program.

## PART I: A RESEARCH PROGRAM

### Objectives

There is no need to have a prior communication theory to develop a consistent and broad research program. Historical knowledge and anthropology demonstrate this possibility. The former, by depending little on comprehensive theories, is capable of organizing, with traditional solidity, rigorous research programs. Anthropology, preceding its theories with research programs that give them support.

A research program with an overarching goal should enable the perception of communicational dynamics in the diversity of situations relevant to the field of knowledge while ensuring that this understanding of dynamics does

not reduce the interest and need to learn the specific logic of each singular situation under study.

The research program I propose, although it elaborates theories, is more methodological than theoretical. This statement does not mean dismissing theories. Not only because the field of communication has developed theories close to the research objects it focuses on, but also because we need the knowledge offered by theories from other human and social sciences to grasp the specificity of the situations we wish to study. Recognizing this possibility does not correspond to an interdisciplinary position, which cannot be the foundation of communication studies. Interdisciplinarity would involve an intertwining of theoretical perspectives focused on *issues specific to the different participating sciences*. The need for external theoretical knowledge in communication refers to *answers produced* by neighboring fields—without becoming dependent on their questions. The most accurate term for this use is “scientific exchange.” All sciences engage in an exchange of answers; while interdisciplinarity is a joint activity aimed at addressing shared questions.

Projecting the diversity of occurrences and communicational processes onto a common, comprehensive horizon does not imply finding a unified concept that centrally defines “what communication is” amid the variation of occurrences. On the contrary, it involves trying to perceive, from this perspective of breadth, the variation of modes and processes through which communicational dynamics manifest in social space.

For this reason, what I seek is an epistemic horizon, as wide as possible, to characterize what the *communicational problem is*—situating it in the conjunction of three elements. The first two are the biological fact of diversity and the social fact of the diversification of the human species, as factors of adaptability and flexibility. These two elements, in turn, require the third: that social participants face the interactive challenge of articulating this dynamic diversity effectively. Without this, the adaptive advantage disappears. I consider this problem to characterize the comprehensive horizon; then, I observe that the issue materializes, in social praxis, in infinitely variable forms and conditions.

Therefore, I do not propose a “theory of communication.” Our research program does not aim to offer a unified explanation or a standardized approach, but rather a search for heuristic, critical, and praxiological perceptions related to what appears—as a specific case of communicational issues—within the social diversity.

With the main goal of seeking consistency in the constitution of the communication field, without imposing on the diversity of research, the central objectives of the program correspond to:

- a) to focus on communicational issues rather than essentialist concepts of what communication is;
- b) to understand communication as any work of human diversity in constructing articulations between the differences that exist and are produced in society;
- c) to perceive communicational dynamics as a process integrated into all human actions in social praxis, and to comprehend it through the logics exercised in each case, each situation, each moment;
- d) to address the specific issues of the investigated situation, pursuing its own logics, and to deepen the study by moving back and forth between these and the broader communicational issues perceived.

In the set of diversified studies, the goal is not to build a network of concepts, but to discover different characteristics in communicational processes, with the expectation of perceiving their eventual presence in communicational gestures that are exercised in varied situations.

The next item presents a set of premises in the constitution of this comprehensive horizon. These are still experimental premises, serving as the foundation of a research program under development, which outlines a research perspective and approach aimed at addressing the diversity of themes, urgencies, and projects that sociocultural experience constantly develops.

After this minimum delineation of the perspective, the article presents, as the first test, an analytical-inferential exercise on studies of concrete situations in reality.

### Premises

Our research program is focused on studying diversified specific situations, observed in connection with the overarching interactional challenge. It seeks communicational issues in the practical life of society; in any situations, whether studied by other sciences or not, in terms of their questions. This is exactly what the field has been doing, in individual research, research lines in graduate programs, and research entities. The working groups (WGs) of Compós exemplify well the diversity of such studies—both in themes and in the sectoral approaches of each WG. Our program involves projecting these specific issues onto a common horizon, searching for macro-issues of a communicational nature. I propose and develop this horizon in previous articles (Braga, 2022a, b, 2023), which elaborate the main foundations of the research program.

An approach of repeated back-and-forth movement between the comprehensive horizon and the specific issues found in the observation of diverse real-world situations can broaden knowledge through mutually made contributions.

The ten premises that follow, based on the referenced articles, synthesize the foundations of the comprehensive horizon.

#### ***Social praxis problems and issues, rather than concepts***

We should avoid a conceptualization that attempts to express the essence of what communication is. Focusing attention on supposed essences circumscribes and excludes. The word “communication” expresses an extremely variable processual dynamic, and therefore, it is difficult to characterize through a concept that seeks to encompass the diversity of situations and occurrences. Thus, instead of defining what the communicational process is, we characterize the *communicational problem*: the issues that constitute this process.

#### ***Emphasizing the process over the communicational gesture***

Given the complexity of the process, there is a tendency to use the word “communication” in reference to the gesture that exercises it—the action of a participant or the related “product” (message, specific speech, text, image, argument, physical gesture...). Certainly, these are important elements. There are others as well. However, in our perspective, we will emphasize the word “communication” for the collective process of the pertinent elements—a dynamic process that is infinitely variable in its composition.

#### ***Identifying communicational aspects***

In social praxis, the gesture with a communicational objective is intertwined with the operational strategies of the social fields in which it occurs and with the specific contexts of human actions. The question here is: how to identify the communicational aspect, while not separating it from the contexts in which it occurs? What enables identification is perceiving, integrated into the actions and circumstances, the aspects that address (or seek to address) a problem—an urgency or project—that can be grasped as being of a *communicational nature*.

#### ***Diversity and composition as adaptive processes***

So, what is a “communicational problem”? At the level of an epistemic horizon, we have the beginning of a comprehensive perspective. Human diversification, with its flexibility, is an adaptive advantage of the species in the face of diverse circumstances. However, it also weakens the isolated specimen. The adaptive advantage is only completed through dynamics of composition between the diverse—serving the collective confrontation of specific problems that require, or will require, some articulated process.

***The communicational challenge: articulating diversity***

We will consider any communication problem in social praxis (urgency or project) in which, in some way—whether established or tentative, effective or not—diverse participants must relate their singularities in facing the challenge posed by the situation. Thus, we understand the communication problem as a challenge that is widely present in human society, in which, for any type of objective, it is necessary to articulate human diversification.

***Not reducing differences: composing singularities***

The diversity of strategies and the integration between the communicational challenge and immediate practical objectives show that “doing things together” does not correspond to a simple process of consensuality—an expression that remains on the thinnest surface of communication. It would be mistaken to consider that communication between different participants implies a primary goal of reducing differences. On the contrary, it is relevant to compose diverse singularities, in favor of confronting complex issues.

***Diversification of participants' experience***

Although communicational work can correspond to adjustments, reducing the roughness of diversity, an important part of communicational work also involves *producing diversification changes*. On one hand, through varying procedures in addressing circumstances. On the other hand, through the transformation of participants' experience, via the communicational gestures activated—transformations that do not standardize them but instead modify their singularity within the composition.

***Communicational dynamics: variations and selection***

In human interaction, participants exercise plural and diverse actions and discourses. Setting aside the causes of such directions, what matters is this production of variations. The variations, enabled by human diversity, stem from the urgencies to face and the projects to be carried out. Social praxis, therefore, must make a selection among the emerging variations. The selection is made according to multiple factors and criteria, based on context conditions and the participating agents.

***Tensions between transformation and stability***

transformation, resulting from variation and selectivity, is thus communicatively produced. In this process, there is a constant dialectical tension between transforming and stabilizing. Stability is a provisional state of interactional

modes, with varying duration and scope. There is always an expectation that stability will prove relevant, adapted to the parameters of reality, and flexible enough for adjustments to changes in the surrounding reality.

***Perspective: a line of connection between  
overarching challenge and specific situations***

The perspective adopted by the research program on communicational issues and processes is a line of connection between the overarching interactional challenge and the specific situation to be faced in social praxis. The specificity of the issues to be traced is brought by the situation, with all its characteristics, objectives, and strategies pertinent to the practical field of occurrence. The communicational dynamic manifests itself in this specific confrontation, which unfolds before the horizon outlined by the interactional challenge.

## **PART II: EXERCISE-TEST**

### **The observables/sources**

Based on these premises, we have now developed an exercise for tracking issues and concretizing the focus of the research program as a pre-test for its project. We have selected two different articles published by colleagues in the field, which offer, clearly and pertinently, reflections on the specificity of their observables. The focus of the exercise is not to deepen knowledge about the observed situations. It involves bringing together the specific communicational issues of both situations with the broad perspective of communication viewed as the work of diversity.

For the tracking of specific issues, we chose the two articles based on the following criteria:

- a) Presentation of different situations in social praxis, with specific directions and diverse issues;
- b) The presence of problems that stimulate reflection on the situation at hand regarding communicational issues, with a relevant offering of knowledge.

The two articles are, therefore, not directly comparable. On the other hand, they show actions of participants directed toward society, seeking to act on their context, and allow for inferences and comments on internal communicational gestures. We aim to grasp the differences and singularities of these actions. The question will always be: *what communication is this?*

With these characteristics, the articles are both pertinent observables for our goal of tracking communicational issues and sources of information about

the specific situations they analyze and the problems they address. It is in this dual role, as source and observable, that the articles facilitate our approach to the relationship between the broad perspective and the specificities studied by the articles.

The study of the articles is organized in two movements. The first step is a careful reading of each article, observing its specific communicational issues—which allows for pinpoint inferences about the observed situation. The second step, in the following section, is a return to the broad challenge, using the very diversity of the specific situations as a heuristic stimulus to think about issues of the communicational horizon in relation to the reality observed in the articles.

**First article: *A contestação às vacinas contra Covid-19 em grupos do Telegram no Brasil* (Lídia Raquel Herculano Maia et al., 2023)**

**Summary**

The article, written by researchers from Fiocruz, UFF, and PUC-Rio, studies four groups contesting the vaccine, raising the arguments used by participants. Based on Grounded Theory, it brings to light the types of arguments from the set of posts and comments circulating. Three major types are identified: concerns regarding the safety and efficacy of the vaccines; theories about financial, political, and social control interests by institutions; and defense of individual freedoms and personal privacy. The data obtained from direct observation of interactions are supplemented in the text with references to other national and international research. The article emphasizes the need to contain the damage caused by denialism and expresses the expectation of contributing to strategies in this direction.

**Commentary**

The article presents a well-structured critical position on denialist argumentation, noting its harmful effects on society in general, as well as on the vaccine contesters themselves. By raising the processes exercised by the groups, it shows the importance of containing them.

Before detailing the arguments in circulation, the article addresses vaccine hesitancy and the epistemic crisis in the health field. Vaccine hesitancy is naturally related to the first of three argumentative lines, regarding the safety and efficacy of the vaccine. The issue of “hesitation” is relevant because it suggests a probable entry point for taking a position against vaccines and, therefore, also a space for recruitment. If, in seeking information on these aspects, the hesitant find a contested environment, they become easy prey for a proliferating circuit of denialism.

We were precisely in a political context where the then President of the Republic argued against the vaccine and denied the risks of the pandemic—to the point of dismissing a Health Minister, a doctor, who was beginning to organize a public hospital care approach. I understand that the traditional habit in society of resorting to neighborhood pharmacopeia and alternative health care (which, however, remained as complementary margins to regular treatments) may have contributed to the uncertainties of the pandemic and the denialist interventions of the former President, favoring the epistemic crisis noted by the article.

The administrators of the groups and other generators of contestation, however, are not part of the hesitant individuals—they are, conversely, argumentative figures with a firm stance, willing to use any argument to propagate their position. In addition to falsely amplifying the risks of the vaccine and the possibility of its ineffectiveness, while concealing statistics that show the minimal proportion of negative effects compared to the high risks of the disease (confirmed by the number of hospitalizations and deaths), the circuits studied in the article add other clearly distorting arguments.

The second argumentative line identified in the article addresses “obscure interests,” linked to conspiracy theories. Certain evident facts of reality (such as profit and political power as motivators of human behavior) are redirected as if they were the explanation of events, simplifying complex processes by alleging that hidden and coordinated forces control social activities from behind the scenes. The participants in the groups believe in a conspiracy “between epistemic institutions and political and financial elites, with scientific journalism being a key part of this conspiracy” (p. 15)—thus constructing an enemy and attributing objectives they wish to resist.

The third type of argument, showing another confusion by the contesting groups between distinct dimensions of social reality, relates the refusal of the vaccine to individual freedom. The defense of freedom is presented as an abstract argument—“in an appropriation of liberal ideas defending individual rights”—through which “individual freedoms take precedence over the collective” (p. 16). Not supported by a democratic structure and social responsibility, it seems to me that this defense actually corresponds to a desire for the freedom of the strongest.

The article highlights, spanning the three argumentative lines, two predominant patterns of formulation. Two of the groups on Telegram emphasize self-confirming message exchanges regarding the anti-vaccine position, including personal reflections and stories lived or reproduced on the subject. The other two groups, although also containing such a format, appear primarily

as repositories of content, in an informative style. Despite the different tactics, a strong homogeneity in positioning is evident—the study found very few moments of dissent.

In the historical references about argumentative processes, we find three main types of strategies:

- a) In rhetorical thinking—the development and formulation of arguments with the potential to convince listeners;
- b) In political debate—the deliberative process in democratic balance among participants;
- c) In scientific controversy—not as an intention to win the argument, but rather as the pursuit of rational and rigorous knowledge about the observed reality.

Such argumentative processes offer good possibilities for decision-making for participants directly or indirectly involved. However, when these angles are observed in the analyzed situation, the article identifies distortions in all three areas: that of scientific knowledge, political positioning processes, and the rhetorical formulation of arguments.

Thus, the argumentative process of anti-vaccine groups is both distorted and distorting: by its almost non-existent coherence with reality; by confusion between social dimensions; by polarization (exclusive binary thinking); by the refusal of the best scientific knowledge; and by the frequent and intentional practice of misinformation.

It is evident that an argumentative interaction process with such a set of defects leads to negative results. The importance of containing this process is pragmatically defended by the article, which hopes to “offer findings for containing the damage they may cause to public health.” With this goal, in addition to ensuring access to vaccines, it proposes maintaining “a dialogue in which different sectors of society can express and address their doubts and concerns” (p. 18). Continuous clarification is, indeed, a relevant public health policy.

For our part, we emphasize that this containment represents a complex communicational challenge—the participants not only resist opposing arguments but also use attempts at counterposition as reinforcement for their denialist stance. Also, from a communicational standpoint, processes need to be considered to bring to the forefront the real diversity of the participants. The plasticity of human experience, if stimulated, may perhaps have the potential to reopen the crystallized dimension. If we also consider that denialist stances thrive in stagnant social environments, the importance of stimulating participatory social dynamics becomes evident.

**Second article: *Comunicação antirracista: notas crítico-reflexivas e propositivas* (Francisco Leite, 2022)**

**Summary**

Francisco Leite's article (a researcher at the Chair of the Institute of Advanced Studies at USP) gathers and systematizes theoretical references on the topic, from both critical and propositional angles. It begins with a communicational perspective that centers on the bond formed in common (Muniz Sodré). Five other sections organize the text: (a) the characterization of racism, from a reflective-critical perspective; (b) the main foundations for thinking about antiracism; (c) authorial references that discuss forms and strategies of antiracist actions. This central section generates an elucidatory framework with seven sets, characterizing actions and objectives. Section (d) cites authors discussing communicational angles related to the topic ("thinking about antiracist communication"). The final considerations (e) remind us that "other oppressed racial/ethnic groups must also be the target of analysis" and suggest fostering logotechnical practices, emphasizing their transformative potential and the task of cooperation required.

**Commentary**

The article competently brings together theoretical notes relevant to the issue of antiracism versus racism. It initially situates the topic within considerations about communication, based on the perspectives of Muniz Sodré.

It is not the purpose of my study to develop a comparative analysis between theories of communication. However, since I intend to relate the specific discussion of the analyzed article to a communicational horizon, I must point out that, although in line with Sodré's thinking (the bond, the "common" processes, "communication [is] greater than the media"), my perspective proposes to emphasize the importance of communicational issues, focusing on differences and the work of their articulation, rather than observing the "constitutive identifications of the cohesive bond" (Sodré, cited by Leite, p. 2). It is in relation to this perspective, summarized in my experimental premises, that I read the commented article.

Not being an expert on the theme of racism beyond what social praxis brings to me as evidence, I learned from the article about what it refers to regarding the antiracist project and from Sodré's viewpoint, which aims to "halt and dismantle racism, with an ethical-political thinking and acting approach to combat it" (p. 4, citing Sodré).

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I recognize the validity of the preference expressed in Leite's article, which deepens the topic from the perspective of antiracism, emphasizing the affirmation of transformative attitudes rather than highlighting racism. However, considering that the expression "racism" refers to an interactional mode that, beyond being erroneous, generates a long-established and stabilized structure (precisely the structural racism that the article addresses) and, therefore, difficult to transform, it seems necessary to reflect on what characterizes the communicational structure to be overcome.

It is not enough, then, to attribute its origin and constitution to European colonialism, which is a good political-economic explanation for the historical development of contemporary racism, but does not explain its duration nor its extension to circumstances in which the revivals of coloniality are less intense (or perhaps better: it does not explain this specific resurgence of colonialism). However, precisely, the article provides elucidatory inputs for attention to the *communicational* structures of racism—that is, the interactional modes through which racism shows itself as structuring human and social relations that transcend the circumstances of its origin.

The framework presented in the article brings together seven contributions from different authors, which Leite characterizes as the "main expressions of antiracism" (p. 12). It is a set of actions, objectives, strategies, areas, and operational modes driven by the transformative effort. There are thirty-four diverse antiracist expressions (with few repetitions from one author to another), highlighting the diversity of dimensions within the racist structure. These are not different racisms, but a tentacular composition, which prevails one angle or another depending on the environment and circumstances.

A relevant point for the axis of my research problem is the observation that racism is directly and originally a communicational issue. That is, communication does not begin with the expression of racist gestures, nor, later, with actions, gestures, and speeches of antiracist confrontation and combat. My perspective suggests that the structures of racism are already an interactional mode of articulation—long stabilized within historical circumstances. The racist communication witnessed in praxis and the directly racist gestures are sustained by this structure, which is already an interactional construction within the historical circumstances of the encounter between European participants and Africans—constructed by the colonizers as different. European colonization triggers both racial and cultural differences, as well as differences in power. Within this set of dimensions, racial difference was constructed as an index and as an argument to establish the oppressive and exploitative interactional mode adopted.

The structuring of racism of the present day was effectively constituted (in the process of immediate causality) within the colonial processes that continue to reinforce it. However, this causality is not sufficient to “explain” the racist gesture in its entirety, nor to perceive the internal logic of the structure that remains—and, therefore, it is insufficient as a target for combat.

The basic logic of the structure is that it has made a forced attribution of negative characteristics to the index “skin color.” Thus, there is an artificial inversion in the expression of the processes: the reduction of action possibilities, imposed by the force of the colonizing relationship over the dominated, begins to be assumed as if it were due to personal and racial characteristics of the dominated. Even when the specific conditions of domination cease, the structural logic remains, seemingly justifying that other restrictions be imposed, in the *most diverse situations*, activating the now universalized structure. As is evident, the contemporary situation cannot be attributed solely to coloniality (even though it is the initial cause).

A multiplicity of social dimensions was simultaneously added to the racial angle as if it were a coherent set—colonized peoples, therefore, weaker, and less technologically developed; over whom colonization also added other elements, such as enslavement, with the forced displacement of large numbers to other continents, an expansion of oppressive conditions, and the suffering of violence. Race and color cease to be considered as a cultural and descriptive identity and become an index of this false totality, which, in turn, is then selected as an indicator of access restrictions—even when the initial conditions of colonization have formally ceased.

What keeps the process functioning is a pre-set and crystallized selective system, closing access to opportunities that could diversify the situation, based on a circular criterion such as: access is not given because, if they have not had access until now, it is because they do not know how to gain access.

It is this aggregation of restrictive dimensions, forcefully linked to race and color, that seems to crystallize the racist structure in the country. The stagnation resulting from racist structures impoverishes society as a whole. In this sense, nonblack people also have the right and the duty to fight for the overcoming of the racist structure: we are all affected by the cultural and human impoverishment that results from barriers to closer interactions and the stimulating compositions of processes—which should characterize a civilizing social praxis.

### **Broad issues, specific issues**

We start with the hypothesis that the observation of connections between specific issues and broad issues allows for heuristic approximations to develop and deepen discoveries in the communicational field.

In the horizon of the communicational challenge of the species (which makes us diverse and diversifying, creating the need to articulate singularities), which broad issues can connect with the specific issues present in the exercise? The connection is not made by proximity, but by highlighting the dimensions in which they differ.

We found four broad issues that connect disparate specificities shown by the two situations: the first is requested by both articles; the other three are suggested by our perspective of study: equality and difference, dimensions of variation, selective processes, and transformation and stability.

The organization of each of these four topics follows the following sequence: a presentation of the overarching issue guiding the topic and a commentary on how this issue is specified in each of the two situations studied.

#### ***Equality and difference***

When addressing equality and difference, the first impression might be that these are opposing expressions. However, when we understand communication as the work of diversity, further elaboration is necessary. If we are singular beings, if we diversify through contact with others, and if, in the effort to articulate differences, we seek some form of equality, it is evident that this equality cannot result from discarding those differences.

Equality opposes forced and discriminatory differences but aligns with articulated, democratic, and well-distributed differences. Boaventura de Sousa Santos' well-known proposition (1999) aptly expresses this matter: "We have the right to be equal whenever difference diminishes us; we have the right to be different whenever equality mischaracterizes us" (p. 44). We should expand this perspective, valuing any difference assumed by the participants themselves and defending its inscription within a democratic society in cultural terms, political action, and personal decision-making. The two studied articles show, on opposing levels, aspects of this general issue.

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The anti-racist struggle is an egalitarian effort, not a search for indistinction. Part of the movement is the pursuit of equality based on fundamental rights, both those legally standardized and those that must develop through the movement itself, such as identity recognition and cultural specificities. Certainly, individual and group projects that participants themselves assume as characteristic of their

objectives and praxis are also included. It is the egalitarian composition among the participants' own differences, and between them and the social context, that ensures the flexible diversification to be defended.

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The homogeneity observed in anti-vaccine groups, as reported by Lídia Maia and coauthors, is not characterized by internal equality but by the discarding of singularities, personal situations involved, and risks undertaken. If the factual diversity and objectives among participants were brought into internal debate within the groups, it would lead to diversified reflections and arguments. By resisting this alternative, the groups assume a single difference—the one that distinguishes anti-vaccine participants from their “enemies,” against whom they turn—artificially adopted as a mark of radical, rejecting difference. It is an extreme situation, which halts communication and prevents significant transformations.

#### *Dimensions of variation*

In complex societies, such as contemporary ones, each interactional gesture is inscribed within various political and cultural variables (or dimensions of variation), involved in interpenetrating social fields.

The variations brought about by human action follow established patterns or exert tension upon these patterns. A constant interactional problem is to articulate these diverse dimensions, giving them appropriate weighting and meaning according to the surrounding reality, the issues faced, and the objectives and projects formulated. Thus, a relevant question for communicational processes in society is the multiple compositions that can be made between diverse dimensions.

In the relatively stabilized situation of the second half of the twentieth century, different social fields organized their internal dimensions through long-developed experience, and it seemed easier to situate processes developing in one field or another—distinguishing what was pertinent to each.

In the contemporary moment of the twenty-first century, communicational processes generate circuits that cross and blur the boundaries between social fields, making them porous (Braga, 2012). This can favor just social claims but also increases the probability of inadequate compositions in social praxis—either due to mistaken weighting among dimensions, discards, and indistinctions, or (perhaps primarily) a flattening among diverse dimensions—as if a standardizing criterion authorized the classification of people. In the production of knowledge, it is necessary to understand how participants work with the various available dimensions.

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Regarding the specificities of the anti-racist movement, Francisco Leite shows that it involves a junction of different variables of the transformative effort, opening multiple fronts and requiring an expanded and diversified degree of involvement. Although this makes the effort more complex, it may provide better conditions for success due to its comprehensiveness and transformative effort concerning the contexts that compose the criticized racist structure.

Simultaneously, this complexity suggests an interest in weighing actions according to specific spheres of confrontation—that is, avoiding a closed concentration on only one dimension, as if all others derived from it. This would occur if only one of the dimensions were always considered a priority over the others—whether it be a class struggle, the race/poverty relationship, juridical claims, the defense of identity recognition and cultural specificities, or the defense of traditions of origin (among other possibilities).

If this conjecture makes sense, the diversity of lines of action and strategies should be valued among participants—more so than the pursuit of a unified “just line.”

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Regarding the dimensions involved in the vaccine denial issue, the problem is different. The specific issue of “vaccination” is inscribed within a set of dimensions (political, social practices, and scientific knowledge) that, although presenting distinct problems, see this distinction flattened.

Participants in denialist groups seem to seek, within this environment, solutions to very diverse and independent problems through a falsely unified promise, proposing not a harmonization among differences, but rather the elimination of norms restricting individual freedom—which, if actually achieved, would lead to a social construction based on the law of the strongest.

The work of balancing diversification is replaced by a strongly standardizing process, subjecting all dimensions of social variation to a single position, linked to the artificial construction of an enemy, upon which they depend for the design of a negative identity. This generates widespread denialism.

Within the groups, there is certainly a difference between the hesitant individuals captured and the generators of disinformation. However, this difference tends to be diluted by the induction toward unhesitating adherence.

#### *Selective processes*

In the processes of plural generation of variations—across multiple dimensions and varied modes of interaction—this plurality leads to selection processes.

The strategies that characterize the communicational process in a society can be better understood if we recognize the selective processes at work in

directing the lines of composition that attempt to operate upon the proposed and attempted variations.

Two main aspects are relevant in social selection: the agents and the selective criteria. Foucault's study (1974) on devices clearly demonstrates the dynamics of variation and selection processes (even though the author does not use these terms)—highlighting the dominant powers. Indeed, these powers have predominance over both main aspects of selectivity. However, not always—otherwise, absolute monarchies would still be the principal form of government. Various forces can act upon the selective criteria: rationality, controversy in debates, scientific knowledge, deliberative political processes, cultural pursuits of balance, advances in juridical ethics, the number of participants in electoral processes, artistic creativity, and social criticism.

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In Francisco Leite's article, we learn about the diversity of acts that stem from and reinforce the racist structure—thus applying a selectively imposed criterion silently within various interactional processes.

In antiracist actions, as in other demands from the so-called minority sectors of contemporary society, we witness voices capable of expressing their own arguments to clarify and defend their criteria for selection among available variations and to claim their influence upon the contexts.

Critiquing the prevailing selective criteria and making egalitarian criteria explicit are certainly part of the relevant actions. The agents of transformation regarding criteria and selectivity gestures will be all those who, in their social practice, perceive the struggle of transformative work against discriminatory and unjust practices, exercising the specific communicational gestures required for transformation.

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The selective criteria of vaccine denial, on the other hand, although they had, for three years, the strength of political predominance and widespread circulation of discourses of fear and hatred, lack rational arguments and scientific and legal foundations.

They do, however, possess the worrisome strength of radical self-referentiality, the solipsistic self-absorption of polarization, and strict binarism—given that their identity, objectives, and strategy result from the generalized denialist selection. An additional problem is that a strictly focused effort against exclusionary binarism tends to reinforce polarization, generating a vicious circle. Thus, an important challenge for social invention is the search for strategies that dilute this strict opposition. Enlightenment efforts are also necessary—especially

to prevent more social participants from being captured by the recruitment of the hesitant.

#### ***Transformation and stability***

Since Heraclitus, we know that in nature, everything transforms (“In transformation, things find rest”—cited by De Masi, 2017, p. 95). This applies both at the geological and biological levels. Living beings, plants, and animals, not only change as organisms but also modify the niches to which they adapt (Gibson, 1977).

The emergence of the human species accelerated the transformative process already tested by nature in other animals. It no longer depends solely on organic changes or niche adjustments—nature outsourced to our species its transformative potential, now in the social space, directly triggered by its participants. Communicational dynamics is the working tool we possess to carry out the activities imposed on us by this outsourcing of transformation processes, fostering new diversifications (far more significant than genetic ones).

The distinctive trait of the species is that we are intensely and extensively transformative—and, therefore, not only in a positive and socially valid way. We also transform mistakenly and in antisocial, oppressive, and destructive ways.

However, we do not transform linearly and continuously. Like nature, we seek to stabilize each process, each environment (macro or micro). In the challenge of organizing compositions of diversity to pursue its objectives, humanity invents modes of action and patterns to make differences and singularities interact—and attempts to fix the alternatives that seem, at least minimally, to work. With this, all social processes are organized, and cultures are created—with a part of confrontation, creativity, and greatness; and a part of injustice and oppression.

From this perspective of communication as the work of diversity, “structure” is the stabilized result of processes that, whether well or poorly selected, endure. To the point, sometimes, of lasting beyond the conditions that generated them. Such structures may be political, economic, cultural, legal, educational, scientific, or even aesthetic. Among these differentiated fields, the generating and sustaining conditions of structures may intertwine in mutual support or be intense in one plane while being strained in another.

It is also important to recognize that situations of stability should not be characterized as stagnation—there is a constant need for greater or lesser adjustments to adapt to ever-changing circumstances. The difference between transformation and stability is not one of alternation (either one or the other). Both are cooccurring, sometimes one being emphasized, sometimes the other prevailing, in varying considerations.

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Antiracist struggles are a significant example of the effort to transform long-standing and imposed structures. To such an extent that racism permeates all of history and, in today's world, the entire spectrum of social processes, related to the diversity of planes of occurrence and contexts, in various social fields, still affecting the subjective plane of a large number of people, where it manifests with the brutality of a banal, unreflected gesture.

The distinction made by Sílvio Almeida (2019, pp. 17–37) between individual, institutional, and structural racism shows these three modes succeeding one another in increasing scope, implying that the third encompasses the first two. This intertwining of structures makes the work of transformation particularly arduous. Leite's article, by presenting the framework of the “main expressions of antiracism,” properly grounds this structural multiplicity—showing the need for a diversity of actions that are directly communicational or that involve important communicational aspects in their development.

Pertinently, Leite notes that “antiracism can be understood as an ethical-political act, a transformational, disruptive, and restorative practice” (p. 15). Although not included in this phrase, the actions proposed in the article reveal a third transformational practice, alongside the disruptive and the restorative: the creative one—investing, through the activities proposed in the commented article, in other innovative structurations that deeply and diversely reform the current compositions of diversity.

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In turn, the article by Lídia Maia and coauthors, on anti-vaccine digital networks, shows the position taken by social sectors and far-right participants who challenge social processes that once seemed firmly established—both in scientific order and health practices. The generators of this denialist stance capture hesitant social participants. Would this also imply a transformative will (even if not in a progressive sense)?

The situation reveals a behavior that does not project new structures but rather—a result of the disorientation stemming from disordered transformations across all social sectors (De Masi, 2017, pp. 93–107)—a *simplifying retreat* of interactional processes. Instead of, when perceiving the increasing complexity, seeking new effective articulations under emerging conditions, closed collective positions are adopted, following purportedly unifying ideas. The fixation on a simplifying attitude creates a rigid resistance against any diversification: a true cessation of the species' diversifying dynamic.

The behavior evidenced thus appears as regressive and dismantling of evolutionarily developed interactional modes. This behavior is facilitated or

stimulated by the monotonic use of digital networks. Certainly, the attitude is not generated by the structure of the networks—but without them, it would not have been able to prosper to the observed extent.

It is possible, given some psychological evidence, that primary reactions along the fear-resentment-hatred axis provoke such an attitude. From the interactional perspective, however, which is our viewpoint, what is significant is the paralysis of communicational possibilities between the two sides of the binary construction, shown in the article as a self-reinforcing aspect of denialism.

There are two levels of radical refusal: no opposing argument crosses the boundary of rupture—all are equalized as enemies. And no internal difference is accepted, as the central feature of the joint identity is the denial of an “other.” The possibilities for effective communication, both internal and external, are extinguished, crystallizing the situation and preventing transformations—except for destructive ones.

## CONCLUSION

I believe that the outcome of this approach demonstrates the preliminary viability of the research program proposed in Part I of the article—since, beyond tracing specific communicational issues, it allowed them to be related to some broad transversal questions, without losing sight of the significant difference between the two situations discussed. Observing the distinct relational pathways of the two situations, moving toward a communicational horizon, enables a combined understanding of their diversity—without reducing it to a central, unifying concept of communication.

Thus, we apprehend the diversity of the situations addressed and the articles themselves (bearing in mind that articles are also communicational gestures). One of the articles advocates an important ethical antiracist stance; the other criticizes a political position and a deplorable communicational process, namely the construction of denialism.

We can also distinguish the characteristics of the observed communicational processes. In the first text, there is an openness to the diversity of the processes referred to for overcoming racism and transforming the context. In the second text, a limit-situation is revealed, where communication is paralyzed at its most simplified level: it is reduced to reinforcing an indistinction among group participants and marking, in the opposites, the (binary) distinction to be rejected.

However, although the difference between the two cases is clear, the diversity is still limited. Diversifying the observation of situations (in praxis and research) will allow, on one hand, the identification of different characteristics of the

communicational process; and, on the other hand, a more precise delineation of the epistemic perspective proposed. We can deepen the central aspects of the program and bring to light other broad questions that emerge through variations and selections with greater differentiation—as, for example, those that give shape to the different WGs of Compós.

This study confirms that, rather than elaborating ontological concepts (within which the diversity of interactional praxis would be systematized), it is preferable to seek characteristics of the communication process, as diverse as they may be, that seem significant—whether they manifest solely in the singularity of one situation or appear in multiple situations.

This should enhance coherence among research endeavors—reducing dispersion without compromising the specificity of their investigative lines or their particular theoretical references. The relationship is established through two-way vertical connections between the singularity of situations and broader levels, mediated by the effectively activated communication processors (see Braga, 2023) and the pertinent interaction circuits. Thus, a reductive standardization of thematic and/or theoretical variety that would result from an essentialist theorization of communication is avoided.

The advantage of a research program over a general theory lies precisely in its flexibility to accommodate intermediate theories, closer to the type of situation being researched (Braga, 2020). Simultaneously, the theoretical and methodological specificities relative to the observed situations may redirect the program for fine adjustments to the goals of the singular research.

It should, therefore, be clear that the comprehensive perspective under development here does not intend to unify the diversity of processes and communicational issues—neither at a conceptually limiting level nor with a theoretical-explanatory meaning. Rather, it is a heuristic perspective that relates macro-communicational issues (which can always be developed or supplemented through attentive listening to the complex social reality) with variously occurring specific or intermediate issues in social praxis and differently approached by research in the field.

The relationship between issues of different scopes enables an investigative pathway between what is socially observed in praxis or empirical research and general, abstract communicational perspectives, making precision and rigorous inferences possible both about the singularity of urgencies and projects and about the broader procedural logics to which they may be referred. ■

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# The ontology of Blackness in an audiovisual essay

## *Ontologia das vidas pretas em ensaio audiovisual*

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### ABSTRACT

The essay discusses the concept of Arthur Jafa's blackness ontology in his film essay *Dreams are Colder than Death* in a dialogical perspective with different American scholars. Taking the context of the Afro-Atlantic diasporas as its object of study, the essay assumes the emergence of transatlantic civilization as the central fact of the blackness ontology. Submitted to the critical metalanguage approach, the selected reports were analyzed as the live documents of the Jafa's idea of blackness ontology. In conclusion, the essay infers that the difficulty in recognizing the insertion of death in life is the obstacle to accepting the existence of black lives and loving them, sharing common civil rights.

**Keywords:** Arthur Jafa, civil rights, diaspora, film essay, ontology, blackness.

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### RESUMO

O ensaio discute o conceito da ontologia da pretéritude de Arthur Jafa em seu ensaio cinematográfico *Dreams are Colder than Death*, em uma perspectiva dialógica com diferentes estudiosos estadunidenses. Tomando como objeto de estudo o contexto das diásporas afro-atlânticas, o ensaio considera a emergência da civilização transatlântica como acontecimento central da ontologia da pretéritude. Submetidos à abordagem da metalinguagem crítica, os relatos selecionados foram analisados como documentos vivos da ideia de ontologia da pretéritude de Jafa. Ao concluir, infere-se que a dificuldade em reconhecer a inserção da morte na vida é o obstáculo para aceitar a existência de vidas negras e amá-las, compartilhando direitos civis comuns.

**Palavras-chave:** Arthur Jafa, diáspora, direitos civis, filme-ensaio, ontologia, pretéritude.



## LAYING OUT THE QUESTION

<sup>1</sup>We preferentially adopt the terms Black/Blackness and their plural forms. In Portuguese, it is also possible to use the term “negro”—meaning literally “Black”; not to be confused with the derogatory use of its English cognate. See Ligia F. Ferreira (2006).

<sup>2</sup>Henceforth abridged to “Dreams.”

THE TITLE OF this essay deserves some elaboration. Without hiding the objective of reflecting on the controversial concept of the ontology of Blackness<sup>1</sup>, it intends to do so through the analysis of an audiovisual experiment—the essay film *Dreams are Colder than Death*<sup>2</sup> (2013) by the Afro-American multi-artist Arthur Jafa. The term “Blackness” is not included in the category called ontology, nor is a philosophical study defined as an “experiment” or inserted in the essay-film genre. Nevertheless, such is the nature of the aesthetic experience that motivated the investigation leading to this current essay.

The title of this essay deserves some elaboration. Without hiding the objective of reflecting on the controversial concept of the ontology of Blackness, it intends to do so through the analysis of an audiovisual experiment—the essay film *Dreams* (2013) by the Afro-American multi-artist Arthur Jafa. The term “Blackness” is not included in the category called ontology, nor is a philosophical study defined as an “experiment” or inserted in the essay-film genre. Nevertheless, such is the nature of the aesthetic experience that motivated the investigation leading to this current essay.

The first point to be highlighted is that Jafa created a unique space for the debate of ideas about the lives of African-Americans, developed in different regions of the US and different loci of reflection: everyday life, history, education, arts, academia, poetry, and community life. To this end, the filmmaker moved his camera through different spaces, collecting accounts from other participants. The debate of ideas, however, does not take place in meetings in which the debaters gather at a round table. In Jafa’s experiment, the debate takes place in the montage of the accounts in the audiovisual composition produced by the filmmaker according to the dramaturgy of the individual discourses.

The result is not only an essay film from an audiovisual experiment but also the aesthetic form of lived experiences of Black people who become spokespeople for their own discourses. Explicitly stated in their ideological positions, the discourses fulfil the triple function of: (i) making the problems surrounding the lives of Black people in the US an object of reflection by themselves; (ii) allowing the artist and speakers to address the ontology of the existence of diasporic experiences generated in the Atlantic crossing; (iii) challenging social consciousness about the urgency of a reflection on the ontological episteme that does not claim to be universal but, rather, inclusive of all human existences, without restrictions.

With that, Jafa proposes not a finished formulation, but a work in progress in which the existence of human beings calls into question not only the subjugation

to which diasporic peoples have been subjected, but also all the categorisations that have contributed to limiting the phenomenon of life to a group of people who have been granted the privileged condition of existence defined as ontology. Questioning the power of this self-proclaimed existential privilege constitutes the fundamental centerline of the debate in the *Dreams* experiment to which we direct the interest of the current study.

To do that, the research conducted explores the power of audiovisual language that constructs the experiment in its different dimensions. In them, the existence of Black people subjected to the dispersion of the Afro-Atlantic diaspora is reorganised and, like every vital organism endowed with self-regulation—as we learned from Humberto Maturana (2001)—, it retraces the paths of lives, constructing other ways of existing and, thus, of “reexisting.”<sup>3</sup> According to the hypothesis of the essay, this “reexistence” does not forget its origins and is at the basis of the ontology of Blackness.

It is understood here that each of the speakers positions themselves as observers of their own experiences, for which they elaborate their own explanations that can then be reformulated by new observations. Remaking the explanatory paths of experiences is what constitutes Maturana’s (2001) “ontology of observation” (pp. 42–69), which guided us in understanding the ontology of Blackness as a form of “reexistence,”<sup>4</sup> contributing to the redefinition of humanity. This is a critical exercise in meta-theory, in line with what was set forth by Frank Wilderson III (2021, pp. 23–24)—that is, a review of epistemologies that do not include the paradox created by the diaspora that forever changed the existence of Black people through enslavement.

We know that, from a philosophical point of view, the Greek prefix *meta*—means an understanding of something that lies “beyond” denotation, indicating that knowledge is not limited to meaning but, rather, glides along the interpretative dynamic that suggests something “after.” Thus, *metaphysics*, *metalanguage*, *metascience*, *metadiscourse*, *metadata*, *metacritique*, etc., are just some of the practices in which the exercise of activities, tasks, or plans calls for previously existing conceptual frameworks. Therefore, the exercise herein proposed requires a reflection anchored in critical inspection guided by analyses that follow different interpretative paths—from empiricism to abstractions, with gradients of complexity that question the very logic of their formulation.

The interest in studying the ontology of Blackness in audiovisual essays indicates that everything that enters the horizon of comprehension will be framed according to the lenses of specific critical metalanguages, starting with the translation of ideas into audiovisual language. Consequently, the already consensual tacit logic regarding the concepts of “ontology” and “essay” will

<sup>3</sup>This is a portmanteau neologism used in Brazil that combines the words “resistir” (to resist) and “existir” (to exist). All translations from work that were not originally consulted in English are our own.

<sup>4</sup>Other studies were fundamental to expanding the understanding of the concept: Calvin Warren (2018); Jorge Albuquerque Vieira (2008); José Ferrater Mora (1994); Nei Lopes and Luiz Antonio Simas (2020).

<sup>5</sup> Coined by biologist and philosopher Jakob von Uexküll (2001), the concept of *Umwelt* implies the specific environment in which a species lives, giving rise to the study of ethology, opening paths for studies of human communication in cultural environments integrated into the ecosystem of the universe.

be subjected to the analysis of cultural contexts not always considered in their specific *Umwelt*<sup>5</sup>—that is, from the point of view of Black people, an urgency in the studies of “Blackness.” By claiming the need to understand the environment of the culture formed by the Afro-Atlantic diasporic dispersion to the Americas, Black thought meets the challenge of shifting critical reflection to the inadvertent “erasure” of ancient civilisations, which extended to people. Instituted by Western European civilisation, self-proclaimed as the unequivocal source of the guiding mentality of peoples’ lives, the existence of beings generated by the transatlantic crossing was not even considered by the epistemology singularised in the white skin.

That said, what is expected to be developed in this study is an exercise in critical metalanguage, according to Yuri Lotman’s (1990, 1998) conceptualisation, which questions the prevalence of the unique interpretation of historical facts, making the categorisation of human existence therefore universal.

This is a fundamental demand for the study of the semiotics of culture, guided by reviewing historical meanings that have excluded individuals from many of their achievements. We thus follow different interpretative paths presented orally in *Dreams*, so that crystallised meanings open up space for the emergence of meanings, respecting the *Umwelt* of peoples and their civilisations that branched out into distinct cultural traditions.

In our research on Black cinema, we parsed out a triple focus of interpretative paths for the emergence of meanings: (i) one arising from the historiography on the disturbances caused by the ideas of independence of colonial regimes throughout the American continent, including Brazil, which came to an end in the 18th century—as in the case of the US (1775–1783) and Haiti (1791–1804); (ii) a second one developed by the US Black movement, whose experiences spread throughout the continent, with cultural and sociopolitical activities that fostered a field of study already consolidated with bibliographic and audiovisual productions; (iii) and a third path suggested to us by the notion of a transatlantic movement that arose in historiographies from the fear and threat that the political class expressed in the face of the growing uprisings of Afro-diasporic peoples on the continent, according to Ifeoma K. Nwankwo’s (2015) work on “Black cosmopolitanism” (pp. 3–10). Examining the perspective of the transatlantic movement from another angle, historian Beatriz Nascimento<sup>6</sup> considers the diasporic crossing as a marker of the great civilisational encounter between East and West, with Africa as the generator of a “hemispheric culture” that generates new sociocultural environments.

The interpretative paths herein outlined support our understanding of the emergence of meanings of a possible epistemic turn, both in the ontology of

<sup>6</sup> Nascimento’s ideas were also developed in the essay film *Óri* (Brazil, 1989. Directed by Raquel Gerber and written by Beatriz Nascimento), and in the book *Eu sou atlântica: sobre a trajetória de vida de Beatriz Nascimento* (Ratz, 2006).

Blackness and in the hemispheric culture generated by the Afro-Atlantic diaspora. From the analytical point of view of this essay, it is necessary to add the role of the emergence of meanings in the construction of the historiographies and metatheories in which Black Studies are inserted, supporting the conceptions presented in *Dreams*.

Even though we are dealing with an aesthetic production in Afro-American culture, we cannot ignore the fact that our analytical perspective is based on an intercultural translation dialogue. After all, the *Umwelt* in which the experiences of Blackness of Afro-descendants in the US develop is not comparable to the experiences in Brazil; despite convergences, we are dealing with distinct cultures. The dialogue between different cultures not only unites, but also provides a comparative basis for arguments to broaden the scope of the approach to the ontology of Blackness, especially due to the ethical dimension to be achieved, without ignoring dilemmas and paradoxes.

In fact, the dialogue between different cultures comes forth in reflections on the ontology of Blackness in *Dreams*. However, there is a basis to be observed in the plurality and multidimensionality of cultural encounters that manifest themselves in Black cultures, which essayist Leda Maria Martins elaborated as “crossroads culture” (Martins, 2021, p. 32), based on philosophical conceptions originating in Yoruba culture. According to Martins (2021, p. 34), polyglossia is the substrate of Bantu culture, whose semantic field designates both individuals and people, sustaining plurality in all spheres of life:

In this religious and philosophical conception of the genesis and the spiral production of knowledge, the crossroads is a principle of rhetorical and metaphysical construction, a semantic operator driven by significance, ostensibly disseminated in Brazilian cultural and religious manifestations of predominance as *Nagô* well as in those nuanced by Bantu knowledge.

From the point of view of the *Umwelt* that characterises the ontology of Blackness, both poly- and heteroglossia imply plural and diverse worldviews, thus shifting the ontology of Black people beyond the dominant one of universal existence.

It remains to be considered that, from the perspective of where we are positioned in our research, the fundamental question that situates different theories, metatheories, and historiographies in the study of Blackness found a valuable formulation in Muniz Sodré's (2023b) arguments on the “spatial semiosis of power” (p. 33). According to the author, the controversies of meaning that subjugated the cultures of peoples of the African-American diasporas are at the

foundation of investigations into the process of Afro-descendance. Hence the erasure of the different civilisational legacies in the name of the self-proclamation of Western European culture to, subsequently, consecrate the inferiority of Indigenous and Black people, condemned to slave labour on plantations and in mining. Recovering this legacy is the role assumed by all reflections committed to reparation and historical recognition, such as Arthur Jafa's experiment.

### Paradoxes of Blackness in an essay film

When he left architecture to dedicate himself to audiovisual production, Arthur Jafa first dedicated himself to photography. He worked as a cinematographer on films by renowned filmmakers, such as Charles Burnett, Spike Lee, and Stanley Kubrick—to name, but a few. In the 1990s, he worked with cinematographer Malik Hassan Sayeed on the film *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999, UK, directed by Stanley Kubrick), and together they created the production company TNEG (Brucker, s.d.). Sayeed also worked with music artists (*Kanye West*<sup>7</sup>, Jay Z, Beyoncé), and Jafa would sporadically make music videos to dabble in audiovisual language and *avant-garde* ideas<sup>8</sup>.

It was whilst working with musicians that Jafa met artist Kahlil Joseph, who teamed up with Jafa and Sayeed in 2018, and the trio embarked on the TNEG project, to promote films made in different African-descendant communities in the US. The goal was to produce a framework that highlighted the situation of Black people as US citizens. Two questions guided their foray: (i) what does it mean to be Black today? and (ii) has equality been achieved? Many of the recordings produced in this endeavour were included in *Dreams*<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Also goes by the name "Ye" now.

<sup>8</sup> Information about the artists and filmmakers' production is available on the Black Avant-Garde Cinema website: <https://ktt2.com/new-Black-avantgarde-cinema-arthur-jafa-malik-hassan-sayeed-112890>.

<sup>9</sup> In a way, the film is the result of a collective effort involving his TNEG colleagues. Jafa directed the movie based on a concept shared with Kahlil, Sayeed, and Asa Mader. The music was composed by Melvin Gibbs for Architext Music. Jafa and Sayeed manned the camera with additional work by Hans L. Charles, Chris Humphries, and Marcus Reposa. Interviews were conducted by Jafa and Gregory S. Tate.

Conceived as an essay film, *Dreams* translates experiences and analyses of Black people's lives into an audiovisual experiment that combines stories, photographs, and videos about the experiences of thousands of Black people in narratives of historical contexts that question the universal category of a single human existence based on the grouping formed by white people from Western Europe. However, it is not about reflecting on philosophical foundations but, rather, about discussing the character of Black humanity. Committed to the semiosis of power, which proclaimed the superiority of one group, all others were discarded. It was understood that when the Atlantic trade route was established to serve political and economic strategies, human beings were objectified. For the colonizers, Black people were not only commercial objects with exchange value calculated according to their possibility of generating dividends and profits, but also specimens devoid of humanity and existential condition.

*Dreams* explores the paradox of these fallacious premises surrounding property established as an instrument of domination, which has forever changed

the existence of Black people. The simple procedure of moving the camera to capture these people's stories, as they share their thoughts, feelings, and ultimately their reflections signifies both confrontation and resistance to experiences in an anti-Black environment.

The awareness of the paradoxical condition of such an enterprise is at the basis of Jafa's project, which resulted in the film essay that combines accounts of experiences and critical analyses, challenging the assumptions of ontological universality. Instead of (re)affirming eternal ideas, it forces our thinking to retrace the interpretative paths, based on the framework established by the African diasporas to the Americas, which not only built the capitalist power of both parties involved—the European and African nations—but also saw the birth of the anti-environment of an *Umwelt* that had not been previously considered.

We could say that Jafa builds a critical project that is attentive to the ills of power constituted in the name of the human substance subjugated to the highest degree of cruelty, capable of promulgating the death-in-life of individuals who certainly do not find themselves in the same condition of humanity—and not because of differences in skin colour. This subjugation, which serves only the political project, underpins the critical dimension of the film essay, as Jafa states (cited by Raengo, 2016):

The fundamental question *Dreams* poses and that we set out to investigate concerns the repercussions of approaching the ontology of Blackness from the point of view of death rather than the point of view of life. Said otherwise: what is the ontology of Black lives, that they are so completely wrapped in an atmospheric anti-Blackness? (p. 18)

Jafa's inquiry reveals not only the paradox of the ontology of Blackness, but also the embryo of the notion of erasing people and silencing an entire civilisation. It is not a matter of reclaiming Blackness as a category, but of redimensioning what has been therein ignored and must be recognised and repaired as a form of corrosion of subjugation itself.

#### **The aesthetic-political project in the passages of its sensitive extensions**

The research object proposed by Jafa in 2013 as an experimental project resulted from long-standing concerns pursued by the artist for over 30 years: the aesthetic expression of Black culture manifested as a political form. The problem had all the potential to be merely a well-defined aesthetic proposition: the search for the fundamental characteristics of Black culture, capable of imprinting a distinctive quality on the constructive procedures of the aesthetics

of Blackness. However, the problem demanded displacements and passages between distinct elements. After all, what is called “diasporic Black culture” results from crossings, dispersions, and “reexistence.”

*Dreams* seeks elements in audiovisual language to materialise the processes of different journeys, particularly self-perception, and awareness of increasingly frequent threats. Jafa translates experiences, thoughts, and sensations into aesthetic experiences of sound and visual images, evoking the sensory world of Black lives in a broader sense. Experiences of violence, threats, and death that Black people experience “in the flesh”—as Hortense Spillers (2021) reports in her theoretical analyses<sup>10</sup>,—have become filmic materiality of the audiovisual dramaturgy in *Dreams*. Many of them are worked on in the enunciations and intonations of orality, enhanced in dialogical audiovisual textualities. To this end, Jafa extended not only microphones and cameras but also his “ears,” re-aching tones and intonations of an entire discursive dramaturgy that supported the writing of audiovisual esthesias.

*Dreams* remains open to the dialogic process of ideological exchanges that develop throughout its entirety, with counterpoints “of” and “between” visual images and interrogative discourses about fundamental issues surrounding the existence of Black people. The discursive intonation of the accounts expresses dialogic relations of different voices, not only of people but also of times and places, imprinting gradients of tones in the audiovisual dramaturgy. A unique plot between voice(s) and visualities, with possible contrapuntal crossings, displacing the thought from immediate causal relations. Often, what we see is not necessarily a direct extension of what we hear; nor does the scene refer to a single space or temporality. In shots and sequences, the opacity of a blurred visuality of people, landscapes, and events in transit evokes reverberations with different discursive tones, as we see in the opening sequence.

#### Figures 1 and 2

Scenes with voiceovers by Hortense Spillers and Martin Luther King Jr.



Note. Screenshots from essay film *Dreams are Colder than Death* (timecode: 2'09").

To say that this is a mere scene of boys diving into the pool would be to ignore not only the reverse editing, but also the reverse time and the discursive mirroring of opposing lines. Let us elaborate. The boys jump into the water and return to their initial position at the same time that, in the soundtrack, Spillers kicks off her dramatic speech in which she slowly utters: “I know...” Before she even finishes her sentence, we hear another voice say in the distance: “I have a dream...”—the statement that consecrated Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech on August 28th, 1963. Both continue their speeches, making the present and past simultaneous, although Spillers’ speech is intoned in the foreground to complete: “we are going to lose this gift of Black Culture unless we are careful.” A statement that is as threatening as it is enigmatic—just like the film we started watching.

In a single shot—one of the boys playing—, three distinct temporalities unfold, namely: the reverse speech of the *mise en scène* in the pool; Spillers’ 2013 speech; and the 1963 recording of Luther King Jr.—all intoned in counterpoint. In the background, Luther King Jr.’s recording continues to alternate with Spillers’ questions, overlapping inquisitive memories of the future of Black people without opportunities, surviving at the cost of many obstacles and suffering, eternally threatened by death. Even though they resonate on the same frequency, the dream of freedom is not at all promising in the reality that subjects people to all kinds of suffering, as shown by the images of human sacrifice in public spaces, mutilated bodies, and fields with human bones scattered throughout the film.

The overlapping of these speeches—one of a hopeful dream, the other of a discouraging threat—reproduces the counter-environment of anti-Blackness that sets the tone for the montage of counterpoints and the different temporalities visually evoked in the scenes in reverse. These are procedures carried out as aesthetic forms of political commitments assumed by the artist to translate the dynamics of situations into “passages,” as Alessandra Raengo (2016, p. 8–27) explains. “Passages” understood in Walter Benjamin’s (2009) sense of displacement in search of a new way of “seeing” the world, which, for the author, means the transition from the regime of verbal writing to the scopic writing of space into photography, cinema, and the city. In the film, the passages do not show causal shifts but, rather, fulfil the purpose of achieving the dialectical leap that alters the quality of the elements in action—in this case, the experiences of human beings who position themselves critically against the subhuman condition of subjugation. In none of the shifts is there a return to the previous situation, and what the testimonies sustain is that, in the post-slavery period, life unfolds “in the wake” of death, as Christina Sharpe (2023) has aptly expressed.

Without losing sight of this conception of passage, the audiovisual dramaturgy of *Dreams* moves like a living organism, reverberating sensorialities in all

instances of human palpitation. Given the magnitude of such manifestation, we argue that the experiment achieves what Jesús Martín-Barbero (2003, p. 271) conceives as the power of new political sensibilities that subalternised people transform into aesthetic ones and whose goal is ethical incorporation. We are interested in examining the sensitive extensions that mark the qualitative leap of Jafa's artistic experiences in *Dreams* that guide his analytical process, both from the thematic and aesthetic-compositional points of view committed to the ethical dimension.

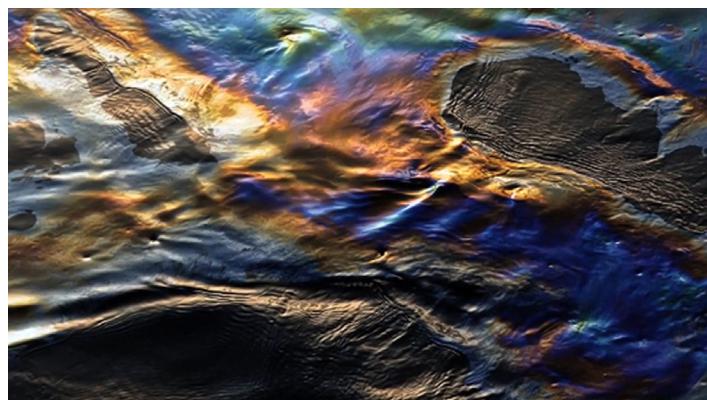
If, on the one hand, the experiences of the passages are presented as an elaboration of aesthetic forms concentrated on sensoriality, on the other hand, they concretise the ontology guided by the experience under threat of death—an elementary premise of the ontology of Blackness for the artist. In the audiovisual aspect of the experiment, the artist placed his creative process of dramaturgy in the form of an essay film and a work in progress.

### THE WORK-IN-PROGRESS NATURE OF THE AUDIOVISUAL EXPERIMENT DREAMS

After the opening credits, a man's voice echoes in a scene of turbulent waters in a dark sea, broken only by a spotlight. As far as we can tell, this is the only intervention with Jafa's voice—whose tone is confused with that of Fred Moten's. The filmmaker presents his fundamental question, addressed to a group of filmmakers, which became the axis of the film's plot, as can be read in the following transcript.

**Figure 3**

*Scene with voiceover by Arthur Jafa*



*Note.* Screenshot from essay film *Dreams are Colder than Death* (timecode: 2'51").

50 years after Martin Luther King [Jr.]'s I-have-a-dream speech, we asked a collective of African-American filmmakers to give us a view as to where things stand with regard to the goals and ambitions of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. Does the dream live on, and if so, what has changed? The reply offers a glimpse into the thoughts and conversations of an America that is rarely heard into discussions that are no longer had because they have effectively been muted. In the process, the filmmakers discovered an even more fundamental set of questions. What is the concept of Blackness? Where did it come from, and what does it mean for people of colour living in America today?

Taken as a closed frame, in addition to the crossing of the Black Atlantic, the scene evokes a discursive bivocality in which Jafa's question pairs up with Luther King Jr.'s speech, echoing in the distance. There is also the voice of Jafa's ideological discourse, calling for concrete actions to redress the civil rights of his people, thus updating the struggle of his ancestors<sup>11</sup>. Here, too, different temporalities intersect with different mediations, preparing the scene in which different points of view occupy the scene, drawing lines of thought through accounts from other people in the African American community.

Furthermore, it is observed that, in each of their accounts, the discursive intonation configures a mode of existence to manifest a political sensibility<sup>12</sup>, shifting the reflection to that which, according to Jesus Martín-Barbero (2003), "constitutes us, which is not only a social fact, but also a reason for being, a fabric of temporalities and spaces, memories, and imaginaries that until now only literature has been able to express" (p. 271). That is something that Jafa and other filmmakers seek, however, to translate audiovisually. As there are many layers with different voices and emotional tones, each existence attempts to compose a fragment in the mosaic of the experiences of people whose existence is, nonetheless, full of dreams, as the title of the film states—"dreams are colder than death"—, which, in turn, contrasts with Luther King Jr.'s desire in his *I have a dream* speech, the leitmotif of the film that resonates throughout.

*Dreams* takes the sociopolitical issues of this secular debate as a challenge for essayistic reflection and invites the speakers to the debate. However, the film does not seem to be concerned with precise answers but, rather, with feelings, thoughts, and experiences as part of the history of each one of the speakers. Each one of them narrates experiences of struggles that left indelible marks on their bodies, their memories, and ultimately their souls. Moten, an essayist and poet, was responsible for articulating the theoretical expositions that, according to our hypothesis, translate, in epistemological terms, Jafa's questions and feelings as if the essayist were a kind of alter ego of the filmmaker. The artist was responsible

<sup>11</sup> We work here with two concepts from the dialogical theory of discourse: *bivocality*, by Mikhail M. Bakhtin, and *ideologeme*, by Valentin N. Voloshinov. Bivocality refers to a natural condition of discourse since, for the author, points of view—or worldviews—correspond to a link in the discursive chain of social interactions in dialogical relations. The challenge is that the voices in interaction mostly confront each other (Bakhtin, 2013, pp. 87–114). *Ideologeme* is a concept that deepens ideas belonging to a certain context in the way one speaks, that is, in intonation. A scream—like the one reported by Frederic Douglass (2021) about the scene he witnessed in his childhood, when he saw his aunt enslaved by his aunt Hester whilst being whipped by her master—is an intonational manifestation loaded with pain and suffering, humiliation, and shame that the enslaved woman felt whilst being beaten. The *ideologeme* is manifested in intonation and singularises only that situation, being incomparable to any other (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 142–144).

<sup>12</sup> According to Jesús Martín-Barbero (2003), a new political sensibility was observed in processes of miscegenation, which introduced into the Social Sciences another method of analysis based on the shortcomings of approaches "that force us to rethink not only the boundaries between disciplines and practices, but also the very meaning of the questions: the (theoretical) places of entry into the problems and into the web of (political) ambiguities that involve and displace the exits" (p. 271, my translation).

for discovering the aesthetic form to express the plasticity of the idea(s) of the different experiences in the “fabric of temporalities and spaces, memories and imaginaries” that was contemporary to him in all its human variety. With that, the experiment broadens the critical and creative horizon of its commitment to the thought movement capable of promoting some type of political action—as was, in fact, Jafa’s work in the TNEG production collective.

What seemed closest to a documentary is revealed as an essay on the confrontation of ideas that lead to different degrees of complexity and interpretative possibilities, particularly with regard to the filmmakers’ great question: what is Blackness? Where did it come from, and what does it mean for Black people living in the US today? From the point of view of the essay, the accounts in *Dreams* focus on these issues because they pulsate with the question about “being Black” and their own existence, whose sutured wounds cannot be hidden or erased.

If it is possible to acknowledge the interpretative paths that open up to different possibilities of thought, then we can say that the accounts present worldviews, and the visual images configure crossroads whose routes can only be known as they are being followed. Thus, the essay film can be read as a performance, a work in progress. On the one hand, it articulates ideas about the life experiences of Black people measured between Luther King Jr.’s dream and the context of violence and constant death threats that ended up transforming his dream into a nightmare, as the film’s title expresses. On the other hand, it evokes the awareness of an existential legacy of experiences that not only do *not* alleviate the painful sensorialities of the wounds on the skin, but also throb in the lesions in the flesh.

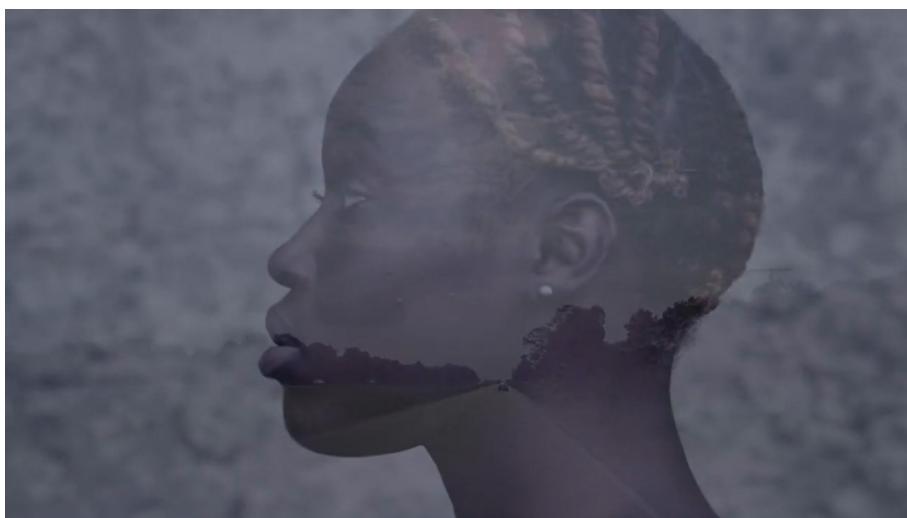
In this case, the composition of a work in progress could not be better accomplished than through a piece of work with the opacity of the audiovisual images that affect the process of editing the shots, the camera movements, and the contrasting tones—both in terms of contrasting light (from shades of grey to red) as well as in terms of sounds reverberating voices from different temporalities. All of that invite us to think about the work in progress of a creative process in which the aesthetics of Blackness can be examined in the materiality of creation, as something that is done—or that is offered as creation—in the very process of perception that executes it.

### COUNTERARGUMENTS TO THE ANTI-BLACKNESS ENVIRONMENT

As the conductor of this orchestration of voices and points of view, Fred Moten returns to the question about the meaning, origin, and significance of Blackness for the African-American population and, thus, theoretically organises

Jafa's argument. Moving away from the inquisitive tone, the poet and essayist construct an explanatory path that the visuality of the image translates into a sequence of double exposures with a person's profile superimposed with the landscape of a motorway, resizing other crossings: would this be the search for the fulfilment of civil rights? This is what one can speculate by listening to the text that accompanies the sequence transcribed below.

**Figure 4**  
*Scene with superimposed images and Moten's voiceover*



*Note. Screenshot from essay film *Dreams are Colder than Death* (timecode: 5'51").*

I was kind of making a distinction between the object of Black Studies and the aim of Black Studies. Black Studies as a form of critique. What is it that Black Studies have been put into the world to critique—i.e., to call into question and to try to sort of undermine the foundations of?

By distinguishing the object from the objective of studies on Blackness, the approach both clarifies and distances itself from established philosophical concepts. Without paying attention to the subtlety of Moten's reasoning, when we begin our understanding of the film by analysing the accounts therein, we start with the idea that the object of Black Studies would be Blackness itself, and the objective would be to critique Western civilisation. However, the argument offered presupposes an opposite reasoning: the critique of Western civilisation is the object because it is within it that the meaning of Blackness established

in the diasporic crossing of the Atlantic is articulated. This distinction is so important to the argument that, in another account, it is resumed and expanded.

The object of Black Studies is the critique of Western Civilisation. The aim of Black Studies is Blackness. So, on the one hand, we pay attention to Western Civilisation as like this massive, brutal, also totally interesting and richly differentiated field of social and intellectual work that has, by and large, you know, been a pretty drastically horrific thing for the world, in my opinion. It's a lot of cool stuff about it, right, you know, but in general, the Earth is having an increasingly harder time sustaining itself under the weight of Western Civilisation, and so we study that. We try to pay attention, to try to figure out how it works, primarily to figure out how to stop it. It's something that I tend to think of under the general rubric of Blackness, which I've tried to understand in its distinction and its difference from Black people (Moten, *Dreams*, 8'28").

In short, without a critique of Western civilisation, the meaning of Blackness is compromised—not to say concealed—since it does not address the causes of its making. Only through such critique can we achieve what is currently claimed as the “erasure” of civilisations of peoples of different ethnicities, cultural traditions, and ancestries; the recognition of which implies an intervention of an ontological nature.

In his study, Moten (2008) does not hesitate to place the field of Black Studies within an ontological investigation, for:

What is inadequate to Blackness is already given ontologies. The lived experiences of Blackness is, among other things, a constant demand for an ontology of disorder, an anthology of dehiscence, a para-ontology whose comportment will have been (toward) the ontic or existential field of things and events. That ontology will have had to have operated as a general critique of calculation even as it gathers diaspora as an open set—or as an openness disruptive of the very idea of set—of accumulative and unaccumulable differences, differings, departures without origin, leavings that continually defy the occasion in general even as they constantly bespeak the previous. (p. 187)

The ontology of dehiscence synthesises the concept qualified by Blackness that, within the scope of the diaspora and the geopolitical expansionism of the power of capital, found in Achille Mbembe's (2018) conception of “*necropolitics*” an updated translation that advanced towards the conception of the political category of “*brutalism*” (Mbembe, 2022), as Muniz Sodré (2023) advert.

According to Sodré, this is a “new paradigm” of exponentiation of the process of “*mediatisation*” that leads to “*fracturing and fissuring*” (p. 24, cited by Mbembe, 2022, pp. 9–10)<sup>13</sup>.

In this conceptual dialogic dynamic, we find an explanation of Moten’s ontology of dehiscence, expanding the scope of the notions of fissure, break, and unhealed wound in a network of understanding that grounds the ontology of Blackness in a dialogue with contemporary ideas. This calls into question the thinking of Martinican Frantz Fanon (2008), who, based on his clinical studies and observation of the history of his people’s struggle, denies the possibility of something akin to an ontology of Blackness<sup>14</sup> amongst Afro-diasporic peoples who only began to recognise their Blackness upon discovering that they “were Black for the other—the white” (p. 103). For Fanon, Black people would not have the ontological resistance to uphold an ontological category. The accounts in *Dreams* point to experiences that should be considered. Spiller, for example, shares that:

My sister had a partial amputation on her right leg. She complained in the end of being in terrific pain, even her leg hurt, but it was the phantom leg ‘cause the leg was gone, but it was still hurting. So, what I’m saying is that it was a flesh memory. ... Another word to explain it is empathy. The flesh gives empathy.

The fundamental nature of Spillers’ account is the challenge of feeling pain in the flesh, reverberating sensorialities as an extension of a “phantom limb” (Sobchack, 2010) in embodied memory. The pain remains throbbing even after the wounds have healed externally. There is also the case of marks that not only take root, but also spill over, forming skin rashes that turn into keloids, which are another type of reverberation of traumatic sensorialities. Just like the modulation of the tone of voice in the accounts, images also bear dramatic intensity by juxtaposing photographs like the ones below in a sequence. The sequence of images is followed by the well-known 1863 photograph *Ex-Slave Gordon*, by William D. McPherson and Oliver (Figure 5).

As Spillers concludes her reasoning, she emphasises her final sentence, establishing the paradox therein: “That is the body flesh. Body flesh creates empathy”, whose intonation ends with the photograph of the word “TERROR” carved into the chest of a Black man (Figure 6). The tension is broken with the image of the cosmos.

<sup>13</sup> For this article, we also turned to the Spanish edition (Mbembe, 2022b).

<sup>14</sup> Fanon uses the word “*négritude*”, attributed to the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire in his *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1939).

**Figure 5**

Archive photograph with voiceover by Spillers.



Note. Screenshot from essay film *Dreams are Colder than Death* (timecode: 6'59").

**Figure 6**

Scene with voiceover by Spillers



Note. Screenshot from essay film *Dreams are Colder than Death* (timecode: 8'08").

A break that prepares for a leap into another level of consciousness, in which the constant threat of death becomes an everyday event, as Saidiya Hartman

(Figure 7) argues in her account, whilst wandering in a public space alongside other people, who stare suspiciously into the camera, in a sign of defiance.

**Figure 7**

*Scene with voiceover by Saidiya Hartman as she is wandering*



*Note. Screenshot from essay film *Dreams are Colder than Death* (timecode: 18'59").*

I know at any moment, my life could end because of an act of gratuitous violence. That's one of the things I know. My own description of, like, extreme vulnerability to certain forms of violence, to premature death. I know so many people who have died too young, who've been murdered. Almost all the boys I had crushes on are, like, all dead. Every year, two or three people in my world...they die, they disappear. I think that part of the social existence of Blackness is that intimacy with death, and it's very different, it's very different.

In turn, Spillers wraps up this acute awareness in another poignant account:

So, it's like, man, I've lost my brothers, lost my parents, I've lost a niece and a nephew. I lost my last sibling and that's like... Jesus! So, the longer I live, the more that's going to happen. So that's...now I know what I did not know four years ago before my sister passed a month, two months after I lost my niece, that...you know, dying is really this...is really real, it's really non-negotiable, and I'm gonna lose some more people.

**Figure 8***Scene with voiceover by Spillers*

*Note.* Screenshot from essay film *Dreams are Colder than Death* (timecode: 45'19").

The editing of the voices in the shots and in the sequence may not follow a linear pattern, but the harmony and rhythm of the intonations reveal combinatorial associations that translate the relationship between disruptive ideas. It accomplishes a transition from the level of hard empiricism to the level of existential and philosophical reflection, organised structurally in the photographic materiality. The editing into enunciative layers leads to a stratum of political-ontological reflection that exposes the fatality of the social “amputation” of Black people from their homelands. People who have become mere diasporic personae who, unlike the mask-personae of dramatic art, are converted into slave labour. If it does not define the existential bases of being Black, the insertion of the ontological perspective redimensions the context of the split, of the displacement, of the wound whose scars create sensory reverberations that continue to throb in the flesh and in memory, even when the limb has been amputated, or the experience has supposedly been somehow erased from history.

### QUASI-CONCLUSIVE INFERENCES

None of this was omitted from the critical study of the essay film that theoretically and conceptually organises the ontological thought of Blackness according to the critical perspective of these studies. Thus, if Jafa explores the poignancy of physical, phantasmatic, and spiritual pain in the opacity of audiovisual images, Moten puts forth the concept of dehiscence to address the existential condition not only of the explicit sensoriality of the painful experience,

but also of the human condition itself, marked by racial violence that extends to the present all the way from the past, preventing the wounds in the flesh and soul from healing. The concept of dehiscence approaches the idea of the ontology of Blackness pursued by Jafa, especially when Moten incorporates the historical dimension founded by the geopolitical colonial project of Western Europe in its imperialist ambition.

We understand that, without a critical vision of Western civilisation, the notion of Blackness as the foundation of the ontology of the body would not be achieved, in whose sutured flesh a dimension of sensoriality is inscribed, running through the vital arteries of the body, soul, and memory. And this is a political sensibility, as Moten leads us to acknowledge in his conclusive reasoning below.

Blackness is a critique of the proper, where what proper means is, you know, you go back to, like, the Latin roots of the term, it's all bound up with the notion of ownership, it's a kind of expropriative dispossessive force; you have it only insofar as you give it away. So, the critique of ownership emerges as a function of being, of people being owned ... part of our privileged relation to Blackness is that we are the ones who have seen it as literally the living embodiments of this tendency for deviance, criminality. Yes, we have a tendency to criminality ... within the context of this legal system, yes, we do. To sit around with some other people and talk about being free ... this conspiracy to steal, it's a criminal act, it's against this law. (Moten, *Dreams*, 21'54")

It is, therefore, a critique of ownership that Western European civilisation imposed on the bodies of Black people; ownership that defines the existence of Black lives and their ontological basis. This is the being that is reborn in the crossing and (re)exists in a different political sensibility, as we see in the film.

By situating Blackness as a critique of "self," "ownership," and, above all, of the being that is "possessed" by becoming the property of another, the concept of Blackness changes and presents itself as a challenge to this notion of the "right" to treat Black people as "private property"—which is, at the basis of the concept, a practice of ownership in the institution of capital as a bargaining chip—as well as to conceive of the possibility of Black people being led to disobedience. In his account, the relationship between jurisprudence and criminality is not resolved by skin colour or psychology, but by the right to property—which is always denied<sup>15</sup>. His last statement attributes to the movement of history the judicialisation of lawbreaking by those who were "chosen" to be "property," which goes against the very nature of being. This is why breaking the law is understood as a "para-ontological disruption."

<sup>15</sup> Muniz Sodré (2019) discusses the perversity that prevented former slaves from having the right to own land, a conflict that persists to this day in *quilombola* communities (p. 41).

<sup>16</sup> In *O Pacto da Branquide*, Cida Bento (2022) discusses how Black people continue to be treated as property in contemporary society.

Treating those enslaved as property is at the basis of the slave project of accumulating power that transforms Black people into economic objects, based on the relationships between race and power, as examined by Cheryl I. Harris (1993) in the emergence of whiteness as the legitimate property of supremacy and power<sup>16</sup>. Only whites have the right to own; only Blacks are treated as property—as US civil rights prescribe. Through enslavement, race and economy merged, concludes Harris (1993, pp. 1717–1718). As a legal institution that makes the enslaved individual property, slavery guarantees the owner the right to transfer, inherit, or pawn their property. Identity itself becomes racialised, and the extreme situation is the slave inheritance of the dark-skinned child.

Deprived of identity, rights, and freedom, what resistance is possible? Not only the songs of lamentation sung on the plantations, but also Black music carries the gestures of imprisonment and of throwing oneself into breaking the bonds of subjugation. In *Dreams*, the intensity of this struggle is staged in the performance of a street dancer who defies gravity with his entire body, vibrating in a dark urban setting that precedes the sequence of shots of vibrant tones of the strident trumpet that resonates with the vital energy of Miles Davis—in an unpredictable counterpoint to the story of usurped rights.

#### Figures 9 and 10

Scenes with voiceover by Moten



Note. Screenshot from essay film *Dreams are Colder than Death* (timecode: 21'54").

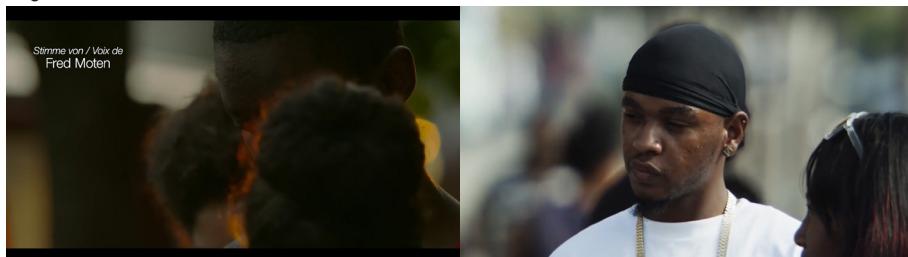
Think about Miles, right? Or Coltrane. Their improvisational work was not, in the first instance, against the law, in some absolute sense. What they were doing was making [the] law; they were constantly engaged in this jurisgenerative process and, at the same time, they were also constantly engaged in the overturning and undermining of the very jurisgenerative process, and they had just made the night before, so because of this intensely and irreducible relationship between lawmaking and lawbreaking; between sort of legality and criminality. They are not opposed to one another in some simple. We have been placed under historical conditions that require us to break the law, to disobey.

Perhaps this is the heresy whereby subalternised people, deprived of their humanity, respond culturally with dance and music that forever changed the African-American cultural profile. In addition to the awareness of the struggle for civil rights and the right to property, the film underpins an important aesthetic-political discovery: improvisation. From music to dance, all the improvisational arts in which the ruling class is carried away also constitute a threat to power, as examined by Nwankwo.

If Moten previously stated that the object of Black Studies is the critique of Western civilisation—the aim of which would be to reach the concept and existential breadth of Blackness—, here we see how much the objective is contaminated by the object, particularly because the objective is responsible for elaborating the critique of property rights, which, ultimately, points to a transformation of the existence of being Black. If Moten situates the notion of property as the main legal agent of the transformation of Black people into enslaved beings, resistance to the institution of slavery is incorporated into their very being. In a way, the pain of violence tears bodies apart into sutured wounds and incorporates death into the flesh, memory, and spirit, marking their existence.

In his final intervention, Moten's firm voice is filled with emotion.

**Figures 11 and 12**



*Note.* Screenshot from essay film *Dreams are Colder than Death* (timecode: 49'30").

When you say that Black people are just an effect of slavery, you raise a question: can Black people be loved? Which implicitly is: can Black people love one another? You know, can Black people be loved, not desired, not wanted, you know, not acquired, not lusted after whatever ... can Black people be loved? Can Blackness be loved? So, what I'm saying is, I believe that the way that Blackness is and how it operates is that it's not an effect of horror. It survives horror and terror, but it's not an effect of these things. So, it can be love, and it has to be defended, and it has to be nurtured. You know? I'll basically just go ahead and say, "I know those things are true," I know those things, you know?

This is the question that refuses to be silenced and whose answers—or, at least, the deepest feelings that dare not be expressed—are on the horizon of the ontology of Blackness, which Jafa seeks to confront, without eliminating paradoxes and dilemmas that diasporic existences bear and that the title of the film—*Dreams are colder than death*—summarises as an existential condition of death-in-life that replaces dreams with wakefulness, with rupture, with dehiscence. In an elegiac tone, the audiovisual dramaturgy becomes a space for the resonance of stories enunciated in tones of voices that oscillate between revolt, discouragement, and pain—modulated in the intonations of visuality. Contrasts between opacity and transparency insert the semiosis of power into the visual composition, confusing semantic fields of inequalities that leave the dream of universal humanitarian rights resonating like “foam in the wind.” Luther King Jr.’s speech thus resonates throughout the film, like a whisper from the beyond. ▀

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# The script as a Charge: examining dialogue dramaturgy in *The Newsroom* and *True Detective*<sup>a</sup>

## *O roteiro como Encargo: examinando a dramaturgia do diálogo em The Newsroom e True Detective*

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### ABSTRACT

I propose an analysis of the dramaturgy of works of television serial fiction, conceived as a “Charge” it establishes for the staging of these formats—employing this very notion in line with what Michael Baxandall characterizes as “patterns of intention” of historical objects. Articulating the dramaturgical conception to the poetic profile of these works, I adopt David Bordwell’s and Jeremy G. Butler’s standpoints, to infer what the instance of staging of these works suggests about the specific role of the art of the script. As a testing ground, I analyze the dramaturgy of dialogue, in segments of episodes from two contemporary works in this field (Aaron Sorkin’s *The Newsroom*, and Nic Pizzolatto’s *True Detective*): in both cases I seek to understand artistic matrices in which the composition of the voices of agents assign styles of staging, as well as the dramaturgical functions of the composition of the characters’ lines, in each of them.

**Keywords:** Dramaturgy, dialogue, style, television serial fiction.

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### RESUMO

Proponho analisar a dramaturgia de obras de ficção seriada televisiva, na qualidade do “Encargo” que ela estabelece para a encenação desses formatos — empregada essa noção na linha em que Michael Baxandall caracteriza os “padrões de intenção” de objetos históricos. Articulando a concepção dramatúrgica ao perfil poético dessas obras, empenho as perspectivas de David Bordwell e Jeremy G. Butler, para inferir aquilo que a instância de encenação dessas obras sugere sobre o papel específico da arte do roteiro. Como campo de provas, analiso a dramaturgia do diálogo, em segmentos de episódios de duas obras contemporâneas nesse campo (*The Newsroom*, de Aaron Sorkin, e *True Detective*, de Nic Pizzolatto): nelas busco compreender matrizes artísticas nas quais a



composição das vozes de agentes encarrega estilos de encenação, assim como as funções dramatúrgicas da composição das falas dos personagens, em cada uma delas.

**Palavras-chave:** Dramaturgia, diálogo, estilo, ficção seriada televisiva.

### STYLE AS INFLEXION OF RECEPTION: RECONSTRUCTING THE POETICS OF TELEVISION SERIAL FICTION

In the introduction to *Complex TV*, Jason Mittell (2015) posits a line of continuity between his effort to delineate a poetics of complexity in televisual narrative fiction and the historically qualified explanation of modes of composing dramatic and narrative poems in classical cinema—embodied in the masterful work of David Bordwell (1985, 1989, 2008). From my perspective, I identify an unavoidable contradiction running through this line of continuity between the two projects: it becomes particularly evident when Mittell insists, both in *Complex TV* and on other occasions, on the need to demarcate the media-specific particularities of cinema and television (Mittell, 2006), something I have elsewhere termed the dogma of “media immanence” in his analytical model (Picado, 2020)<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, this supposed alignment of his purposes with those of Bordwell is noted, especially within the framework of a “historical poetics” applied to televisual storytelling, as Mittell (2015) expresses it:

Historical poetics situates formal developments within specific contexts of production, circulation, and reception, where innovations are seen not as creative breakthroughs by visionary artists but as the nexus of numerous historical forces that work to transform norms and possibilities. Such an analysis examines the formal elements of any medium alongside the historical contexts that helped shape innovations and perpetuate particular norms .... Throughout the book, I connect creative choices to these crucial contexts both to account for how complex television emerged and to suggest why it may have developed as it has. (pp. 5–6)

I mention the introduction to *Complex TV*, given its considerable circulation in our fields of study, because a continuous reading of the book’s argument does not make visible the alleged adequacy between Bordwell’s matrix of “historical poetics” and Mittell’s analysis of televisual serial fiction: the dimension that Mittell assigns to the narrative and dramatic composition of these formats resembles more a behind-the-scenes anecdote of the production, circulation, and reception/consumption of these materials—more akin to what the social sciences abundantly perform in the analysis of televisual serial fiction—than

an approach to the creative processes more proper to a poetic theory, especially in its possible correlations with perceptual modalities.

If we contrast this last point about the sensitive reception of audiovisual works with how Bordwell addresses it in his theories, it is because we recognize that Bordwell (1989) conceives it within an inferential framework of the activity of fruition, appreciation, and aesthetic judgment of classical fiction cinema—recognizing from the outset the mode of construction of these works along a dual axis, namely: in their properly “narrative” configuration and the “stylized” character of their dramatic materialization (Bordwell, 1985). If we return to his statements about the reception of cinematic fiction, we will note the distances between such a *poetic core* of examination (more focused on cognitive and sensory horizons of aesthetic appreciation) and what is expressed, under the same title, in Mittell’s text:

In some traditions, “poetics” has referred only to the “productive” side of the process; “aesthetics” was often assumed to account for the work’s effects. But Aristotle was at pains to include in the *Poetics* a discussion of the audience’s responses to tragedy .... Certainly, a poetics of cinema should recognize something like pleasure as an effect to be explained, but as it stands, the concept is notably broad. In watching an image, we pay attention, make inferences, and perform both voluntary and involuntary perceptual activities that need analyzing and explaining. In following a narrative, we make assumptions and draw on schemata and routines in order to arrive at conclusions about the world. Somehow all this may come out as pleasure, but we scarcely know how. (Bordwell, 1989, pp. 269–270)

Although part of Mittell’s reflection on the reception of televisual fiction refers to such markers of Bordwell’s filmic poetics<sup>2</sup>, there are still noticeable deviations imposed on this argument—toward an approach more proper to the sociology of consumption practices than to what poetic theories prescribe about the effects of these works (especially concerning understanding reception as previously demarcated on the textual surface of the works)<sup>3</sup>: in the chapter of *Complex TV* dedicated to the “understanding” of these formats, Mittell deviates from the narrative and dramatic conventions of serial works to propose a classification of reception behaviours, in phenomena such as “spoilers” and “repeated viewing.” As relevant as these phenomena are, relative to the consumption practices of these products, they do not strictly derive from a poetic matrix of the effects of works—especially those that act on probabilistic horizons of reception, as in certain strands of a theory of “aesthetic effect” (Iser, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> In extensive portions of his argumentation about understanding serialized universes in *Complex TV*, Mittell discusses aspects of an immanent treatment of televisual poetics, aligning with the cognitivist perspective of film poetics—as well as being perfectly attuned to much of what arises from dynamics in which narrative works invoke the active role of reception—, such as in Meir Sternberg’s poetic theories of suspense, for example (Sternberg, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Although these questions primarily involve the problem of the relationship between poetics and “aesthetic effect,” as illustrated by some trends in reception aesthetics and textual semiotics (Eco, 1979; Iser, 1979), rhetorical approaches to literary fiction also contribute to this end, particularly in the work of Wayne Booth (1961).

Above all, they disregard, at least partially, the inferential patterns under which Bordwell conditions the fruition and aesthetic appreciation of these universes.

As I discuss throughout this book [*Complex TV*], many viewers do not consume television in individual isolation but watch as part of viewing communities, often facilitated by fan cultures and online paratexts. Hypothesizing is a cognitive process performed by individuals in the act of viewing, but such ideas and potential answers are frequently articulated within fan communities, turning internal hypothesizing into the cultural practice of *theorizing*. (Mittell, 2015, p. 174)

Moreover, the theme of reception in Mittell is merely a symptom of general difficulty in media studies (given the dominance of a sociological and anthropological vocabulary of explanation) to establish the heuristically appropriate place of the “aesthetic effect” phenomena of expressive works, regardless of their means and production processes—once we consider the portion of reception conception as an activity, within limits not exclusive to the sociological or anthropological description of the phenomenon—in short, when we take into account that the cooperative process of textual comprehension does not predominantly occur in social contexts of interaction among appreciators but liminal in the cooperative dynamics that govern the relationship between text and reader, an aspect addressed by numerous authors situated in fields as diverse as literary history and criticism, rhetoric, and textual semiotics (Booth, 1961; Eco, 1979; Iser, 1979; Jauss, 1982).

We need only consider what Bordwell postulates about the inferential precepts of the aesthetic evaluation of classical narrative cinema to locate the difference between his project of historical poetics and that of Mittell: in the rigour of this framing of appreciation patterns, there would be no significant differentiations between the subjectivity of aesthetic judgment, relative to social environments of its discursive negotiation—fundamentally because such a demarcation is not strictly relevant to a poetic approach. I have previously argued that the “historical” character of Mittell’s proposition about a poetics of televisual storytelling evades the real object of such a *historicization of the poetic* in Bordwell: the notion of *poiésis* in Bordwell as *praxis*, therefore defined as a modality of creation constitutively destined to produce sensible, cognitive, and emotional effects (Gomes, 1996), escapes the author of *Complex TV*.

For the poetician, such conventions and skills become the center of attention. Since *poiésis* means “making”, poetics could profit from a pun of its own: it focuses on the *work* – the film as an object, but also the regulated effort that produces and uses it.

Filmmakers aim to make certain sorts of objects, which in turn produce more or less predictable effects when used in conventional ways. (Bordwell, 1989, p. 268)<sup>4</sup>

As my interest here is not directed at unveiling the narrative structures that characterize a significant part of the poetic endeavour in film analysis, I propose another use of Bordwell's inferential paradigm, as an aid in determining other orders of problems no less significant for a poetic approach to televisual fiction: I intend to focus on the question of a "heuristics of style" (Picado, 2019)<sup>5</sup>, to qualify the notion that the characteristics of recognition of televisual serial fiction work result from an *inflexion of reception*—which is why the taste judgments that consecrate them employ the inferential capacities of appreciators to recognize the marks of the works' poetic identity.

Regarding modes of receiving such a sense of stylistic attribution in televisual formats (especially within the line of "historical poetics" of the audiovisual), the work of Jeremy G. Butler expresses lines of continuity with Bordwell's ideas: in the introduction to his *Television Style*, I identify this strong demarcation of the notion of style as characteristic of a poetic approach to televisual products, with a special focus on the aesthetic qualification of this category—even contrasting this dimension with the perspectives of reception analysis originating from the social sciences.

Cultural studies ethnographers prefer to examine the recipient of the transmission and not the transmission itself. I am oversimplifying here, but the empirical emphasis on the recipient and not the text means that the text's stylistic aspects are of less interest than the recipient's use of the text's signifieds. Cultural studies scholars, for example, have examined viewers' responses to soap opera by talking to the genre's fans and by examining materials they (the viewers) have written about the programs. What interests scholars most is how viewers understand the characters and relate them to their own lives and not how the viewers feel about stylistic attributes like shot-counter shot editing or a zoom-in to conclude a scene. (Butler, 2009, p. 2)

## WHAT SCRIPTS ENTRUST TO STAGINGS: FUNCTIONS OF SERIAL DRAMATURGY

Beyond the connection between *aesthetic regimes of reception and inferential cogitation of style*, I also aim to delineate certain objects more specific to this consideration—especially when the concrete examination of certain operations of televisual *poiésis* comes into view. In this specific aspect, I am less concerned

<sup>4</sup> Going beyond this subscription of the poetic to artistic creation, Wilson Gomes recovers a kind of pragmatic horizon from Aristotelian Poetics, introducing the role of reception – especially that which qualifies the response to works as aesthetically charged: in these terms, we not only understand the works but also qualify this experience with a hedonistic valence (related to pleasure) as well as an affective one (which leads us to the problem of catharsis, relative to each artistic genre). "That proper pleasure and effect are the same thing, namely, what the representation provokes in the receiver, there is no doubt. One only needs to follow Aristotle's discursive thread to realize that the two terms occupy the same semantic space, one indicating the general effect of the work's strategies on the receiver, the other qualifying this effect as a change provoked in the spirit of the work's enjoyer" (GOMES, 1996, p. 115, my translation).

<sup>5</sup> By adopting this expression, I designate the explanatory horizon of the idea of "style," based on the poetic analysis of televised serial fiction products: such "heuristics" result from the greater attention to the poetic operations of these works, insofar as they allow for estimating the complementary space between "patterns of intention" that generate them and the horizons of their agency in the aesthetic experience—manifesting both in the dramaturgical matrix and in the enacted incarnation of these audiovisual products.

# D

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with the stylistic marks materialized through audiovisual staging—or even those resulting from the “plot’s engines” governing the degrees of immersion in the diegetic and mimetic universes of narrativity (Baroni, 2017)—and more focused on how to critically situate the “patterns of intention” that structure these styles.

<sup>6</sup> When considering the problem of intentionality that structures historical objects, Baxandall conceives of the “Charge” as a constraining force that drives acts of creation, with this force potentially originating from outside the creators (a politician commissioning a bridge from an engineer) or from their internal impulse (Picasso crafting the portrait of his patron Kahnweiler). Meanwhile, the “Guideline” concerns what conditions the execution of these commissions, given the various orders of their limitations—among which I venture to situate the question of the means and materials employed, an aspect helping me to transpose these notions to the type of relationship that occurs between dramaturgy and staging, not only in televised serial fiction but also in cinema and theatre.

<sup>7</sup> In parts of this discussion about the guidelines Picasso imposed on the creation of Kahnweiler’s portrait, Baxandall addresses this problem to the agency of the creator’s prior references, such as those of Cézanne—in such a way that these questions involve the means Picasso employs to situate himself within a particular aesthetic lineage in the history of painting. But this “visual interest” can be thought of in terms such as those Bordwell designates as the artistic paradigm of “problem and solution”—generally directed toward an assumption of the experience of realism, and originating from Gombrich’s conception of the historical problem of pictorial illusion, in a psychological key (Gombrich, 1960).

Following the line of thought of art historian Michael Baxandall, this involves the relationship between a “Commission” and its “Guidelines”<sup>6</sup>: the consideration of any historical object, insofar as it involves the restitution of an order of its determinations (to use the examples adopted by the author, a technological feat or a pictorial work), should imply the mediation of cogitation through which these relationships can be stipulated. Most often, it is the attentional effort of our perception that brings to appreciation the salience of certain aspects of the works, allowing us to hypothetically trace back to the orders of intentionality that governed the creation and completion of these objects. This is how Baxandall (1985) characterizes the “Commission,” under which historical objects (and works of art, in particular) are retrospectively endowed with a certain aspect of their generative process:

A painter’s Charge is indeed more elusive than a bridge builder’s. By definition, the bridge builder’s role has been to span: the manner in which he has done so has varied within his circumstances, the character of the site, and of the material and intellectual resources of his culture. To find anything like as long-running a role for the painter it is necessary temporally, to be rather general .... In a quite arbitrary and stipulative way I shall say for the moment that the painter’s role has been to make marks on a plane surface in such a way that their visual interest is directed to an end. (p. 43)

Without Baxandall being fully clear about the specific status of “visual interest” (even though one might intuit it as linked to some aspect of the aesthetic appeal of painting)<sup>7</sup>, I venture to think about the relationship between functional instances of dramaturgy and audiovisual staging, defining them under this matrix of the “Charge”—so that we can begin to understand how a poetic approach to style becomes a heuristic benchmark for the analysis of televised serial fiction<sup>8</sup>. On other occasions, I have approached these problems from a conception of *mise-en-scène* (an instance identified with the materialization of stylistic profiles of televised serial fiction works, in Bordwell), taken as a “functional mirror” of dramatic writing (Picado, 2023).

In the sense that this functional interaction between instances of creation in televised serial fiction works, the traits of dramaturgy - such as dialogue composition—function as a “Charge”, thus determining how they are ultimately

realized through staging. In the case of the function attributed to the stylization of dialogue (in creators like Aaron Sorkin, Amy Sherman-Palladino, and Shonda Rhimes), the verbal language of the characters entrusts the resources of audiovisual *mise-en-scène* to embody what originates from the dramatic composition. I have previously examined this aspect of the stylistic profile of their televised serial fiction works in Sorkin, in terms of the updating by different directors of his dramaturgy—often throughout narrative arcs and seasons of the same work, as in *The West Wing* (Picado, 2019).

To better delineate my objectives, I propose to examine how dramaturgy, taken as the functional locus of creation in televised serial fiction, becomes the generative centre of the forces that will command staging solutions—precisely those that will materialize the recognizable style of these works. With this aim, I will focus on analyzing two season arcs from two series that are considerably distinct in their audiovisual style—and even in the serial logics that govern their respective narrative structures, namely: the second season of *The Newsroom* by Aaron Sorkin (HBO, 2012–2014) and the first season of *True Detective* by Nic Pizzolatto (HBO, 2014–2024)<sup>9</sup>.

What allows this comparison stems from the fact that both works share the same narrative matrix for organizing their season arcs: in both cases, narrative events and actions derive from the recollections of protagonists—despite the differences that the narrative logic of each creator-dramatist confers to the staging of these shared narrative structure. I hypothesize that such differences arise from how the Charge of dramaturgy is transferred to its staging in each case<sup>10</sup>.

At the heart of this difference, within which Charge is identified with dramaturgy, I shall take into account the artistic matrix under which the “analepsis” of events (Genette, 1972) is structured narratively for my analysis of style: in the case of *True Detective*, it is derived from how such issues emerge in literary forms (especially embodied in the novelistic pattern), under a predominantly diegetic matrix; in *The Newsroom*, the same topic is conditioned by imperatives of *mise-en-scène*’s realism—thus structured under the mimetic matrix of this representation<sup>11</sup>.

As a specification of these problems related to modes of narrative representation, I also evaluate the operative function that the dramaturgy of dialogue (specifically) and the function of character language (in general) assumes for each of these productions. Under this framework of aspects and dynamics proper to the poetic composition of televised serial fiction works, I will illustrate the heuristic use of the notion of “style” in the analysis of these works, considering the structures that articulate these elements as “effect programs”—rather than

<sup>8</sup> In a properly sociological key of reflection, this way of operating through inference and retrospection is already present in those reflections on collective dynamics that permeate the relationships between these two instances of the intentional management of televised serial fiction works: even if marked by a greater attention to competitive patterns in these relationships between subjects in the field of cultural production (informed by Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical views on the cultural dimension of 19th Century French literary production), it is the mention of such social contexts of “crafts” (Souza & Barreto, 2014) that allows me to assimilate these social places of fictional creation in television to a perspective more attuned to the “functional” treatment of dramaturgy and audiovisual staging, closer to Bordwell’s historical poetics (Picado, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> In the case of *True Detective*, the 4th and 5th seasons were written by Issa López in 2019 and 2024—with Nic Pizzolatto writing the first episode of the 4th season.

<sup>10</sup> I follow here the trail of scholars who have recently pointed to the issue of the screenplay as key to a stylistic study of serial formats (Silva & Quirino, 2020, 2021), though situating myself on more specific aspects of dramaturgical composition—such as those located within the realm of dialogue or the thoughts of agents.

<sup>11</sup> In the extensive lineage of approaches to these two magnitudes of narrative and dramatic representation (mimesis and diegesis), even if confined to the limits of literary forms, I adopt here the influential perspective of Gérard Genette in addressing these issues (Genette, 1966).

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mere products derived from an economic and competitive logic of cultural circulation (Picado, 2023).

Before delving into the details of all these considerations, I briefly discuss the importance of the inferential paradigm of poetic analysis employed here: it concerns the instrumental value of certain modalities of examination that value textual constructions of expressive works—especially operating through what Butler designates as a “reverse engineering” of their signification. In *Television Style*, the author emphasizes the weight of disciplines like textual semiotics in the ways they confer a heuristic to this excavation of stylistic marks in audio-visual works.

The following chapters frequently engage television texts in the manner of a semiotician—seeking to find the essence of style in television’s sound-image details. It is, of course, possible to get lost in television’s minutiae of television in that manner, but I agree with authors such as Bordwell ..., who contend that one must “reverse engineer” media texts in order to fully understand their style. Thus the same attention to detail that scriptwriters, directors, cinematographers, editors, and so on, put into the *construction* of a television text must be employed in the *deconstruction* of that text. This is a lesson in film and television analysis that I learned long ago, when, as an undergraduate, I was forced to perform shot-by-shot scene *découpages*, in a French cinema class. (Butler, 2010, p. 6)

Regarding the present examination, I start with what serial works present as the result of their materialization (their staged profile of a prior narrative structure), identifying, from there, the iteration of stylistic traits that allow us to reach certain dramatic operators (such as the modulation of dialogue). In recent manifestations of this sort of study, an empirical force is given to materials of scriptwriting – something that is bloceked here, for reasons to be explored. On one hand, I do not intend to stray from the precepts of Bordwell’s stylistic analysis, regarding the identity between “style” and “staging”—which leads me to treat dramaturgy as the matrix of the Commission transmitted to the instances of *mise-en-scène*. On the other hand, access to the dramatic materials of episode scripts has been partially hindered—an aspect that allows me to fully exercise the heuristic of “reverse engineering” in the stylistic analysis proposed by Butler<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> From a practical standpoint, I attribute this choice to the difficulty of accessing the original scripts of these episodes—especially in the case of the first episode of the second season of *The Newsroom*; as for the pilot of *True Detective*, the challenge arose from the discrepancies observed between the scriptwriting and the actual delivery of the characters’ lines in the episode’s performance.

## ARTISTIC MATRICES OF SERIAL DRAMATURGY IN AARON SORKIN AND NIC PIZZOLATTO

Thus, I present my analytical corpus, consisting of the opening segments of the first episodes of seasons from two HBO television series—namely, the pilot episode of *True Detective* (by Nic Pizzolatto) and the first episode of the second season of *The Newsroom* (by Aaron Sorkin). In both, I identify a similar structure that organizes the narrative arcs, with an introduction to the topical universes of the story through character monologues recapping events up to the present moment of their initial exposition. Both episodes enact this analepsis (flashback) of the characters, starting from situations in which they provide testimonies about past events—in meetings with lawyers from a cable news network (*The Newsroom*) and inside a police station, during an internal affairs investigation into previous inquiries about a serial killer in rural Louisiana (*True Detective*).

What stands out, given this similarity in storytelling frameworks, is the fact that each of these works employs distinct strategies to develop the articulation between the elements of the story and the discursive functions fulfilled by this instance of character testimony—here transformed into a kind of enunciative device for the fictional universes of the works. For example, there are differences in how this same structure is used in each series: in *The Newsroom*, the fictional universe established by the context of the testimony to the lawyers governs the entire season; whereas in *True Detective*, the scope of the analepsis only reaches a midpoint in the season, when new plot developments demand a departure from this structuring aspect of the narrative framework provided by the detectives' accounts to the investigators.

To begin, let us consider the case of the first scene of “*First Thing We Do, Let's Kill All the Lawyers*,” the first episode of the second season of *The Newsroom*: during the questioning by ACN News lawyer Rebecca Halliday, Will McAvoy (the network's anchor) outlines the entire arc of actions for the upcoming season—except, of course, for the fact that at this moment of exposition, we do not yet know the nature of the motivation behind this sequence of events that will constitute the intrigue to be developed. Through this character's voice, we are exposed to this sequence of events in the form of a question about the probability that this meeting with the lawyers could have been avoided:

REBECCA HALLIDAY: “If Ben Furusho hadn't broken his ankle, if Jim Harper hadn't gone to New Hampshire to cover for him, if Jerry Dantana hadn't been brought from DC to cover for Jim, if Mike Tapley had been used on the panel instead of Cyrus West, do you think...”

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At this point in her speech, the lawyer is interrupted by Will, who notices that one of Rebecca's assistants has mistakenly typed a word, saying: "Genoa." Without initially knowing the significance of this small event, the two characters engage in an intense verbal exchange, in which their respective lines cross to the point of making the subject of the conversation almost incomprehensible—but through which we eventually discover that this is the name of a U.S. military rescue operation in Pakistan, during which soldiers allegedly used chemical weapons to kill a civilian population. In just over 2 minutes of screen time, we are informed not only about the sequence of events for the season but also about what will constitute the central theme—or, in narratological terms, the portion of the fabula (story) for this season's plot.

REBECCA HALLIDAY: If Jim Harper hadn't...

WILL McAVOY (interrupting): No.

REBECCA: Let me finish the question...

WILL (interrupting): We don't have time for this. No, if Jim hadn't gone to New Hampshire, if Dantana hadn't come to cover for him, if West hadn't come for a drone panel, if 17 different things hadn't conspired in just the right order, we wouldn't be sitting here.

REBECCA (pause): Fourteen months ago, you went on air and called the Tea Party the American Taliban.

WILL (interrupting): I did.

REBECCA: And?

WILL: The Taliban resented it.

REBECCA (pause): Fourteen months ago, you went on the...I'm starting from the beginning...fourteen months ago, you went on the air and called the Tea Party the American Taliban.

WILL: Yeah.

REBECCA: What happened then?

WILL: A lot.

REBECCA: For starters?

WILL: The president of AWM was kicked out from the Capitol building.

Only then are the narrative dynamics of the season's main plot introduced, as we finally leave this testimonial setting and enter the plot of events established by the lawyer's initial hypothetical question. In any case, it becomes clear early on that the dramaturgical function assigned to this present-tense enactment, through which the events of the story are recounted, is an attribute of the classic technique of "exposition"—through which dramatic theatre has

historically established the function of the “chorus,” whether in the theatrical rites of Hellenic culture or in the way Elizabethan drama conventionally handled these introductions through speeches that explicitly outlined aspects of the plot to be developed (as in Shakespeare’s famous prologue to *Henry V*)<sup>13</sup>.

A particular aspect of this function, through which Aaron Sorkin, the series creator, employs character actions to serve the purposes of narrative exposition, is a hallmark of his dramaturgical style, notable in two ways: both as an item of iteration, marking his approach to these devices in his other works, and as a possible contrast with other creators in this same medium. In the latter regard, the pilot episode of *True Detective* (“*The Long Bright Dark*,” written by Nic Pizzolatto) begins with the same device used in *The Newsroom*—but with the subtle difference that we are presented with two distinct testimonial settings, separated by a 5-day interval, in which detectives Marty Hart and Rust Cohle (from the Louisiana State Police homicide division) are interrogated about details of an investigation into serial murders—events in which they were involved and had solved seventeen years before the moment they appear before us on screen.

Another relatively minor detail is that, unlike Sorkin’s construction of the dramaturgical device of testimony that performs the narrative exposition in the second season of *The Newsroom*, Pizzolatto does not immediately introduce the interlocutors of the two protagonists: in Sorkin, the voice, body, and performance of the lawyer serve as a strategic counterpoint for the initial exposition of the plot; in *True Detective*, the internal affairs agents collecting the testimonies are merely a shadow of this same function (leaving us almost alone with the protagonists), with the off-screen voices of investigators Thomas Pappania and Maynard Gilbough only assuming a corresponding physical presence when the episode has already advanced nearly two-thirds of its total duration.

The most important distinguishing feature between the two works, considering the functions that dramaturgy assigns to the staging of television drama, lies in the degrees of a rhetorical function attributed to each of the analepses triggered by their testimonies: in *The Newsroom*, since the character testimonies constitute part of a narrative exposition strategy, with the drama of subsequent episodes developing the actions promised therein, the relationship between what the anchor and the lawyer discuss in the initial scene and the events that follow are not tinged by doubts we might raise about the reliability of these accounts. In short, the gap between what the witnesses assert about the season’s main plot (the report on a possible military crime) and the actual sequence of events (once exposed by the drama of the events) does not raise questions about whether the witnesses are hiding or distorting the reported facts—elements that would eventually be contradicted by the staging of the intrigue of these actions.

<sup>13</sup> The perilous narrow ocean  
parts asunder.  
Piece out our imperfections with  
your thoughts.  
Into a thousand parts divide  
one man,  
And make imaginary puissance.  
Think, when we talk of horses,  
that you see them  
Printing their proud hoofs i’ th’  
receiving earth,  
For ‘tis your thoughts that now  
must deck our kings,  
Carry them here and there,  
jumping o'er times,  
Turning th’ accomplishment of  
many years  
Into an hourglass; for the which  
supply,  
Admit me chorus to this history,  
Who, prologue-like, your  
humble patience pray  
Gently to hear, kindly to judge  
our play (Shakespeare, 2004,  
pp. 8–9).

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Moreover, there is a fundamental separation between the insertion of these moments in which the characters testify and those in which we are immersed in the enactment of the events: in other words, given that these testimonies serve the rhetorical function of introducing us to the season's *fabula*, the dramaturgical function of the accounts does not guide the actual actions in the staging—another way of saying that the witnesses, thus exposed, do not constitute narrators of their adventures, since the subsequent staging of the events will assume this function of scenically plotting them, in a mode of narration by the “non-dramatized narrator”—or, as Wayne Booth (1961) defines it, the “reliable dramatized narrator,” since the plot of events is constructed with a considerable erasure of the marks that might lead us to suspect the intrigue itself<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> It is always advisable to remember that Booth rejects the idea of a “non-dramatized” narrator, as he argues that the rhetorical function of narration is to serve as a means of mediating the values communicated by the author to their presumed readers: in this sense, the division of narrative modes is established, within a rhetoric of narrative, between “reliable” and “unreliable” narrators, all of whom are necessarily “dramatized,” even if to varying degrees.

Completely different is the function of the staging of this interlocution situation in the first season of *True Detective*: in many ways, what Pizzolatto's dramaturgical conception establishes as its Charge is the problematization of the very reliability of the detectives' testimonies, in light of the factual order of the investigated events—or even relative to the real motivation of the investigators, given the object of their interests, in the face of each of the two interrogations. Regarding this latter point, the initial interactions of the investigators with Hart and Cohle, at the beginning of the episode, are particularly revealing of this difference in the leitmotif of this situation, relative to that which guides the case of *The Newsroom*, in two fundamental aspects: 1) the investigators in *True Detective* are collecting the detectives' testimonies as part of an internal affairs investigation (thus, without the intent of defending their interviewees), whereas the lawyer in *The Newsroom* is employed by the same organization as the anchor she is questioning (and her questions aim to guide the defence process for the organization and the journalist himself); 2) moreover, there is a difference in the subject matter that commands the interactions between investigators and detectives in *True Detective*—for while Hart is questioned about the character of his partner, the questions asked of Cohle precisely concern the investigation from 17 years prior, implying that the real subject of the interrogation is not clear to the two protagonists:

INVESTIGATOR (off-screen): What'd you think, you paired up with him?

HART: What do I think? Well, you don't pick your parents, and you don't pick your partner. You know, they used to call him “The Tax Man” for awhile? He come out of Texas, so nobody knew him. Seemed a bit raw-bined to me. Edgy. Took three months till we got him over to house for dinner. Around that big 419, that's what y'all want to hear about, right? Dora Lange. The kids in the woods.

INVESTIGATOR (off-screen): Yes, sure. But about about Cohle. We've heard some stories.

ANOTHER INVESTIGATOR (off-screen): Kind of a strange guy, huh?

HART: Strange? Hmm, hehehe, yeah. Rust would pick up a fight with the sky, he didn't like its shade of blue. But when we finally got him over to the house, this is when the case was hot, poor bastard looked like he was on his way to the firing squad.

This rhetorical aspect of fictional discourse instructs us to consider certain artifices of fabula construction, especially in how the narrative instance serves to mediate the relationship between author and reader through a narrative construction: as we have already seen above, the relationship established between discourse and the reported story, at least in certain works typical of literary modernity, is marked by what designates the figure of an “unreliable narrator” (Booth, 1961). This aspect equally functionalizes the narrative text of television serial fiction, particularly through the solicitation of reception regimes equally marked under such a hermeneutic sign of suspicion, attention to detail, and the demand for periodic revisiting of plots through the repeated viewing of episodes (Jost, 2017; Leal & Borges, 2017).

One might also speculate that the stylistic differences in television series, derived from what their dramaturgy assigns to the staging, reflect what I call the “artistic matrices” of each writer-creator: the iteration of certain dramaturgical writing procedures, such as those derived from language (character dialogues, levels of narrative discourse represented by them, modes of character composition through what they say and think, among others) permeates the works of Sorkin and Pizzolatto; the fact that these two episodes update the same narrative structure, founded on the staging of an analepsis, but performing such distinct functions within this same organization, is a phenomenon that can be analyzed through the different artistic matrices that inform the two writers.

The frequency with which Sorkin relies on verbal interaction between characters to create rhetorical effects of narrative exposition, as well as to offer dramatic compensations for the absence of physical conflict situations in his plots, says something about how much this dramaturgical matrix is rooted in compositional models proper to stage drama—particularly in the matrices of modern realist theatre<sup>15</sup>. Beyond this point explored here, other aspects illuminate his creative style, which many have analytically examined: among these, the most obvious and equally attributable to this matrix offered by theatrical drama is the rhythm that structures the composition of dialogues, insofar as they serve not only the purpose of referring to thematic horizons of the plot (as well as conferring the most characteristic tints to each agent) but also of conferring a

<sup>15</sup> It is never excessive to reiterate Sorkin's background as a playwright: his theatrical career practically took off with the play *A Few Good Men* in 1989, and its film adaptation in 1992 marked his first effort as a screenwriter for cinema—resulting in an Oscar nomination the following year. These characteristics of a dramaturgy centred on the power of dialogue are embedded in his audiovisual creations, both in television and film—focusing on the almost musical dynamism of verbal exchanges between characters.

<sup>16</sup> Without singularizing Sorkin's case, authors like Monika Bednarek and Sarah Kozloff address these two dimensions of the art of dialogue in scripts—with the former focusing more on television, while the latter examines cinema. In both, however, the representation of the character's speech serves a dual function of aiding narrative structuring at various levels (plot logic, character profiles) and serving as an indicator of particular aesthetic effects among which the production of rhythm is the one that interests us most closely, especially in Sorkin's work (Bednarek, 2018; Kozloff, 2000).

certain affective intensity to these situations—a known factor in the attraction his creations exert, both in fiction cinema and television series<sup>16</sup>.

The case of Pizzolatto evokes other generative matrices of these narrative composition resources, aimed at guiding the *mise-en-scène* of serial dramas: the fact that the pilot episode of *True Detective* constitutes a field of experimentation on discursive levels in which character accounts align or not with the orders of events in a narrative plot suggests the importance of the literary trajectory of its creator in informing such issues of dramaturgical composition. Throughout much of the first season of this series, we witness the non-trivial challenge of scenically configuring the problem of the unreliability of an account that will command our mode of immersion into the plots of these two detectives, an aspect common to literary matrices of narrative organization than to audiovisual staging devices in cinema and television.

Like Sorkin, the matrix from which Pizzolatto draws to elaborate his dramaturgy imports the problems and challenges of a poetically interesting composition of these same resources in modern and contemporary literature: it is thus that the question of voice in *True Detective* migrates beyond this initial situation of interlocution with the investigators and comes to punctuate the very internal scope of the episode's plot—so as to cinematically update an ancient question of literary narrativity, namely, that of the authority of the narrator, constituted as a problem of poetic diction and fictional rhetoric (Booth, 1961; Genette, 1991): initially configured as a topical aspect of the story (given that the protagonists mature their suspicions about the motivation governing their respective interrogations for internal affairs), it ultimately constitutes the very narrative mode of the season—since, guided by the voices of the witnesses, we will discover that the order and meaning of the events conferred by the staging often diverge from the voices of the protagonists' accounts of these same actions, something we witness at key moments of this season.

#### DRAMATURGICAL FUNCTIONS OF DIALOGUE IN *THE NEWSROOM* AND *TRUE DETECTIVE*

The function of Charge exercised by the dramaturgical composition of dialogue and character lines in *The Newsroom* and *True Detective* (at least within the scope of the segments explored here, within the limits of this text) manifests through distinct strategies and effects. In light of research on the art of dialogue in fictional cinema and television series, one can revisit the same passages from the initial segments of the two episodes to discern these styles.

Right from the start, there is a significant difference in the quantity of lines used in the dialogue in each case. In *True Detective*, the verbal interaction that introduces us to the world of the plot (occurring between Hart, Cohle, and the investigators) is marked by a protocol in which the centres of each line are reasonably well-defined, due to the nature of the situation they find themselves in—each detective is implicated in these segments. When these verbal exchanges expand into the diegesis of the crimes from seventeen years earlier, the volume of lines guiding these actions remains considerably limited to the punctuations of the two protagonists' voices—whether recalling the characteristics of their work in front of the investigators (when each voice serves as a voice-over commentary on the actions we witness from their past in the investigation) or through their effective interaction with each other as they comment on aspects of the crime scene. All of this occurs at a pace where the turns of each speaking centre are considerably reduced in intensity (which provides significant information about the states of mind mediating the relationship between the protagonists):

COHLE: This is gonna happen again, or it's happened before. Both.

HART: Go on.

COHLE: It's a fantasy enactment. Ritual. Fetishization, iconography—this is his vision; her body is a paraphilic love map.

HART: How's that?

COHLE: An attachment of physical lust of fantasies and practices forbidden by society.

HART: You get that from one of your books?

COHLE: I did.

In contrast to Aaron Sorkin's style, Pizzolatto's approach is indicative of a characteristic already noticed by scholars of dialogue in classical narrative cinema—where a more sparse economy of character speech is valued, especially in correlation with the scenic precepts of their physical actions (signalized by the intervals between characters' speech turns). This is how Sarah Kozloff examines the issue of dialogue quantity in films, particularly in its primary function of articulating various magnitudes of narrative expression—relating to character traits, and the function of significant aspects (especially those that are difficult to clarify through mere staging). In the case of the opening of *True Detective*'s pilot episode, the sparse nature of these verbal manifestations does not elide the evident guiding function of the protagonists' lines, whether at the crime scene or in their interaction with the investigators.

Long speeches by a character are prevalent for their usefulness in fulfilling the functions mentioned before. They can certainly be “realistic”—people rarely speak in expressive epigrams. They allow for the explanation of a complicated argument or the description of a past event narrative. They contribute significantly to the revelation of character. They keep our attention focused on a stellar performance. (Kozloff, 2000, p. 67)

From the perspective in which Sorkin elaborates these functions, there is a discrepancy in the quantity attributed to character lines, due to numerous choices by this creator. This is evident from the comparison between the amount of dialogue in the script relative to the on-screen performance time—for example, in the same 41 seconds used by Pizzolatto to situate the conversation between the two detectives at the crime scene (with slower turns between speaking centres), Sorkin favours a considerably more intense mode of verbal exchange, resulting in the impression of a greater volume of information conveyed through dialogue for the drama—much of which will remain imperceptible, even to attentive viewers, only surfacing in our awareness after repeated viewings of the series.

This occurs at the end of the opening scene of the first episode of the second season of *The Newsroom* when Will McAvoy revisits the question initially posed by lawyer Rebecca Halliday (“If Ben Furusho hadn’t broken his ankle, if Jim Harper hadn’t gone to New Hampshire...”): in responding to the question about what could have prevented this meeting with the lawyer, the verbal exchange between the two not only informs the topical structure of the fable to be enacted (when the network president is barred from a Congressional event) but also structures itself in a particular rhythm, precisely derived from the choice to make the oscillation between speech turns an event that serves to produce particular pacing, with consequences for the aesthetic quality of our experience of these scenes.

In practically the same duration as the *True Detective* scene (around 40 seconds of screen time), the perfect contrast between Sorkin’s and Pizzolatto’s styles is enacted in their approach to the magnitude of dialogue quantity. In *The Newsroom*, the mentioned scene embodies what some authors characterize as an economy of rapid exchanges between speaking centres—something that, in Sorkin’s style, is amplified in those situations of his dramas where multiple characters act (an aspect that makes his examples indebted to the points Sarah Kozloff (2000) identifies with the dramaturgical style of Howard Hawks’ cinema):

Shorter turns, on the other hand, may be associated with a faster pace, even though our sense of pace is determined not only by how long the turns may last but also,

obviously, by how quickly the actors speak—John Wayne draws out a short line very slowly, while Eddie Murphy delivers a long speech, creating a sense of breakneck speed. It is the combination of short turns with fast speech that creates a staccato effect. (p. 69)

In another magnitude of the dramaturgical work on character lines, we note that while Pizzolatto centres the most important interactions of his drama on two main agents, *The Newsroom* is structured—like other Sorkin creations in film and television—as an “ensemble drama,” resulting in a dramaturgy exercised over multiple speakers (resulting not only in larger quantities of dialogue but also in the density of information and the rhythmic quality it demands). With this, we enter another realm of these works, concerning how many speaking centres exist in Sorkin’s work.

The effect of all this is evident in the structuring of scenic dynamics through the dramaturgical composition of dialogue, as the most striking characteristic of this creator’s style. Shortly after the scene where Reese Lansing (the network president) is barred from entering a Congressional session to discuss a bill against digital piracy (Stop Online Piracy Act — SOPA), there is a verbal exchange between him, his mother (Leona Lansing, owner of the conglomerate to which the network belongs) and Charlie Skinner (the network’s news director), marked by a plurality of intersecting topics as the speech turns succeed one another—resulting in a typical effect of relative thematic disorientation, characteristic of Sorkin’s style:

LEONA LANSING: Oh, it wasn’t an oversight, it was deliberate. Those two words are antonyms.

CHARLIE SKINNER (interrupting): Are you telling me...

REESE LANSING (interrupting): Who would have thought that calling the Tea Party Congressmen the American Taliban would have consequences? There was absolutely no way to see this coming...

CHARLIE: The consequence is that you were left off of a guest list...

LEONA (interrupting): For SOPA!!! Not for the Met Gala!!!

REESE (interrupting): It seems that when they were called them the American Taliban, they minded.

CHARLIE: Stop. Are you telling me AWM was left out of a meeting with the US House of Representatives because of the show last week?

LEONA: No, don’t be silly! Wait, YES, that’s exactly what we’re telling you. Do you know how much we lose every year to piracy?

CHARLIE (pause): No.

# D

## The script as a charge: examining dialogue dramaturgy in *The Newsroom* and *True Detective*

LEONA: No, me neither. It could be 10 billion, it could be 100 billion. Let's just assume it's 100 billion.

CHARLIE: OK.

LEONA: I want that 10 billion!!!

The same 41 seconds of the previously analyzed sequences are now employed to create more than a logical framework for the narrative succession of events—since we are now confronted with a function more proper to generating aesthetic effects of this dramaturgy of dialogue. Sorkin plays with the almost musical dynamics of the characters' speech turns—insofar as they are not only agonistically contested by the characters but also because the imperceptible intervals of exchange generate a perceptible rhythm for these compositions—something we can only notice in the properly aesthetic regime of our attention to these moments. Beyond what some scholars designate, under the form of these exchanges between multiple agents, as an instrument for representing social realities through the staging of speech, what stands out here is the genuinely stylistic trait of producing a discursive pacing, more than the supposed direction of the logic of the narrative intrigue.

Two characters in conversation provide more “action,” more suspense, more give-and-take than monologues, because new information or emotional nuances can be exchanged, questioned, reacted to. On the other hand, in true polylogues, a lot is happening; there are many speakers, many agendas, much distraction to routinely handle important narrative functions (e.g., explaining narrative causality, revealing character psychology). (Kozloff, 2000, p. 72)

Such topical variation, implied by character turns, is staged much more sparsely in Pizzolatto's writing. In the scene analyzed earlier, when Cohle explains the meta-psychotic character of the killer's profile while examining the crime scene, there is a change of subject in the conversation when Hart (convinced or not by the explanation of the crime's motivations) decides to invite his partner to dinner with his family:

COHLE: Her knees are abraded, rug burns on her back, cold sores, gum line recession, bad teeth – there's decent odds she was a prost. He might not have known her, but (pause) this idea goes way back with him.

HART (pause): You got a chapter in one of those books on jumping to conclusions? (Pause). You attach an assumption to a piece of evidence and you start to bend the narrative and support it (Pause). Prejudice yourself.

COHLE (Pause): Wait and see on the ID.

HART: All right.

COHLE: This kind of thing does not happen in a vacuum (Pause). I guarantee you this wasn't his first (Pause, lights a cigarette). It's too specific.

HART (Long pause): Hmm (Sigh), Listen, hmm, this is a stupid time to mention this, but (pause), you have to come to dinner with us (pause), I can't keep Maggie off anymore (pause), so you just gotta.

COHLE (Long pause): All right.

Once staged, this brief transcription of verbal turns consumes the same 40-odd seconds of screen time, serving to contrast the dramaturgical styles of Pizzolatto and Sorkin in terms of the system of signals about the protagonists' emotional motivations through what they say—as well as creating an atmosphere less governed by the principles of acceleration and emotional intensification of dialogue, in line with what the season of *True Detective* will reinforce as a mode of producing a horizon of response in the experience of its viewers.

In concluding this exploration, limited by space, I highlight only the importance that the analysis of these dramaturgical materials can offer to the examination of the dynamics of style consolidation, as traits of recognition in serialized television fiction, in the regimes or inflexions proper to their possible reception as “effect programs.” I reiterate the importance of considering the use of a heuristic of style, based on a look at completed works—in the very measure of their consideration, from inferential paradigms of poetic analysis, which operate through “reverse engineering”—going from the appreciation of the works to the illustrated consideration of these dynamics of determination, in which dramaturgy serves as *Encargo* for the creative solutions of the staging instance of the works.

The style that emerges here does not treat underlying structures of meaning in these compositions as inflexible but precisely defined as an aspect of a “relative individuation” to these same structures (Granger, 1988)—as in the way Sorkin and Pizzolatto employ the resource of analepsis narration but update it in significantly distinct ways. In my perspective, it is such a variation in the use of these structures (such as the use of analepsis and the dramaturgical functions of dialogue) that makes the particular charm of each of these creators’ styles. ■

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# AGENDA

IN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH



# LGBTQIAPN+ blackness in advertising: does this rainbow have all the colors?

## *Negritude LGBTQIAPN+ na publicidade: esse arco-íris tem todas as cores?*

■ P A B L O M O R E N O F E R N A N D E S <sup>a</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the representations of LGBTQIAPN+ blackness in the communication of Brazilian brands between 2018 and 2020. We selected content from 10 brands on their official Instagram accounts and ads published in Veja magazine and analyzed them using a combination of intersectionality and semiotics. The results show that, despite the low level of representation, there is a break with negative stereotypes and a prevalence of black LGBTQIAPN+ representations through celebrities. We conclude that breaking down barriers of invisibility is still a challenge for the black population, especially when it comes to LGBTQIAPN+ intersectionalities.

**Keywords:** Advertising, intersectionality, semiotics, LGBTQIAPN+, representation.

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### RESUMO

Este trabalho discute as representações da negritude LGBTQIAPN+ na comunicação de marcas brasileiras entre 2018 e 2020. Foram selecionados conteúdos veiculados de 10 marcas em suas contas oficiais no Instagram e anúncios veiculados na revista Veja, e analisados a partir da combinação entre interseccionalidade e semiótica. Os resultados apontam que, apesar da baixa representatividade, nota-se o rompimento com estereótipos negativos e uma prevalência de representações negras LGBTQIAPN+ por meio de celebridades. Concluímos que romper barreiras de invisibilidade ainda é um desafio para a população negra, sobretudo quando atravessa por interseccionalidades LGBTQIAPN+.

**Palavras-chave:** Publicidade, interseccionalidade, semiótica, LGBTQIAPN+, representação.





# LGBTQIAPN+ blackness in advertising: does this rainbow have all the colors?

*The censorship plaque on my face says*

*Not recommended for society*

*The comfort stripe on my body says*

*Not recommended for society*

*Perverted, unloved, bad boy, beware*

*Bad influence, bad appearance, indecent boy, faggot*

*(Caio Prado, Not recommended).*

## INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

WE BEGIN THIS text with an epigraph from the song by Caio Prado, which celebrates its 10th anniversary in 2024, and which addresses the discomfort that dissident bodies provoke in society. Existence, visibility, and being in the world place them in a condition of danger, based on elements that constitute their identities. In the cited song, Caio Prado speaks about his body, his existence, as a black and gay man, and how these and other characteristics place him in a situation of vulnerability. The experience reported in the composition is not singular and resonates with many people, as can be inferred from the nearly 2 million total streams of the song on Spotify and YouTube<sup>1</sup>.

Lélia Gonzalez (2020), still in the 20th century, challenged the black and feminist movements regarding the gap that did not encompass black women in the struggles of both. From an effort, although uncoordinated but coinciding in time, in various parts of the world, emerged the thought that would be named by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) as intersectionality. It arises as a theory and analytical lens that complexifies the processes of interpreting everyday life without hierarchizing oppressions, allowing the understanding of the lives of individuals traversed by various identity matrices in society.

Sexual orientation, sexuality, and gender identity are important identity matrices that, when analyzed together with class, sex, and race, make the reading of daily life challenging but, at the same time, offer powerful answers in the pursuit of social justice. It is through these analytical lenses that we seek to understand the representations in the discourses promoting consumption that we analyze in this article. We intend to observe how brands perceive the bodies “not recommended to society” in their consumption promotion discourses.

This work is part of the research project *Publicidade e negritude: Olhares interseccionais sobre os discursos de promoção do consumo* [Advertising and Blackness: Intersectional perspectives on consumption promotion discourses], which analyzes, from an intersectional perspective, the representations

<sup>1</sup> Numbers observed in December 2023.

of blackness in the communication of brands considered by the consultancy Interbrand as the most valuable in the country.

In this study, we bring into discussion blackness as traversed by manifestations related to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual/*Travesti*, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual, Non-binary/binaries, Drag Queen/Drag King identities, and other pluralities (LGBTQIAPN+). Thus, the objective of this article is to discuss the representations of LGBTQIAPN+ blackness in the communication of Brazilian brands.

Considering that, in 2025, the challenges faced by the LGBTQIAPN+ population remain complex, given the individual demands of each group within the acronym, we emphasize the following: trans women and men still fight for life, for work, for access to the formal labor market, for the right to use public restrooms, and for having their identities respected (Benevides, 2023); lesbian women fight against patriarchal oppressions and exercises of power that subject them to various forms of violence, such as corrective rape; bisexual individuals fight against invisibility and negative stereotypes of promiscuity associated with their identity; gay men still fight against the homophobia entrenched in discourses about masculinities.

How are the various demands of the LGBTQIAPN+ population affected when these bodies are racialized? When observing sexual orientation and gender identity combined with race, complexities emerge that demand specific reflections on the object of study. It is along this path that we formulate the guiding question of this text: even in the face of such low representation rates of the black population in brand communication, as identified by Moreno Fernandes (2022a, 2024a), is there space for complex representations that characterize, for instance, an LGBTQIAPN+ blackness?

The justification for this work is grounded in the perception—developed throughout the analyses conducted within the project—that the representation of blackness in brand communication is still lacking in plurality and does not take intersectional complexities into account (Moreno Fernandes, 2023, 2024b). With this in mind, we seek to investigate whether, in the discourses promoting consumption (magazine advertisements and social media posts), the LGBTQIAPN+ population is relegated to a non-place, as Lucas Veiga (2019) points out, specifically referring to the black fag:

Given that various media devices are among the main vectors for the production of desire, and that the Black fags<sup>2</sup> find themselves in a condition of rejection within these devices, the place that is assigned to them in the economy of desire is a non-place. (p. 88)

Our understanding acknowledges the centrality of consumption in the contemporary world, acting in the construction of imaginaries regarding what is desired, admirable, and aspired to in culture as a whole (Pompeu, 2021). This idea affects the formation of the economy of desire and relates to the concept of representation, as discussed by Hall (2016): “It is the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system employing signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning” (p. 108). Thus, representations in brand communication also participate, within the cultural sphere, in the construction of individuals’ identities, while also contributing to the perpetuation of violence against them: “To fight against the violence of LGBTphobia without linking this struggle to the fight against racial inequality is a way for LGBT movements to reinforce the sense of non-place experienced by black queer individuals” (Veiga, 2019, p. 89).

We consider the problematic representations of racialized LGBTQIAPN+ individuals as places of violence perpetuation, through the theoretical lens of Patricia Hill Collins (2019). The author identifies with the stereotypes constructed in media narratives, controlling images that subjugate black women specifically. Although we do not employ the concept of controlling images as analytical categories in this text, it is an important theoretical framework when placed in dialogue with the notion of non-place presented by Lucas Veiga. Based on Crenshaw (2002), who sees in advertising representations a space for the consolidation of imaginaries that harm minoritized groups—consistent with Moreira’s (2019) discussion of recreational racism in media representations of blackness and its intersections—we understand consumption promotion discourses as a privileged site for investigating the cultural repertoires circulating about black LGBTQIAPN+ bodies.

The complex system that constitutes advertising, in its ecology (Perez, 2018), constructs representations of a culturally constituted world, as Grant McCracken (2010) affirms when reflecting on the movement of meaning transfer in society. Clotilde Perez draws upon McCracken’s model and proposes an update from the perspective of Brazilian society. The author argues that consumption rituals “reveal the subtleties of interpersonal relationships. Through their purchases and usages, people reveal their values, desires, and rejections and, moreover, express their idealizations and aspirations” (Perez, 2020, pp. 75–76). Among the values, desires, rejections, idealizations, and aspirations are also desires related to historically minoritized identities—far beyond material desires—also encompassing life histories and aspirational models.

In other works that are part of our research, we identified how the representation of black bodies in Brazilian communication is problematic in several

dimensions, especially when advertising discourses are considered: the black population is underrepresented, a historical and recurring issue already discussed by Hasenbalg (2022), Diogo (2014), and Sodré (2015), among others; the representations reinforce stereotypes or affirm positions of subjugation, as discussed by Corrêa (2006), Leite (2014), and Moreno Fernandes (2023).

We consider publicity an important space for reflection on dimensions of representativity and the impacts of representation, as it is a privileged arena due to its social relevance in a consumer society (Trindade & Perez, 2019). Brazilian society has a strong cultural relationship with advertising, and countless jingles, slogans, mascots, and advertising narratives are part of everyday life and the collective imagination in the country. Advertising images have played an active role in processes that assigned negative signs associated with blackness, also contributing to its invisibilization.

Understanding how the communication of Brazilian brands contributes to the project of constructing a whitened imaginary of Brazilian society—thus reinforcing what Sodré (2023) calls the slaveholding social form—is a crucial step toward changing the epemicide paradigm (Carneiro, 2023) regarding black existences in Brazil. The slaveholding social form deals with racial relations in an ambiguous, contradictory, and paradoxical manner, making racial debate in the country difficult due to the complexities posed by the myth of racial democracy—a political project that prevailed for years, including in the formation of Brazilian social thought (Gonzalez, 2020). This project pushed the intellectuality produced by black individuals to the margins, as Sueli Carneiro (2023) notes: “in the case of epemicide as a subdevice of the raciality dispositif, the racial inequalities naturalized within the realm of education appear as an effect of power” (p. 106). Thus, by reflecting on the forms of representation in advertising, we aim to challenge the raciality dispositif, with the goal of rethinking brand communication and the representation of blackness in the media.

At the same time, the LGBTQIAPN+ population was rendered invisible in consumer narratives, given the conservative nature of Brazilian advertising regarding this topic (Santos & Cunha, 2019). When not rendered invisible, this population was subjected to mockery and ridicule, generating humor through stereotypical representations that, in fact, reinforced violence against these bodies. Such representations have decreased over the last decades, a conclusion highlighted by André Iribure Rodrigues (2018):

In the context of diversity and sustainability, it is essential to recognize advertising practices as a mediating and guiding element in contemporary society, particularly regarding changes in the representations of homosexuality aligned with the

# A

## LGBTQIAPN+ blackness in advertising: does this rainbow have all the colors?

historical struggle of authors seeking visibility, access to civil and human rights, respect, and social inclusion. As a promoter of social consumption practices, advertising must be aware of what it reproduces and proposes as social practices, including affective and sexual ones, of what is regulated and, therefore, requires appropriate treatment. (p. 93)

Since the end of the twentieth century, we have observed certain efforts—particularly within consumer-promotion discourses—to abandon narratives that inflicted violence upon those who diverged from heteronormativity. For decades, such discourses encouraged physical and verbal violence or public humiliation through mockery of these individuals. This shift aligns with the intense mobilization of LGBTQIAPN+ movements, which, in the 1990s, began to include visibility among their various demands, as discussed by Renan Quinalha (2022):

The accumulation of years of organized activism experience, a well-established dialogue with various state institutions, the consolidation of a market aimed at this segment, and the increasingly prominent presence of an LGBTI+ subculture are elements that attest to this population's growing recognition by society at large. (p. 124)

Researcher Leo Mozdzenski specifically discusses the interface between consumption and the visibility of the LGBTQIAPN+ population by analyzing what he calls outvertising. He conceptualizes the phenomenon based on the theoretical discussion of femvertising—a type of advertising that seeks to be less misogynistic by engaging female consumers in a manner more faithful to their desires and aspirations (Lins, 2020, p. 137). Mozdzenski (2020) defines the concept as a “trend in advertising that seeks to empower the LGBT community by granting sex-gender dissidents varying degrees of agency, voice, and visibility in advertisements” (p. 233). Considering the historical context of mockery within the cultural sphere, the representations found in outvertising are positive insofar as they suggest the construction of more humanized imaginaries for the LGBTQIAPN+ population. We do not disregard the ambivalences stemming from the fact that such representations often arise more from the recognition of consumers' purchasing power, but our focus here is specifically on their effects on the cultural signs in circulation.

As the stereotypical representations of the LGBTQIAPN+ population in advertising have gradually given way to other forms of expression of sex-gender diversities—accompanying efforts aimed at increasing black representativity and striving for better representations of blackness, toward more counterintuitive advertising—we ask: What happens when we consider the intersection of racial

identities, gender/sexual orientation, and sexuality? In this process, we draw upon intersectional thought, developed by black feminists, to reflect on the representations of an LGBTQIAPN+ blackness.

Intersectional thought developed across various parts of the globe throughout the 20th century, as discussed by Laura Guimarães Corrêa (2022). The author highlights how this thought evolved in Brazil through the contributions of Lélia Gonzalez on racism and sexism; through reflections on borders, race, and sexuality from the Chicana perspective of Gloria Anzaldúa; and through the work of American Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term *intersectionality*, among other intellectuals. Intersectional thought is constructed from the lived experiences of racialized women who began to challenge hegemonic feminism while also questioning Black movements and those of other ethnic groups since, in these spaces, there was no openness to discuss the complexity of experiences shaped by patriarchy and racialization simultaneously.

Crenshaw (2002), in reflecting on representational intersectionality, considers how advertising plays a role in creating representations that foster violence against bodies shaped by diverse intersectional matrices, thus actively contributing to their marginalization. From this perspective, we consider the responsibility of consumer-promotion discourses in the construction of meaning:

It is in consumption—not merely in the acquisition of objects turned into products, but in the pursuit of satisfaction—that man finds the means to attain the meanings he desires. Man's desires cloak his most vital needs in desire, transforming his natural need for food or protection into a thirst for pleasure and hunger for power, merging what the body demands with what the mind simply and symbolically wants. ... Hence, advertising, as something constituted through signs, is also a means of access to desired meanings. (Pompeu, 2021, p. 62)

Thus, it is possible to understand the transformation of needs into symbolic desires within a capitalist regime, where consumption becomes central. Therefore, one can comprehend the role of representations in discourses aimed at promoting consumption. These representations act to stimulate the desire of communication consumers for the advertised products, services, and lifestyles. An idea of an idealized life is created—an inspiration constructed from this notion. From there, we understand the demands for greater representativity or for more diverse representations, which do not discriminate against or ridicule minoritized groups. Such representations humanize and foster an identity that is less violated by media discourses, as discussed by Beatriz Nascimento (2022).

One of the things observed in the Americas, due to the colonial project adopted and its social consequences in terms of hierarchies, inequalities, and the legacy of slavery (Gonzalez, 2020), is the persistence of violent stereotypes against minoritized groups, as discussed in the constitution of culture—specifically in the media. Despite the specificities of each country, it is evident that there were efforts to keep the black population marginalized, and it is worth considering representations of other minoritized groups from an intersectional perspective, such as the LGBTQIAPN+ black population. In Brazil, specifically, a racialized regime of representation persists (Hall, 2016), in which the media have been fundamental to the consolidation of negative imaginaries about blackness, from colonization (Mbembe, 2018) to the present.

## METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS

The brand selection process considered the results of the rankings from the three years preceding the material collection, as explained in Moreno Fernandes (2021). We considered the Interbrand ranking as a consecration instance (Bourdieu, 1996) for the brands included within it, in the advertising field. It is not the aim of this work to problematize the Interbrand's calculation methodology or to question the ranking itself. We have been using its results for over three years to evaluate how brands position their brand discourses within society. From this list, we organized a list of the 10 most frequently ranked brands, resulting in: 1) Antarctica; 2) Banco do Brasil; 3) Bradesco; 4) Brahma; 5) Cielo; 6) Itaú; 7) Natura; 8) Petrobras; 9) Skol; and 10) Vivo. We observed how these brands communicated with their audiences on Instagram and in *Veja* magazine, collecting all the pieces published for corpus selection between the years 2018 and 2020.

The data collection period was defined by considering the end of a decade that represented a moment of amplification of anti-racist discourses in the media and that, coincidentally, also marked the first year of the pandemic, which brought challenges to the logic of advertising production due to the requirement of remote work.

Through processes of heteroidentification, we selected all materials that featured representations of black individuals. As discussed by researcher Rodrigo Ednilson de Jesus (2018), heteroidentification consists of an external evaluation of phenotypic characteristics by an assessment panel. In Brazil specifically, heteroidentification processes have been adopted by the federal government as a means of verifying eligibility for affirmative action policies in education and public service (Brazil, 2018). At this stage, the project team analyzed each

of the materials and carried out the heteroidentification, highlighting in a table the racial identification of the individuals represented in all materials.

As explained in Moreno Fernandes (2022b), heteroidentification was necessary because “we did not have access to the advertising agencies responsible for the campaigns, nor any guarantee that they would provide us with information about the model/actor selection process and their self-declared racial identity” (p. 7). Thus, based on the classification of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, and through heteroidentification, the represented individuals were classified, highlighting the materials in which black individuals (black and brown) were portrayed.

In the case of *Veja* magazine, in 2018, 44 advertisements were published; in 2019, 26 advertisements; and in 2020, 39 advertisements. Of this total, black individuals appeared in 23 ads in 2018; 17 ads in 2019; and 14 ads in 2020. On Instagram, there were 239 posts featuring people in 2018; 1,106 in 2019; and 1,278 in 2020. Of these, in 2018, 239 posts included black individuals; in 2019, 457; and in 2020, 556. These figures guided the first part of the research, in which we discussed the indexes of black representativity in brand communications (Moreno Fernandes, 2022a, 2024). Although it is not our main objective, it is important to highlight how the numbers expose representativity as an ongoing challenge when it comes to confronting the invisibility of blackness. Representativity is understood from the perspective of black bodies occupying spaces of power (Almeida, 2018), recognizing media representations as one of these spaces. What can be observed is that this remains a challenge, still serving as a barrier to the construction and affirmation of a positive black identity (Munanga, 2019).

In the analyses conducted up to this point, we observed that the intersection between the matrices of race and gender is the most recurring. It occurs in the manifestation of cisgender identities, with a predominance of representations of black women. This result indicates a trend toward breaking with controlling images (Collins, 2019) that associate black women with negative and dehumanizing stereotypes. We also identified counterintuitive representations (Leite, 2014) of black women, who appear as protagonists or—in fewer instances—as universal subjects (Kilomba, 2019), representing all of the brand's consumers. At the same time, black women are often represented alone, without interaction with others, reinforcing the idea of the “singular Black individual” (Corrêa & Bernardes, 2019), and it is common, in family representations, for black women to appear representing single-parent families (Moreno Fernandes, 2023), which may reinforce a phenomenon widely discussed among black intellectuals: the loneliness of black women (Pacheco, 2013).

Another result of the analyses conducted so far demonstrates how representations of blackness are still tied to limited meanings (Moreno Fernandes, 2023). Blackness still appears, in most cases, to meet a representational demand, in which there is no space for a complex identity that incorporates other dimensions, such as sexual orientation, body size, regional origin, disability, etc. Nevertheless, we identified a counterintuitive advancement in the rupture with the stereotype that associates blackness with poverty. In a significant portion of the material, we noted the effort to present a middle-class blackness, portrayed as a consumer of products and services, which is positive given the history of Brazilian brand communications. It is always important to recall, as addressed in Moreno Fernandes (2022a), the statement made by Brazilian advertisers in the 1980s that the presence of black individuals in advertising devalued the product.

In analyzing the material, as previously emphasized, with race as the primary identity avenue, it was possible to identify how the notion of diversity in gender/sexual orientation still operates from a perspective that universalizes whiteness (Kilomba, 2019) as the consumer subject. In this sense, representations of LGBTQIAPN+ blackness remain very scarce.

The analysis of these representations is carried out through the combination of intersectionality and semiotics (Moreno Fernandes, 2023). As we have justified, the connection between them is based on the contemplative capacity that semiotics demands from the researcher. Considered an analytical lens for interpreting the world, intersectionality is capable of broadening the perspective on communication phenomena, making explicit what often goes unnoticed in the context of a society trained to view the world through the myth of racial democracy. The method has proven to be an effective way of analyzing communicational objects, due to the contemplative capacity required by semiotics from the observer of the phenomenon (Santaella, 2018), while intersectionality allows for the observation of the world from the perspective of minoritized groups (Crenshaw, 1989). The association between semiotics and intersectionality is fruitful, as it combines the pragmatist view of Peirce's thought with the theory developed by black women, applying them to the analysis of the communicative power of cultural products.

The intersectional semiotic analysis first resorts to collateral observation (Peirce, 1931), in order to understand contextual information regarding the perceived identity avenues in relation to the sign itself. The metaphor of identity avenues and their intersections refers to the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (2002), who conceives of power axes as intersecting roads: "Using an intersection metaphor, we will initially make an analogy in which the various axes of power, that is, race, ethnicity, gender, and class, constitute the avenues that structure the

social, economic, and political terrains" (p. 177). This stage, related to firstness in a semiotic perspective, requires the researcher's sensitivity to the racial dynamics manifested in communicational products. As we explain, "Without collateral observation, the intersectional elements are not even seen in the first reading" (Moreno Fernandes, 2023, p. 5). For this reason, we begin our observation by separating materials that include representations of blackness.

Next, in the observation of the sign in relation to the object, the collateral experience—another concept by Peirce (1931)—contributes to the identification of elements in the dynamic object (Santaella, 2018), which allows us to perceive the manifestation of identity avenues and their intersectional contextualization. Here, we examine the communicative potential of icons, indices, and symbols in affirming attributes of the represented identity avenues, beyond the utilitarian function of consumption-promotion discourses.

We have sought to identify, in our analyses, how blackness is intersected by other identity avenues (Crenshaw, 2002) in the representations found in consumer promotion discourses. Attentive to our objective, to carry out the identification process of the person represented as belonging to the LGBTQIAPN+ population, we draw upon the manifestation of signs of iconic, indexical, or symbolic nature—from a semiotic perspective—associated with this population in the materials. Furthermore, in the case of celebrities, we refer to public statements in which they were affirmed or self-affirmed as belonging to the LGBTQIAPN+ population, considering that such statements, from the perspective of the dynamic object, construct indexical and symbolic repertoires regarding the gender identity and sexual orientation of the represented individuals.

As addressed in Moreno Fernandes (2022b), "the sign in relation to what it represents is manifested through the use of stereotypes—which, in the case of minoritized groups, are based on the simplistic reduction of meanings about a person, as Hall (2016) explains" (p. 6). It is through this process that, often, violent representations against the LGBTQIAPN+ population have been constructed in brand communication. In our specific case, we paid close attention to these manifestations, which appear not only in the immediate object, but also in the dynamic object, with their meanings constructed through collateral observation. As we explain in Moreno Fernandes (2022b), at this stage, it is possible to "understand how those represented (or made invisible) identity avenues contribute to meaning-making" (p. 6).

In the third stage, we observe the intersectional dynamics (Carrera, 2021), seeking to identify the manifestation of stereotypes, controlling images, or counterintuitive possibilities within these representations from the perspective of emotional, functional, and logical interpretants (Perez, 2017). Here, the

interactions among the represented identity avenues, their intersections, and their meanings—from the perspective of the cultural repertoire potentially represented in the consumption scene (Carrascoza, 2012)—allow us to analyze the selected materials.

The signs are interpreted from the perspective of thirdness (Peirce, 1931), through the interactions constructed within the constituted consumption scene or in their meanings within society. As we explain in Moreno Fernandes (2022b, p. 6), it is in the reading of the interpretants, “sensitized by the identified matrices of oppression and the intersectional dynamics involved, that we can understand blackness in contemporary Brazilian advertising, considering the place of stereotypes and their political use.” In the case of interpreting an LGBTQIAPN+ blackness, this stage will allow us to reflect on stereotypes, erasures, violence, and invisibilities, based on the results of the material readings.

### RESULTS: BLACK LGBTQIAPN+ REPRESENTATIONS

In 2018 and 2020, no black LGBTQIAPN+ representations were identified in the advertisements published in *Veja* magazine by the advertising brands. In 2019, we identified one instance in a Vivo advertisement celebrating Mother's Day, in which two women appear embracing a child. We discussed this material in Moreno Fernandes (2023) within the broader debate on Black family representations. The photograph on the cellphone screen, present in the ad, allows for the inference that it portrays a same-sex couple, composed of two black lesbian women (Figure 1), based on the display of affection constructed through the indexicality of the consumption scene.

**Figure 1**

*Advertisement with LGBTQIAPN+ Representation in 2018*

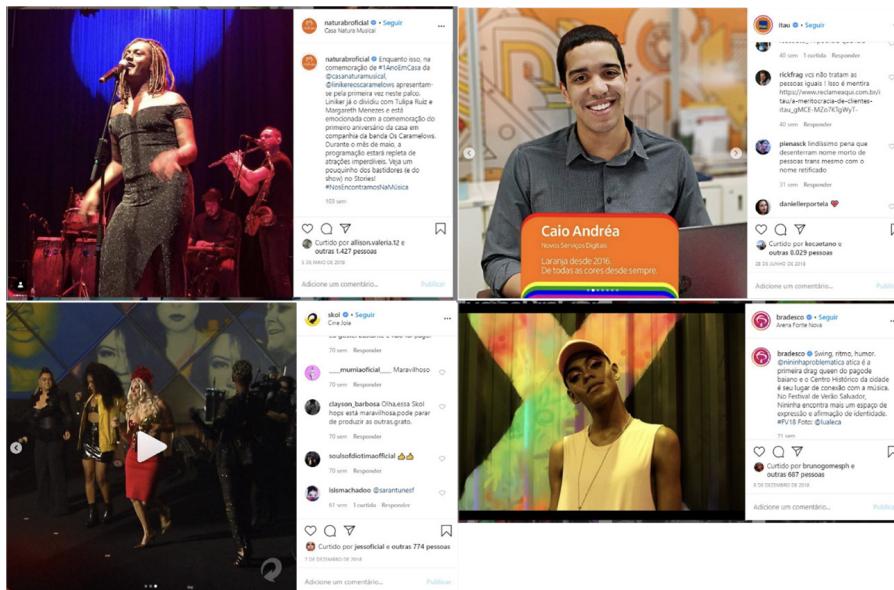


*Note.* *Veja* magazine.

In the content posted on Instagram in 2018, four occurrences were found: one from Bradesco, one from Itaú, one from Natura, and one from Skol (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

Content with LGBTQIAPN+ Representations in 2018



Note. Screenshot from the Instagram accounts of Natura, Itaú, Skol, and Bradesco.

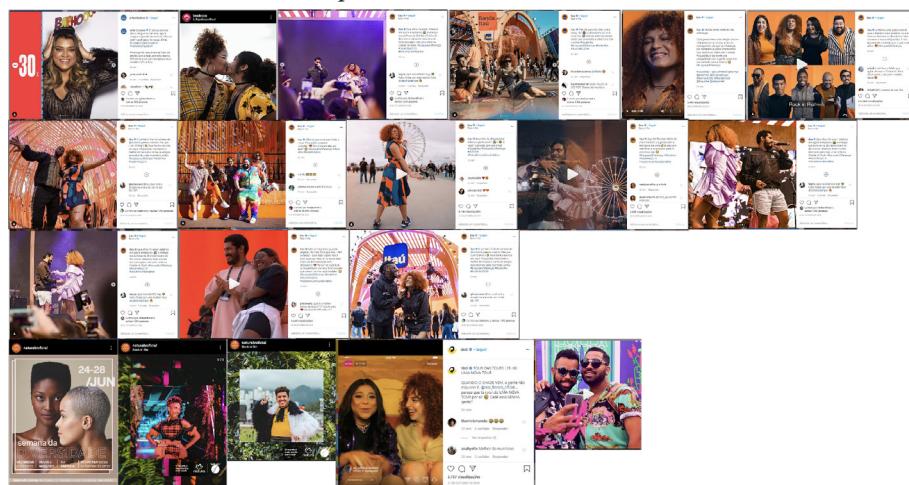
In 2018, Natura featured a photo of the singer Liniker—a trans woman/*travesti*—on stage at Casa Natura Musical. Itaú posted a carousel with six photos, one of which included a bank employee, Caio Andréa—a black man, with no specification regarding his identification within the LGBTQIAPN+ acronym. Skol presented a post with a video of the Women's Music Event awards, in which two black bisexual women were on stage: the singers Preta Gil and Karol Conká. Bradesco featured a photo of the singer Nininha Problemática—gay, drag queen—at the Salvador Summer Festival of that year, which was sponsored by the bank.

In 2019, in turn, we identified a greater number of representations of black LGBTQIAPN+ individuals (Figure 3). They appeared in more brands than in the previous year and in greater volume. The beer brand Antarctica posted a photo of the singer Preta Gil. Bradesco presented a photo carousel of attendees at the Lollapalooza festival, with one image showing a kiss between two black women. Itaú made 11 posts about the Rock in Rio festival, in content that varied between carousels, videos, and single photos, including five pieces featuring the singer Liniker and seven featuring the singer Mel Gonçalves—a trans woman. Natura posted a photo promoting Diversity Week, which takes place from June 24 to 28, featuring two black women embracing—suggesting a possible bisexual or lesbian representation—a photo with the singer Karol Conká, and a photo

with the host Spartakus Santiago, a gay man. Skol posted a video of the artist Blogueirinha—a drag queen portrayed by a gay man. Vivo featured a video with attendees of the Lollapalooza festival, including a kiss between two black men, suggesting possible bisexuality or homosexuality.

**Figure 3**

*Content with LGBTQIAPN+ Representations in 2019*



*Note.* Screenshot from the Instagram accounts of the brands Antarctica, Bradesco, Itaú, Natura, Skol, and Vivo.

In 2020, black LGBTQIAPN+ individuals were represented in a slightly higher number of content pieces than in the previous year, indicating an upward trend. This time, there were 24 instances, with a greater number of brands featuring black LGBTQIAPN+ individuals (Figure 4). Bradesco published three photos featuring black women, each one portraying: Karol Conká and Sandra de Sá—both bisexual—and Linn da Quebrada—trans/travesti; a video with photographs of several black artists, among them some from the LGBTQIAPN+ population; a photo featuring the same people as in the previously described post; two posts about Pride Month, one with the influencer Preta Araújo—bisexual—and another with the influencer Murilo Araújo—gay; and a video from a Father's Day campaign featuring an interracial same-sex couple (a black man and an East Asian man).

Cielo posted a photo of the influencer Nath Finanças—bisexual—, and two posts with photos promoting an internship program featuring a black woman—without specifying which letter of the acronym she identifies with, suggesting an affiliation through the insertion of the LGBTQIAPN+ pride flag in the image—and five posts with photos of the singer Ludmilla—bisexual. Itaú

posted an illustration of two women reading a book to a child, allowing for the inference of a lesbian homoaffectionate family representation. Natura made two posts promoting a Pride Month campaign with the singer Liniker, a photo carousel for Pride Day with two black individuals: Maíra Andrade (sexual orientation not disclosed) and Alessandro Oliveira—non-binary. Petrobras posted a photo of Olympic athlete Ana Marcela—lesbian. Skol published a post with the singer Ludmilla — bisexual—and another with a photo of the singer Márcio Victor—gay. Vivo featured a post with a photo of researcher Nina da Hora—lesbian.

**Figure 4**  
*Content with LGBTQIAPN+ Representations in 2020*



*Note.* Screenshot from the Instagram accounts of the brands Antarctica, Bradesco, Itaú, Natura, Skol, and Vivo.

In a general approach to the sign in relation to the object, each year, we observe, in a positive light, a greater presence of black LGBTQIAPN+ individuals in the materials, with a more significant increase from 2018 to 2019. It is possible to affirm the breaking of invisibility surrounding the intersectional identity of black LGBTQIAPN+ individuals, who begin to appear in brand communications, even if still limited to social media. The representations are iconic, conveyed through photographs, sometimes with illustrations. In some cases, the affirmation of belonging to the LGBTQIAPN+ community is established through indices, inferred from exchanges of affection that lead to the interpretation of the dynamic object as such. In any case, the identification of the individuals represented as members of the LGBTQIAPN+ population is established through symbols, at the level of the dynamic object, from which, based on collateral experience with the individuals portrayed, it is possible to infer whether they belong to the acronym or not.

Identification was facilitated, notably, because the vast majority of representations were of celebrities. Anonymous individuals appeared fewer than ten times, and in these instances, their belonging to the LGBTQIAPN+ population could be affirmed through indexical elements, such as: the kiss of couples in two posts; elements referring to the LGBTQIAPN+ flag in three pieces of content; and family representations suggesting same-sex affection in two pieces—one lesbian couple and one gay couple.

This process demonstrated to us, as discussed by Rodrigues (2018), that the visibility of sexual minorities remains modest, despite the recognition of some progress, particularly in the representation of a universal subject (Kilomba, 2019) who, even when defying gender norms, is still white. The modesty of this visibility is striking when we consider the intersectional crossings of race, sexual orientation, gender identity, and sexuality, especially in light of the volume of material analyzed. Still, as we noted, there were advances.

At the level of the interpretants, we observe that black LGBTQIAPN+ representations, in the vast majority of the content, do not relate to the functional interpretants of brand communications. This becomes even more evident when we examine the content posted on social media, where the black LGBTQIAPN+ population appears represented without connection to the brand's communication, that is, outside of consumption scenes (Carrascoza, 2012). These representations occur in posts related to the coverage of events sponsored by the brands and, in the case of 2020, in live broadcasts with artists, with no direct relation to the products and services marketed by the organizations.

The materials represent black LGBTQIAPN+ individuals at the level of emotional interpretants, mostly promoting events featuring celebrities. This factor allows us to understand that the visibility of black LGBTQIAPN+ individuals in brand communications, at the level of logical interpretants, is limited to media celebrities, with a tendency toward the erasure of black LGBTQIAPN+ individuals in everyday or anonymous situations.

Even though there is low visibility of anonymous black LGBTQIAPN+ individuals, there is a rupture with a site of manifestation of recreational racism (Moreira, 2019), which can be interpreted as an image of control over the black LGBTQIAPN+ population: we did not identify, in the corpus, any pejorative representations or portrayals that place LGBTQIAPN+ individuals in positions of dehumanization. From the perspective of representations, there is a predominant trend toward counterintuitive forms, in a certain sense, under specific intersections, given that the protagonism, in the years observed, belongs to the bodies of *trans/travesti* individuals and women.

We consider the presence of women—whether cis or trans, lesbian or bisexual—as the majority in the set, to be a counterintuitive point (Leite, 2014) in our readings. In this direction, the visibility of black trans women is a phenomenon that deserves emphasis. The trans population is marginalized in Brazilian society, experiencing exclusion in multiple ways. It is subjected to worse conditions in terms of employment, access to education, healthcare, and is more exposed to violence, as explained by Benevides (2023):

Despite numerical variations, in the overall context, there has been no significant change regarding the violence and social subordination that trans people experience. They continue to face the worst rates of violence and human rights violations when compared to any other group systematically subjected to state violence, precisely because the trans population is the only one that breaks with the sex-gender system and the binary logic. This becomes a factor of difference experienced solely by this segment of the population and, as a result, leads to severe issues perpetrated by those who seek to uphold the cisnormative logic. (p. 10)

When intersected by the racial dimension, the violence becomes even more complex, placing them in a position of vulnerability and dehumanization: “we can observe, for instance, that *travesti* and trans women die more frequently in public spaces and are mostly black, just as *travestis* and trans women are the main victims of homicide” (Benevides, 2023, p. 14). Thus, the increased presence of black LGBTQIAPN+ bodies being composed of trans women/*travestis* is a fact that must be highlighted and celebrated, especially given the history of invisibility and transphobia perpetuated by Brazilian advertising.

The visibility of black trans/*travesti* individuals brings a result that warrants problematization, due to an ambivalence in Brazilian society. Much like the notion of a double bind/double knot of racism, as discussed by Gonzalez (2020) and Sodré (2023), the visibility of black trans women in brand communication representations can be contrasted with a curious fact about Brazil: the country that leads the world in statistics on the murder of trans people (Benevides, 2023) is also the one with the highest volume of searches for pornography involving trans individuals on online adult content platforms (Já é notícia, 2022). Thus, there is a contradiction between the discourse of hate and fetishization of these bodies, and we may also consider reading the visibility of trans women in brand discourse from this perspective. Still, we emphasize that no initiative of fetishization or hypersexualization of the represented trans women was observed; they appeared far more due to their visibility as celebrities than because of their gender identity. This emphasis is important, given historical cases of violent and

dehumanizing fetishization of trans bodies in advertising, such as the calendar by the Leo Burnett agency, nominated for an award at the Clube de Criação in 2015 (Propmark, 2015).

We did not identify, within the set, any representations that place the black LGBTQIAPN+ population in a position of ridicule or humorous stereotypes, which is a counterintuitive point worthy of note, ultimately breaking with recreational racism (Moreira, 2019). However, there remains a notion of reinforcing a sanitized imagination about the black LGBTQIAPN+ population, as they rarely appear to interact with other people or in contexts of affective exchanges. Among the counterintuitive possibilities, we highlight three homoaffectionate family representations: two lesbian and one gay. Although numerically under-represented in the set, this constitutes a possibility of representing existence in consumption-promotion discourses that are still uncommon. We agree with Leite (2023) when he states that:

These productions [publicity pieces] would qualitatively include, disseminate, and reinforce in the sociocultural repertoire “other/new” images and representations of these people, hitherto disregarded and silenced—for example, the expressions of loving and romantic affections and the experiences of homoaffectionate families, which would begin to strategically integrate the symbolic scenarios and flows of the country’s media production. (p. 138)

At the same time, we are discomfited by the fact that the family representations display only discreet manifestations of affection between the individuals. In the cases of Vivo and Itaú, the mothers are shown embracing their children, and in Bradesco’s case, the fathers are shown embracing their sons. Of the three cases, the only one to make an explicit statement about the homoaffectionate family structure is Bradesco, while in the others, the interpretation of the women’s sexual orientation remains within the realm of inference. The choice for a subtle representation of homoaffectionate families involves a space of careful and strategic brand positioning, as discussed by Leite (2023), “in the face of the risks and adverse effects that such actions may or may not produce socially, such as boycott protests, attacks on the reputation of brands, products, advertising companies, etc.” (p. 142), especially from conservative and intolerant groups.

Regarding erasures, we identified a tendency toward the invisibilization of black men within the LGBTQIAPN+ population, since the majority of black individuals represented are women—either cisgender or transgender—with a significant presence of lesbian and bisexual women. Black LGBTQIAPN+ men—whether cis, gay, or bisexual—tend to appear less frequently than women,

and, in the case of this corpus, they are a significant minority. Black trans men do not appear at all, being completely rendered invisible. This had already been observed in other studies, even regarding heterosexual black men, though without stratifying in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation; however, it becomes even more pronounced here when intersected with the specificities of the LGBTQIAPN+ population. We can understand this perspective as a barrier that intersects with dimensions related to black masculinities (Fanon, 2008) and their position as complicit masculinities (Ribeiro & Faustino, 2017) in relation to white men, thereby occupying a secondary position in terms of representational possibilities. In the case of black LGBTQIAPN+ men, masculinity becomes an obstacle to their visibility in consumer scenes, as they do not perform, either from a gender or racial perspective, the ideals that serve stereotypical representations—which may explain the trend toward their invisibility. Thus, they are still relegated to a non-place, as we pointed out, based on Vieira (2019), at the beginning of the text. This non-place is reinforced by the low volume of academic works that problematize issues related to masculinities (Postinguel, 2021), especially black masculinities.

Another rupture concerns the place of class. This, which can be seen as a violent stereotype for the Black Brazilian population, emerges in an interesting way in our analyses. We observed that there is no immediate association between blackness and poverty. As discussed by Mbembe (2018) and Munanga (2019), the rupture of this colonial stereotype is an important exercise in contemporary media culture and was a positive aspect of the material analyzed. Given that the majority of Black LGBTQIAPN+ celebrity representations are women (*cis/trans/travesti*), the class dimension stands out, portraying these individuals as successful—a possibility for the construction of a positive image.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We emphasize that occupying spaces remains a challenge for the black population, especially when positioned at the intersection of identity avenues, referencing Crenshaw's (1989) metaphor. The intersectionalities, such as belonging to the LGBTQIAPN+ community, revealed how certain barriers are still in the process of being broken, particularly in discourses promoting consumption. Even in a context where outvertising is used to recognize LGBTQIAPN+ individuals as consumers, it is evident that the intersection with blackness makes this inclusion more complex. The semiotic intersectional analysis undertaken revealed how limited the spaces for the representation of these bodies still are in brand communication. When considering the magazine over the three

years observed, from a set of 10 brands and more than 50 advertisements, there was only one representation in which one could infer the presence of a black LGBTQIAPN+ individual. This allows us to conclude that traditional marketing communication, even when considering the crisis of print media, is still not open to the inclusion of black bodies that deviate from heteronormativity.

On Instagram, black LGBTQIAPN+ individuals have greater visibility, though still quite restricted compared to the overall corpus: out of nearly 3,000 pieces of content, black LGBTQIAPN+ representation appears in fewer than 50. Despite becoming increasingly present in our society, social media remains a restricted communication space for brands, and in the case observed, posts are shown only to followers and are subject to algorithmic mediation. Thus, in these spaces, brands generally maintain more plural and diverse communication, while simultaneously being more limited to specific groups who receive the content. Still, within this space, it is important to highlight that LGBTQIAPN+ representations are often not featured in the brand's advertising pieces themselves, but rather in the coverage or promotion of events supported or organized by the company, with no direct relation to its products/services.

There have been some advances, but major challenges remain and must be addressed in order to rethink brand communication in all its complexity. Accustomed to a patriarchal logic structured around the myth of racial democracy, Brazilian society has historically pushed those who deviate from the norm to the margins. This has been the case for the black population, for women, and for the LGBTQIAPN+ population as a whole. Historically, the presence of LGBTQIAPN+ bodies in positions of humanization has caused discomfort and provoked noisy reactions from Brazilian society, as evidenced in the 2015 Valentine's Day campaign by O Boticário (G1, 2015) or Natura's 2020 Father's Day campaign (Carvalho, 2020). Similar reactions occurred when black individuals were placed in leading roles, occupying the position of the universal subject, as also happened with O Boticário in 2018 (Prado, 2018). It was not within the scope of our research to evaluate positive or negative reactions to black LGBTQIAPN+ representations, but the numbers and the manner of representation signal how this topic remains taboo.

There has always been struggle and resistance, and in recent decades, important achievements have been secured by black and LGBTQIAPN+ Brazilians. However, at the points where these two identity avenues intersect, we observe that the fight is still to break through invisibility. The limited space granted to black LGBTQIAPN+ individuals tends to occur more due to a celebrity status than as consumers, and representations often isolate effective interactions. We must, therefore, celebrate the achievements while also acknowledging how long

the road remains toward breaking away from a condition that continues to assign these bodies to a non-place—for they are “not recommended to society,” as Caio Prado once wrote. **M**

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# Critical media theory: Chun, Galloway, Wark

## *Teoria crítica da mídia: Chun, Galloway, Wark*

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### ABSTRACT

We performed a presentation of the critical theory of the media (North American, emerged from the 2000s) present in the authors Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Alexander R. Galloway and McKenzie Wark. We distinguish three key themes, software, networks and classes, which engender a compilation of texts (articles and book chapters). From this, we outline the themes, questions, contexts and central theses raised by the authors, as well as make explicit, in final considerations, the scopes of their media archaeologies, which foment their critical theories.

**Keywords:** Critical Media Theory, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Alexander R. Galloway, McKenzie Wark.

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### RESUMO

Realizamos uma apresentação da teoria crítica da mídia (norte-americana, surgida a partir dos anos 2000) presente nos autores Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Alexander R. Galloway e McKenzie Wark. Distinguimos três temas-chave, *software*, *redes* e *classes*, que engendram uma compilação de textos (artigos e capítulos de livros). A partir disso, delineamos os temas, as questões, os contextos e as teses centrais levantadas pelos autores, assim como explicitamos, em considerações finais, os escopos das arqueologias de mídias que fomentam suas teorias críticas.

**Palavras-chave:** Teoria Crítica da Mídia, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Alexander R. Galloway, McKenzie Wark.



## INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup> Born in 1969. Ph.D. in English Language from Princeton University (USA). Professor of "New Media" at Simon Fraser University (CA) since 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Born in 1974. Ph.D. in Literature from Duke University (USA), in 2001. Professor of "Media, Culture, and Communication" at New York University (USA) since 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Born in 1961. Ph.D. in Communication from Murdoch University (Australia). Professor of "Culture and Media Studies" at The New School University & Eugene Lang College (USA) since 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Let us cite the titles of three important books by each author: *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Chun, 2011), *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Chun, 2016), *Discriminating Data: Correlation, Neighborhoods, and the New Politics of Recognition* (Chun, 2021), *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Galloway & Thacker, 2007), *The Internet Effect* (Galloway, 2012), *Uncomputable: Play and Politics In the Long Digital Age* (Galloway, 2021), *A Hacker*

*Manifesto* (Wark, 2004), *Telesesthesia: Communication, Culture and Class* (Wark, 2012), *Capital is Dead* (Wark, 2019). Frequently, the most important chapters of the authors' published books were previously released in the form of articles in academic journals, some of which are study materials for the present article.

<sup>5</sup> Table 1 likewise presents the texts that constitute the author's translation and notes project.

<sup>6</sup> In Brazil, the use of the authors' works remains limited to occasional and scattered citations. Considering the two most recent general introductory works on

TO PHILOSOPHICALLY UNDERSTAND AND CRITICALLY STUDY digitalization without falling into demonizations, conservatisms, or eschatologies, three authors currently stand out as significant references: Wendy Hui Kyong Chu<sup>1</sup>, Alexander R. Galloway<sup>2</sup> and McKenzie Wark<sup>3</sup>. In the academic literature produced by them, beginning in the early 2000s, certain characteristics emerge and intertwine: the competence in dealing with history and, above all, with the current advances in engineering and computer science; the attention given to the materialities of digital media; and the critical reflection based on the combination of sociopolitical, cultural, and economic aspects—successfully recovering, particularly in the field of media studies, the essential elements of the tradition of critical theory and subsequent contemporary technopolitical and post-structuralist theories, through which each author seeks to represent themselves differently, yet converging in themes, problems, and debates.

In this light, Chun, Galloway, and Wark compose a refined and rare body of literature<sup>4</sup>, standing as the main exponents of a new generation of North American critical theorists, especially regarding the diverse issues involving the themes of software (the logical-mathematical component of the computer), networks (digital, computer networks), and classes (social classes, considering their configurations based on materialities or, classically, on the productive forces). Nevertheless, this literature still lacks translations<sup>5</sup> and broader debate<sup>6</sup>. This article, discussing the aforementioned authors through three key themes (software, networks, and classes), seeks to reduce this gap.

## SOFTWARE, NETWORKS, AND CLASSES

Following the division into three key themes, we compiled the authors' texts (articles and book chapters). The table below presents the compilation, constituting the central axes of the article's discussion.

The defined themes—software, network, and class—are, in themselves, significant in both technical and human terms. Nevertheless, they deliberate a productive—indeed, indispensable—correlation among materialities (software-hardware), environments (computer networks, considering both non-human and human ecosystems, such as "social networks"), and structures (stratifications of the technical and social bodies, considering their symbolisms and hierarchizations). Software, in a broad sense, refers to the logical-mathematical component (source codes, compilers, data structures, algorithms, programming languages, operating systems) of any modern computer which, integrated with

**Table 1**

Compilation of texts according to the themes of software, networks, and classes

	AUTHOR AND YEAR/TITLE (in Portuguese)	TITLE AND SOURCE (original)
S O F T W A R E	Wendy H. K. Chun (2005) Software: a persistência do conhecimento visual	On Software, Or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge Grey Room, 18, 26–51
	Alexander R. Galloway (2006) A linguagem quer ser ocultada: software e ideologia	Language Wants To Be Overlooked: On Software And Ideology Journal of Visual Culture, 5(3), 315–331
	Wendy H. K. Chun (2008) “Fontiçaria”: o código como fetiche	On ‘Sourcery’, or Code as Fetish Configurations, 16(3), 299–324
	Alexander R. Galloway (2013) A miséria da filosofia: realismo e pós-fordismo	The Poverty of Philosophy: Realism and Post-Fordism Critical Inquiry, 39(2), 347–366
	McKenzie Wark (2017) Wendy Chun: programando políticas	Wendy Chun: Programming Politics In McKenzie Wark. General Intellects: Twenty-One Thinkers for the Twenty-First Century (pp. 211–225). Verso
	McKenzie Wark (2017) Alexander Galloway: a intraface	Alexander Galloway: The Intraface In McKenzie Wark. General Intellects: Twenty-One Thinkers for the Twenty-First Century (pp. 197–210). Verso
	Alexander R. Galloway & Eugene Thacker (2004) Protocolos, controles e redes	Protocol, Control, and Networks Grey Room, 17, 6–29
	H. K. Chun (2015) Networks NOW: obsolescente demasiado cedo	Networks NOW: Belated Too Early Berry, David M. Berry, & Michael Dieter (Ed.), Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design (pp. 289–315). Palgrave Macmillan
	Alexander R. Galloway & David M. Berry (2015) Uma rede é uma rede é uma rede: reflexões sobre o computacional e as sociedades de controle	Network is a Network is a Network: Reflections on the Computational and the Societies of Control Theory, Culture & Society, 33(4), 151–172
	McKenzie Wark (2004) A classe hacker	Abstraction (Chapter 1) and Class (Chpater 2) In McKenzie Wark. The Hacker Manifesto (pp. 13–31). Harvard University Press
C L A S S E S	McKenzie Wark (2015b) A classe vetorialista	The Vectoralist Class (Partes I e II) Parte I: E-flux Journal, 65, May, 1–8 Parte II: E-flux Journal, 70, February, 1–6

Note. Elaborated by the author.

“cyberculture theories” (Rüdiger, 2011) and “digital media theories” (Martino, 2014), which are already outdated, the contributions of the new generation do not appear, except for those of Wark, and even then only partially, in the chapter entitled *O esquerdismo cibernetico: McKenzie Wark & Richard Barbrook* in Rüdiger's work.

physical, microelectronic configurations—the hardware—composes the symbolic-cybernetic machine executable in a discrete, binary, or digital manner. A computer network refers to the telecommunication of data between two or more electronic computing devices, based on software components (protocols, links, firewalls, graph data structures) and hardware components (modems, routers, fiber-optic cables, servers). Social class refers to the model of social stratification, paying attention to technoscientific conformations and their corresponding organizations of labor, generating agreements, conflicts, and mobilities among classes (dominant and dominated classes, in an openly political sense; upper, middle, and lower classes, in a sociological-analytical sense).

<sup>7</sup> David M. Berry, professor of “Digital Humanities” at the University of Sussex (UK), is the author of the main introductory and epistemological books on the critique of digitalization, from the perspective of critical theory in particular and the humanities in general. We refer here to three of his books: *The Philosophy of Software: Code and Mediation in the Digital Age* (Berry, 2011), *Critical Theory and Digital* (Berry, 2014), *Digital Humanities: Knowledge and Critique in a Digital Age* (Berry, 2017).

As Berry (2014)<sup>7</sup> asserts, the process of softwareization is neither autonomous nor separate from political and economic spheres; *pari passu*, the process of the “computationalization of reason” does not occur without mobilizing automatizations, commodifications, and metamorphoses in the relations between capital and labor, through the virtualization of culture on a general level. Software is the “engine of contemporary societies,” a “meta-medium of informatics” that converges previous media. Its ongoing extensibility “... has important consequences not only for how we create and interact with media, but also for the techniques of knowledge in a ‘computerized society’” (Manovich, 2013, p. 337, emphasis in original), even more so contemporaneously, where networks of hardware and software, operating through object-oriented and data-oriented programming, are capable of generating artificial intelligences at the level of machine learning and deep learning—that is, they are capable of self-producing algorithms and self-managing certain data mining processes in order to establish visual, audio, and linguistic recognition or to perform predictive, adaptive, or self-organizing analyses and syntheses.

Consequently, the challenges for contemporary research are immense. The establishment of democratic contracts and the commitment to reducing various inequalities and prejudices demand an intense transdisciplinary dialogue between the fields of Computing and the Human and Social Sciences. Presentisms and unguarded empiricisms have dominated the discussions on the topic, thus making careful examinations and debates on classical and contemporary literature both valuable and imperative, as they help build bridges of dialogue between fields and clarify the deeper philosophical-political implications of contemporary materialities. In light of the academic challenge presented, the works of Chun, Galloway, and Wark raise and update various relevant dialectical tensions and contradictions for the critique of contemporary culture, in such a way that culture, capital-labor, and industry are now glimpsed and understood through a

meticulous philosophical-archaeological examination of the digital machine and its consequent mappings and agencies of affects, gestures, and environments.

We will present and briefly discuss the compilation of texts, aiming to outline the questions, contexts, and central theses raised by the authors, as well as, at certain points, to propose questions, hypotheses, or conjectures from the perspective of contemporary debate. Finally, in the concluding remarks, we will broaden the discussion, reasoning about the scopes of the critical theories of the three authors based on their different media archaeology.

### Software

The initial text, *On Software, or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge*, by Chun (2005), possesses all the elements that elevate it to the status of a classic, a status confirmed by the subsequent impact it achieved. The article—in fact, a lengthy essay—raises numerous discussions through a careful analysis of the processes of innovation in computing, from their genesis as limited calculating machines in the 1940s to their transformation into revolutionary media machines—a new and revolutionary means of communication, equally managed by a new and revolutionary science: cybernetics.

The history of digital computing—that is, the creation and optimization of software (and hardware)—is marked by serendipity (such as the emergence of symbolic programming languages), a diversity of technical levels (from direct programming languages to structured and high-level languages), setbacks and controversies (particularly the transition from operational procedures and actors to programming procedures and actors), theoretical challenges (such as the separation between instruction and machine; programming oscillating between servile and commanding activities; and the “expansion of the user,” as addressed by scientists like Von Neumann and Norbert Wiener), impediments, tensions of commoditization, commercialization and conflicts (between operators and programmers), and gendered oppositions and hierarchies in the definition of competencies and roles (the professionalization of programmers and the case of the “ENIAC girls,” their significance, and the subsequent erasure of their history). All these subjects are discussed remarkably in Chun’s essay, which navigates smoothly between issues and problems of computing and the social and human sciences.

From the beginning of the essay, a general thesis is embraced, establishing extensive critical cohesion, namely: the birth of programming (or software) served a “compensatory domain,” at once continuously and exponentially elevating the invisibility of agencies—the “concealment of the machine”—and producing intense visibility for a new—virtual—reality, through “explosions of

instructions” and the “expansion of the user,” based on regimes of interface and interactivity. In fact, the proclaimed profusion of “visual culture” is the opposite of transparency, embodying an “invisible system of visibility” in a dialectic of revelation and obfuscation, serving as a model for the “invisible networks of capital.” Hence, Chun fruitfully plays with the idea that software is a “functional analog of ideology,” keeping in mind the various meanings this intricate Marxist concept has acquired throughout history, meanings that raise questions about the dual and opposing effects of interpellation and constraint in the production of a new reality by operating systems—Chun’s focus in this 2005 essay, and likewise today, in relation to digital platforms—with the paradigmatic subject being the issue of programmability inherent in this context, denoting, in short, the shift from “old” to “new media.”

The following text, *Language wants to be overlooked: On software and ideology*, by Galloway (2006), is a lengthy and purposeful response to Chun’s essay, seeking centrally to advance the two main theses announced—“software is a functional analog of ideology”; “visual knowledge persists in software.” The investigation into this new language in the world—“software,” conceived as sequences of instructions or routines to perform tasks—introduces an intricate discussion about the deepening of forms of representation or mimesis in the world.

Galloway details the fundamental properties of such language, denoting the opposing, problematic, and paradoxical theoretical meanings. Software is not an optical technology; however, it is fully transfigured into visual, figurative, or allegorical dispositions, even enhancing visuality in the world. For this to occur, software must conceal itself as much as possible in order to guarantee its full potency as a form of human communication. It is the intangible made visible. Thus, one of the important outcomes of Galloway’s text, and its relevance today, is the elucidation of the particularity of the symbolic-informatic model of software, formed by various non-optical and non-narrative technologies, distinguishing it from previous media; yet, paradoxically, by concealing (overlook) all of this, it became more efficient and “overlooked,” through simulations and interfaces. Here lies the paradox of the computer: it created the contemporary “visual culture” while lacking anything visual or narrative. Visuality and computation relate in problematic ways. Software is solely a logical-mathematical thought converted into technology and now performs the hegemonic technical configuration in defining the social sphere of contemporary societies—as a vehicle of programmability that exploits the image, the genetic formation of culture (following W. J. T. Mitchell), to abstract, fetishize, figure, or allegorize; in a word, to ideologize the world at an unprecedented level in history.

In Galloway's (2006) formulation, "software is an example of technical transcoding without figuration that nevertheless coexists with an exceedingly high level of ideological fetishism and misrecognition" (p. 319, emphasis removed). Thus, visuality and computation have a problematic relationship. It is necessary to conceal computation as much as possible (encapsulate and obfuscate, in programming's technical terms) to ensure that the computational medium ceases to be a communicational medium. In this way, much like theories of ideology sustain, software involves a "high degree of constraints imposed on discourse," being an "environment that generates various theoretical problems." The demand here, therefore, is not only whether software can carry a certain political worldview—that is, not merely a strictly political interpretation—but, more fundamentally, concerns the form of allegorical or figurative representation through which software appears to the social and political world — as an "intense mimetic forest," as a (analogical) continuously variable copy of ideology, thereby deriving its "functionality" figuratively, with immediate effects on appearance and fetishism.

For the author, ultimately, it is necessary to understand and politicize the internal dialectic, both reflective and obfuscating, of programming, as well as the other mechanisms of the computer's complex machinery of concealment and dissimulation, for it is these that validate and make productive the analogical relationship with ideology and the entire allegory (following Fredric Jameson) of the social and political world capable of being unfolded: from the history of the production and social division of labor (in common terms, the precarization or Uberization seen today) to the fragmentation and atomization of all layers of social life (neoliberalism and social bubbles today).

*On 'Sourcery' or code as fetish configurations*, an article by Chun (2008), is in part a reply to Galloway, addressing a topic which, though indicated and considered central in the two previous texts, had not been properly explored: the nature of source code. Its relevance is obvious. The source code, present in every computer, is the point of origin and convergence of the contents, effects, and extensions of digitalization processes. For the author, understanding software—and new media in general—rigorously and specifically inevitably demands reflecting on what these new fabrications of compilation, interpretation, and execution languages from source code entail.

Chun's text excels in revealing the full complexity of the subject. The source code encompasses "both machinic and human rituals" in myriad associations and obscurities. Through it, software conveys a mythical sense of *logos*, that is, integrating word and result, thought and action, time and space, execution and inscription. Such integrative force, which aims to be performative and

de-anthropomorphic as a machine language, could only fall into a magical dimension, and this is Chun's thesis: the source code is a "magical source," a *sorcery*, reaching a level of "a fetishism that obfuscates the vicissitudes of execution and makes our machines demonic" (Chun, 2008, p. 300), meaning that executions occur in the background, neither visualized nor represented. Source codes function as veiled and spectral axioms, determining certain controls and possibilities of influence over future events.

Among other things, the article is valuable in highlighting how the "black box of algorithms"—a frequent expression today—actually stems from resolutions and conventions that lie at the genesis and core of programming. The current modes of surveillance and, even more so, of capture by "algorithms" were already a foreseen possibility at the very inception of programming. These are some of the decisive contributions made by the author in this text.

In *The poverty of philosophy: Realism and post-Fordism*, Galloway (2013) Galloway (2013) presents the following central statement-question: "What should we do so that our understanding of the world does not purely and simply coincide with the spirit of capitalism?" (p. 352, emphasis removed). In view of the critical unrest and demand against current forms of surveillance and capture, the exploitation of bodies, and the concentration of power and wealth through software, the ultimate interrogation falls upon the meanings of contemporary critique, which cannot be reduced to the same cognitive and technological mechanisms and supports responsible for value extraction, based on codification and information processing through mathematical routines; in other words, based on the softwarization and capitalization of the world.

It follows that any current philosophical or scientific trend that synchronically and uncritically settles into and embellishes itself within the logic of the contemporary post-industrial infrastructure may legitimately be accused of resignation and complicity. Thus, Galloway's text—its intellectual productivity and critical contestation—focuses on the plans and categorizations of scientific and philosophical thoughts that are congruent and compassionate toward cybernetic models of capture and surveillance. He notes how certain new currents of thought, especially those titled speculative realism and object-oriented ontology—with emphasis on that conceived by Graham Harman based on the philosophies of Alain Badiou and Quentin Meillassoux—have been adjusting themselves ahistorically and uncritically to the prevailing computational thinking today, namely object-oriented programming (JavaScript, C++, Ruby, Objective-C, Lisp, Python). His contestation is timely and productive, serving, as Galloway (2013) aptly notes, as a "great dividing line" between two schools of thought,

those who consider today that symbolic logic, geometry, linear analysis, set theory, algorithms, information processing, and so on are outside of ontic history, that is, outside the history of instances (but not necessarily the history of essences), and those who recognize that such mathematization exists today at the very heart of the mode of production and therefore, not only drives history, but in some basic way is history itself. One approach will answer to the name realism, the other, materialism. (p. 359)

For Galloway, in the current historical moment, where the economy is not merely guided but founded on the prevalence of software, any philosophical position that fails to recognize mathematics as both synthetic and historical blurs the concepts of the “absolute” and the “real,” and thus becomes susceptible to accusations of conservatism, naivety, or resignation. After all, Galloway (2013) asks and answers: what would Latour’s or Graham’s object-oriented democracy look like? “Their democracy has little relation to the rule of the people, only the rule of the market” (p. 363).

Wark, drawing on two texts (*Wendy Chun: Programming Politics and Alexander Galloway: The Intraface*), written already in the mid-2010s, sought to recover and interpret the debate and contributions of Chun and Galloway regarding software, while also highlighting her own views, disagreements, and questions. In the first text (Wark, 2017a), she acknowledges that Chun’s central thesis (software as analogous to ideology) achieved remarkable archaeology through her immersion in the field of computing and her various theoretical conjectures, which revealed “the role of computing in the management of populations and the cultivation of individuals as ‘human capital’” (p. 198), with Chun being a pioneer in demonstrating and valuing Foucauldian notions (notably that of governmentality) within the field of digitalization critique. The combination of Marxist traditions (source code as fetish; software as a form of property, commodity, and ideology, etc.) and Foucauldian traditions (code as a matrix of governmentality; computing and biology derived from the same episteme, etc.) is, for Wark, a source of convenient inquiries, comments, and criticisms, with these conveniences serving as the evaluative foundation of her entire text, which results in the outlining of three questions or themes for exploration in contemporary research. Is the programmer or coder entirely subsumed within the forms and processes of labor and property with software? Put differently: should we accept Chun’s assertion that code is a fetish that determines the imaginary and truly controls things? This is a sensitive question for Wark, the author of *The Hacker Manifesto*<sup>8</sup>; after all, is software part of neoliberalism, or is software the infrastructure of neoliberalism? Wark seeks to reassess such infrastructural

<sup>8</sup> Wark (2017, p. 200, emphasis added), in a summarizing excerpt, highlights his position: “perhaps command itself is not quite so commanding, and is a gesture that only appears to restore the subject to itself. Maybe command is not ‘empowering’ of anything but itself. Information has control over both objects and subjects.”

determination and to question the lesser importance Chun attributed to the struggles and negotiations in the history of the industrialization of cognitive tasks and their application in the division of labor, which contributed to shaping software as a fundamental and distinct form of labor and commodity, of deskilling, casualization, and hierarchy (here, we should recall, the classic theme of technological constructivism emerges). Finally, is software a case of fetish and ideology? For Wark, a more suitable path for understanding software would be to think of it based on terms developed by Alexander Bogdanov, namely substitution and basic metaphor, moving away from considering it as something that “sustains and depoliticizes” through ideology, as Chun (and Galloway) suggest.

In turn, in *Alexander Galloway: The intraface*, Wark (2017b) comments on and interprets the notion of software in the text *Language wants to be overlooked: On software and ideology*, also considering ideas and related discussions presented in other chapters of the work *The interface effect* (Galloway, 2012), which included the aforementioned text. Wark warns that, in Galloway's view, the fundamental property of digital media, specifically software, is not quite an ontology, but rather the simulation of one. Unlike earlier media, software is a remedial arrangement between the computer and the user, being the instance, the environment—the mediation—for the current practices and effects of the users and objects; in other words, software appears as something closer to the field of ethical agency (what ought to be) than to ontology (what is). The computer is an “ethical machine” because, ultimately, despite being a normalizing or centralizing force, it does not define or determine a world; on the contrary, software “simulates ideology” from a “zone of indecision,” which opens an interesting aesthetic-political debate on the allegorical dispositions of the interface. In the text, Wark helps us understand the implications and issues of Galloway's “distinct and subtle” allegorical characterization of digital media. Let us highlight only a few relevant points from the debate between the two: how should we think about the new types of storage, processing, and transmission we are now dealing with? How does this materialize or visualize? What class of relationships—especially political—emerges, then, with computers? Or: what kind of aesthetic-political machine does the computer promote? Is it still possible to establish a profound interpretative model (like those of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud) today? If so, of what kind?

## Networks

The next two themes, digital networks, and social classes, are evidently understood from the broader process of softwarization. *Protocol, control, and networks* (Galloway & Thacker, 2004), a text coauthored by Galloway and Eugene Thacker, examines the theoretical and innovative constitutions in the field of cybernetics that led to thinking about computational (and biological) organization in terms of complex architectures of interconnections between nodes and edges. Specifically, the authors are interested in analyzing the characteristics and cybernetic contingencies through the application of graph theory (the area of mathematics that studies the relational structures between objects within a given set) and protocols (the area of computing that studies the rules, conventions, and conditions of possibility for control and connection in a given communication or data transfer between computers). Attention to the technological configurations of networks is essential for understanding the origin of the Internet—particularly the creation of its various protocols, namely, *Internet Protocol, Dynamic Host Configuration Protocol, Transmission Control Protocol, Hypertext Transfer Protocol, and File Transfer Protocol*—and for comprehending the new geopolitical dimension that emerged from it, which today encompasses a complex network of software, digital platforms, and servers on a planetary scale, operating through cloud computing<sup>9</sup>. In 2004, by focusing on the effects and political transformations brought about by computer networks, the authors produced a pioneering text, now considered a classic, problematizing and conceptualizing decentralized and distributed environments (fluid, dynamic, and far-reaching) and the controlling properties (modulatory, flexible, monitoring, regulatory) of networks. One of the notable achievements of the text was to offer conceptual parameters for sociopolitical studies of what Deleuze had previously written, in the field of political philosophy, about “societies of control,” and even earlier, Simondon, with his ontologies and cosmologies of psychic, technical, and collective individuations.

*Networks NOW: Belated too early* (Chun, 2015) is a seminal essay for understanding the centrality of social networks in defining the prosperity, coordination, and social imaginary of neoliberalism. In the text, the author presents the main arguments and theses that she has been refining in her two most recent works, *Updating to remain the same* (Chun, 2016) e *Discriminating data* (2021).

To give consistency to her arguments and theses, Chun revisits concepts from Fredric Jameson, Benedict Anderson, and Mark Granovetter, authors who shed light on the problematic phenomena of “postmodern disorientation,” the “local-global decoupling,” and the “collapse of the political imaginary,” in order to update them within the current macrocosm of social networks, which

<sup>9</sup> Bratton's *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (2015) articulated a (re)reading of contemporary geopolitics in this sense.

exploit flows of fragmented subjectivities immersed in and for the production/exploitation of information, value, capture, surveillance, and control. “Networks encapsulate everything that is new and different about our social institutions, global formations, and political and military organizations” (Chun, 2015, p. 289), being paradigmatic due to their capacity to map and track the flows of affects, environments, and capitals. Such powerful capacity is, in fact, extremely impoverishing for life and its social relations, as the social engineering constituted by networks always focuses “on the actions of individual agents as individual agents, rather than as part of mass society or community” (Chun, 2015, p. 295), refining a vast apparatus of subjectivations through repetitive habits and empty, precarious performative dynamics.

Thus, the “postmodern logic” of new media is centered on the continuous and antinomic refinement of mappings and dissipations (leaks). In other words, social networks, as soon as they subject the world to a map (geolocate, list, relate, catalog, schematize, project), successively launch new measures (an eternal cycle of premature obsolescence) to make it porous once again, breaking boundaries and repeatedly entangling social ties or friendships—reduced to “into matrices of relation, based on nodes and connections” (Chun, 2015, p. 300). As a result, new media and their mapping logics “are driven by what they seek to contain: the leak. What, after all, is a social media friend, if not a leak?” (Chun, 2015, p. 301).

The metamorphoses and costs of expanding contacts and social interactions through social networking platforms have become extremely harmful to the formation of authentic and productive connections within collectivities (such as the creation of crowdsourcing, *peer-to-peer* culture, and other collaborative, horizontal, and democratic interactions and affects, productive of knowledge and values, as many had hoped in the 2000s), precipitating the failure or toxic exploitation of communities and shattering their public and democratic functions and potential within civil societies. Chun asserts that the corporate-logical foundation of social networks is the serial and fragmented agglomeration of individuals such as You and never of individuals such as We. The macrocosm of You is the basic and sufficient unit for the mapping of connections and tracking, aiming to continually train and maximize individuals’ habitual repetitions, managing them within the aforementioned dissipative logic. The habits created on networks “are arguably what culture can be in the era of neoliberalism” (Chun, 2015, p. 307). The author describes the dramatic consequences of all this: “Rather than engaging in decisive political action, we defer and extend action: we are arguably forever searching, but never finding” (Chun, 2015, p. 289)<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Chun quotes William

James, who revealed the habit’s extremely conservative psychological side. Habit is “is ‘the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent. It alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance, and saves the children of fortune from the envious uprisings of the poor’” (James, 1890 quoted in Chun, 2015, pp. 307–308).

The third and final text on the key theme of networks resulted from a dialogue between Galloway and Berry (2015), focusing primarily on the presentism of many

social philosophies and technologies, which proclaim: “everything is reduced to networks.” Mark Zuckerberg (“people are networks”), Donald Rumsfeld (“the battlefield is a network”), Bruno Latour (“ontology is the network”), John Von Neumann (“computing is a network”), David Joselit (“art is a network”), Konrad Wachsmann (“architecture is a network”). All areas of human knowledge seem to promulgate such concepts and methodologies, disseminating the “metanarrative of network empiricism” (Galloway). Regarding this, Galloway presents his critiques, also raising new suspicions and questions toward a debate on the (mis)directions of contemporary philosophy—a topic that was central in the text *The poverty of philosophy: Realism and post-Fordism*, under the theme of software, and that now extends to networks. In what ways are the “philosophies of reticulations” (ecologies, assemblages, networks, systems, environments), rooted in post-foundationalist paradigms, closely associated with the logic of capitalism that today exploits interpersonal relationships? Is it time to abandon the Deleuze of the “1970s” (of rhizomes and machinic assemblages) in favor of highlighting the value of the Deleuze of the “1990s” (of control societies)? How can we avoid abandoning contingent and systematic propositions? (Galloway highlights how the thoughts of François Laruelle help address this issue). How can we reconcile the hermeneutic tradition of the human sciences with the empiricist models that abound in the so-called digital humanities?

For Galloway, attempts to replace postmodernist critical propositions and narratives with “network empiricisms”—the “Google Deleuzians,” the “Carl Sagan Deleuzians,” and the “Wet Diaper Deleuzians,” as he classifies them—are even more problematic, leading to a further emptying of critique and, consequently, a lack of confrontation with the current misery of the capitalist world.

By offering no alternative to the network form, reticular pessimism is deeply cynical because it forecloses any kind of utopian thinking that might entail an alternative to our many pervasive and invasive networks. And all of this is often under the aegis of ‘Deleuze’—our once dear Deleuze! (Galloway & Berry, 2015, p. 7)

The issue is not the “end of critique,” but rather the new meaning of critique “after decentralization” and the dominance of political technologies in the constitution of social structures. Thus, echoing Chun’s position regarding the deployment of dissipative networks and their consequent destruction of the *socius* and communities, the issue today is the struggle against the “weakening of civil society,” following its displacement by a “new configuration of [technological] apparatuses, deployments, and structures” (Galloway & Berry, 2015, p. 16)<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Galloway cites an important thesis from Michael Hardt’s article *The Withering of Civil Society* (1995).

## Classes

The historical fable of the end of domination and class conflict in the “information society” is vigorously refuted by Wark, beginning with his classic 2004 work, *A Hacker Manifesto*. This work not only refuted that notion but also laid new theoretical foundations and raised pertinent questions to rethink domination and conflict, clarifying, for this purpose, the paradigm shifts that occurred from the 1970s onward with the insertion of computers at the core of capitalist organization. From that work, we highlight for discussion the first two chapters, *Abstraction* and *Class*<sup>12</sup>; in addition, another text is also considered—his reevaluation of the subject in the essay entitled *The vectoralist class*, published in two parts (Wark, 2015, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> For translation purposes (complementary academic project), the chapters were aggregated and titled *The Hacker Manifesto*.

<sup>13</sup> “To abstract is to construct a plane upon which otherwise different and unrelated matters may be brought into many possible relations. To abstract is to express the virtuality of nature, to make known some instance of its possibilities, to actualize a relation out of infinite relationality, to manifest the manifold” (Wark, 2004, p. 5).

<sup>14</sup> In the field of physics and mathematics, vector calculus encompasses mathematical operations with physical quantities characterized by magnitude, direction, and sense, establishing geometric relations and interventions. In computer graphics, points, lines, curves, and other geometric forms are regularly used in the (re)construction of drawings, capable of filling, extending, enclosing, compressing, folding, and intertwining them without increasing file size, as the information for their (re)configurations is arranged as vectors to be drawn (rather than as singular or contingent events).

In 2004, Wark identified and detailed a redefinition of social classes, carrying out a clarifying periodization. The neoliberal sense of the contemporary era—highlighted by Chun as a critical key—signifies, above all, a new phase of commodification, of private appropriation, and of the abstraction of labor, supplanting, in order of importance and locus of power, the earlier phase directed by the pastoralist class, conditioned by the first nature—that of land or agriculture—in the extraction of value and subordination of peasants, and the phase of the capitalist class, based on the second nature—that of industry and infrastructures—for the extraction of value and direct subordination of the proletariat. The third and paradigmatic phase, Wark proposes, is directed by the vectoralist class, profoundly adapted to the extraction of value from a third order of nature: information, produced and/or managed by software-hardware and computational-social networks. Likewise, a new subordinate class emerges, the class of hackers, who inform the third nature. “To hack is to produce or apply the abstract to information and express the possibility of new worlds, beyond necessity” (Wark, 2004, p. 7), so that the hacker class—that is, the various specialists and creators of sciences, philosophies, technologies, and arts—finds itself in a peculiar ambivalence, between masters and slaves, between appropriators and expropriated, between creators and sterile, being coerced by the vectoralist class to work under conditions in which they lose control over what they produce.

Although the previous domains are still present in the contemporary world, they no longer define the directions of surplus value and innovations. Computational coordination is abstract<sup>13</sup>, and its action essentially vectoral, in the sense that it can, in principle, be deployed anywhere, based on the topological procedures of software/information networks, which globally fill, extend, compress, fold, and interlace territories<sup>14</sup>. In the beginning (the 1970s), coordination was restricted to finance, but today,

Finance finds itself joined by other kinds of control through information, whether through the control of patents, copyrights, and brands, the control of supply chains through logistics, the control of the spatial deployment of resources through GIS, or most recently through control of access to information about the shifting landscape of people and things by making all things addressable. (Wark, 2015, p. 5)

Wark's writings, her theses, and her historical and political contextualizations obviously spark a range of debates. One of the author's merits lies in avoiding reductionism on the subject. There are distinct ruling classes (pastoralist, capitalist, and vectoralist) and expropriated classes (peasant, proletarian, and hacker), such that their political-economic articulations and expressions raise various questions and studies, with particularly significant considerations concerning the forms of liberation/control of the hacker class. In 2013, in writing her "considerations on *A Hacker Manifesto*," Wark assessed the pertinence and gaps between what the hacker class could be and what it has been in reality, as well as its consciousness or unconsciousness as a class.

I first proposed the idea of the hacker class in 2000, and in the intervening years have repeatedly been told that even if it exists, it can never become conscious of itself as a class. But frankly, I think the recent politics of information bears out the thesis. The hacker class does not march down the boulevard behind red banners on May Day. But it is fully capable of organizing around net neutrality, creative commons, open publishing in science, challenging stupid and harmful patents, and so on. The contemporary equivalent of the trade union consciousness of the old labor movement has well and truly arrived. (Wark, 2013, p. 91)

Recently, in his book *Capital is dead*, Wark (2019) highlighted the growing superiority of the vector class over the capitalist class.

If the capitalist class owns the means of production, the vectoralist class owns the vectors of information. They own the extensive vectors of communication, which traverse space. They own the intensive vectors of computation, which accelerate time. They own the copyrights, the patents, and the trademarks that capture attention or assign ownership to novel techniques. They own the logistic systems that manage and monitor the disposition and movement of any resource. They own the financial instruments that stand in for the value of every resource and that can be put out on markets to crowdsource the possible value of every possible future combination of those resources. They own the algorithms that rank and sort and assign particular information in particular circumstances. (p. 55)

Unlike certain current perspectives (such as those of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, for example), social classes in Wark are not defined through the representational-discursive approach, but rather based on the conditions of the productive forces, thus disagreeing with those attached to a “genteel Marxism,” which grants superior value to the cultural and political superstructures and “little or no attention” to the infrastructures or productive forces (Wark, 2015, p. 220).

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

*During the 1980s and 90's— influenced greatly by poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and cultural Marxism— media studies tended to focus on the realm of the superstructure: subjects, texts, ideology, spectacle, language, and so on, whereas today the focus has shifted from the superstructure to the base. I'm thinking of the renaissance in more archival and historical approaches to media studies (dubbed media archaeology), or the trend in digital media toward more hard-nosed, machine-oriented methods (platform studies, software studies).*

— Galloway, in conversation with Berry (2015, p. 15)

The critical media theories of Chun, Galloway, and Wark establish, as we have demonstrated, general themes and issues that present themselves through multiple intersections and dialogues. However, it is possible to observe distinct emphases and horizons of critique and archaeological research in each of these authors.

Based on her archaeology of software and, subsequently, the networked digital environments formed by it, Chun ultimately seeks to formulate a deeper critical perspective on neoliberal culture, which is instilled in individuals through continuous investments and concealments of arrangements, processes, manipulations, and instructions, recognizing in software an important disposition of contemporary rationality.

To know software has become a form of enlightenment—a way to comprehend an invisible yet powerful whole—and this conception of software grounds its appeal. Software has become a metaphor for the mind, for ideology, and for the economy: cognitive science comprehends the brain/mind in terms of hardware/software; molecular biology conceives of DNA a series of genetic ‘programs’; and culture itself has been posited as a form of ‘software’ in opposition to nature, which is ‘hardware’. (Chun et al., 2022, p. 4)

More recently, Chun (2021) has been extending her critical theory by researching the innovations and applications of network sciences and machine learning in generating new forms of social discrimination and segregation through data purifications.

Galloway, in turn, through his archaeologies of networks, digital games, and interfaces, constituted, in the 2000s, a trilogy of publications titled “*allegories of control*,” examining especially the contemporary aesthetic and political intertwinements via such informational devices. Regarding networks and digital games, he emphasized their tendentially anti-hermeneutic properties, arguing for the need to study them in their diagrammatic or machinic formations, which, in the case of networks, generated a new political economy—of management, modulation, and control—through protocols, and, in the case of digital games, revealed a contemporary environment—of actions, operations, simulations, and interactions between subjects and objects—already distinct from the cinematic aesthetic paradigm and, thus, replete with cybernetic machinisms and allegories characteristic of current control societies. With respect to interfaces, his interest subsequently focused on the new aesthetic-political dimensions—of obfuscation, opacity, and illegibility—of various interface devices (graphical, network, user-based), founded on software, which is responsible for the current “visual culture” that, as we have seen, did not imply greater transparency and narrative power, but rather the production of “*interface effects*” overcrowded with figuration, zones of interaction, signification, and indecision, often serving as ideological vehicles—of control, capture, appearances, and fetishisms.

For Galloway, renewed attention to current “*interface effects*” and other processes of digitalization, associated with the diagrammatics of power, is essential to uncover the possible domains of subjectivation, resistance, and communization.

Instead of a politicization of time or space we are witnessing a rise in the politicization of absence—and presence—oriented themes such as invisibility, opacity, and anonymity, or the relationship between identification and legibility, or the tactics of nonexistence and disappearance, new struggles around prevention, the therapeutics of the body, piracy and contagion, informatic capture and the making-present of data (via data mining)...The question here is very clearly not one of territorial ‘autonomy’ (Hakim Bey) or a reimagining of space (the Situationists), but rather a question of opacity and unreadability. As McKenzie Wark writes in his fine book *A Hacker Manifesto*, ‘There is a politics of the unrepresentable, a politics of the presentation of the nonnegotiable demand.’ Strictly speaking then, and using the language of ontology, it is not simply that a new ‘cultural logic’ has

been secreted from the mode of production than it is a claim about logic itself (a logic of logic), for logic is the science of appearing, just as ontology is the science of being. And to be neat and tidy about things, we ought to remember that these new digital devices are all logic machines to begin with. (Galloway, 2011, p. 246–247)

Since the 2010s, Galloway (2021, 2022a, b) has been expanding his investigations into the philosophical and political dimensions opened by the “cybernetic hypothesis,”<sup>15</sup> seeking primarily to understand, by anchoring himself in the philosophies of Laruelle, Badiou, Husserl, and Deleuze, the contingencies, limits, and possibilities of the digital (and the analog), of mathematics, and of geometry.

<sup>15</sup> The cybernetic hypothesis “refers to a specific epistemological regime in which systems or networks combine both human and nonhuman agents in mutual communication and command. Along with the many related fields that parallel cybernetics—network sciences like ecology, systems theory, and graph theory; the sciences of economic decision such as game theory and rational choice theory; information science and signal processing; behaviorism, cognitivism, and the post-Freudian sciences of the subject—the cybernetic hypothesis has come to dominate the production and regulation of society and culture” (Galloway, 2014, p. 111).

Wark, in her archaeological studies, rather than defining a specific device, was concerned with more broadly apprehending the origins and implications of the new media “cultural logic” (referred to by Galloway in the citation above), which is, more often than not, miserably absent in contemporary critical studies.

trying to understand culture will lead you to understanding media, which will lead you to try to figure out some things about technology. Then it turns out that the genteel forms of Western Marxist thinking taught in universities for several generations now are not good at understanding how the forces of production actually work. That requires some actual technical knowledge and experience, or at least a willingness to concede that others may know about such things and to learn from them. The production of counterhegemonic knowledge can really only be comradely and collaborative. (Wark, 2019, pp. 18–19)

In this way, Wark established timely problematizations and considerations regarding contemporary theories and praxis, highlighting how they are being even more decisively defined and structured by media devices, which would notably help to explain many of the current (mis)directions, oversights, and forgetfulness of the progressive or revolutionary left (Wark, 2015, 2017a, b). Alongside this, she repeatedly noted the pressing challenge of critical theory today, should it wish to avoid falling into intellectual hypocrisy. On this matter, and ultimately, two passages from the work *Telesthesia: Communication, Culture and Class*, published in 2012, follow.

The paradox of our times is that both the privatization of information, and the expansion of an informal commons, are happening at the same time. What might give us hope is the very fragility of the vectoralist position, which runs counter to the ontological properties of information itself, and can only protect its interests

by a massive ramping up of the level of legal coercion...If critical theory is to resist becoming merely hypocritical theory, it has to engage with its own means of production and distribution. A hacker politics is one of participating in, and endeavoring to create, both technically and culturally, abstract gift relations, within which information can not only want to be free, but can become free. (Wark, 2012, pp. 147–148) **M**

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# Distribution of the sensible and decolonial aesthetics in Brazilian games of the 1990s<sup>a</sup>

## *Partilha do sensível e estética decolonial em jogos brasileiros dos anos 1990*

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to correlate Brazilian games developed and released in the 1990s for the Master System games platform with the concepts of decolonial aesthetics, as presented by the Argentine semiologist Walter Mignolo, and the distribution of the sensible, introduced by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière. The article departs from the theoretical review of the concepts of decolonial aesthetics and the distribution of the sensible and then presents and comments on the games selected for the corpus of the work, elaborating on the possible relationships between them and the concepts described above. Finally, it concludes that these games are representative of a decolonial mark in Brazilian games developed in the 1990s.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, decolonial, distribution of the sensible, Master System, TecToy.

### RESUMO

Este artigo tem por objetivo correlacionar jogos brasileiros desenvolvidos e lançados na década de 1990 para a plataforma de *games* Master System com os conceitos de *estética decolonial*, conforme apresentado pelo semiólogo argentino Walter Mignolo, e *partilha do sensível*, introduzido pelo filósofo francês Jacques Rancière. O artigo parte da revisão teórica dos conceitos de estética decolonial e partilha do sensível para, em seguida, apresentar e comentar os jogos selecionados para o *corpus* do trabalho, elaborando as possíveis relações entre eles e os conceitos acima descritos. Por fim, conclui que esses jogos são representativos de uma marca decolonial nos *games* brasileiros desenvolvidos na década de 1990.

**Palavras-chave:** Estética, decolonial, partilha do sensível, Master System, TecToy.

<sup>a</sup> English translation of Jacques Rancière's concept of *partage du sensible*, as rendered by Gabriel Rockhill in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

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## INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup> In Brazil, the military dictatorship lasted from 1964 to 1985.

<sup>2</sup>The Famicom/NES system was launched in Japan in 1983 and North America in 1985 by the Japanese Nintendo, and the Master System console, was released in Japan in 1985 and North America in 1986, by the also Japanese SEGA.

**I**N 1989, LESS THAN HALF A decade after the end of the military regime that ruled Brazil for twenty-one years<sup>1</sup>, the third generation of video games—represented mainly by the Famicom/Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) and the Master System consoles—arrived in Brazil<sup>2</sup>. However, in Brazil, the Nintendo *platform* (Montfort; Bogost 2009) would be accessible only through *clones* (Ferreira, 2017), since, according to Arnhold (2010), no Brazilian company had managed to represent the Japanese owner of the platform. Among those clones were the Phantom System, produced by Gradiente, the Top Game, produced by CCE, and the Dynavision 2, produced by Dynacom, all Brazilian electronics companies.

On the other hand, the Master System platform was officially launched in Brazil by TecToy, a Brazilian company founded two years earlier to explore a niche left open by Estrela, the leading Brazilian toy manufacturer back then: electronic toys (Arnhold, 2010). Before becoming SEGA's representative at the launch of the Master System, TecToy had released four electronic toys that were successful in sales at the time: i) the *Zillion Pistol*, licensed by SEGA, in 1988; ii) the talking bear *Teddy Ruxpin*, in 1988; iii) the children-aimed computer-like toy *Pense Bem*, also in 1988; and iv) the small electronic toy *Estrelinha Mágica da Turma da Mônica*, in partnership with Maurício de Sousa studios, in 1989. As Stefano Arnhold, president of TecToy's board, points out, the sales success of those toys was crucial for SEGA's approval of TecToy as its exclusive representative in Brazil (Arnhold, 2010). However, during the entire 1980s decade, launching foreign products in Brazil was not accessible due to the so-called Market Reserve Policy, an economic policy in vogue in the country throughout the 1980s, revoked only in 1991.

The Market Reserve Policy, initiated in the late 1970s and which in 1984 culminated in the Federal Law 7,232/1984, known as the National Informatics Policy, had as its guiding principle the replacement of imports of electronic components and devices to promote the national technological progress, through the development and manufacturing of such components and devices in Brazilian territory (Brazil, 1984). In addition to restrictions on imports, the law prevented foreign companies from establishing themselves in the country—hence the need for Brazilian firms to represent foreign companies in the commerce of their products—in addition to limiting the sending of royalties abroad. As Articles 2 and 3 of the law explain:

Art. 2. The National Informatics Policy aims at national training in informatics activities (IT activities), to the benefit of the social, cultural, political, technological, and economic development of Brazilian society.

Art. 3. For the purposes of this Law, IT activities are those related to the rational and automatic processing of information, and specifically those of research, development, production, import, and export of electronic, semiconductors and optoelectronic components, as well as the respective electronic grade inputs. (Brazil, 1984)

Despite being quite restrictive, the law allowed Brazilian firms to import electronic components if they could not be manufactured in Brazil, as stated in its article 22:

Art. 22. In the case of information technology goods and services, judged to be of relevant interest for internal scientific and productive activities and for which there are no national companies capable of meeting the effective needs of the internal market, with their own technology or acquired abroad, the production may be admitted in favor of companies that do not fulfill the requirements of article 12<sup>3</sup>, provided that the interested organizations, have approved, in the National Council of Informatics and Automation—CONIN, effective training programs for their technical staff in product and production process technologies. (Brazil, 1984)

Due to the exceptions presented in article 22 of the law, certain Brazilian firms were able to acquire the legal means to become representatives of foreign companies, for the production and commercialization of their products (as was the case of TecToy with the Japanese SEGA). Thus, the production of part of the devices was entirely done in Brazil (primarily using off-the-shelves components), and core components of such devices, as CPUs and chips with specialized functions, were imported from abroad, based on the permission granted by the article 22 of Law 7,232.

Thus, in 1989, TecToy became a pioneer by officially launching (under licensing) a third-generation video game console in Brazil: The Master System. This launch opened a range of possibilities for the development of games for the platform, aimed primarily at the Brazilian market and that dealt with themes related to Brazilian culture, including the following: i) titles related to the *Turma da Mônica* franchise—a successful and well-known group of characters aimed at children and teenagers: *Mônica no Castelo do Dragão* (Monica in the Castle of the Dragon), a mod of Wonder Boy in Monster Land launched in 1991, and *Turma da Mônica em: O Resgate* (Monica and friends in<sup>4</sup>: The rescue), a mod of Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap launched in 1993, in addition to other

<sup>3</sup> Extract from Article 12: "Art. 12. For the purposes of this Law, national companies are legal entities incorporated and headquartered in the Country, whose control is, on a permanent, exclusive, and unconditional basis, under the direct or indirect ownership of individuals resident and domiciled in the Country, or by entities governed by internal public law" (Brazil, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> "Monica and Friends" is the official English translation of "Turma da Mônica".

titles (also mods) such as the *Sapo Xulé* (Stinky Feet Frog) games triad, from 1995, and *Geraldinho* (Little Gerald), also from 1995. In addition to mods, TecToy also developed and launched original games, such as: *As Aventuras da TV Colosso* (The Adventures of TV Colosso), launched in 1996, *Castelo Rá-Tim-Bum* (Ra-Tim-Bum Castle), launched in 1997, and *Sítio do Picapau Amarelo* (The Yellow Woodpecker Farm), launched in 1997.

Besides launching mods and original games, TecToy also made what can be said as the first translation of a renowned video game into Portuguese: the RPG *Phantasy Star*, launched in Brazil in 1991. In addition to the Master System, TecToy also developed original games and mods for the successor *Mega Drive*, a fourth-generation console released in 1988 in Japan, 1989 in North America, and 1990 in Brazil.

We propose that Brazilian video game productions developed in the 1990s by the company TecToy for its Master System console can be associated with modes of creation and reception (*poiesis/aisthesis*) that bear traces of a decolonial aesthetic (Gomez, 2019; Mignolo, 2012, 2018), insofar as they contrast with the hegemonic productions of the video game market at the time, which were predominantly developed by studios located in the so-called Global North and thematically rooted in that same context. Furthermore, these Brazilian productions also resonate with Jacques Rancière's (2016) concept of the *distribution of the sensible*, in that they offer ludic-interactive experiences attuned to the specific sensibilities of their target audiences, activating new forms of agency and new ways in which “a common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution” (p. 7).

The main goal of this paper is to correlate video games developed and launched by TecToy—a Brazilian electronics and video game company—in the 1990s in Brazil for the Master System platform with the concepts of *decolonial aesthetics*, as introduced by Argentinian semiologist Walter Mignolo (2012; 2018), and the *distribution of the sensible*, as introduced by French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2016).

For the scope of this article, we assess six games, divided into three groups: i) two games based on the *Turma da Mônica* franchise: *Mônica no Castelo do Dragão* (1991), and *Turma da Mônica em: O Resgate* (1993); ii) one game based on the *Geraldinho* character: *Geraldinho* (1995); iii) three games based on the *Sapo Xulé* character: *Sapo Xulé vs. Os Invasores do Brejo* (1995), *Sapo Xulé—O Mestre do Kung Fu* (1995), and *Sapo Xulé—S.O.S. Lagoa Poluída* (1995).

Regarding the methodological framework employed in this study—particularly in the analysis of the research corpus—a media archaeology approach can provide the necessary support for the present investigation. To avoid linear

and “evolutionary” perspectives, media archeology aims to ‘uncover’ socio-technical apparatuses and events from the past, many of them left aside in the various media histories, to better understand current media phenomena, in their cultural, economic, and political biases. In the words of Jussi Parikka (2012):

Media archaeology is introduced as a way to investigate the new media cultures through insights from past new media, often with an emphasis on the forgotten, the quirky, the non-obvious apparatuses, practices and inventions. (p. 2)

The author adds: “all archaeological excavations into the past are meant to elaborate our current situation” (Parikka 2012, p. 6). Zielinski (2006), another media archeology theorist, points out:

The goal is to uncover dynamic moments in the media-archaeological record that abound and revel in heterogeneity and, in this way, to enter into a relationship of tension with the various present-day moments, relativize them, and render them more decisive. (p. 11)

Thus, from the perspective of media archeology, discovering some practices of the Brazilian games industry from a not-so-distant past, such as the 1990s, can help us better understand how the Brazilian games industry and culture have developed in the last 30 years. The Market Reserve Policy, although it fostered an early culture and consumption of games in Brazil, also harmed, to a certain extent, the Brazilian game development industry. As only a tiny fraction of the major game companies were able to establish themselves in the country in the 1980s and early 1990s, this resulted in many obstacles to accessing game development funding, resources, software development kits (SDKs), and other tools. This scenario would only begin to change in the 2010s, with the arrival of online game distribution services in Brazil, such as Steam, Xbox Live, and PSN, and with the worldwide rise of the indie games’ scene.

## DECOLONIAL AESTHETICS AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE SENSIBLE

In an interview given in 2010, Stefano Arnhold, chairman of TecToy’s board, speaks about his motivation for developing Brazilian games at the time:

# A

## Distribution of the sensible and decolonial aesthetics in Brazilian games of the 1990s

We wanted to charm Brazilian consumers with things that were closer to them, and our first idea was Turma da Mônica ..., and from then on, we really looked for a line of characters that Brazilian children loved, like Chapolim. (Arnhold 2010)

At the time, there was a lack of games that provided sociocultural identification to the Brazilian player. From the dawn of commercial video games in the 1970s to the present day, the video games industry has focused on significant themes or settings from western history or, to be more precise, the Global North (De Paula, 2021). From the 1970s, with titles reminiscent of the imaginaries of the space race waged by the USA, such as Space Invaders (Taito, 1978) and Asteroids (Atari, 1979), passing through the great European wars (a theme so widely presented in the video games industry, with dozens of examples, such as the Call of Duty franchise), the French Revolution (Assassin's Creed: Unity, Ubisoft, 2014), Greek mythology (God of War, Santa Monica Studio, 2004; Hades, Supergiant Games, 2020), Japanese mythology (Shenmue, SEGA AM2, 1999; Okami, Clover Studio, 2006; Ghost of Tsushima, Sucker Punch, 2020), through Norse mythology (Jotun, Thunder Lotus, 2015; Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, Ninja Theory, 2017; God of War, Santa Monica Studio, 2018), there is a large gap of themes or scenarios that point to stories referring to what is conventionally called the Global South (Iqani; Resende, 2019). It could be argued that this gap is a consequence of the reduced number of development studios located in countries belonging to the Global South. However, for example, the reduced number of Greek studios, compared to North American and Japanese ones, was not a hindrance to developing games with themes based on Greek mythology by studios that were foreigners to that country.

The main point of this discussion is not to assess whether games whose themes refer to sociocultural aspects of a given place provide better ludic-interactive experiences for their players. The issue at hand is the relative erasure of sociocultural aspects belonging to the so-called Global South in the video game industry. In the rare exceptions in which such aspects appear in titles distributed on the leading gaming platforms, such as Xbox, PlayStation, or PC, their development is the responsibility of local teams. In the Brazilian scene, there are, among others, titles such as Aritana and the Harpy's Feather (Duaik, 2014), Dandara (Long Hat House, 2018), and Horizon Chase Turbo (Aquiris, 2018).

Based on the ideas of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière and his concept of *the distribution of the sensible* and on the relationships that the author makes between aesthetics and politics, we argue that this erasure is related to certain hegemonic distributions of ways of doing and perceiving (*poiesis*/

*aisthesis*), which ensure the occupation of certain places to specific groups and proscribe it to others. In the words of Rancière (2016):

I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution. (p. 7)

Such (hegemonic) distributions and divisions are not random but driven by processes of imperialism and colonialism, not only geopolitical but also—and above all, for this study—epistemic. As Walter Mignolo (2018) argues, the conduct of such processes has historically been carried out by actors belonging to the Global North, especially Europe and the United States, based on the phenomenon called Eurocentrism, which, according to the author, makes their worldview visible as universal. In the words of Mignolo (2018):

Eurocentrism refers to the enunciation, the flows, and the domains constituting CMP [Colonial Matrix of Power] as if the domains were mirrors of the world and the enunciations/enunciators the site where “true representation” of the world takes place. (p. 194)

In this way, the eventual normalization of academic/scientific/cultural common sense that projects the “true” production of knowledge originating in the Global North should be reviewed and addressed if what is intended is the production of new—or the rescue of old—knowledge, equally legitimate and essential, but which have their origins in places historically placed aside by the holders of the “absolute truth(s).” According to Walter Mignolo (2018), the origin of this “colonialism of knowledge” dates to the European Christian conquerors in their journeys to “discover” new worlds at the end of the 15th century. In his words, “The strong belief that their knowledge covered the totality of the known brought about the need to devalue, diminish, and shut off any other totality that might endanger an epistemic totalitarianism in the making” (p. 195).

In line with Rancière, but from another theoretical-epistemological perspective, Mignolo (2012) comments on the aesthetic assumptions that marked a large part of Western history. In Mignolo’s (2012) words:

That is, if aesthetics was constituted as a Eurocentric philosophical discourse in the eighteenth century in Europe—not in Asia, Africa or Latin America, and the Caribbean—this discourse contributed, directly and indirectly, to devalue and, thus, to colonize expressions of feelings and affections both in contemporary non-Western societies—from the 18th century to today—and also in those societies' pasts. The European philosophical-aesthetic discourse built its own past in the art of Greece and Rome and managed to establish it as criteria and categories to feel, value, and theorize. (p. 29)

According to Mignolo (2012), the postcolonial attempts carried out by artists and academics in the early 21st century, despite being legitimate in their proposal to liberate art from Eurocentrism, remained based on aesthetic and political assumptions dominated by Eurocentrism (p. 27), because, among other factors, they still point to aesthetic epistemologies of the Global North, many of which are dependent on neoliberal policies (p. 35). For an effective decolonial aesthetic to be possible, it is necessary first to free oneself from the colonial pattern of power (Quijano, 2014), which includes the classical theories and epistemologies of philosophical aesthetics, present since Baumgarten, the “founder” of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline in the mid-eighteenth century, passing through essential philosophers of Western culture, such as Kant, Hegel and Hume and, not least, reaching the analytical philosophy of the twentieth century, with Russell, Moore, and Wittgenstein (Shusterman, 1998). In the words of Mignolo (2012):

The Greek concept of *aisthesis*, which refers to feeling, the five senses and affection, and emotions, changed to aesthetics, in the 18th century, and became a philosophical theory to regulate taste. The *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (Kant, 1767) is a kind of *vade mecum* of this regulation. Philosophical aesthetics regulates taste, just as the secular concept of reason regulates knowledge. Anyone who does not conform to the rules of taste and rationality—as conceived in the West—belongs to the barbarism that must be civilized or to a tradition that needs to be modernized. (p. 38)

The author adds:

Decolonial aesthetics—or the decolonial aesthetics [plural], based on what was said earlier about the unity of the diversity that is not the homogeneous totality—is oriented towards the decolonization of modern aesthetics and its mutations, postmodern and “altermodern” aesthetics ... Starting with decoloniality from

Bandung<sup>5</sup> and continuing with the analysis of the control of subjectivity, in the colonial pattern of power, through art and philosophical aesthetics, decolonial aesthetics are already an option, along with, and against modern, postmodern, altermodern, de-westernizing and postcolonial aesthetics. (p. 38)

<sup>5</sup> Reference to the Bandung Conference, held in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955.

From the perspectives of Rancière and Mignolo, we think of decolonial aesthetics as an expanded unfolding of the notion of aesthetic experience as presented by authors generally framed in the philosophical field of *pragmatism*, such as John Dewey (1980) and Richard Shusterman (1992), who criticize, each in their terms, the epistemological bases of both classical aesthetics and analytical aesthetics, as the latter tend to disregard historical, cultural, social and economic contexts and, on the contrary, tend to sublimate a certain timeless universality in their aesthetic assumptions (Shusterman, 1992).

However, we believe that, despite having contributed exceptionally towards an epistemological turn regarding the understanding of the notion of aesthetic fruition, or aesthetic experience, pragmatist philosophy still lacks in providing due attention to themes that are precious to the decolonial perspective, such as the artistic and scientific production of the so-called Global South, in addition to all the issues that surround the most recent discussion on southern epistemologies (Santos & Meneses, 2009), such as those linked to issues of race, gender, class struggle, among others (Souza, 2021). On the other hand, the notion of decolonial aesthetics, as presented by Mignolo (resonating here with Rancière's concept of the distribution of the sensible), seeks to give voice and space to aesthetic-philosophical productions—of actions, knowledge, and feelings—located in the so-called Global South, with particular attention to Latin America.

Although authors that deal with decolonial aesthetics, such as Mignolo and Gomez, do not explicitly define the concept of decolonial aesthetics, it is possible to trace a connection between it and the notion of the *aesthetic regime* (of arts), as presented by Rancière (2016), for whom aesthetics, in a macro sense, should not be mistaken by *representation*, but taken as the ways of doing and sharing the *sensible*. In the author's words:

This means, first of all, elaborating the very meaning of what is designated by their term aesthetics, which denotes neither art theory in general nor a theory that would consign art to its effects on sensibility. Aesthetics refers to a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making. (p. 4)



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In this sense, engaging with Rancière's aesthetic regime also entails a critique of classical aesthetic assumptions, which are deeply embedded in common perceptual frameworks and therefore call for a movement toward the decolonization of aesthetics itself. In the words of Mignolo (2012),

Thus, to decolonize aesthetics in order to liberate *aisthesis* means to disconnect from the rules laid out by Kant ... to disconnect, in both thought and practice, from the anxiety for the new and to connect instead with the celebration of communal—non-imperial—ways of life (p. 40).

Following the notion of the aesthetic regime proposed by Rancière, this work does not analyze video games *per se*, *i.e.*, their narrative, graphics, sounds, and gameplay. Conversely, it aims at understanding how certain games were produced, launched, and distributed and how these events can produce a broader perspective of the social, political, and cultural implications of video games among different contexts and cultures. In this sense, context, rather than form, would tell us more about the impact of certain video games on society (Kirkpatrick, 2011).

## MONICA AND FRIENDS, GERALDINHO, AND SAPO XULÉ: PIONEERS OF BRAZILIAN (THEMED) GAMES

As shown at the beginning of this work, in the 1990s, a Brazilian company became a pioneer in developing games aimed at the Brazilian market. This company was TecToy—still active in the market today, *i.e.*, in 2023. However, at that time, mainly due to the restrictions imposed by the Market Reserve policy, it was one of the few national companies to be able to license a video game console in Brazil<sup>6</sup>, the Master System, owned by the Japanese SEGA. Because of the “officiality” of its console, in contrast to the unofficial launch of consoles of the same generation by other companies, such as the various clones of the NES system, TecToy had all the logistical and institutional support from SEGA so that it could develop and launch titles that had a closer connection with Brazilian video game consumers, at that time still mostly restricted to children and teenagers. At this point, we begin to articulate Rancière's notions of the distribution of the sensible with that of decolonial aesthetics, as proposed by Mignolo, to TecToy's productions.

Among the Brazilian productions of games by TecToy for its Master System console, we chose six titles that dialogue promptly with elements of Brazilian popular culture, primarily aimed at children and teenagers at the time. They are:

<sup>6</sup> In 1983, Gradiante licensed and launched the Atari 2600 console in Brazil.

i) two games based on the *Turma da Mônica* franchise; ii) the game *Geraldinho*, based on the homonymous comic strip character; (iii) three games based on the character *Sapo Xulé*. Next, we will present each of these titles and comment on their possible relationships with decolonial aesthetics, based on Mignolo's proposition, and Jacques Rancière's concept of the distribution of the sensible.

### Monica and Friends

Created in 1959 by Maurício de Sousa, a Brazilian writer and cartoonist, *Turma da Mônica* (Monica and Friends) has been, for more than five decades—one could say—the most famous cartoon franchise aimed at children and teenagers in Brazil. First published as comic strips in the Brazilian newspaper *Folha da Manhã*, the success of the gang's characters was so huge that in a few years, they would go beyond the comic strips, appearing in major advertising campaigns from the 1960s on (Fiel, 2022), becoming pervasive and well-known throughout the country. Since then, the franchise has occupied several media formats, such as graphic novels (the main/original media format), animated cartoons, live-action movies, TV series, stationery, toys, and video games.

The characters of Monica and Friends largely mirror many particularities—and certain stereotypes—of the Brazilian people regarding social, cultural, economic, and demographic aspects. Although the gang sports Monica's name, the little girl was not the first character created by de Sousa for the group, which were Franjinha and Bidu, published as a comic strip in 1959. According to Inácio (2020), Monica made her débüt only in 1963, interacting with Cebolinha, a character created in 1960 (Figure 1). In 1970, Maurício de Sousa launched the first comics magazine titled *Mônica e a sua turma* (Monica and her Gang) (Figure 2).

**Figure 1**

First appearance of Monica, in 1963



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Figure 2  
First *Mônica e a sua Turma* comics magazine, in 1970



<sup>7</sup> Maurício de Sousa (born in 1935) is a cartoonist, writer, and businessman. He is the creator of the Turma da Mônica group of characters, launched in 1959, and the founder of Maurício de Sousa Studios.

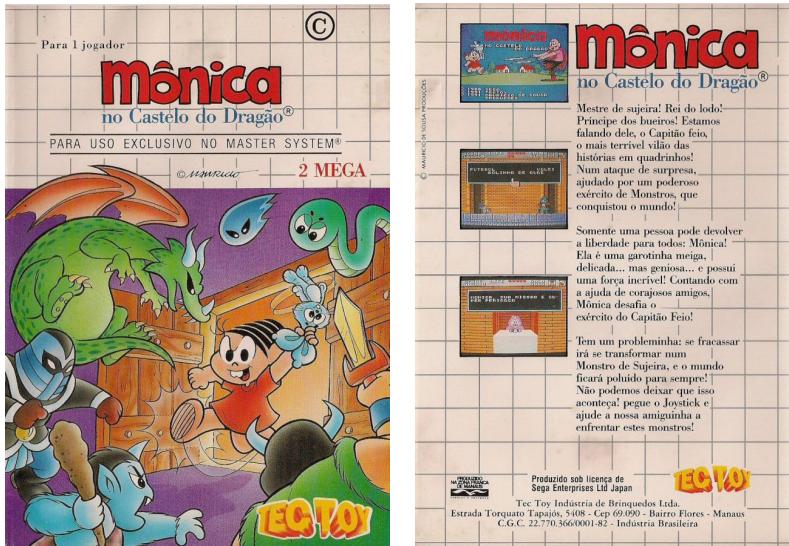
In 1991, through a new partnership with Maurício de Sousa studios<sup>7</sup> —in a previous partnership, in 1989, the company launched the electronic toy *Estrelinha Mágica da Turma da Mônica* (Monica and Friends Magic Little Star)—TecToy launched in the Brazilian market, for its Master System platform, the game *Mônica no Castelo do Dragão*, an adaptation—in more precise terms, an official mod authorized by SEGA—of the game Wonder Boy in Monster Land, released for the same platform in 1988 (Forte et al., 2015, p. 137). In the Brazilian version, the character Wonder Boy was replaced by the character Mônica, and the original game's weapon, a sword, was replaced by Monica's rabbit Sansão. According to Arnhold (2010), the intention of replacing the weapon was to make the game more appropriate for the game's target audience: children and teenagers. According to Martinez (2015), the game was very popular among Brazilian players.

In 1993, two years after the launch of *Mônica no Castelo do Dragão*, TecToy, still in partnership with the Maurício de Sousa studios, launched in the Brazilian market the game *Turma da Mônica em: O Resgate*, a mod of the game Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap, from 1989. As in the previous title, the character Wonder Boy was replaced by the character Mônica, and his weapon, a sword, was again replaced by the rabbit Sansão. In addition to Mônica, other characters from her group appear in the game, such as Chico Bento, Cebolinha, and Magali.

According to Fiel (2022), as of 2022, Monica and Friends comics outsell their primary competitor, Walt Disney's, pointing to a connection between readers and characters and stories that keeps itself strong after more than five decades.

**Figures 3 and 4**

Front and back of *Mônica no Castelo do Dragão* cartridge box



**Figures 5 and 6**

Front and back of *Turma da Mônica em: O Resgate* cartridge box



## LITTLE GERALD

Geraldinho (*Little Gerald*) is a comic strip character created by Brazilian cartoonist Glauco Villas-Boas (1967–2010). It was published in the Brazilian newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, in its supplement *Folhinha*, aimed at children and teenagers. It told the adventures of Geraldinho, the son of Geraldão (*Big Gerald*), a previous character also created by Glauco. Later, Geraldinho was published as edited graphic novels, including the strips published earlier in the newspaper. The strip has a comical sense of humor—maybe most suited for teenagers than children—and tells the everyday-life “adventures” of a boy (Geraldinho) who is always eager for TV, ice cream, and soda. Besides Geraldinho, other characters include his dog *Cachorrão* (Big Dog) and his cat *Tufinho*.

In 1995, TecToy launched the Geraldinho game for the Master System. Like the other titles cited in this paper, it was also an approved mod—in this case, a mod of the game *Teddy Boy* (1985), one of the first titles launched for the Master System/SEGA Mark III platform<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> In Japan, the Master System platform was launched as the SEGA Mark III, in 1985.

The name Master System was designed especially for foreign markets (Americas and Europe). *Teddy Boy* was, thus, one of the first titles launched in Japan for the Mark III, using the SEGA Card media format, instead of the usual cartridge.

**Figures 7 e 8**

Front and back of Geraldinho cartridge box.



## Sapo Xulé

Sapo Xulé (*Stinky-Feet Frog*) is a character created by Brazilian cartoonist Paulo José, based on a popular children's folk song that goes as follows (in free translation):

*The frog doesn't wash his foot<sup>9</sup>  
(He) doesn't wash (it) because (he) doesn't want  
He lives down there by the lagoon  
(He) doesn't wash (it) because (he) doesn't want  
What a stinky foot!*

<sup>9</sup> Translated as it is in the original song, with the word *pé* (foot) in the singular: “*o sapo não lava o pé*” (the frog doesn't wash his foot).

The stories of Sapo Xulé revolve around the importance of the Happy Lagoon for the city of *Sapópolis* (*Frogopolis*, in free translation), where he and his friends live. They touch on important subjects such as the preservation of nature and the environment, themes that have been situated at the core of Brazilian political, economic, and cultural discussions for ages. The character appeared first in the *Kidnews* education newspaper (Figure 9) and in the *Sapo Xulé* activities magazine (Figure 10) and was later adapted to animated cartoons. It was also launched as a toy, manufactured by TecToy (Figure 11): an action figure of the character, which came with a stinky odor, resonating thus the core of the frog personality, according to the aforementioned folk song—i.e., not washing his foot.

The action figure was a massive success among Brazilian children. Given its success, TecToy decided to launch a series of three games based on the Sapo Xulé character, all of them in 1995, which were: 1) *Sapo Xulé vs. Os Invasores do Brejo* (*Stinky Feet Frog vs. Wetlands Invaders*); 2) *Sapo Xulé—O Mestre do Kung Fu* (*Stinky Feet Frog—The Kung Fu Master*); 3) *Sapo Xulé—S.O.S. Lagoa Poluída* (*Stinky Feet Frog—S.O.S. Polluted Lake*) (Figures 12 to 17). The games were mods—all of them approved by SEGA—of the following games, respectively: 1) *Psycho Fox* (SEGA, 1989); 2) *Kung Fu Kid* (SEGA, 1987); 3) *Astro Warrior* (SEGA, 1986).

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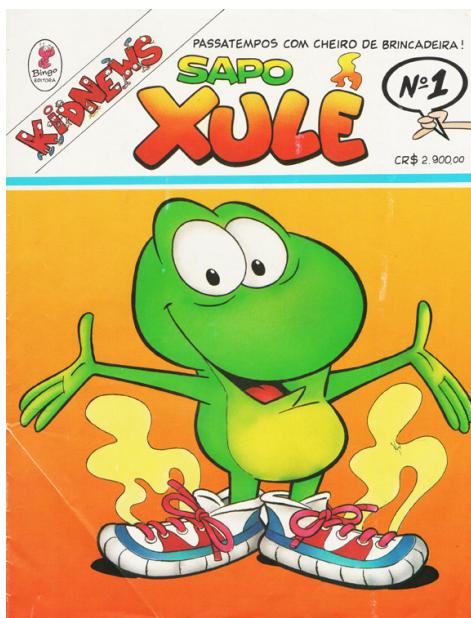
**Figure 9**

*Kidnews educational newspaper, n. 1, sporting Sapo Xulé on its first page. April 1993*



**Figure 10**

*Cover of the Sapo Xulé activities magazine, n. 1, 1995*



**Figure 11**

Toy (action figure) of Sapo Xulé. TecToy, 1993

**Figures 12 and 13**

The front and back of Sapo Xulé vs. Os Invasores do Brejo cartridge box

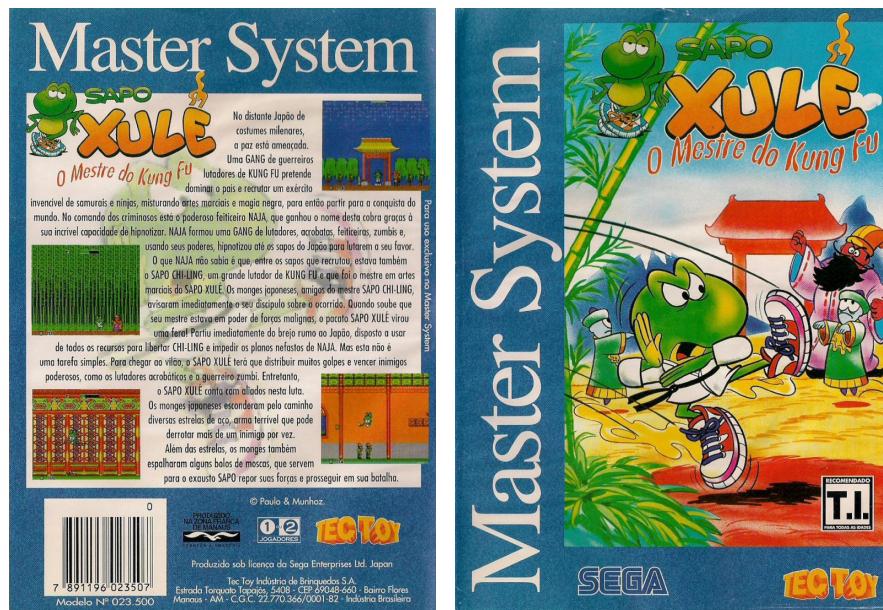


# A

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**Figures 14 and 15**

Front and back of Sapo Xulé: O Mestre do Kung Fu cartridge box



**Figures 16 and 17**

Front and back of Sapo Xulé: S.O.S Lagoa Poluída cartridge box



One aspect of these games worth mentioning is that TecToy chose original games that had their gameplay consonant with the games they wanted to mod/launch. For example, for the development of *Sapo Xulé: O Mestre do Kung-Fu* (Stinky-feet Frog: The Master of Kung Fu), TecToy modded the game Kung Fu Kid, allowing the creation of a story that suited its gameplay. In this example, Sapo Xulé travels to Japan to confront the character Naja and his gang to release Sapo Xulé's Kung Fu Master. This choice affords ludonarrative congruence, a game design concept that is paramount today.

### DISCUSSION: DECOLONIAL AESTHETICS AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE SENSIBLE IN BRAZILIAN VIDEO GAMES OF THE 1990S

First, it is essential to underscore that this paper—and the research project that surrounds it—is not methodologically based on empirical and reception studies in the way that it does not seek to rely upon data obtained from players or critics of the games cited above. In other words: it is not relevant for this research whether those games received critical acclaim or had huge sales. Conversely, the (material) methodological approach to this research—media archaeology—has among its core practices the unveiling of media artifacts that were either left on the margins of its media histories or compendiums—in the case at hand, the many inventories and catalogs of Master System games—or did not receive proper attention, especially when they do not belong to the mainstream places of those media. Regarding video games, it is reasonable to say that these places are primarily located in North America, Europe, and Japan. Focusing on “forgotten” media is critical to the media archaeology approach since it does not conform to the “history of the victors.”

Secondly, as pointed out by authors such as Quijano (2014), Mignolo (2012, 2018), and Gomez (2019), being decolonial is an *option*, no matter the field of knowledge. Historically, global-western culture and the production of knowledge have been led, disseminated, and taken for granted by groups of individuals that belong to the Global North. Even in countries that belong to the Global South, it has been commonplace, particularly in the humanities, that academic research relies on Global North authors, scholars, and thinkers. Only recently, a parcel of Global South scholars became aware of the importance of redirecting their sight to the vast and rich knowledge that has already been produced by their “geographically associated peers,” so to speak. It is why authors that have been investing their time and research to create this awareness about decolonial epistemologies insist on stressing that to produce decolonial knowledge is an

*option*, in the sense that one must make an effort to opt for the “non-natural”—*i.e.*, historically westernized—way of producing knowledge.

Regarding this “non-natural” production of knowledge, Pedro Pablo Gómez (2019) points out that Global North art histories have been treated as universal histories, while Global South art histories have been treated as particular histories. For example, most books about “the” history of art (see, for instance, E. H. Gombrich’s well-known and pervasive *The Story of Art*, first published in 1950) deal mainly with European art history. On the other side, most books about the Global South production of art have titles such as *Latin American Art* (Scott, 2000), *A History of Art in Africa* (Visona et al., 2007), and *The Art of Brazil* (Lemos et al., 1983), pointing to exceptions within the “universal” art history.

Regarding Brazilian video games, particularly the ones developed (*modded*) by TecToy for the Master System platform, the option to choose local themes is not straightforward, because western pop-culture imaginaries have been overwhelmed, for decades, by North American and Japanese cultural aspects, which include characters, settings, and myths. The video game context follows suit. For instance, in the comprehensive list of Master System games edited by Humberto Martinez (2015), most of its 334 games bring North American and Japanese-themed titles. If it seems “natural” that most of the platform’s games are based on those countries’ settings, since the platform was first launched in Japan and then in North America, this fact alone should not have inhibited the development and launch of games based on other settings and cultures. This erasure points to what Mignolo (2018) says about the “natural” and historical *effacement* of non-Global North themes and subjects in pop culture. Thus, developing and launching games based on Brazilian characters and settings for a platform that had most of its users in Japan, South Korea, Europe, and North America together was a colossal bet and movement by TecToy<sup>10</sup>, going against the grain of the mainstream video games market, back then and even nowadays, resonating what Jacques Rancière elaborates about the *scenes of dissent*, which, according to Marques (2013):

Are constituted when actions of subjects who were not, until then, counted as interlocutors, erupt and “cause ruptures in the unity of what is given and in the evidence of the visible to design a new topography of the possible. (Rancière 1995, p. 55)”. (p. 7)

One issue on the horizon of this research is whether the creation of a particular media object that approaches decolonial aspects is, *per se*, a decolonial option, even if their creators are unaware of this approach. This issue becomes

<sup>10</sup> Video Games Sales Wiki. Available at: [https://vgsales.fandom.com/wiki/Third-generation\\_of\\_video\\_games](https://vgsales.fandom.com/wiki/Third-generation_of_video_games). Accessed 28th January 2023.

crucial when we take games created by a big company, like TecToy, which has profit as one of its primary goals. In our assessment so far, we believe that even if media creators are not aware of the decolonial approach or do not have a socio-cultural-political bias as their primary objective, the final result—the work—still possesses the decolonial aspect embedded in it. The same companies could have invested their time and efforts in developing media objects with content that would empathize with a greater audience. However, when choosing content that relates to local, non-mainstream audiences, they nonetheless practice decolonial aesthetics, no matter the means to achieve it.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Since the mid-2010s decade, Brazilian video game development has grown exponentially. In addition to investing in “global” themes, as those presented, for instance, in acclaimed games such as Knights of Pen and Paper (Behold, 2012), Chroma Squad (Behold, 2015), and Celeste (Maddy Thorson, Noel Berry, MiniBoss, 2018), Brazilian developers have also been developing games that somehow relate to their history, culture, myths, and identity, such as Aritana and the Harpy’s Feather (Duaik, 2014), Dandara (Long Hat House, 2018), and Horizon Chase Turbo (Aquiris, 2018).

Aritana and the Harpy’s Feather, a game developed by the Duaik studio and launched in 2014, is inspired by Brazilian indigenous culture and presents the adventure of the indigenous Aritana, who has the mission of acquiring a harpy’s feather and bringing it back to his tribe to cure the tribe’s chief, Tabata, who got severely ill.

Dandara, a game developed by Long Hat House studio and launched in 2018, which won the Game of the Year prize at the 2018’s Brazilian Game Awards, has its protagonist inspired by Dandara dos Palmares. Dandara was the wife of Zumbi dos Palmares, the founder of Quilombo dos Palmares, a *quilombo*<sup>11</sup> from the 17<sup>th</sup> century located in the current Brazilian state of Alagoas.

Horizon Chase Turbo, a game developed by Aquiris studio and launched in 2018, is a tribute to 1980s and 1990s arcade-like car-racing games. However, far from presenting only generic or worldwide mainstream circuits and cities, as is the case with most car-racing games, Horizon brings to the player, in addition to foreign tracks, many Brazilian cities as street tracks, such as Salvador, in the state of Bahia, Niterói, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brasília, the federal capital, and Chapada Diamantina, a geological region famous by its mountains and plateaus, also located in the state of Bahia. The game map also shows key landmarks of those cities, such as the Ponte Juscelino Kubitschek (*Juscelino*

<sup>11</sup> *Quilombos* were communities of enslaved people who escaped from their raptors, during the period known as *Colonial Brazil*, which lasted from 16th century to late 19th century. *Quilombo dos Palmares* was located in the present-day Brazilian state of Alagoas and was the biggest *quilombo* of Brazilian History.

*Kubitschek's Bridge*) in Brasília, the Museu de Arte Contemporânea (*Museum of Contemporary Art*) in Niterói, the Farol da Barra (*Barra's Lighthouse*) in Salvador, and the vegetation that is part of the Parque Nacional da Chapada Diamantina (*Chapada Diamantina's National Park*), in the state of Bahia (Figure 19).

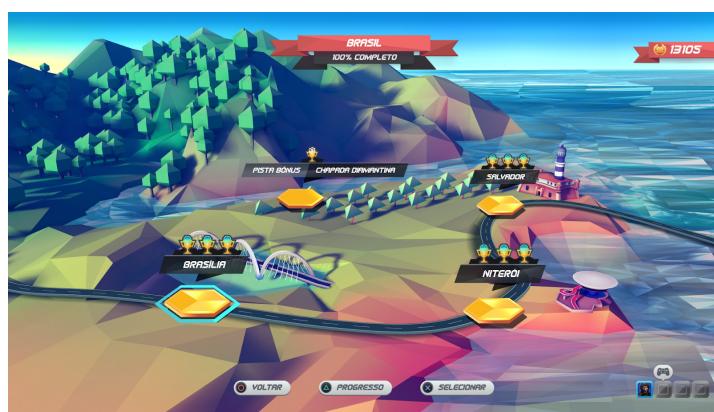
**Figure 18**

Screenshot of *Dandara*'s gameplay, with *Dandara* interacting with an NPC inspired by the Brazilian modernist painting *Abaporu* (1928) by Tarsila do Amaral



**Figure 19**

Screenshot of *Horizon Chase Turbo*'s Brazilian circuit map



Nevertheless, Brazilian games dealing with distinguishing Brazilian themes should not be seen as a novelty or a post-2010s phenomenon. As media archaeology theorists insist on pointing out, many modern-day achievements can be

linked or traced back to developments from the past—whether they have seen daylight or not. In this sense, Parikka argues that the works of Erkki Huhtamo and Siegfried Zielinski have been influential in opening up “the question of what the new is and how we should incorporate historical knowledge into thinking about current and future media.” He adds, “Thinking cyclically has been one media-archaeological strategy for critiquing the hegemony of the new” (Parikka 2012, p. 11). In this way, understanding certain techno-cultural and social phenomena from the past can illuminate media phenomena from the present.

As seen throughout this paper, TecToy made a bold *option* to develop games that somehow dealt with aspects of Brazilian culture, especially in a time—the 1990s—when the “video game culture” as a whole was mainly based on Japanese, North American, and even European settings, as well as historical and cultural aspects. Also, it is essential to emphasize that the games that served as the basis for Mônica no Castelo do Dragão (1991) and Turma da Mônica em: O Resgate (1993), respectively Wonder Boy in Monster Land (SEGA, 1988), and Wonder Boy III: The Dragon’s Trap (SEGA, 1989), were never officially launched in Brazil. Thus, instead of just licensing and launching the original games, which would be a much easier and less demanding and expensive task, TecToy opted for modding those games to render them closer to the Brazilian audience, even if it resulted in leaving out its catalog one of the best-known platform-genre game franchises since the 1980s to this day.

The games developed and launched by TecToy, as presented in this paper, are representative of a decolonial mark in video games (even if their creators were unaware of it) in a time when most of what was consumed in Brazil, in terms of pop culture, was either from North America or from Japan, especially among teenagers. Movies, TV shows, animated cartoons, music, and video games were almost synonyms for having contact with English or Japanese languages. The erasure of Global South content on the media landscape at that time is not something to be taken for granted, but to be reflected upon. As media archaeologists endorse, understanding media events from the past can help scholars better understand media events from the present, including its diverse processes and contexts. ■

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# Beyond design: algorithmic interfaces as epistemological agents

## *Além do design: interfaces algorítmicas como agentes epistemológicos*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Instagram's content recommendation system to understand how algorithms generate knowledge about social experiences. The findings suggest that Instagram uses its digital interface to analyze and classify relational patterns based on a user's information consumption history on the platform. We argue that the influence of PDIs extends beyond the scope of traditional design research. PDIs function as epistemological agents and methodological devices that co-produce social phenomena and insights into social structures. As a contribution, we introduce the concepts of Algorithmic Interfaces and Methodological Affordances to explore the interplay between digital interfaces, communication, and society.

**Palavras-chave:** Datafication, digital epistemology, platform digital interfaces, algorithmic interfaces, methodological affordances.

### RESUMO

O texto examina patentes de Interfaces Digitais de Plataforma (IDPs), focando no sistema de recomendação de conteúdo do Instagram, para entender como algoritmos criam conhecimento sobre experiências sociais. Os resultados indicam que o Instagram usa a interface digital para elaborar gráficos sociais, analisando e classificando padrões de relação baseados no histórico de consumo de informação na plataforma. Defende-se que a agência das IDPs vai além de um problema de design, pois operam como agentes epistemológicos, metodologias que coproduzem fenômenos sociais e conhecimento sobre o social. Como contribuição, o texto propõe os conceitos de *Interfaces Algorítmicas* e *Affordances Metodológicas* para estudar a relação entre interfaces digitais, comunicação e sociedade.

**Palavras-chave:** Dataficação, epistemologia digital, interfaces digitais da plataforma, interfaces algorítmicas, *affordances* metodológicas.

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**HE RISE OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS IN multiple spheres of daily life has positioned algorithms as key actors in shaping social experiences. More than merely providing personalized services, enabling individual empowerment, and simplifying everyday tasks, these platforms operate as programmable digital architectures. They were designed to record actions, extract variables, classify data, and identify patterns with predictive potential (Van Dijck et al., 2018). This ability to monitor, interpret, and intervene through the conversion of social experiences into digital data is known as datafication (Dencik, 2019; Flensburg & Lomborg, 2021; Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013; Van Dijck, 2014). Datafication functions primarily as an epistemological device and constitutes one of the fundamental pillars of platformization (A. Lemos, 2021; Van Dijck, 2014).

Digital platforms create favorable conditions that transform ordinary experiences—such as messaging friends, watching movies, or ordering food—into methods, instruments, and sites for collecting data on user behavior. Platforms thus act as broad agents of social transformation, reshaping not only services but also the social practices, politics, and cultures that surround these services (d'Andréa, 2020).

The ability to generate data is closely linked to the ways in which platforms are accessed and activated. Actions are elicited and unfold within classification regimes prioritized by each service at the level of the Platform Digital Interfaces (PDIs)<sup>1</sup>. PDIs facilitate use, promote engagement, and supply information to all actors involved in the network—individual users, third-party companies, APIs, databases, investors, developers, computational models, among others.

PDIs instrumentalize user interactions as methods for data collection and for generating knowledge about user experiences. In this sense, PDIs are not merely “tools for task completion” but are methodologies for the datafication of the practices they mediate. PDIs thus occupy a dual role: epistemological—enabling observation and discourse about social realities through lens of algorithmic mediations—, and ontological—by shaping routines and updating social repertoires through the uses, appropriations, and applications of these tools.

Despite the relevance and epistemological shift that PDIs represent, interface studies are predominantly conducted within the Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) field, generally focused on instrumental perspectives, user experience, and design praxis (Dourish, 2006, 2007, 2017). This perspective often limits the understanding of PDIs to their tangible properties—what Hookway (2014) describes as “surface”<sup>2</sup>—resulting in a misapplication of concepts, or what Latour (2013) refers to as a “category mistake,” where an inappropriate interpretive

<sup>1</sup>By Platform Digital Interfaces (PDIs), we refer to all digital interfaces that support the existence of the platform, including user interfaces (UI) as well as machine-to-machine (M2M) interfaces—such as APIs and backend interfaces. PDIs are closely tied to datafication processes, transforming social experiences into digital data.

<sup>2</sup> We will address the distinction between surface and interface in section 3.

lens is chosen or applied to the wrong logical type, ultimately compromising the analysis.

The category mistake in the concept of interface popularized by design, for example, complicates the investigation of how the epistemological programs of platforms reconfigure practices, modes of knowledge production, and the social role of digital objects today. This restricts studies of PDIs to tangible elements manageable by design practices, thereby reducing Platform Digital Interfaces to technical intermediaries and neglecting their role as translators of social experiences into methods, instruments, and objects of digital knowledge (Lowrie, 2017; Maalsen, 2023; Matzner, 2022; Van Dijck, 2014).

Ignoring the epistemological agency exercised by PDIs risks obscuring the conditions enabling contemporary phenomena driven by the informational agency of digital platforms—democratic and electoral crises via fake news (Feliti, 2022; Nascimento et al., 2022), environmental issues due to data center energy consumption (Beuscart et al., 2022; A. L. M. Lemos et al., 2021), threats to human rights and individual liberties (Castets-Renard, 2021), and the reconfiguration and precarization of labor (Grohmann et al., 2022), among others.

Moreover, without considering the epistemological nature of PDI mediations, we risk overlooking the motivations, objectives, politics, guidelines and purposes behind the development of methods enabling these phenomena. In other words, studying communication phenomena involving digital platforms requires treating Platform Digital Interfaces not merely as user-platform links but as epistemological agents. It is necessary to go beyond seeing interfaces as design problems or project issues, focusing instead on the processes enabling their creation, implementation, and maintenance as epistemological agents. This means transcending design and addressing digital interfaces as “matters of concern”<sup>3</sup> (Latour, 2004, 2008, 2015) for Social Sciences.

Given this context, our central question is: what implications of the epistemological agencies of digital interfaces remain invisible within traditional interface studies? The primary objectives are: a) highlighting the influence of PDIs in data collection and analysis, emphasizing their dual epistemological and ontological roles in shaping routines and updating social repertoires; b) discussing limitations inherent to design-centered perspectives prevalent in interface studies, which may obscure the epistemological and ontological roles of PDIs concerning the social phenomena they mediate.

We argue that the algorithmic mediations of PDIs create favorable conditions for establishing relationships and digital practices driven by epistemological modes of knowledge production, which, in turn, shape both the social and the digital realms through what we will define as algorithmic interfaces and

<sup>3</sup> Matters of concern refer to the critical position proposed by Latour, which seeks to move beyond essentialisms and stabilized definitions in the scientific field (matters of fact), focusing instead on the arrangements, events, and associations that emerge as important elements for analyzing a phenomenon.

Approaching Platform Digital Interfaces as a matter of concern for the social sciences means going beyond the stabilized definitions of interface propagated by the design field (interface as a matter of fact) and recognizing that PDIs play a fundamental role in understanding how platform-mediated social phenomena are established.

methodological affordances. Briefly, algorithmic interfaces are a critical and extended reinterpretation of the general notion of “Platform Digital Interfaces,” emphasizing the relational and epistemological qualities, through which algorithmically mediated experiences shape the construction of knowledge and society. methodological affordances, in turn, describe the epistemological possibilities for action emerging from these ‘modes of relation’ inherent to algorithmic interfaces, where the nature of the actions afforded is shaped by epistemologies specifically derived from algorithmic modes of knowing. The concepts of algorithmic interfaces and methodological affordances provide a theoretical framework more suited to capturing epistemological agency and social transformations mediated by algorithms and digital platforms.

To illustrate the dynamics of algorithmic interfaces and their methodological affordances, the paper will initially examine Facebook (now Meta) patents related to algorithmically mediated interface models, specifically developed for Instagram. The patents were identified through searches in Google Patents<sup>4</sup> using keywords associated with platform services (Van Dijck et al., 2018), such as “recommendation systems,” “ranking systems,” and “classification systems.” Subsequently, we filtered patents specific to social networking platforms due to their global prominence, as indicated by the Digital 2023 Global Overview Report<sup>5</sup>. Finally, we selected patents associated with the most accessed platforms in 2023 according to the same report, namely Facebook and Instagram.

The patent examination serves as a synthetic tool for exploring and describing the methodological qualities of PDIs, aiding in the characterization of the object of inquiry in these interfaces. In the third part of this paper, we outline the issue of category mistakes (Latour, 2013) for digital communication studies and position PDIs as concerns for Social Sciences. Finally, we present the definition of algorithmic interfaces and propose an outline for the notion of methodological affordances.

## 2. DIGITAL INTERFACE AS METHOD, “RELATIONS” AS OBJECT OF DIGITAL INQUIRY

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/see-posts-you-care-about-first-in-your-feed>

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://about.instagram.com/blog/engineering/designing-a-constrained-exploration-system>

Four years after the launch of its algorithmic feed<sup>6</sup>, Instagram disclosed some details about the logic behind this tool. In the blog post *Designing a Constrained Exploration System*<sup>7</sup>, Mahapatra (2020) explains the foundations of the platform’s content recommendation algorithms. The text highlights the concept of *feels like home* as the principle behind the interface redesign, suggesting that the experience of scrolling through the explore feed should feel like an extension of navigating the individual feed.

To create this sense of familiarity when consuming new content, Instagram employed a system that integrates machine learning and artificial intelligence to filter what can be seen according to the platform's knowledge of each profile's content consumption and social interaction patterns. The system is embedded across multiple layers of Instagram, interconnecting databases, users, and other platforms. It broadly operates as a Platform Digital Interface (PDI), and is primarily composed of models for content classification, ranking, and recommendation<sup>8</sup> based on data collected through user experiences.

To gather variables that feed content recommendation systems, the platform requires a methodology to identify and classify account interests. Instagram implements this through a sophisticated interface integrating artificial intelligence algorithms, interaction buttons, and content creation tools. Through this interface, Instagram constructs an information architecture with defined protocols to relationally monitor user actions throughout their interaction with the platform. In patent US11245966B2<sup>9</sup> (Saxena et al., 2022), Meta (Facebook) describes the interface proposal as follows:

systems and methods involve tracking user—interactions with respect to digital content items and generating and providing a creation insight including an identification of one or more products predicted to engage users of the networking system. (Saxena et al., 2022, p. 1)

The strategy involves deploying a broad and comprehensive digital interface (PDI) that leverages graphical user interfaces (GUIs) and APIs<sup>10</sup> (Figure 1, right side) to extract and classify interaction data from an Instagram account within the Meta network (including third-party services connected through APIs). Extracted and classified data are then utilized to create a social representation system known as a social graph (Figure 1, left side). The social graph serves as a methodological tool, instrumentalizing the analysis of user interactions with digital content, thereby enabling Instagram to identify elements in posts, compare them to similar content accessed on other platforms, classify these elements, and explore potential relationships among them.

<sup>8</sup> An accessible summary explaining how Instagram's ranking algorithm works, updated, can be accessed at the following link: <https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/instagram-ranking-explained>

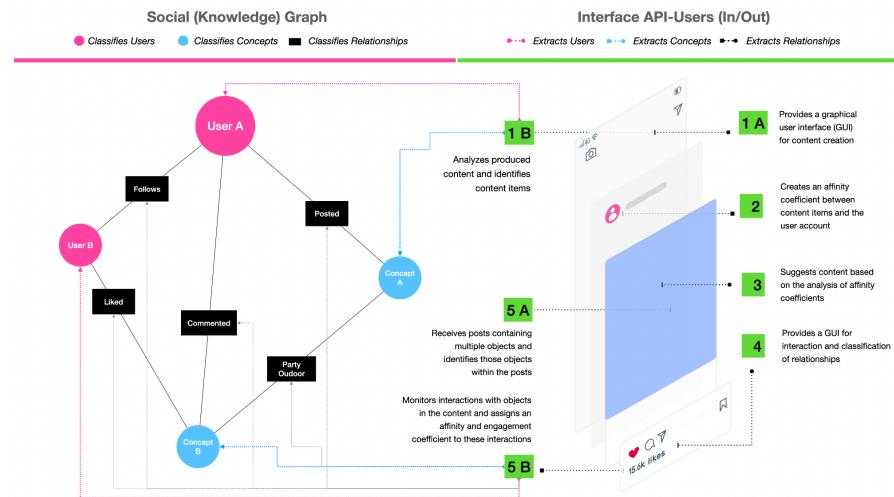
<sup>9</sup> The patent remains active and is the updated continuation of a series of patents that began in April 2017, one year after the implementation of the algorithmic feed on the platform. The Instagram blog post is from December 2020, when the platform also announced updates to its interfaces and user experiences. During this period, there was no observable change in the logic of action inscription or relationship mapping in the patents. The updates, when they occur, are mostly related to code and algorithm improvements.

<sup>10</sup> API stands for Application Programming Interface, which are programmable interfaces that enable connections between the platform and third-party applications. Through APIs, Instagram gains access to user experience data from other compatible services, which it can use to enhance its own ranking and recommendation systems.

# A

## Beyond design: algorithmic interfaces as epistemological agents

**Figure 1**  
General synthesis of the PDI.



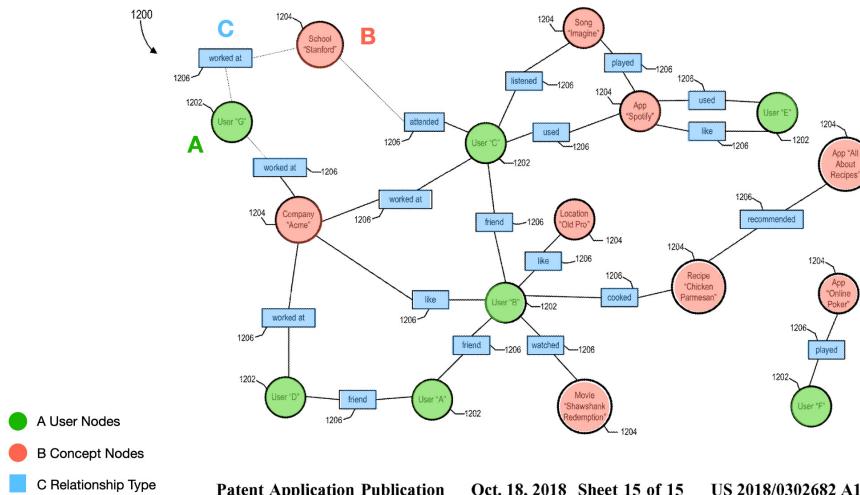
*Note.* From left to right: social graph created from user nodes and concept nodes; interface layers responsible for extracting, classifying, and refining relational data built during the interactive experience. Diagram synthesized from patent US17107592, Matching and Ranking Content Items. Available at: <https://patents.google.com/patent/US1124596B2/en?oq=US1124596B2>. Image credit: Elias Bitencourt, interface vectors modified from a Stories template on Freepik.

The social graph is represented by “user nodes” (Figure 2A), “concept nodes” (Figure 2B), and the “type of relationship” (Figure 2C) established among nodes. The Platform Digital Interface (PDI) explores various affinity-based relationships between “users” and “concepts,” classifying them and assigning values to compute proximity and similarity between nodes according to these relationships. In the social graph, users may represent individuals (humans), entities (businesses, companies, or third-party applications), or groups interacting or communicating through the network (Saxena et al., 2018).

Digital content produced by users is analyzed by artificial intelligence and computer vision algorithms, also patented by Meta (Garcia & Mitchell, 2015). These agents identify items in posts, classifying them as “concepts.” Concept nodes represent groupings of variables with which users interact. The system recognizes concepts such as places, websites, companies, celebrities, brands, audio clips, videos, games, activities, ideas, theories, or combinations of concepts (Saxena et al., 2022). Information about users, concepts, and relationships is enriched from interaction metadata associated with graphical user interface (GUI) elements or general platform interface components (e.g., APIs).

**Figure 2**

*Representation schema of social relationships employed by Instagram's content recommendation model*



Note. Patent US17107592, *Matching and Ranking Content Items*. Available at: <https://patents.google.com/patent/US11245966B2/en?oq=US11245966B2>.

According to the described methodology, if an Instagram user listens to the song “Imagine” via the Spotify app<sup>11</sup>, the system creates connections between the “user node” (Figure 3, “User C”), the “concept node” song (Figure 3, “Song Imagine”), and the “concept node” application (Figure 3, “App Spotify”), labeling these connections according to relationship types such as listened to, used, or played (Figure 3A, B, and C). Nodes and relationships are stored in Instagram’s system, each assigned unique identifiers enabling retrieval or association with other network objects (Saxena et al., 2022) potentially related or similar to concepts associated with “music” and “Imagine.” This flow of monitoring, classifying, and relational analysis feeds the platform’s content recommendation systems according to recent experiences, digital practices, and user profile routines.

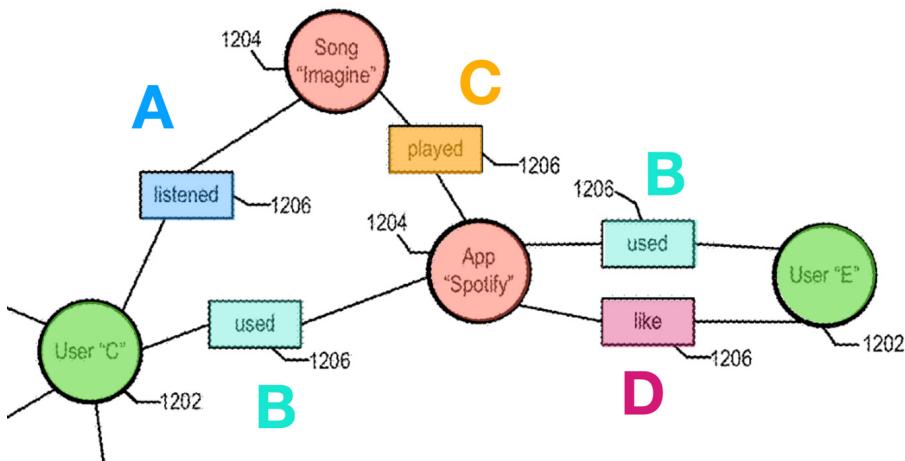
According to Mahapatra (2020), each node in the graph constitutes a potential information source for the entire system. People, media, celebrities, content, and relationships can all serve as input for machine learning models—either to predict recommended content (users or concepts) for a given profile or to use generated content as predictors of new associations. The interaction activities mobilized (and registered) in accordance with the platform’s

<sup>11</sup> In 2018, Spotify announced an integration with Facebook and Instagram, allowing users to share music (and data) on stories. See: <https://artists.spotify.com/blog/we%27ve-made-it-easier-to-share-spotify-to-instagram-stories>.

established grammar (Agre, 1994; Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Gerlitz & Rieder, 2018) enable the construction of a relational map outlining Instagram's interests.

**Figure 3**

*Detail from the representation schema of social relationships employed by Instagram's content recommendation model, emphasizing associations between user nodes and practice nodes*

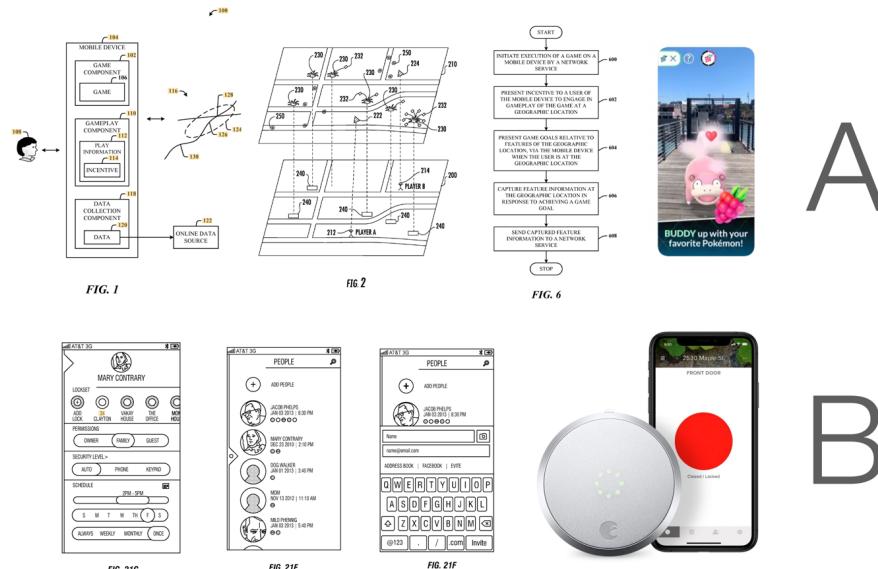


*Note. Patent US17107592, Matching and Ranking Content Items. Patent US 17107592, Matching and Ranking Content Items, available at: <https://patents.google.com/patent/US11245966B2/en?oq=US11245966B2>.*

In this context, the digital interface itself operates as a method, explicitly placing relationships as the primary object of digital inquiry—or, more precisely, treating the “relation” as a matter of concern (Latour, 2013). The principle of the Platform Digital Interface as a method is not restricted to social networks. The same mechanism—using digital interfaces as methodological systems for the datafication of tasks—is present in mobile app games and in nearly all “smart” devices on the market. The Microsoft patent that laid the foundation for the Pokémon Go game (Figure 4A), for instance, registers the invention as an “architecture that motivates and utilizes users as the means for capturing geographical data of a desired location” (Gerson et al., 2013, p. 1).

**Figure 4**

A) Illustrates the methodological architecture, matching between graphical interface and database, and flowchart of the employed method. B) Depicts graphical interfaces for enabling access and classifying relationships with authorized home entrants.



Note. Source A: Patent US8550909B2, *Geographic Data Acquisition by User Motivation*. Available at: Patent US8550909B2, “Geographic Data Acquisition by Motivating Users,” available at: <https://patents.google.com/patent/US8550909B2/en>. B: Patent US14205608, available at: <https://patents.google.com/patent/US9322194?oq=%92C322%2C194>.

A similar methodology can be observed in the August Smart-lock patent (US14205608, Cheng et al., 2016), describing a physical device with a digital interface enabling homeowners to grant or restrict home access based on registered smartphone presence. The app allows programming routines, access levels, and affinity or kinship classifications for contacts (Figure 4B). According to the patent, transmitted or received information “may employ logical resources such as AI and machine learning algorithms to provide analysis, insights, planning, learning communication, and initiate actions” (Cheng et al., 2016, p. 49).

What emerges from the methodological model of these Platform Digital Interfaces is the visualization of relationships based on similar reactions and practices towards events, topics, contexts, and products. PDIs assume roles beyond facilitating tasks or personalizing user experience. They exploit engagement actions and practices to extract relational data, generating knowledge relevant to platform economics (Sadowski, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). Consequently, digital interfaces assume methodological role in the datafication project. As coproducers of knowledge, PDIs invite epistemological inquiry, repositioning



“digital interfaces” from design concerns to matters of concern within the Social Sciences.

### 3. PLATFORM DIGITAL INTERFACE AS A MATTER OF CONCERN FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

*“what circulates when everything is in place cannot be confused with the setups that make circulation possible” (Latour, 2013, p. 32).*

With the popularization of digital platforms, the design of digital interfaces as datafication methods become more prominent. More than points of contact between humans and technical objects, they serve as instruments to continually update the social by generating knowledge about society in the making. As previously discussed, datafying user experiences in digital platforms does not merely enable active usability management; instead, it primarily seeks quantitative patterns that emerge from user interactions. These granular patterns follow logics of social classification dictated by the algorithmic identities of digital objects generated within the network, which do not necessarily align with classical sociological categories (Cheney-Lippold, 2017; Venturini et al., 2018).

This perspective suggests that digital platforms and their interfaces constitute epistemological infrastructures designed to understand the relationship between society and technology through datafying the practices emerging from these very interactions. Conflicts arise when media and technology studies or digital humanities adopt a simplified notion of “interface,” derived from Human-Computer Interaction (HCI). From a design standpoint, interfaces facilitate communication between human users and technological devices, providing feedback, assisting task completion, and delivering user-friendly experiences. However, for platforms, digital interfaces generate algorithmically oriented relationships to broadly produce knowledge through the datafication of user practices.

HCI is heavily influenced by user-centered perspectives and design-oriented procedures (Carroll, 2003; Y. Rogers, 2012), often distilling contributions from other fields into prescriptive protocols and guidelines for concrete design actions (Dourish, 2006, 2007, 2017). This instrumental orientation not only foregrounds which interface elements are presented to users and their implications, but also the very modes of doing and the ways in which those practices are carried out. Similarly, interface evaluation methods emphasize scrutinizing appropriations, operationalizations, and outcomes according to usability heuristics,

information-design principles, and user-experience criteria (Nielsen, 1994, 1995; Nielsen & Molich, 1990; Norman & Nielsen, 2016).

The issue with applying notions inherited from HCI to Science and Technology Studies (STS) is that the interface approach suffers from a category mistake (Latour, 2013). Unlike first-degree errors —such as those arising from sensory misperception or instrument misreading— category mistakes (errors of interpretation) affect the interpretative framework itself, reshaping how knowledge about the phenomenon is constructed. As Latour states, “it is one thing to embark boldly on a well-marked path; it is quite another to decide which path to take at the outset in the face of signposts that are hard to interpret” (Latour, 2013, p. 53). In this context, the inherited notions of interface in HCI lead to an error of direction, where the interface is approached as a mere tool or technical problem, rather than being considered as a critical actor in the construction of knowledge and social practices mediated by digital technologies.

First-order errors remain confined to the same interpretative framework. For example, in a study using content analysis as its method, a social media post may initially be coded as “authentic” and later re-evaluated as the product of bot automation. In this case, revisiting both the findings and the analytical instruments leads to a correction and refinement of the analysis without calling into question the content analysis approach itself. A category mistake, however, risks misunderstanding “the detection of the causes of the mistake itself” (Latour, 2013, p. 49). It occurs when an inappropriate interpretative framework is applied to the analysis or, as Latour suggests, when one attempts to extract from an object something it cannot provide—political meaning from subjective matters, scientific value from religious contexts, or purely technical attributes from creative endeavors.

In the case of Platform Digital Interfaces, a first-degree error would correspond to those correctable “interface mistakes” that can be manageable or avoided through design intervention. Conversely, an “interface category mistake” concerns about whether the “interface concept” popularized by HCI meets the verification criteria necessary for investigating algorithmically mediated communication phenomena.

Regarding the concept of interface, Branden Hookway (2014) argues that “interfaces” must be distinguished from “surfaces” because they do not refer to objects, things, or conditions but rather to “a relation between things or conditions, or to a condition as it is produced by a relation” (Hookway, 2014, p. 14). Surfaces, according to Hookway (2014), are the means by which things express themselves or can be read and accessed within a relationship. Although

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interconnected, interfaces and surfaces are entities with distinct problems and objects of inquiry.

Acknowledge the surface as a problem or as an object of analysis means paying attention both to the modes in which elements manifest on the surface and to the ways in which these objects produce the surface itself. This approach requires the use of methodologies that allow us to interrogate the surface “both on its own terms as a surface and in its means of referring to the thing that it surfaces, whether as an expression, a topology, a signifier, and so on” (Hookway, 2014, p. 13).

Conversely, the interface’s object of inquiry resides in what allows both the assembly of elements into relations and the behaviors those relations assume throughout the process (Hookway, 2014, p. 13). Treating the interface as a matter of concern means examining the conditions that bring actors into relation, how those associations are enacted, and the consequences that emerge from these chains of practice (Latour, 2012; Mol, 2002).

By emphasizing human attributes—experience (D. Norman & Nielsen, 2016), cognition (D. A. Norman, 1987), emotion (D. Norman, 2007; Picard, 2000)—and the instrumental properties of objects—perceived affordances (D. Norman, 2013), digital affordances (Murray, 2012)—HCI takes the interface as a “surface” amenable to design intervention. These emphases expose the category mistake noted earlier: they employ lenses that scrutinize only surface manifestations and their design impacts, instead of probing the “modes of relation” (interface - Hookway, 2014), its conditions of existence, and their latent possibilities for action.

By reducing the human–computer interface to its instrumental properties —treating it as a surface (Hookway, 2014)—design confines its examination of society–technology mediations to concerns strictly within its projectual domain. This instrumental viewpoint complicates examining emergent arrangements among people, objects, institutions, values, environments, power, and technology—arrangements emerging from the epistemological regime of datafication but extending beyond the narrow realm of technical-artifact creation.\

### FIRST APPROACH: EXAMINING ALGORITHMIC INTERFACES

Even design approaches most aligned with contexts of algorithmic mediation reproduce the aforementioned category mistake. Eugene Wei (2020), former Amazon product designer, coined the term *algorithm-friendly design* to refer to ways design can help the algorithm “see”. In Wei’s proposal, algorithm-oriented interfaces denote graphical user interfaces “optimized to feed the algorithm with

as much useful signal as possible" (Wei, 2020, p. np.). According to the author, this type of interface may be considered a variant of user-centered design, since when design "helps the algorithm see it is still seeking to promote the best possible user experience" (Wei, 2020, p. np.).

While Eugene Wei's term helps illustrates examples of interfaces documented in Meta's patents, it reproduces the aforementioned category mistake by focusing solely on the surface of algorithm-driven systems, seeking more efficient ways to enhance the user experience. As discussed, Platform Digital Interfaces (PDIs) are not merely guided by the ideals of task optimization or user experience design (D. Norman, 2013), based on cognitive (D. A. Norman, 1987) and emotional models (Picard, 2000). They are above all epistemological agents that use experience as a method to produce knowledge about usage practices.

Contrary to what the term algorithm-friendly suggests, treating PDIs as "modes of relation"—Interfaces (Hookway, 2014)—means examining the motivations that set mediated relations in motion. For this reason, PDIs, given their methodological qualities, must be understood beyond the tangible surface rendered by textual, graphical, sonic, tactile elements or activation routines. Platform Digital Interfaces demonstrate these "modes of relation" driven by an epistemological program operationalized through algorithmic methodologies. We propose to name these epistemological, algorithmically mediated and datafication-oriented relations "algorithmic interfaces".

By introducing the concept of algorithmic interfaces, we seek to foreground the "modes of relation" (Hookway, 2014) mobilized by digital platforms in order to examine how the social is implicated within the digital and how the digital itself is *inaugurated*—in the Latourian sense of instauration—as a possible social event. The project of algorithmic interfaces does not exclude the domain of design; rather, it originates in phases that precede the design methodology.

Where algorithm-friendly design (Wei, 2020) highlights user-interface optimization, algorithmic interfaces draw attention to the epistemological nature of mediations that define the society-platform relationship, positioning them as communicational agents co-responsible for reconfiguring objects of inquiry within communication research field.

These modes of relation, oriented by the epistemological regime of datafication and instantiated through engagement with digital platforms, are which we term algorithmic interfaces. The modes of relation of algorithmic interfaces rest on three premises: 1) The entities involved are not exclusively human, acknowledging the material agency of non-human actors, 2) An ontological articulation with machine-learning systems and artificial intelligence, and 3)



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An epistemological architecture designed to collect usage data and produce knowledge about the interactions it mediates.

These premises lead to at least four epistemological potentials or latent possibilities for action within algorithmic interfaces: a) the translation of the user into organic processors and sensors; b) the (re)framing of social practices as methodological baits; c) the production of experience as a laboratory for data practices; and d) the appropriation of memory, environmental resources, authorship, and the ethics of knowledge.

## **The Translation of Users into Organic Processors and Sensors**

When they invite users to produce and classify data in real-time about their interactions, algorithmic interfaces not only enable the expansion of distributed processing capacity, but also enable data processing as a culturally contextualized activity, translating users into organic processors and sensors. By integrating data extraction methodologies into the repertoires of everyday cultural practices, users operate both as sensors, allowing for granular data capture, and as processors, providing distributed classification and contextualization of these data organically. In this way, the modes of relation algorithmically driven by platforms become inseparable from cultural contexts.

The practice of data collection and processing becomes organic, adaptable, and integrated into various social repertoires. Liking a post, sharing content, giving a high rating to a service, or looping a playlist to boost artist engagement on streaming platforms may vary in terms of object, frequency, relevance, or meaning depending on regions and services used, but they remain data processing and classification practices tied to this “mode of relation” oriented by the epistemology of datafication.

Although labeling and classification prescriptions constitute platform-wide rules, the ways these relations establish themselves are unpredictable and indebted to contexts, appropriations, and cultural imaginaries (Bucher, 2017; Gibbs et al., 2015). This means that by translating users into organic processors algorithmic interfaces not only gain more granular insights into user behaviors but are also enriched by each new context in which they emerge.

## **The (Re)Framing of Social Practices as Methodological Bait**

Data production and labeling from platform interactions are mediated by templates and ephemeral digital objects that represent users (avatars, statuses, content, products, offers, etc.) (Gehl, 2011). For the systems, this ephemeral material comprises what Robert Gehl (2011) calls archives of affect: digital objects that operate as repositories of relational data that platform owners

can reorganize to construct particular forms of knowledge about users. The archives of affect (Gehl, 2011) are traces of the (re)framing of social practices as methodological bait. In algorithmic interfaces, content, products, services, and engagement routines can simultaneously serve as pretexts, triggers, targets, methods, and outcomes of interactions.

In other words, texts, images, and actions of producing, circulating, and consuming content, products, or services are also methodological baits that facilitate evaluating relations and qualifying affinities across the network. Writing a post on X (formerly Twitter), sharing an image on Instagram, or swiping right on Tinder says less about shared content or interpersonal affinities than about what these actions reveal concerning the processes and chains of practices they generate.

In fact, services, information, consumed products, and the relationships formed also function as “pretexts for better understanding” the actions and social repertoires embedded in the construction of these platform experiences. In turn, this prompts a reconfiguration of the ends and modes of practice of relations according to the epistemological potentials they offer the platform. Consequently, not only do the design and purpose of things and social practices shift, but, above all, the methods themselves are transformed, appropriating the modes of social doing as methodological pretexts for apprehending the social in the making.

### **The production of experience as a laboratory of data practices**

By orchestrating actions according to its own norms and grammars (Agre, 1994; Geboers et al., 2020; Gerlitz & Rieder, 2018), a platform also produces usage cultures that, while still dependent on contexts and appropriations, create permissions for users, organizations, and algorithms to learn mutually and adjust their practices according to datafication’s epistemological project.

The “modes of relation” of algorithmic interfaces are of great importance here. They create favorable conditions for digital platform experiences to function in two ways: as experiments and as laboratories. Experiences function as experiments in the sense that they provide a framework for knowing and studying social practices (Latour et al., 2019; Marres, 2017) tied to each service. User actions can be monitored and analyzed, generating insights into behaviors, preferences, and trends. In this sense, the platform becomes an experiment to understand the social in the making.

However, these experiences also function as laboratories: platforms provide an experimental epistemological infrastructure for testing ideas and shaping cultural repertoires oriented toward data practices (Bitencourt, 2021; Bitencourt

et al., 2021; Bruno et al., 2019). In this context, the laboratory is more than a mere site of observation; it is also an environment for creating practices and repertoires organized around the “modes of knowing the social” as defined by the platform’s own criteria. Interaction practices on the platform ultimately give rise to new modes of behavior and engagement—a usage culture driven by, and in service of, datafication through the development of practices and relations with latent epistemological potential; in other words, the adoption of habits and behavioral patterns better suited to collecting the data needed to generate knowledge about the experiences constructed on the platform (Bitencourt, 2021).

### **The Appropriation of Memory, Environmental Resources, Authorship, and the Ethics of Knowledge**

Algorithmic interfaces enact “modes of relation” that not only facilitate the production of knowledge about the social but also centralize the means, methods, and products of those knowledge-forming modes. Consequently, the epistemological potential of these relationships is directly tied to broader ethical costs, since algorithmically mediated “modes of relation” blur the boundaries between environmental sustainability and development, public and private spheres, individual and collective domains, individual rights, corporate legal security, and state sovereignty.

Given that the means and methods employed by digital platforms are predominantly proprietary, the creations, products, profits, and usage rights resulting from algorithmic interfaces generally belong to those who make their commercial enterprise possible (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; van Doorn & Badger, 2020). When combined with the environmental cost of intensive computational processing (Beuscart et al., 2022; Cubitt, 2017; Cubitt et al., 2011; A. L. M. Lemos et al., 2021, Lemos, 2021) and their capacity for long-term archiving on globally distributed servers, algorithmic interfaces enable States or corporations to appropriate, both synchronically and diachronically, collective memory, environmental resource management, authorship, and cultural production (Athique, 2020; Gaw, 2022; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). At the same time, the opacity of these interfaces’ processes hinders regulatory oversight and facilitate new ways to contest and (re) framing the ethical and political dimensions of platform-mediated practices (Amoore, 2020; Hill, 2020).

This implies that these modes of relation oriented by the epistemological project of datafication not only occasion permissiveness for the production of knowledge and culture but also promote conditions for appropriating and governing the knowledges and resources needed to generate and manage them. Thus, algorithmic interfaces create favorable scenarios for platforms to become,

at the same time, authors, curators, judges, managers, and archivists of the social memories and productions resulting from the relations they favor. In other terms, the epistemological product of algorithmic interfaces is a construct potentially contestable on environmental, knowledge ethics, common-good, intellectual-property, and individual-liberties grounds.

## SECOND APPROACH: CONTEXTUALIZING METHODOLOGICAL AFFORDANCES

The epistemological principles governing algorithmic interfaces do not prescribe isolated properties of the actors involved, nor do they determine specific effects; rather, they delineate the field of possible actions afforded by the relations they establish. The a latent propensity for actions outlined above are qualities of the “modes of relation” of algorithmic interfaces. They do not correspond to causes or consequences, nor are they properties inherent to platforms or algorithms; they are latent conditions within the relation (the algorithmic interface) that may, or may not, manifest in particular forms and effects depending on context.

As conditions for the emergence of possible couplings and actions, these epistemological permissiveness allude, with reservations we will make next, to Gibson’s notion of affordances. For Gibson (2015), affordances are the conditions that the environment “offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill. (...) something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment.” (Gibson, 2015, p. 119). However, in the field of HCI, the affordances of interfaces are popularly operationalized from the notion of “perceived affordances” proposed by Donald Norman (2013).

Contrary to Gibson’s original ecological idea, Norman (2013) reduced affordances to those perceived properties of an object that would determine its possibilities of use. This design-centric approach to affordances also suffers from the category mistake we mentioned. As design takes what is surface as interface (Hookway, 2014), the analysis of interface proprieties (modes of relation) often occurs only at the surface level (expressions, topology, signifiers). However, this “surface-restricted” comprehension of affordances does not allow discussions about the relational nature and practical consequences that algorithmic interfaces provide.

Bucher and Helmond (2018) highlight that alternative notions of affordances have been used to explore the relationship between society and technology. However, even when these approaches adopt a relational perspective—locating

affordances not in entities but in relations—they remain subject to anthropocentric bias (Latour, 2012). In practice, this means they tend to privilege the human over the technological, focusing primarily on properties of the relation as manifested through the effects, transformations, appropriations, and potentials of human uses of technology.

As an alternative, Bucher and Helmond (2018) propose a platform-sensitive approach. This approach reclaims Gibson's (2015) ecological proposition in a manner compatible with the relational nature of Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2012), expanding the notion of users to include non-human entities within systems and drawing attention to the role algorithms play in reconfiguring possibilities for action in the environment.

By repurposing the idea of the environment in Gibson's terms to recognize the specificities of algorithmic arrangements on each platform, they advocate a relational and multi-layered framework approach to affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Since algorithmic spaces not only offer something to their users but also rely on users to instantiate the digital environment, it becomes necessary to understand the affordances that social actions offer back to the digital. While other relational ideas of affordances help reflect on “what the digital enables the social to do,” the multi-layered affordances approach asks back: “what does the social offer to the digital?” (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

Aligned with the perspectives of multi-layered affordances, it is worth considering that the specificities in the modes of relation that characterize algorithmic interfaces prioritize the permissiveness with epistemological motivations. We propose to use the term methodological affordances to refer to these propensity for association and action oriented toward knowledge production that derive from algorithmic interfaces. Methodological affordances pertain both to the logical permissivities (latent or manifest) that facilitate inferences, deductions, abductions, and the unfolding of information about actors, as well as to the procedures employed to understand the relationships formed in these encounters—protocols, grammars of action, methods, etc.

Methodological affordances, therefore, are not properties foreseen by a given digital function, or by a norm for use, but the potentials for action through “ways of knowing” that emerge from the interplay of norms, prescriptions, appropriations, interests, contexts, temporalities, algorithms, and business models. Methodological affordances have a situated character and manifest in appropriations, resistances, and errors that arise in the course of actions. This means that methodological affordances are only empirically accessible from the practices, actions, and experiences of knowledge production that made a difference in the making of a given phenomenon examined.

The translation of users into organic processors and sensors; the (re)framing of social practices as methodological bait, the production of experience as a laboratory of data practices and the appropriation of memory, environmental resources, authorship, and the ethics of knowledge are examples of how the methodological affordances of algorithmic interfaces are expressed.

They point to mutual permissiveness that the relationship can promote, enabling the involved entities to trigger practices that will gain situated nuances depending on each context. The main specificities of methodological affordances in relation to the multi-layered affordances approach of Bucher and Helmond (2018) are: the epistemological orientation that specifies the established associations and the methodological nature which underlies the practices they engender.

Unlike the conceptions of affordances employed in HCI, the concept of methodological affordances outlined here does not primarily seek to contribute to surface-level debates within the field of design. Although it may assist designers in rethinking strategies for digital projects, it aims instead to illuminate the sociotechnical encounters driven by datafication and to provide a foundation for inquiries guided by questions such as: What methodological possibilities does social communication potentially afford to the digital? What communicational practices emerge from the epistemological frictions between the digital and the social? What do the modes of “acting to know” and the practices of “knowing through acting” reveal about the epistemologies and ontologies of communication today?

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

So far, we have highlighted that standardizing certain actions to extract information about digital experiences is an epistemological principle that characterizes the “modes of relation” mediated by datafication. Digital platforms employ digital interfaces powered by artificial intelligence resources and machine learning algorithms as methodological tools for producing knowledge about user experiences. To illustrate this point, we drew on the Digital Platform Interface models documented in Meta’s patents, which underpin the interfaces used by Facebook and Instagram. We emphasized that datafication positions DPIs as objects of inquiry for the social sciences, extending beyond a design-centered problem.

We further noted that the concept of the interface, as popularized by design, is influenced by user-centered and project-oriented perspectives, which are highly prominent in HCI studies. We argue that the instrumental bias of design activities introduces a category mistake in the concept of the interface reducing

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its understanding to the notion of surfaces that can be addressed through design interventions. This category mistake hinders the ability to examine the socio-technical relations that are established through the coupling of society and datafication, thereby limiting recognition of the mutual possibilities this association offers.

To address this category mistake, we proposed examining algorithmic interfaces and contextualizing their methodological affordances. We defined algorithmic interfaces as “modes of relation” oriented by the epistemological regime of datafication and instantiated through engagement experiences with digital platforms. The concept of algorithmic interfaces represents a critical reinterpretation of PDIs, moving beyond instrumental perspectives and placing particular emphasis on how interfaces shape the construction of knowledge and the experience in platform society.

Moreover, we suggested that algorithmic interfaces create multilateral affordances, enabling the social to become an object of digital epistemology inquiry and the digital to establish itself as a social ontology. Methodological affordances refer to the situated epistemic permissivities that emerge from the “modes of relation” between society and technology mediated by algorithmic interfaces. As potential examples, we identified the capacity to translate users into organic processors and sensors; the repositioning of social practices as methodological pretexts; the instrumentalization of usage experiences as laboratories for data practices; and the facilitation of the appropriation of memory, environmental resources, and the ethics of knowledge.

Finally, the concepts and directions outlined in this work do not seek to replace the contributions already consolidated, but rather to offer new perspectives for dialogue across communication studies, digital humanities, and digital methods (Rogers, 2013). By emphasizing the centrality of algorithmic interfaces and their methodological affordances, we propose to highlight the digital not as a property of technological media, but as an ontology of the social, instantiated and sustained through its own regimes of knowledge production.

In this sense, it becomes necessary to move beyond certain approaches to interface analysis that remain prevalent in research across design, communication, media studies, and the digital humanities, such as: digital formalism, which reduces interfaces to graphic conventions, usability patterns, and engagement metrics; digital functionalism, which conceives interfaces merely as technical tools for data collection and analysis; digital empiricism, which treats interfaces as repositories of objective traces of actions performed within the environment, sustaining immediate hypotheses or explanations; and digital observationalism, which regards interfaces as fields for describing usage cultures and emerging

imaginaries, while dissociating them from the methodological projects implicit in their design. In contrast, the notion of algorithmic interfaces and methodological affordances invites us to understand digital interfaces as epistemic and ontological operators of the digital itself, providing insights into the modes of knowledge production and (re)existence that characterize platformized society. **M**

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# Beyond sense: objectivity, subjectivity and intersubjectivity from the perspective of comic book journalism

## *Para além do sentido: objetividade, subjetividade e intersubjetividade sob a perspectiva do jornalismo em quadrinhos*

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### ABSTRACT

We examined two graphic narratives contained in Joe Sacco's *Reportagens* (2016): *Hébron: por dentro da cidade* and *A guerra subterrânea em Gaza*. Our choice is justified by the fact that the author participates in the dialogues and travels through areas of the region; for reporting similar topics published in competing outlets. We aspire to understand these narratives as a way of knowing the world and sharing everyday life, thinking about subjects with their individualities and pluralities beyond the subjectivity vs. objectivity dichotomy. We start from the assumption that presence is also intersubjectivity. We used Gumbrecht's (2010) aesthetic analysis proposal as a methodology, based on its effects of presence, which in our work are used as an analytical category.

**Keywords:** Comic book journalism, presence, subjectivity, objectivity, intersubjectivity.

### RESUMO

Examinamos duas narrativas gráficas contidas em *Reportagens* de Joe Sacco (2016): *Hébron: por dentro da cidade* e *A guerra subterrânea em Gaza*. Nossa escolha é justificada pelo fato de o autor participar dos diálogos e percorrer áreas da região; por reportar temas semelhantes e publicados em veículos concorrentes. Aspiramos ao entendimento dessas narrativas como um modo de conhecimento do mundo e partilhamento do cotidiano, pensando os sujeitos com suas individualidades e pluralidades para além da dicotomia subjetividade vs. objetividade. Partimos do pressuposto de que a presença também é intersubjetividade. Empregamos como metodologia a proposta da análise estética de Gumbrecht, a partir de seus efeitos de presença, estes que em nosso trabalho são utilizados como categoria analítica.

**Palavras-chave:** Jornalismo em quadrinhos, presença, subjetividade, objetividade, intersubjetividade.

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## INTRODUCTION

**C**OMICS JOURNALISM EMERGES from the need to tell stories in depth, focusing on topics that are usually excluded from traditional journalistic coverage or by adding new data to journalistic investigations briefly reported in the mainstream media. It can facilitate understanding when addressing complex issues such as domestic violence, abortion, rape, murders, wars, catastrophes, among others. The news in graphic narrative format has the potential to capture the reader's attention due to the visual content that complements the text.

When journalism appears through the language of comics, a tension arises between what can and what cannot be verified. Unlike a recording, a drawing cannot be verified. The artist constructs their art according to their intention, highlighting elements that may or may not be consistent with reality. According to Sacco (2016), the artist draws from a truth that is not literal, which allows for multiple interpretations and styles. Even if comic artists work from the same reference, their drawings will be different. This process does not eliminate the artist's journalistic aspiration. Through investigative refinement, the artist adheres to professional obligations, accuracy in reporting, attention to the dialogues and speech of interviewed characters, engagement, and fact-checking.

In this context, the aim of our work is to understand that comic journalism makes subjectivity apparent; it reveals what is latent<sup>1</sup> and hidden by technique within the everyday context of the journalistic industry. When it emerges, it creates a space of presence through intersubjectivity. We aspire to comprehend these narratives as a mode of knowledge about the world and a sharing of the everyday, considering subjects in their individualities and pluralities beyond the dichotomy of subjectivity vs. objectivity. We begin with the assumption that presence is also intersubjectivity. Both objectivity and subjectivity, when analyzed separately, are found within the realm of their totalities. Conversely, when interwoven through discursive language, they assume mutual characteristics capable of constituting new knowledge. Intersubjectivity is guided by a reflective process that may result in certain epiphanies that produce presence at some time, in some place, for someone, at some time and place.

To expand the proposed theoretical horizon, we analyze two graphic narratives from *Reportagens* by Joe Sacco (2016): *Hébron: por dentro da cidade/Hebron: A Look Inside the City* (published in *Time* magazine on March 12, 2001) and *A guerra subterrânea em Gaza/The Underground War in Gaza* (published in *The New York Times Magazine* in July 2003), works in which the journalist covered conflicts between Jews and Muslims. Our selection is justified by the author's participation in the scenes and dialogues, and for reporting similar themes

<sup>1</sup> Latency, according to Gumbrecht (2014), is that which is clandestine—which cannot appear—it does not know if it will appear.

published in competing outlets. The local population lives among rubble, the inhabitants of these territories struggle to survive, refugee homes in the Gaza Strip are demolished for allegedly serving as terrorist bases, and residents are terrorized and trapped by random shootouts between Palestinians and Israelis.

To investigate the corpus, composed of the graphic narrative *Reportagens* by Joe Sacco (2016), we adopt Gumbrecht's (2010) aesthetic analysis methodology, drawing on his "effects of presence," which in our study are used as an analytical category aimed at perceiving certain layers that display both objective and subjective features, provoking a sensory experience in the reader.

To mark its philosophical origins and situate the use of the term *intersubjectivity* in our theoretical, methodological, and analytical framework, we rely on the principles of Marsciani (2014), Azevedo and Wielewski (2016), Piva et al. (2010), Cerutti-Rizzatti (2014), and Ribeiro (2015). In discussing the precepts of journalistic objectivity and subjectivity, both in theory and practice and intertwined with and between contemporary subjects, we draw from the works of Bucci (2000), Traquina (2007), Melo (2006), Tassis (2023), and Vilas Bôas (2023). From an aesthetic approach grounded in textuality, visuality, experience, emotion, and sensitivity, we employ the principles of Will Eisner (2010) and Thomas Giddens (2018), highlighting how images, words, and sequences interact and influence reading processes, and how different forms of communication relate in comics. Given the need to understand comics journalism as a new space for language and societal discussion—and all that this entails—we apply various configurations of journalistic practice as discussed by Silva and Lucas (2023), Assis (2011), Vilas Bôas (2023), Silveira and Huf (2021), Teixeira (2020), and Sacco (2016). To comprehend certain layers that present both objective and subjective properties in their structure, we rely on the discussions of Gumbrecht (2010), Ferreira (2020), Monay et al. (2017), Lage (2018), and Silva (2017).

## THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

In addition to examining the epistemological and philosophical foundations of the concept of intersubjectivity, we also define our stance within this understanding.

According to Marsciani (2014, p. 11), in the pursuit of subjectivity, part of twentieth-century philosophy and human sciences added the complication of a necessary and demanding intersubjective dimension, in which subjectivity can neither be inscribed nor conceived: the subject is an "inter-subject," an "always-collective-subject," since we can no longer conceive of subjectivity without cultural determination, against a background of anthropological sharing of

conditions of existence and persistence. Culture—any culture—would render us intersubjectively determined subjects; primarily, and above all, subjects whose forms of individuation must vary along more or less regular lines of a real genesis.

Starting in the 20th century, according to Azevedo and Wielewski (2016, p. 480), thinkers devoted themselves to investigating the forms of interaction between human subjectivities (intersubjectivity), which led to the recognition of the importance of language in this process.

According to Marsciani (2014, p. 11), phenomenology, in its entirety, closely followed the development of a philosophical theory of subjectivity, making it one of the main paths to be followed, and, in its achievements, brought to the forefront—to great surprise—the theme that appears to be constitutive of transcendental intersubjectivity. Phenomenology reaches a kind of limit on its path, in which the final determination of the meaning of the world phenomenon reveals itself as being produced in a dimension proper to a structure that assumes the forms of meaningfulness in which subjectivity is shaped in reciprocity—an intersubjective subjectivity.

Piva et al. (2010, p. 72) clarify that subjectivity and intersubjectivity are themes addressed by phenomenology. They are based on some aspects of Hegel's theory and the foundations of Husserl's phenomenology, who appears to have been the first to use the term intersubjectivity. Hegel proposes a critical revision of the philosophy of the subject, ranging from Descartes to Kant, whose fundamental characteristics are reason, autonomous will, and the power of reflection. It assumes that, for every process of socialization of the individual, there is a series of intersubjective obligations based on ethicality — ethical life. The central question for him is not origin, but the transformation and expansion of society, in such a way that individual freedom and the particularities of each individual may be balanced with social bonds.

Cerutti-Rizzatti (2014, p. 228) analyzes intersubjectivity according to Bakhtinian principles, as the relationship of the “self” with the “other,” mediated by language, in distinct social, historical, and cultural environments; or as the encounter between subjectivity and alterity. Thus, the intersubjective reveals the social insertion of individuals in a specific environment and their connections with others through language, revealing their complex historical-cultural chronotopic implications. The researcher proposes a reconciliation of the intersubjective dimension in the work of reading, considering the act of reading as an encounter between readers and authors, and understanding it as a cultural process (Cerutti-Rizzatti, 2014, p. 226).

Thus, Piva et al. (2010, p. 72) show that texts on intersubjectivity present the interactional notion as a fact. In this way, the idea of interaction is considered

one of the common foundations of intersubjectivism. The concept of intersubjectivity is also used to designate different processes or aspects of the same process, often being used as equivalent to concepts such as: relation, interrelation, interpenetration, interdependence, bond, among others.

According to Ribeiro (2015, p. 208), intersubjectivity would imply a direct communication between two subjectivities, without a physical substrate interfering in this communication. Intersubjectivity refers to two theoretical strands: 1. Intersubjectivity refers to two subjectivities that communicate directly and create a reality common to both; 2. Intersubjectivity refers to two subjectivities that communicate indirectly, using verbal or non-verbal processes.

On one hand, the journalist, when present in the scenes of their comic report, narrates the dialogues of the characters and their own conversation with them. Therefore, the graphic narrative provided by comics draws on the first theoretical current of intersubjectivity, that is, there is direct communication between two or more subjectivities. On the other hand, comics, by themselves, especially based on their aesthetic structure, follow certain common rules in their form. The verbal language present in the speech balloons refers to the dialogues of the characters, as well as describes names of places and things or even periods of time. The illustrations guide the reader in their literary analysis of the comics. These aspects represent indirect communication between the narrator, their characters, and the reader, requirements of the second theoretical current.

With no intention to defend or criticize the theory of intersubjectivity, we simply mark its philosophical origins and situate the use of the term within our theoretical, methodological, and analytical process.

## JOURNALISM: OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY

In this section, we use the assumptions of Eugênio Bucci (2000), Nelson Traquina (2007), José Marques de Melo (2006), Nicoli Tassis (2023), and Valéria Maria Vilas Bôas (2023) to discuss the principles of journalistic objectivity and subjectivity in their theory and practice, “intertwined” with the subjects and “among” the subjects in contemporary times.

According to Melo (2006, pp. 37–38), the issue of objectivity originates with journalism itself. This occurred shortly after the “bourgeois revolution,” when, in Europe, journalistic practice took two different paths: the emergence of opinion journalism in France, marked by an interpretive flow of reality, and in England, the anchoring of objective journalism in which factual reporting predominated, separated from commentary. Traquina (2007) emphasizes that the value of objectivity emerged in journalism in the 20th century, based on

a fundamental change that occurred in the 19th century, where primacy was given to facts rather than opinions.

According to Tassis (2023), from the beginning of the 19th century, the transformations experienced by Western societies, especially in European countries and the United States, began to reverberate in journalistic practices. A reflection of this is that media outlets with a clearly combative character saw their spaces restricted, and explicitly opinionated texts were confined to special sections and signed columns. In line with Melo (2006), the cult of objectivity reduces the journalist's creativity, which is then canonized in editorial manuals, a gesture that signifies a reduction in their reflective capacity regarding reality.

Objectivity, when used as the most suitable model for producing a certain type of journalism, tends to be a typical characteristic of those who manage large corporations—a submission to hegemonic power. Thus, objectivity appears as a technique of “doing,” a brief moment that does not allow for adequate reflection. On the other hand, there is a subjectivity that, in a way, controls this “doing,” dictating the orders.

For Traquina (2007), objectivity marks the methodology that the journalist must follow, facilitates and allows its indiscriminate use, saving time for the media outlet in which they operate; objectivity serves as an instrument that privileges the subjectivity of hegemonic power, that is, as interest, opinion, and ideology of those who manage large media corporations. According to Tassis (2023), this results in the recognition of information as a product of commercial value, which transforms journalistic practice into an information industry.

According to Traquina (2007), from the end of the First World War and the experience with propaganda, a distrust arose among journalists regarding the notion that “facts speak for themselves”; consequently, objectivity is accepted as a mirror of rules and processes to be followed. In the 1930s, objectivity came to hold some professional value, becoming an ideal (utopia) in the face of the impossibility of overcoming subjectivity in the presentation of news. For Melo (2006), objectivity is confused with truth; in its promotion and dissemination, impartial substances are concealed within the current journalistic activity of the mass media. Similarly, Traquina (2007) argues that objectivity in journalism is not the negation of subjectivity, but rather consists of a series of “interpreted actions” used by subjects, ensuring credibility as a disinterested (impartial) part that seeks protection from potential critics (protectionism) of their work.

On one hand, Traquina (2007, p. 146) states that, despite all the criticisms of objectivity, modern journalism is undeniably associated with a notion of equidistance between the journalism professional and the various social agents, acting with fairness, observing the “various perspectives,” and maintaining

independence. On the other hand, Bucci (2000, p. 90) explains that there is another sphere of journalistic independence that relies on the personal convictions of each professional. That is, as individuals and members of society, journalists also possess their cultural competencies formed from their religions, political ideologies, ethnicities, and sexual preferences, among others.

Bucci (2000) affirms that there is no distinction between subject and object in journalism. Thus, a question arises with ethnologists who consider man both subject and object of study simultaneously, asserting that neither has its existence recognized in nature: "but rather in language, that is, in the symbolic, and, furthermore, both see themselves not as subject and object, but as subjects who see each other as others" (Bucci, 2000, pp. 91–92). For the author, this helps to understand the difficulty imposed on the reporter in the pursuit of objectivity, such that the intention to report the event accurately depends on sources, subjects, and their "relations"; therefore, in this process, there is a mystification alongside the desire to perform their work faithfully. The researcher states that objectivity, in practice, is completely impossible: "nevertheless, everyone continues to believe in it — and it is at the foundation of the trust pact the press maintains with society" (Bucci, 2000, p. 92).

Given that there is no cultural distance between the man who is the reporter, the man who is the news, and the man who is the recipient of the information, Bucci (2000, pp. 92–93) questions: "from where, then, can objectivity emerge?" The author clarifies that: "objectivity is a word that comes from object," and says that a discourse is objective when it expresses the characteristics of the object itself and not those of the narrator (subject). As an arbitrary product, "journalism" uses the assumption that narration can be objective and consequently faithful to the characteristics of the object without distortions caused by the subject. There is entirely objective information, such as the announcement that the temperature on Raja Gabaglia Avenue, in Belo Horizonte, is 13 degrees Celsius. It is an objective statement, and that suffices, just as a game score—nil-nil—is objective information. Reporting that the president of Clube Atlético Mineiro has been meeting with the team's coach and player agents at the club headquarters since ten in the morning is also objective, but insufficient, as it lacks complementary information. "What is the meeting about? ... Who sets the tone of the conversation? Who is leading ... the discussions?" (Bucci, 2000, pp. 92–93).

Thus, objectivity is dependent on the subjective actions of the individuals who are the news (Bucci, 2000, p. 93), so that news is observed through subjective experiences pertaining to those responsible for informing the viewers. The less elementary the information, the more subjective aspects it depends on to become objective. Therefore, the news is produced by men, who are subjects.

# A

## Beyond sense: objectivity, subjectivity...

Consequently, the journalist is a subject who speaks of another about a third and fourth subject (Bucci, 2000, p. 93). From this perspective, journalism has no objects, only subjects. All those involved in press activities—such as writers, reporters, presenters, camera operators, editors, and photographers—possess their subjectivities; thus, they are the same as their objects, that is, the subjects who serve as their objects. How, then, can they describe them objectively? (Bucci, 2000, p. 93). For the author, the only possible answer is a subjective one, since objectivity depends on the journalist as well as on the story that will be investigated and consequently told. “The best objectivity in journalism is, therefore, a fair, transparent, and balanced presentation of *intersubjectivity*” (Bucci, 2000, p. 94, our emphasis).

According to Ferreira (2020, p. 627), subjectivity, sensory perception, and feelings, combined with the pursuit of scientific objectivity, must be thematized and valued through critique and research rigor, as the affective and sensory can also be instrumentalized to incite dishonest actions. This potential concerns not only writing practices but also a characteristic of human realities that must be resignified for and with the reader. If it is not possible to be literally impartial and objective, objectivist thinking generates significant methodological concern. “This critique brings forth the idea of scientific neutrality and the use of scientific discourse and its supposed impartiality to legitimize colonizing projects” (Ferreira, 2020, p. 627). The rigorous work of the journalist does not consist merely of a methodical relationship between the subject’s investigation and the analyzed object. This distance created between subject and object “would be a side effect of this excessive scientific expectation concerning objectivity, which promised neutral results, especially under certain positivist understandings” (Alonso, 1995 cited in Ferreira, 2020, p. 632).

When journalism claims objectivity, it constitutes a critical “intersubjective” field among the actors who are present and produce the facts, those who observe the production of these events, and others who, through reports, become informed about the events that occurred.

Therefore, this mixture of objective and subjective characteristics within the language of comics crosses the aesthetic and literary compositions that comprise the journalist, the characters, time, and space. This tension seems to synthesize an intersubjectivity that is not given by its closure, but by its openness, in a constant attempt to reflect on and understand what is subjective and what is objective.

## ON GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

Following the principles of Will Eisner (2010) and Thomas Giddens (2018), based on an aesthetic approach rooted in textuality, visuality, experience, emotion, and sensibility, which together present both objective and subjective perspectives (intersubjectivity), we discuss how images, words, and sequences interact and influence reading processes, and how different forms of communication relate within comics.

According to Eisner (2010, p. 7), during the twentieth century, storytellers developed a language capable of expressing a variety of thoughts, sounds, actions, and ideas in a sequential order, separated by panels. This initiative expanded the possibilities of a single image. Throughout this process, a modern narrative art form known as comic books was developed. In the twentieth century, sequential art evolved based on print media, especially comic books and newspaper strips. Today, digital technologies allow the expansion of creative boundaries of the fundamental principles of graphic narrative.

Giddens (2018) defines comics as a form of knowledge that explores or presents different modes of communication: visual, textual, graphic, linguistic, spatial, and narrative, through a complex structure of multiple panels. This language displays aesthetic and formal rules that may be applied, used, or rejected for different purposes. According to the researcher (Giddens, 2018, p. 4), although criticized and dismissed as art, comics became widely popular in the social imagination and, across several fields, expanded their themes. Comics have had a significant impact on cinema, television, merchandise, clothing, political protest, and violent crime. They offer the possibility of crossing the boundaries of rational language, recognizing the mediation between the order of already-known forms and the disorder of a world not consciously structured.

According to Eisner (2010, p. 2), reading comics is an act of aesthetic perception and intellectual effort. As they present an overlap of words and images, it is necessary for the reader to apply their interpretive, visual, and verbal skills. The rules of art—perspective, symmetry, brushstroke—and the rules of literature—grammar, plot, syntax—intertwine with one another. “Likewise, art, as a primarily emotional or sensory phenomenon, produces, interprets, and values its forms according to specific rules: of creative processes, formats, and display; thus, aesthetics implies the presence of rules” (Giddens, 2018, pp. 10–11).

In this regard, Giddens (2018, pp. 10–11) argues that aesthetic engagement allows us to see other layers (such as atmosphere, texture, form, visuality, and broader aesthetic dimensions), which, along with formal rules, influence the meanings present in the encounter with an object (intersubjectivity).

Giddens (2018, pp. 17–18) states that the capacity of comic pages to be organized without a linear or temporal sequence challenges an essentialist view of comics as a sequence. However, this does not mean denying that the simultaneous reading of multiple images is an essential part of the interpretation process. In this way, a timeless concern with hybridity in comic forms can be observed, with various elements and modes of communication “interacting.” Texts, images, page design and quality, print formats, and printed materials may influence the meanings and interpretations present in the reading of comics.

According to Eisner (2010), the texts that accompany certain graphic narratives add thoughts that are not illustrated, written in hand-drawn letters in a style that matches the feeling expressed by the message. “The visual treatment of words as graphic art forms is part of the vocabulary” (Eisner, 2010, p. 2).

Eisner (2010, pp. 7–8) argues that understanding an image requires an exchange of experiences (intersubjectivity). Thus, for the message to be understood, the artist must recognize the reader’s life experience. The artist uses images stored in the memory of both parties. This endeavor will depend on how the reader perceives the meaning and emotional impact of the image. Style and technique are foundational elements of the image and what it communicates.

In the modern comic strip, the “pictogram” of devotion would be expressed through variations in calligraphic style. Through lighting or “atmosphere,” its emotional quantity could be altered. Finally, combined with words, it would form a precise message to be understood by the reader. (Eisner, 2010, p. 9)

According to Eisner (2010), the encoding, although not authored by the artist, results in an alphabet that expresses a specific context, creating an entire emotional plot. The graphic artist presents narratives with deeper meanings that address the complex human experience.

Comics play a crucial role in critical understanding, allowing us to employ an open and creative cultural aesthetic. Giddens’s (2018) assertion indicates the emergence of both objectivity and subjectivity. In our understanding, intersubjectivity is created because this aesthetic openness functions not only in creation (objectivity) but also in (re)creation (subjectivity). Each panel becomes just one element in a complex system of knowledge—both integrated and separate, limited and unlimited. According to Giddens (2018, p. 17), defining the forms and marks of literature or the words of a statute is also a subjective encounter between reader and reading, through which meaning is formed by the subjective “interactions” between a text and its audience. This is related to aesthetics and

the connection of comics with reading processes and presentation styles, providing meaning through sensory experience and mediating reality and concept.

According to Eisner (2010), the emotion of speech is perceived within the balloon through lettering. In many cases, these features result from the artist's style and the characters interacting within the balloons, which may increase or decrease the volume of speech through calligraphy and onomatopoeia. "The typographic composition indeed has a kind of inherent authority, but also a mechanical effect that interferes with the personality of hand-drawn art" (Eisner, 2010, pp. 25–26).

The sequence of comic panels reveals a subjective reading. McCloud's statement, as cited by Giddens (2018, p. 16), indicates that comics use the "gutter," the empty space between panels, which we must look at as we move from one frame to another.

Objectivity becomes subjectivity when aesthetics generate reflections, which differ depending on the medium through which it is conveyed. "But this 'other world' is also a world of rich humanity and aesthetic experience, of the complex human realities that dwell beyond the limits of rational order" (Giddens, 2018, p. 2).

Although some thinkers have attempted to make the observation of beauty a task of objective experience, they were constantly undermined by the inherent contingency of aesthetics, production, and perception; the messy subjectivity of aesthetics could, at best, only imitate or imply a more rationally objective truth. (Giddens, 2018, p. 3)

According to Giddens (2018, p. 6), in psychoanalysis, the unconscious is often understood as a set of repressed memories, hidden experiences from the past that return to the present. Eisner (2010) states that it is possible to narrate an isolated event and transfer the action to different temporalities. The images presented by Joe Sacco, for example, show devastated cities with hundreds of dead bodies scattered on the ground—occurrences from different temporalities that remain in the present. The panels that make up this perspective allow for a deeper analysis, provoking an emotional effect on the reader.

Although it has value and understanding, "intersubjectivity" requires a prior separation that functions as a binomial: theory and practice, reflection and action, objectivity, and subjectivity. Comics offer multiple perspectives and sensitivities: "there is more in between than words and images... Readers do not interact with comics only through their eyes; their whole bodies are involved in the execution of the work" (Giddens, 2018, p. 21).

Neither journalism nor comics can escape aesthetics; they are always linked by their common features, as human objects: “life, the world, our experiences, our emotions, our understandings—whether encoded in legal rules or in comic book panels—are all filtered through the aesthetic perception of our senses” (Giddens, 2018, p. 4).

Epistemological deconstruction, supported by the theoretical and empirical frameworks that compose our work, places us in a privileged position of investigation. By analyzing some of the formal dimensions of comics, we perceive that this medium can explore worldly complexities through its constitution and reading.

As comic books demonstrate, reality is not determined by objective sources, but by human contexts, preferences, and aesthetic practices. Graphic narrative, on the contrary, does not aim to separate objective and subjective issues, as it considers their encounter (intersubjectivity). Comics, with their various forms of knowledge and communication, expose this incompleteness and inevitability.

### OBJECTIVITY, SUBJECTIVITY, AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN COMICS JOURNALISM

In this section, we analyze comic journalism, emphasizing that one of its main characteristics is the journalist's testimony and participation as an indicator of presence in their own investigation, allowing for an interaction that moves into the intersubjective field.

According to Silva and Lucas (2023, p. 89), comics journalism—a practice that has only recently gained space in traditional news outlets—represents a new opportunity for journalism to be explored in this time of extreme change and uncertainty about the profession.

Joe Sacco, in the 1990s, with the work *Palestine* (1996), was a pioneer in publishing a major comics reportage. With detailed illustrations reproducing faces, landscapes, weapons, and debris left by grenades, bullets, and landmines, he allows the reader to follow him through destroyed homes and cities. According to Assis (2011), Sacco softens certain points in his narratives with the intention of easing fragments of history; this is justified to hold the reader's interest and help them digest more complex themes. The journalist reintroduces the characters in the comics through their own voices; the actors are reconstructed not only as objective witnesses—their characteristics, feelings, and actions are illustrated and textualized.

According to Vilas Bôas (2023), reportage is one of the genres in which testimony is an important strategy for gaining the reader's trust. Thus, Joe Sacco,

when reporting a fact, narrates himself in solidarity “with a source or even to offer a framework of understanding for the reader/viewer from a personal experience” (Vilas Bôas, 2023, pp. 31–32). According to Silveira and Huf (2021), comic journalism allows the journalist to insert themselves in the text as an author-observer and/or even as a participant in the narrative, thereby describing feelings, emotions, and affections through the journalistic investigation process.

Teixeira (2020, p. 10) highlights that journalism, comics, news, and daily life are all forms of communication through which the world communicates. Furthermore, the journalist seeks, through reportage, to make the reported event more human. They must add a much broader context than what we are used to encountering in our everyday lives.

As Sacco (2016) emphasized, a major danger for journalists is the propagation of fidelity that serves balance. Thus, it is necessary for a journalist to deepen their investigation and not take certain accounts as truth, regardless of who speaks them, and not absorb the truth as neutral merely due to an equal distribution of space. In the journalistic field, there is a belief that its own methods of investigation, narrative construction, text editing, data treatment, reliable sources, and equal measurement for hearing all sides involved in a conflict would be factors capable of guaranteeing the neutrality and transparency of the narrative, functioning as a mirror of reality.

When referring to terms such as objectivity and subjectivity, as Silva and Lucas (2023, p. 90) highlight, we consider the current ways in which the journalistic field presupposes such expressions, taking into account the differences between genres: informative, interpretative, opinionated; and formats: reportage, brief, interview, etc. Thus, these boundaries tend to contract as new media, productive logics, possibilities for textual and discursive structuring, and reading/communication contracts between outlets and audiences emerge. Silva and Lucas (2023, p. 90), based on the concepts of Lochard and Boyer (2004, pp. 63–64) in a discussion about communicative purposes in the media, argue that the use of drawn images may indicate the pursuit of a more informative discursive result, based on narrative and description, or a more opinionated result, based on caricatures and drawings that suggest argumentative potentialities and, ultimately, narratives.

Sacco's (2016) interest, as declared by the author in *Reportagens*, lies primarily with those whose voices are usually silenced. He asserts that it is not his role, as a journalist, to balance the voices of the characters with the apologia of hegemony. The powerful must be cited so that their words can be weighed against the truth, not to obscure it. He clarifies that the positive aspect of a medium such as comic journalism is its freedom from the constraints of traditional journalism.

According to Silva and Lucas (2023), Sacco rejects the realism of 19th-century journalist-illustrators in favor of an extremely caricatured style, influenced by authors like Crumb, developed for satirical humor rather than as a record of real events. Moreover, Sacco frequently portrays himself within the scenes, emphasizing the journalistic process and the figure of the journalist, rejecting the photographic tendency to pretend that there are no people behind the camera or that subjectivities do not influence the image.

Thus, subjectivity is present in the decision-making throughout the process, as Sacco (2016) questions: "How to respond, for example, when asked whether drawing can aspire to *objective* truth? Is it not precisely objective truth that journalism is about? Are drawings not *subjective* by nature?" (p. 5, emphasis in original). The connection that arises from objectivities and subjectivities opens space for intersubjectivity, in its latent form, to emerge.

Silva and Lucas (2023, p. 98) explain that Sacco is influenced by the debates surrounding journalistic objectivity and subjectivity, yet his works are not confined to one side, frequently employing techniques from both. Therefore, the connection between these themes and his work is not fixed; it may vary depending on the context of each work, its respective conditions of production, and his own productive practices.

In this regard, Joe Sacco (2016, p. 5) claims to have no problem with the meaning of objectivity, as long as it is not merely to address a fact with pre-conceptions. He does not believe that most journalists are capable of reporting a fact, regardless of its relevance, with objectivity. According to the author, an American journalist arriving in Afghanistan cannot immediately detach herself from her American perspective and the prejudices that may influence the report she will produce. For instance: the American soldiers she accompanies are her compatriots and share values similar to her own; how, then, can she "perceive them as instruments of a nation-state that operates according to its own interests, which in practice — in objective terms — they are?" (Sacco, 2016, p. 05).

The objective of jointly working with the perspectives of the reporter/journalist, the foreigner, and the illustrator is to convey feelings through drawing and text. Teixeira (2020, pp. 8–9) emphasizes Scott McCloud's statement that, in all figures, meaning is insignificant, variable, and completely differs from images of reality, since the meanings of the text are assigned by the reader:

You give me life by reading this book and "filling in" this iconic (cartooned) form. Who I am is irrelevant. I'm a little piece of you. And if who I am matters less, maybe what I say will matter more. Well, that's the theory. The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled—an empty shell that we inhabit to

travel to another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon. We become it. That's why I decided to draw myself in such a simple style... However, the phenomenon of non-visual self-awareness may, to a lesser extent, apply to our whole bodies... Our identity and consciousness are invested in many inanimate objects every day—our clothes, for instance, can change the way others see us and how we see ourselves. (McCloud, 2008, pp. 36–37, cited in Teixeira, 2020, p. 9)

Using the arguments presented by Mazur and Danner (2014, p. 237), Teixeira (2020, p. 4) asserts that Sacco combines memory and reportage, highlighting the potential of comics as a tool for deeper and more emotional journalism. The specific elements of comics, such as caricature and exaggeration in Sacco's case, along with the inclusion of the artist-reporter as a character, raise particular questions, requiring the journalist to confront the inevitable subjectivity inherent to the journalistic activity.

Subjective expressions are not limited to individual emotions, contrary to the arbitrary predominance that promotes a relationship positioning reason and emotion as opposing terms. If emotion is, in fact, a physical response of the individual to a stimulus—for example, smiling, joy, and happiness arising in moments of triumph and glory—on the other hand, sadness, crying, and unhappiness occur in moments of loss and defeat. Therefore, the meaning of “affection and sensitivity seems to allow us to go beyond a notion that associates it with the individual and to include a *collective dimension* in the construction of ethical, aesthetic, and moral dispositions that also constitute our values” (Vilas Bôas, 2023, pp. 30–31, *our emphasis*).

Silva and Lucas (2023, pp. 89–90) treat the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity not as mere criteria that determine whether a work belongs to one category or another, but rather as more fluid states, which the comics journalist can bring to the surface of their work at certain moments, depending on the textual and visual constructions they produce. In this regard, Sacco attempts to balance two discursive tactics: objectification, which seeks a distance expressed through the reporting of facts and sources, and subjectification, which aims for an approximation and placement of one's own point of view.

According to Teixeira (2020, p. 6), the artist, reporter, or comics journalist will be the one who chooses which stories they wish to tell. The narratives present a variety of forms of expression. The author's and interviewees' feelings, for example, with their testimonies and accounts in a report, as in Joe Sacco's work, must always be contextualized. Teixeira (2020), paraphrasing Juan Bordenave, emphasizes that the message must be inserted in a constant frame of reference. In other words, how existence can be applied to it. Thus giving it a representational

# A

## Beyond sense: objectivity, subjectivity...

dimension. By creating narratives, it gains in size and depth. Communication extends and conveys its content to readers, as communication is confused with life. In literary works, meaning belongs to the reader because it is the reader who masters the senses of the work. Authors are not owners of their works. They belong to the readers, who continuously rewrite and reconstruct their meanings.

In summary, the great benefit of a medium inherently interpretative, such as comics, is that it did not confine me to traditional journalism. By making it difficult for me to absent myself from a scene, it does not allow me to make impartiality a virtue. For better or worse, the comic medium is uncompromising, which leads me to make choices. In my view, this is part of its inherent message. (Sacco, 2016, p. 6)

The images are connected to the text, which gains volume and expands its dimensions. We follow the stories of comics journalism with our own perspectives and imagination—places from which we draw the true meanings of the work. However, according to Teixeira (2020, p. 11), there is a story behind all of this. The subjectivities of others attempt to reproduce what they truly saw, but this is already understood; thus, there is now only one fully imagined reality. The fact is no longer as relevant for either the journalist or the historian. Imagination is no less important than material reality.

I insist on this because I want to reinforce the idea that in the process of transcription, writing, or drawing, there is a definitive break with the past. The images, graphically orchestrated in “comics journalism,” will be present to break, often, with the monotony of the text—perhaps to give it greater movement or versatility. (Kelly, 1972, p. 53 cited in Teixeira, 2020, p. 11)

According to Silva and Lucas (2023), Sacco’s visual inscription in his own reports is not solely intended to generate a sense of effect concerning his physical presence in the mentioned location, allowing him to vary the strategies of his discourse. This visual representation goes further. Sacco, self-portrayed in a cartoonish manner, appears more than just as a comics journalist—he emerges as a kind of extension of a self from previous works.

The logic present in the graphics and images displayed by Joe Sacco’s graphic narratives seems to oscillate between the poles of objectivity and subjectivity. In other words, it appears that intersubjectivity inhabits this oscillating condition. Thus, we cannot see it in its entirety, as it is employed through the objective and subjective pilgrimages of the comics journalist, his characters, and readers.

## BEYOND MEANING: POSITIONS AND CONCEPTS IN MOTION

In this section, we discuss the objectivity/subjectivity dichotomy in modern experience, drawing on the notion of the production of presence, which signifies the willingness of subjects to engage with the objects of the world without attributing meaning. We also highlight the influences and foundations behind Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's conceptual development of a nonhermeneutic field, shedding light on thinkers who play a decisive role in the gradual evolution of his thought.

Gumbrecht (2010) supports his formulation based on two metaphysical levels grounded in the presence of the world: the material surface related to the culture of presence and the semantic depth based on the culture of meaning. According to Silva (2017), if human beings consider themselves part of the world of objects, this relationship gives rise to the movement of the culture of presence in conflict with the movement of epistemological saturation, aiming at a living organic approximation that interacts through affections, via a comprehension that is not merely based on meaning.

According to Silva (2017, p. 509), Gumbrecht presents the culture of presence as a possibility and condition for the traditional understanding of language, emphasizing the hegemony of meaning production by the hermeneutic culture, which specializes in metaphysics of representation. Thus, he aspires to free himself from the hermeneutic predominance in the human sciences so that they may move toward other paths—non-interpretative and non-metaphysical—that are capable of accomplishing, within this Cartesian scientificism, that which meaning (signification) cannot convey.

For Gumbrecht (2010, pp. 76–77), the difficulty in developing non-interpretative concepts lies in the fact that the predominance of the Cartesian worldview at the beginning of modernity, and of hermeneutics since the early twentieth century, makes it initially seem impossible for us to perceive concepts that fulfill the practical purpose and theoretical grounding of anything other than interpretation. In this way, Gumbrecht's philosophy opens up to epistemological diversity, to the investigation of non-classical themes such as nature and its characteristic polysemy, and to the “interrelations” of subjects (intersubjectivity).

In this same movement, historians' growing attention to the process of epistemological modernization is highlighted and framed within the phenomenon of the perception of temporal acceleration between the years 1780 and 1830. In his theoretical foundation, Gumbrecht begins with authors who demonstrate contemporary affinities with his epistemological intentions.

Jean-Luc Nancy points out that, “unlike the conception of ‘real presence’ in medieval theology, presence can never become part of a permanent situation; it

can never be something we can, so to speak, hold on to" (Gumbrecht, 2010, p. 82). The author emphasizes that presence in contemporary conditions means birth as an arrival that erases itself and returns to itself.

In this sense, Gumbrecht (2010), in accordance with Karl Heinz Bohrer's hypothesis, states that the ephemerality of certain appearances and disappearances pertains to the fundamental characteristic of aesthetic experience, referring to this as the negation of aesthetics itself—that is, the denial of awareness of evanescent presence.

Through Martin Seel's postulate, Gumbrecht (2010) confirms that appearance is amalgamated with presence, and anything that appears is present because it offers itself to the individual's "senses." Thus, the appearance of things always produces an awareness of the limitations of human control over such things [*Unverfügbarkeit*].

Gumbrecht (2010, pp. 89–90) also enables us to understand his theory through the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who refers to the non-hermeneutic dimension of the text as its "volume" [*Volunlm*] stressing the tension between its semantic and non-semantic components, and aligning this with the tension between "world" and "earth" developed by Heidegger (2010) in the essay The Origin of the Work of Art. "It is the 'earth' component that allows the artwork or poem to 'anchor itself'; it is the 'earth' that grants the artwork existence in space" (Gumbrecht, 2010, pp. 89–90).

Therefore, what is before, through, and beyond can communicate, for the appearance of anteriority, when crossed by an epiphanic moment, may go beyond meaning because its action is what matters—not its arrival. In light of the above, we find the possibility of the thesis defended by Gumbrecht (2010, p. 10) not to annul the culture of meaning by the predominance of the culture of presence, "but the *interrelation between them...* certainly within the culture of presence there is a paradigmatic *interrelation* with sensitive reason" (Silva, 2017, p. 509, our emphasis). According to Lage (2018, p. 75), a culture of presence is primarily associated with its spatial relation; whereas in a culture of meaning, the emphasis lies in its temporality and in the action of man upon it, as a transformative act upon history and the world. Everything changes "together," contrary to hermeneutic thinking which, in its positivism, views man as a modifying agent rather than a participant who is modified by things. Gumbrecht (2010) argues that individuals have thought of as the dominant self-reference in a culture of meaning. In a culture of presence, however, the body becomes the self-reference.

The arts are wonderfully rooted in substance, in the human body, in stone, in pigment, in the vibration of the entrails, or in the weight of the wind in the reeds. Good art and good literature begin in immanence. But they do not end there. This clearly means that it is the task and privilege of aesthetics to swiftly render present the continuum between temporality and eternity, between matter and spirit, between man and “the other.” (Gumbrecht, 2010, pp. 83–84)

Accordingly, Gumbrecht (2010) draws upon Heideggerian propositions that place the work of art as a prominent site for the happening of truth, a space where Being reveals and withdraws itself, presenting things in ways other than the usual. He indicates that Being signifies all that appears and hides in the event of truth. When revealed in a work of art, Being is neither spiritual nor conceptual; it belongs to the dimension of things. Therefore, Being is not meaning—it is presence. Being occupies space because it has the characteristics of a thing; it has substance. Being is not a metaphorical reference. Gumbrecht (2010) cites Heidegger’s essay *Zur Erörterung der Gelassenheit*, from 1944–1945, which indicates that “Being” withdraws rather than offers itself to us, such that “the things that appear” in the withdrawal of Being “cease to have the character of objects” (p. 95).

In this way, Gumbrecht (2010) asserts that art is the emergence and the event of truth. He then questions whether truth arises from nothing. He illustrates that the meaning of “nothing” is not the opposite of that which “is.” If we think of that which “is” as a present object, this shift is illuminated by the existence of the work as a true being. “Truth never results from objects that are present and commonplace. On the contrary, the opening of the Open, the unveiling of what is, only happens insofar as openness is projected” (Gumbrecht, 2010, p. 98).

According to Gumbrecht (2010, p. 81), it would be worthwhile to reestablish contact with things in the world outside the subject/object paradigm, avoiding interpretation without passing judgment on it.

We infer that an intersubjectivity, constituted by the conjunction of objective and subjective poles, has the potential to simultaneously traverse a culture of meaning and a culture of presence. However, the moment journalism claims objectivity, it constitutes a critical intersubjective field among the actors who are present there—individuals who produce the facts, those who observe the production of events, and others who, through accounts, become informed about such occurrences.

## LINGERING WITH THINGS: *DASEIN* AND PRESENCE

At this point, we present some considerations on “Presence,” a concept so central to Gumbrechtian philosophy, from the perspective of Heidegger’s *Dasein* (being-there), especially in relation to the possibilities and conditions of language for presentification. We emphasize that, within the scope of Presence and *Dasein*, the concepts of Being and Serenity are arranged, complementing each other in the direction of the understanding proposed in our work concerning the production of presence.

We highlight that our investigative proposal directs its attention to the concept of *Production of presence* by Gumbrecht (2010), whose studies are grounded in Heidegger’s theses. Thus, in our research, Heideggerian thought serves only as an introductory approach to the understanding of *Dasein*. Due to its high degree of complexity, we discuss *Dasein* based on authors who delve directly into the work *Being and time*.

It is important to note that, in the Brazilian version of *Being and Time*, the translator Márcia de Sá Cavalcante Schuback (2006, p. 309) chooses to replace the expression “being-there” (*ser-aí*) with “*pre-sence*” (*pre-sença*) in the translation of the word *Dasein*. The author explains that *pre-sence* is not synonymous with existence or with man. The word *Dasein* is commonly translated as existence. In short, she says she chose the translation *pre-sence* to avoid being trapped by the implications of the metaphysical binomial essence-existence. To overcome the immobility of a static location that “being-there” might suggest. *Pre-sence* is not synonymous with man, human being, or humanity. It evokes the ontological constitution process of man, human being, and humanity. It is in *pre-sence* that man constructs his mode of being, his existence, his history, etc.

According to Gumbrecht (2010), *Dasein* means human existence that relates functionally and spatially to the world, that is, “being-in-the-world.” This world that connects with *Dasein* is an already interpreted world; thus, it is “within-reach.” The thesis on the position of “Being-in-the-world” as revelation is characterized by Heidegger as *serenity* [*Gelassenheit*], whereby things may happen by themselves. The intention to reveal Being does not arise from *Dasein*, but from Being itself. *Serenity* can also be understood through its potential to place itself outside the distinction between activity and passivity.

Therefore, we understand that *Dasein* has the function of being-in-the-world, in contrast to the individual who places himself in front of the world; thus, serenity can set aside any kind of imagination and transcendent projection: “*Dasein* should not occupy a position that could be connected to the manipulation, transformation, or interpretation of the world” (Gumbrecht, 2010, p. 97).

In this way, the attention to the ontological predisposition of always being a possibility of *Dasein*, its condition as an existential structure of being-in-the-world, to the detriment of its constant erasure through the reduction of Being to its entity, given in the rehabilitation of the proper/authentic mode of understanding, brings to light the possibility for *Dasein* not to reproduce or update the world it is in, but to project itself by creating new ones. (Monay et al., 2017, p. 143)

In one of the dialogues from *Conversations on a Country Path*, Heidegger writes that “serenity would then be not only the path, but also the movement” (Lage, 2018, pp. 79–80). The concept of “serenity” provides the conditions for a reflection that, within Heidegger’s philosophical framework, could overcome the modern dichotomy between “subject/object”—that is, the notion of a subject conceived as eccentric in relation to the world, whose main objective is to act upon and transform it through the accumulation of information and technical knowledge.

Thus, comics journalism documents certain passages and consequently reveals “subjectivities” implicit in texts and illustrations. This documentation becomes necessary in opposition to the incessant sequence of thought coupled with the daily speed of modernity, which together render serenity—understood as a reflective process and constitutive of the thing—unfeasible:

Heidegger writes that a face-to-face response would be best, since “in writing, thinking easily loses its dynamism. But the most difficult thing to maintain there is precisely the multidimensionality proper to its realm.” It is, therefore, possible to perceive that the desire to overcome metaphysics is related to the recognition of a moving thought—by no means stagnant, univocal, or fixed—that focuses (and cares) more about the movement of walking and thinking than about the goal to be reached. (Lage, 2018, p. 80)

According to Silva (2017, p. 513), the concepts of *Dasein* and presence are interconnected as substance, linked to a spatial dimension, and associated with movement. Gumbrecht (2010) highlights that the most important converging point, on one hand, is the “tension” that occurs “between” “meaning,” understood as that which transforms culturally specific things, and on the other hand, “presence” or “Being.”

According to Lage (2018), the non-hermeneutic and non-metaphysical perspective goes beyond the dismissal and irrelevance of the production of meaning, proposing approaches that lie beyond or beneath the interpretive principle; thus, it increases the level of complexity in contemporary views on

the materialities of communication—in our case, enveloped in the theme of comics journalism.

According to Gattass (2007, pp. 18–19), to reduce literature—in our case, comic books—to a mere procedure of remediation would be to strip it of its richness and complexity. As they are not classified within pre-established categories, these elements bring academic discussion to new approaches in theorization. According to the author, this is the point at which such theories converge with Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's historiographic project. Both require a more complex perspective. To assume and value the intersubjective dimension of artistic works related to the subjectivities of the narrator, characters, and readers requires a cognitive effort equivalent to that proposed for portraying the past, implying the production of its presence in the present.

If we do not concern ourselves with speed, but rather with the path, it seems to us that producing presence does not mean invoking certain historical periods as truths, but rather revealing, through sensitivity, facts present in certain testimonies. In summary, it is possible to conclude that the transcendent ontology of presence involves objectivity arising from sensitivity, which reflects individuals who become present when connected by common issues.

The experience an individual has when throwing themselves into the world becomes part of their subjectivity. An experience resulting from the interaction with/of other subjectivities, therefore, is intersubjective. This journalism, which navigates between objectivity and subjectivity, consequently constructs intersubjectivity. It is not about knowing the world through one's mental faculties, but through the experience of the subject who projects themselves into the world. This knowledge is not predetermined because it is not concerned with achieving an objective, only with its movement. The epiphany, with its fleeting appearance and disappearance, establishes the *Dasein/Presence* of Being and its relationships with the things of the world. This being-in-the-world, when related to the world, becomes part of itself through its own relationship with that very world.

### REPORTS UNDER ANALYSIS

In order to investigate the corpus composed of the graphic narrative *Reportagens* by Joe Sacco (2016), we employ Gumbrecht's (2010) aesthetic analysis methodology, based on his concept of presence effects, which in our work are used as an analytical category. Our intention is to investigate layers that contain both objective and subjective qualities that provoke a sensitive experience in the reader.

Joe Sacco (2016) considers *Hebron: A Look Inside the City*, published in *Time* magazine, to be his worst work in comics journalism. The journalist-cartoonist asserts that, when working for such a prestigious outlet, he abandoned his usual first-person approach and returned to practicing the objective journalism he had learned in college. As a result, he claims to have failed in his attempt to adequately represent the injustice that continues to affect thousands of Palestinians subjected to control by hundreds of Jewish settlers. It is worth noting that some reports include graphics and maps: *Hebron: A Look Inside the City*, for example, features a panel showing the division between Palestinians and Israelis in the city of Hebron. This, in a certain way, helps the reader to navigate the content to be read, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

Panel from the chapter “Hebron: A Look Inside the City” (p. 16)



Note. Sacco (2016).

In addition to being present in the comics themselves, the author explains the origin of his encounters with the characters, triggering various situations and altering the impression that the reporter is merely a spectator.

Sacco, through multiple themes, narrates events situated in different dimensions and layers (subjectivities/witnesses) of the past, each presenting unique feelings and affections that do not belong to the order of logical reason. Through his graphic narratives, he documents experiences against oblivion, placing greater value on the actions of ordinary people than on the objectivities of the elite. Taking the side of the weaker party, neutrality and objectivity dissolve in the midst of the author's explicit partiality. Thus, he does not allow impartiality to be transformed into virtue.

# A

## Beyond sense: objectivity, subjectivity...

This is evident in the following excerpt: "You can feel the evil energy in the air of the West Bank—the sparks of friction between two peoples who hate each other." The author presents the hatred that exists between Jews and Muslims, the desolation, the feeling of hopelessness. Also, the strength that people possess to fight for survival, even under adverse conditions. The journalist moves between opposing sides in the process of his journalistic investigation, creating a dialogue between the journalist himself, characters, and readers (Intersubjectivity).

Sacco shows details about residents of the Gaza region through drawings that represent episodes not witnessed firsthand but narrated by the journalist's sources, relying on spatial and temporal references. In Figure 2, the journalist recounts his meeting with Mohammed Abu Ilhalaweh, who, in February 1994, was in the Haram al-Khalil mosque when Baruch Goldstein, a resident of the Kiryat Arba settlement, entered and killed 29 Muslims during a worship service. Sacco reports his interaction with his characters—an action commonly omitted in traditional journalism. Often, this exchange provides more detail and information than the content being reported. A photo on the wall of Abu Ilhalaweh's house recalls the bullet that left him paralyzed that day.

**Figure 2**

*Panel from the chapter "Hebron: A Look Inside the City" (p. 17)*



*Noie. Sacco (2016).*

At the Bachelor's Union in H1 (Figure 3), Joe Sacco shook the hand of a man whose son had been killed by Israeli soldiers. In the materialization of testimonies, pain, and suffering, the narrative is anchored in a density of detail capable of interrupting the reader's rhythm, making them perceive, beyond the scene presented in the drawing, the environment and its physical meanings. Sacco was led to the front, between rows of men listening to the exhortations of a succession of speakers. Dozens of masked youths entered marching, staring down the crowd. Behind these masks lies a sensibility supported by faces that, at first, are not revealed but nonetheless produce presence in an epiphanic moment that emerges with their entrance and vanishes swiftly with their exit. In this way, Sacco conducts a project of making present the faces that are normally neglected in/by other media approaches. Therefore, the humanization of the other's experience presents itself as being-in-the-world, a subject who "interacts" with the world and its individuals, existing in the world alongside them.

**Figure 3**

Panel from the chapter "Hebron: A Look Inside the City" (p. 18)



Note. Sacco (2016).

The journalist (2016) considers *The Underground War in Gaza* a successful project. Representing *The New York Times Magazine* opened doors for Joe Sacco at the Israeli Government Press Office. He had the opportunity to spend 24 hours with soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), stationed at their posts on the border with Egypt. This opportunity allowed him to communicate Israeli concerns about arms trafficking while questioning the escalation of the campaign to demolish Palestinian homes.

Going beyond his initial intentions, Sacco places himself at the center of events; this presence mediates between opposing axes. By making himself

present in the narrative, he introduces “life experiences,” opinions, fears, among others. In doing so, he follows the traditional parameters of journalistic activity, “wandering between” journalistic objectivity and subjectivity, materializing testimonies and experiences in the form of his reports.

*The Underground War in Gaza* presents, through a vignette, the division between Palestinians and Israelis, represented by the two sides of the city of Rafah—the Egyptian and the Palestinian. Thus, a mental framework is created that enables the reader to imagine, through texts and illustrations, the daily life of the population living in the conflict zones.

Rafah is composed mainly of refugees and is one of the most militant Palestinian cities, surrounded on both sides by Jewish settlements and by a security zone controlled by Israel that crosses the border. The IDF considers Rafah its most active front. Misfortune for some and merit for others, Rafah became the entry point for weapons arriving for militants in the Gaza Strip via a tunnel system extending from Egypt.

**Figure 4**

Panel from the chapter (*The Underground War in Gaza*, p. 28)



Note. Sacco (2016).

Joe Sacco (2016) witnessed a house being demolished along with other dwellings. Colonel Avi (Israeli army), in conversation with the journalist, argued that Palestinian gunmen were using these houses as strategic positions to target an excavator. According to the colonel, it was an empty house with no family inside. According to Sacco (2016), the IDF's claim that the demolished houses

were generally uninhabited was theoretically accurate; for Palestinians, however, it was the opposite of the truth. The author presents opinions from both sides that reveal inconsistencies in various testimonies and, above all, makes it clear that it does not matter who initiated the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis—the brutality is so immense that discernment is almost always forgotten. The number of victims (mostly innocent) continues to rise.

In the refugee camp in the Gaza Strip, right on the border with Egypt, Joe Sacco reports a battle between Palestinian tunnels and Israeli bulldozers in Rafah. According to the journalist-cartoonist, a bulldozer tore down rows of houses and pushed the debris into another lot. In protest, children retaliated by throwing stones. Upon seeing the neighboring house collapse, a desperate woman asked Sacco if hers would be the next to fall.

Regarding Joe Sacco's graphic narratives, we note that comic journalism creates the possibility of discovering new things about individuals and events through personal exchange (intersubjectivity), which most conventional journalists tend to omit from their reports.

**Figure 5**

Panel from the chapter (*The Underground War in Gaza*, p. 30)



Note. Sacco (2016).

In the previous panel, with Joe Sacco present in the scene, and in accordance with our theoretical-methodological-analytical framework, we highlight three dimensions and/or layers of presence: first, the “*subjectivity*” of the journalist himself, materialized through his accounts; second, the “*subjectivity*”(ies) of the other characters present in the scene, materialized through their testimonies and “*interactions*”; third, the “*subjectivity*”(ies) that may be or are constituted with

each reading, according to the different readers who engage with the narrative. Thus, this interaction of subjectivities results in an intersubjectivity.

The serenity expressed in Joe Sacco's strokes illustrates the emotions and affects experienced and enacted by the characters through their expressions, causing the reader to feel the pain and suffering inflicted by the war that still afflicts those populations.

In our understanding, regarding the subjective dimensions inherent to the graphic narrative and its characters, Sacco established boundaries and produced knowledge through the incorporation of reality, presenting divergent perspectives that enable a journalistic activity contributing to the construction of new worlds.

Joe Sacco (Figure 6), when he is visibly present in his own narrative, causes journalism to take on the place of subjectivities (intersubjectivity); in contrast, clandestinity (latency) has its moment of rare appearance. Thus, it becomes a journalism that constitutes the production of presence (*Dasein*), which, as it emerges, places itself along the horizon.

Journalism is not an exact science. In Sacco's comic reportage, we notice flaws and patches as intrinsic characteristics of the human condition. The people he interviews are not sources that dissolve into thin air after being consulted; they are subjects who bear witness to events that happened to them, "*among them*" and with the world (Presence / *Dasein* / Intersubjectivity).

**Figure 6**

Panel from the chapter (*The Underground War in Gaza*, p. 31)



Note. Sacco (2016).

The issue of the body resonates in Joe Sacco's reportage when he makes himself present in his works, revealing the subject he is; this "*touching from within*" materializes his subjectivity, meeting intersubjectivity. He presents a before, a now, and an after when completing his reportage, exploring objectivity and subjectivity, relating them in space-time, in a kind of intersubjective fusion shaped by serenity.

At the end of each chapter of *Reportagens*, there are notes about the author's experiences during the investigation, mentioning the media outlets in which they were published. With regard to the conflict reported by the cartoonist-journalist, we perceive that, at present, violence has increased. We have seen indications of this in the mass media. The demolition of houses is intensifying. The ultimate project of removing Palestinians or separating them from their land continues. The news presents itself as epicenters of certain modern experiences and crises that are interconnected with our own side (latent). A world that cannot be historicized, a modern time that compels us to look only forward.

On the other hand, we have comics journalism, stemming from a slower production logic that occurs primarily in the context of books—a medium that carries the possibility of opening up worlds. Journalism in this context provokes an opposing movement, producing presence. In composing this movement, there are subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and the connection between the worlds of the reader and the world of the producer.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Journalism positions itself within the context of modernity with the positivist claim that it is possible, through rational and technical knowledge, to reach the truth. This discussion helps us understand journalistic language beyond meaning. When journalism is produced, this hypothesis collapses, since it is not possible to produce journalism outside the subjectivity of its producer. Thus, the principle of journalistic objectivity, proposed by theorists linked to the news-construction process, is rendered unfeasible in the face of the discussions raised and the activities practiced in journalism.

When journalism does not assume the place of subjectivity, it seems to resort to objectivity; in doing so, subjectivity becomes latent. We then have journalism that claims to possess truth and to produce objective truth. In standard journalism, presence exists but does not appear, perhaps because the presence of this relationship with the world is more distant. That is, the journalist is able to read their objective, but cannot read their world; thus, their intersubjective presence becomes latent because their world is separated from them.

This naturalization of journalism separates individuals from the world through its media logic and naturalizes a daily life as though it had been invented, rather than a daily life that is close to us. This objective gesture ends up naturalizing the latency of a world that does not become present for the subject consuming a given piece of news. Comics journalism, on the other hand, begins from the principle that subjectivity is apparent. The power of this lies in the production of the presentification of the fact along with its historicization by the reader, from their own world, which renders subjectivity apparent—and what is produced through this presence is intersubjectivity itself.

We consider presence beyond meaning in relation to objectivity and subjectivity in journalism, since it has never been objective; the moment it is installed, it positions itself intersubjectively. Thus, the intended objectivity becomes latent, both in the journalistic act of production and in the journalistic act of consumption; however, the latency of subjectivity in production is also a result of a latent intersubjectivity in reading.

Through journalism, we witness news of wars, catastrophes, crimes, sports, among others. Why does this not provoke the material touch of presence in the body? Because it is latent—both in the world of the producer and in the world of the reader; at some point, it may appear, and the result is a distancing from the world within journalism.

In our model of society, linked to the logic of progress, journalism that does not render the presence of the world latent implodes the project of the world. This kind of journalism is useful to a world that constantly displaces us from the world. If we begin to witness intersubjective journalism, we get the impression that we cannot bear the world.

On one hand, we understand that the excess of demands, based on criteria of objectivity, is not materialized when it excludes individual issues as its main activity. In this way, it serves only as a reproduction of the world itself and not as a creator of new worlds. On the other hand, with the criticism of objectivity, the treatment of subjectivity is freed, resulting in an excessive number of egocentric narratives; thus, the plan of action is annulled by the inertia of an individualized society that looks at the world without being in it.

In this way, we move from a discussion about objectivity vs. subjectivity in journalism, considering it as intersubjective because it presents itself as an ontology capable of overcoming them. Gumbrecht, in his thesis, argues that we live in a world filled with interpretations; thus, the researcher critiques what is considered true. Considering the Heideggerian principles that support Gumbrecht's thesis, "serenity" is the absence of haste, which contrasts with the

speed of progress that seems to limit the subject's vision, often directing them towards what they consider to be truth.

Gumbrecht describes an excess of simultaneities in the present, motivated by historical events already accepted by society as truth or by the incessant media production in its various formats and genres, such as: Globo soap operas, Cinemark movies, Netflix series, History Channel documentaries, Cartoon Network animations, among others, which invade and occupy the present time, allowing the credibility of the past without questioning it and promises of a prosperous future that never materialize. Media technology can increasingly individualize subjects, making both their own presence and the physical presence of things in the world unnoticed and impalpable. In light of the above, comic journalism adopts a peculiar way of delving deeper into its investigation when reporting an event, which is rare today, a media form where the reader, the journalist, and the character are interconnected. Through graphic narratives, both produce presence through their intersubjectivities. **M**

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# Politicization and depoliticization: a theoretical-methodological framework for the analysis of communication dynamics

## *Politização e despolitização: abordagem teórico-metodológica para análise de dinâmicas comunicacionais*

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### ABSTRACT

This article develops a theoretical-methodological proposal to analyze political discussions in digital environments and empirically understand the processes of politicization/depoliticization. Through operationalization via multimodal content analysis, the analytical framework integrates textual and visual elements, which are often treated separately. The study provides an analytical framework to grasp the processes of politicization and depoliticization through three interactional dynamics: framing analysis, visual analysis, interlocutors' performance.

**Keywords:** Politicization, depoliticization, multimodal analysis, political communication.

### RESUMO

Este artigo desenvolve uma proposta teórico-metodológica para analisar discussões políticas em ambientes digitais e compreender empiricamente os processos de politicização/depoliticização. A partir de uma operacionalização através da análise de conteúdo multimodal, o quadro analítico articula elementos textuais e visuais, os quais muito frequentemente são tratados em análises à parte. O estudo fornece um quadro analítico para apreender os processos de politicização e depoliticização a partir de três dinâmicas interacionais: análise de enquadramento, análise visual e atuação dos interlocutores. Essa metodologia ajuda a lidar com a complexidade das interações digitais e pode ajudar a entender como esses processos ocorrem simultaneamente.

**Palavras-chave:** Politização, despolitização, análise multimodal, comunicação política.

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the democratic crisis has sparked a growing debate on the processes of politicization and depoliticization of issues of common interest across different societies. Authors such as Burnham (2001), Wood and Flinders (2014), Hay (2007, 2014), and Jenkins (2011) have worked with these concepts. This framework contributes significantly to advancing social understanding, as contemporary notions of neoliberalism are often identified as one of the main influences on depoliticization, with attempts to remove responsibility and social agency and to empty the concept of politics. However, empirical research that presents an adequate operational design to systematically observe and measure the dynamics of politicization and depoliticization remains rare. Most studies are based on sophisticated but descriptive concepts. In contrast, our proposal in this article involves creating an operationalization capable of systematically identifying these processes in communicative interactions in digital environments.

The proposed analytical framework presents two main contributions. First, within research on online conversations and discussions, the digital environment expresses increasing complexity in terms of actors, referring to the diversity of groups, categories of agents, and plurality of voices. Antagonistic groups and discourses organize themselves in various environments, sometimes in homogeneous spaces (like-minded groups) and sometimes in heterogeneous spaces (plural groups), with frequent clashes between opposing discourses. There is also an increasing overlap of interactions and modes of action (conversations, mobilizations, and protests with different purposes) in the digital environment. Therefore, empirical analyses must strive to identify and analyze different actors and modes of online interaction.

The literature on digital media has produced an accumulation of knowledge about the varied uses of textual and visual resources in the production, distribution, and reconfiguration of content in these spaces. In this context, the second contribution of the proposed analytical framework is to combine quantitative and qualitative methodologies, capable of integrating text and image in line with multimodal studies (Maia et al., 2022a, b; Rizzotto et al., 2017; Wessler et al., 2016; Wozniak et al., 2015). Furthermore, research based on a single digital platform has clearly become insufficient to encompass the complex and plural dynamics of the digital terrain. The present framework for systematic analysis is sufficiently flexible to be employed across different digital environments, in alignment with cross-platform studies (Maia et al., 2015, 2022b).

Our proposal aims to provide an analytical framework for the operationalization of the concepts of politicization and depoliticization, where we seek to

understand the importance of discursive and visual resources. To achieve this purpose, our approach encompasses three main components: i) framing analysis, focusing on the processes of politicization and depoliticization; ii) visual analysis based on visual content related to the private, public, and governmental spheres; and iii) analysis of the performance of interlocutors, considering the design and capabilities of platforms, with a distinction between the performance of individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions.

## POLITICIZATION AND DEPOLITICIZATION

Studies exploring the concepts of politicization and depoliticization have proliferated in the research agenda of Communication and related fields. Although the concern with the thought and dynamics of neoliberalism—as a way to reduce the boundaries of the state, restrict public responsibility, and limit administrative management to a minimum—is not recent, the terms politicization and depoliticization are today used more specifically. There is an overlap of studies dealing with politicization and depoliticization processes in theoretical, empirical, and analytical fields (Bates et al., 2014; Burnham, 2001; Hay, 2007, 2014; Jenkins, 2011; Wood, 2016; Wood & Flinders, 2014). The conceptual framework, with distinct types of politicization and depoliticization, has become particularly relevant for application in empirical research concerned with the crisis of democratic legitimacy, the advance of political parties, illiberal groups, and authoritarian leaders (Azevedo & Vimieiro, 2021; Fawcet et al., 2017; Maia, 2017, 2019; Maia et al., 2020).

Initially, it is necessary to clarify what politics understand in this line of studies. In his book *Why we hate politics*, Hay (2007) adopts a broad definition of politics, going beyond the arrangement of institutions, parties, and governance processes. This author offers a list of some conditions for the existence of politics, such as: the possibility of choosing between alternative actions and solutions to perceived problems, the capacity for agency, public deliberation, communicational flows, and disputes of interest, among others (Hay, 2007, p. 65). Early studies on politicization and depoliticization tended to focus on the governmental sphere. Burnham (2001), for instance, refers to depoliticization as a dynamic related to the redistribution of tasks to other extra-governmental arenas and also as an attempt at dereponsibilization rather than accountability to citizens. In this line, Flinders and Buller (2006) suggest that depoliticization, as a strategy of rulers, involves an attempt to *remove* something (responsibility, social agency, or even politics itself). Politicization, in turn, means seeking to *add* something (responsibility, politics, or agency). The authors suggest that

the processes of depoliticization and politicization should be seen in relation to the set of political institutions and social arenas, and also associated with the perceptions and ideas (social perspectives) that sustain these institutions.

Hay (2007) conceives distinct stages for the processes of politicization and depoliticization, through three stages for each. Based on Hay's (2007) realms, Wood and Flinders (2014) develop a framework in which these types of politicization/depoliticization are viewed through the movement of demands and claims between the private, public, and governmental spheres. On one hand, politicization occurs when issues affecting people's lives come to be understood as "problems," that is, they cease to be seen as "natural" and, therefore, become, in some way, subject to transformation through the actions of individuals. On the other hand, depoliticization occurs when issues that were previously a concern of the governmental sphere return to the public and/or private spheres (Hay, 2007, 2014), as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Developments of the processes of politicization/depoliticization*

Hay (2007) typology	Wood and Flinders (2014) typology	Main action	Actors
Politicization type 1	Discursive politicization	Recognition of the damage suffered	Individuals
Politicization type 2	Social politicization	Deliberation and mobilization	Society and media
Politicization type 3	Governmental politicization	Advocacy and public policies	Government and institutions
Depoliticization type 3	Discursive depoliticization	Naturalization and/or denial of the damage	Individuals
Depoliticization type 2	Social depoliticization	Individualization and/or criminalization of struggles	Society and media
Depoliticization type 1	Governmental depoliticization	Delegation of state functions	Government and institutions

*Note.* Prepared by the authors based on the works of Hay (2007) and Wood and Flinders (2014).

In a recent collection, *Anti-politics, depoliticization, and governance* (Fawcett et al., 2017), researchers from Political Science, Public Administration, Philosophy, and Communication revisited these concepts and examined the processes of depoliticization and the increasing levels of dissatisfaction with politics as instituted processes and practices. In her contribution to this volume, Maia (2017) discusses the politicizing and depoliticizing effects of everyday conversations. She argues that the connections between governance networks and social spaces

are increasingly complex in a hybrid and interconnected media environment. Conversation and informal discussions are related to the construction of citizens' preferences and group interests; to the processing of debates about collective problems, including social conflict and parallel activism processes; and also to citizens' demands for political and social accountability. Therefore, the potential of everyday conversation in the processes of politicization and depoliticization must be conceived in a broad sense, establishing interfaces with the private, public, and governmental spheres. Subsequently, in contrast to approaches that regard formal forums or deliberative mini-publics as more democratic, Maia (2017) maintains that these spaces are necessarily interdependent, especially when viewed from the perspective of an interconnected system.

Conceptually, Type 1 politicization is the first and most basic process—it occurs through people's reflective perception and questioning of an issue that previously belonged only to the realm of fact. This type is associated with individuals' critical articulation capacity and the contestation of values or practices previously regarded as natural and, therefore, seen as "destiny" (beyond individual choice). In other words, Type 1 politicization occurs when an issue migrates from the realm of fact to the private sphere. At this stage, the issue begins to be understood as a product of the social or cultural structure and thus subject to transformation through individual action.

Type 2 politicization can be seen as a continuation of this critical process, occurring when themes and issues previously restricted to the private sphere gain public visibility and begin to be debated as matters of common interest, relevant to all. This implies their transition from the private to the public sphere, becoming objects of discussion in terms of principles or values to be defended or practices to be implemented. Thus, the understanding of causes and possible solutions comes to be addressed to (or sought by) the collective, moving beyond the merely individual or private scope.

The Type 3 politicization process is related to the governmental sphere. Issues of common interest that require regulation or reform become part of the formal political agenda. They become topics of debate in legislative houses, targets of public policies or administrative programs within executive bodies, or even subjects of disputes in judicial proceedings. At this stage, a transition from the public sphere to the domain of the State and government occurs.

The concept of depoliticization describes the displacement of decision-making from the State to society, following the reverse path. The first depoliticization, Type 1, is characterized by the delegation of State functions to non-governmental institutions, social agents, and the market (in the case of privatizations). Even though there is still State control, governments or public bodies restrict

themselves to ensuring compliance with rules or contracts through a set of laws or criminal sanctions (Wood & Flinders, 2014).

Type 2 depoliticization concerns issues that were previously discussed in the public sphere and related to collective interest, which are shifted to the private sphere. The erasure or silencing of certain conflicts (between social groups or between specific populations and public managers) from the media and digital platforms are examples. In the words of Wood and Flinders (2014), this stage can be conceived as the “process by which social deliberation around a political issue gradually erodes, as it effectively becomes depoliticized” (p. 159).

Finally, Type 3 depoliticization addresses the displacement of issues from the private sphere to the realm of necessity. Here, there is a refusal to make decisions regarding the issue at hand, or even a defense of the undesirability of implementing specific actions, such as educational, precautionary, or protective measures. Frequently, this process is associated with the framing of political processes as pre-established, “normal” facts justified by “common sense,” leading to the naturalization of phenomena. Wood and Flinders (2014) use the term “discursive depoliticization” to describe the naturalization of contentious issues, the dilution of identity differences, and the evocation of moral panic to replace debate with immediate solutions to perceived problems. Under these conditions, depoliticizing discourses undermine the inquiry into alternative understandings of problems and/or the questioning of moral and ethical principles to be upheld in actions or public policies, or pursued in a given direction for solving social problems (Maia et al., 2023). In situations where broad consensus and crystallized unidirectional understanding prevail, depoliticizing discourses often present themselves as totalitarian, preventing criticism and contestation, as these are no longer socially recognized (Bates et al., 2014, p. 246).

### FOCUSING ON THE SPHERES AND TYPES OF POLITICIZATION

There is a considerable number of studies addressing processes of politicization/depoliticization, especially in the fields of administration and governance (Flinders & Buller, 2006; Hay, 2014; Willems & Van Dooren, 2016; Wood, 2016; Wood & Flinders, 2014). For our purposes, it is important to highlight that, despite the significant interconnection between the private, public, and governmental spheres, empirical studies typically focus on one sphere to observe the movement among different types of politicization/depoliticization. In the first phase of research in this area (Hay, 2007, 2014; Wood, 2016; Wood & Flinders, 2014), studies predominantly concentrated on the governmental sphere, aiming to explore transitions along the vectors of politicization/depoliticization. In a

more recent phase, research (Azevedo & Vimieiro, 2021; Baptista et al., 2022; Maia, 2017, 2018; Maia et al., 2020; Orlandini, 2023; Orlandini & Maia, 2023, 2025) has become concerned with the processing of controversial political issues and social conflicts in the public sphere. Here, the investigation of discursive disputes and activist movements, which fight for transformation in a desired direction, gains central analytical attention.

Studies on the public sphere typically emphasize the importance of observing and tracking social and discursive changes, as these are associated with reforms and governmental decisions (Maia, 2012, 2014; Maia et al., 2023; Wood & Flinders, 2014, p. 152). Jenkins (2011), in particular, pointed out three main reasons for intensifying the interest in depoliticization and politicization processes in the extragovernmental spheres. These are: (i) contemporary currents of political theory and their efforts to politicize the social realm by valuing citizens' perspectives; (ii) depoliticization as a governance strategy in electoral democracies; and (iii) the use of the term "politicization" with a pejorative connotation to designate the undue penetration of partisan politics into arenas that should remain neutral and extrapolitical, such as sports, religion, and science.

Jenkins (2011) and Bates et al. (2014) argue that the dynamics of depoliticization seek not only to remove politics from the interactions among agents but also to destroy the perception of the possibility of making choices (eliminating alternative choices). In the words of Bates et al. (2014), "politicization helps to denaturalize, to reveal and contribute to contingency, openness, and autonomy; depoliticization generates discursive sedimentation, the restriction, removal, or suppression of our capacities for autonomy" (p. 246). In this context, politicization can be described as a process of discussion and deliberation within a context of choice, whereas depoliticization would be linked to fatalism and the restriction of debate.

In our proposal for empirical operationalization, we share the interest of Bates et al. (2014) in focusing on political and argumentative perspectives within the public sphere, in order to distinguish different framings, political judgments of accountability, and demands for action (or inaction). Through systematic analysis, we can shed light on the very understanding of the problem from the perspective of the enunciators, whether pertaining to the private, public, or governmental sphere, as well as the proposed or preferred solutions.

In our theoretical-analytical framework, we understand that the processes of politicization and depoliticization should not be viewed as alternative processes, as if one or the other occurs exclusively, as much of the literature suggests. The dynamics, even if moving in opposite directions, can operate in parallel and simultaneously. It is also important to highlight that the boundaries between

spheres should be treated as porous and, therefore, as objects of contestation and dispute. To operationalize the types of politicization/depoliticization in an empirical study, we intend to demonstrate that it is important to understand the arguments and speech resources, in our case, within the public sphere. Thus, what we seek is to apprehend the meaning articulated in the speech act and the understanding attributed to the problem, regarding the imputation of responsibility and the referral of solutions as pertaining to the private, public, and governmental spheres.

## CHALLENGES OF OPERATIONALIZATION

### **Conceptual complexity**

The operationalization of the concepts of politicization and depoliticization imposes difficulties of different natures on the researcher. Here, we indicate three challenges: (a) the multilevel understanding of politicization/depoliticization or processes with simultaneous dynamics; (b) the fluid boundaries between the “stages” or phases of development of the social conflict; and (c) the degree of institutionalization of the issue in the governmental and legal spheres. To address these difficulties, it is important to elaborate further on these challenges and on the tools for constructing the analysis.

The types of politicization/depoliticization, as Wood and Flinders (2014) recurrently warn in their work, should not be treated in a unidirectional manner, nor are they mutually exclusive. According to the authors, it is necessary to conceive the spheres as concentric and, in some cases, overlapping, so as neither to hierarchize nor delimit them, but rather to understand the complex interrelation between them. Depending on the research interest, researchers may employ different categories and subcategories of analysis. Our analytical framework proposes the methodological use of systematic content analysis, in order to scrutinize how the problem is viewed and contested by different social actors. As we will explain in the following section, content analysis allows for the capture and tracing of meanings under different conditions, with various modes of aggregation and levels of comparison within the studied case. Thus, processes of politicization and depoliticization can be examined as dynamics that may operate in parallel and simultaneously, even if in opposite directions.

The second difficulty in employing the concepts of politicization/depoliticization lies in apprehending the stages of the conflict at hand. Conceptually, we must understand the boundaries between the spheres as fluid and subject to recurrent contestations (Wood & Flinders, 2014). Systematic content analysis is also an appropriate methodology for addressing this difficulty. For example, Bates

et al. (2014) emphasize the importance of examining the content of conflicts as well as the context in which they occur. According to the authors, attention to the context of the debate (about the controversial political issue) "allows for the identification of processes of politicization and depoliticization within the same moment and the same political space, in which depoliticizing *content* may be found in contextual changes of politicization and vice versa" (Bates et al., 2014, p. 246). We highlight that, even though the transition between spheres (private, public, and governmental) may often appear ambiguous, maintaining a focus on the content expressed by different social actors (individuals, groups, social actors, or populations in one way or another) is fundamental. Content analysis enables mapping and tracking the transformations of arguments, discourses, or demands over time. In this sense, the researcher's dialogue with historical, cultural, and sociological studies on the issue at hand is crucial for substantively understanding the findings and interpreting them appropriately.

Finally, and in a related manner, demarcating institutionalization within the governmental, administrative, and legal spheres is the third challenge in developing empirical studies based on the concepts of politicization/depoliticization. The different levels of institutionalization may even affect the understanding of what triggers politicization or depoliticization (Beveridge et al., 2014; Burnham, 2001; Flinders & Buller, 2006) and/or what is defined as a political-party intrusion into a process that should maintain neutrality, remaining distant from partisan conflicts (Berg-Sørensen, 2006; Meyer-Sahling, 2008). A critical dialogue with previous studies offers researchers important parameters for examining decision-making processes, public policy designs, activism, and demands from social movements regarding the case at hand within a given society. As already indicated above, systematic content analysis, to address these challenges, must be anchored in a consistent literature review and document research, not only to construct analytical categories (codes) but also to comparatively understand substantive issues within a delimited space and time.

### **Complexity of digital environments**

Studying the processes of politicization and depoliticization within the digital environment also requires careful attention to the unique dynamics of each digital platform. In our theoretical-analytical framework, we emphasize the importance of (i) examining different platforms and (ii) considering the peculiarities of forms of expression based on verbal and pictorial content within the digital environment. In the early studies on online conversation and discussion, research focused on a single platform. With the increasing interconnection of media, the multiplicity of digital environments, and their interlinkages, current

studies seek to understand interactions occurring across multiple platforms (Maia et al., 2015, 2022b; Yarchi et al., 2020). This strategy (cross-platform studies) avoids generic or oversimplified understandings and, instead, seeks to demonstrate types of engagement specific to each platform.

Platforms often encourage multiple forms of expression and interaction through their affordances, with textual content and nonverbal communication evoking a multiplicity of meanings, not always obvious at first glance, including political stances, emotions, reactions, and information on various subjects simultaneously. Studies on the discursive potential of images, for instance, highlight the importance of visual and socio-political aspects of conversation. Thus, visual content is also an essential element in communication across social networks and must be investigated with equal attention and analytical rigor.

### **OPERATIONALIZATION OF DIFFERENT STAGES OF POLITICIZATION AND DEPOLITICIZATION**

This section aims to develop an integrated analytical framework to employ the typology of politicization and depoliticization in studies on online conversation. We start from the premise that it is necessary to consider the variety of users' repertoires and modes of enunciative agency, as well as the specificities of digital platforms. A cautionary note is necessary here to emphasize that we conceive platforms as environments that bring forth the social, and not merely as spaces that mediate political debate (Van Dijck, 2013). To reiterate, due attention and analysis of platform design and technical interface (including technical devices, supports such as affordances, or resources for the production and sharing of text and images) are crucial for the study of online communication.

Our methodological proposal is based, in part, on the model of multimodal analysis (Wessler et al., 2016; Wozniak et al., 2015) and the combination of textual and visual element analysis expressed in the digital environment. Developed by Wessler et al. (2016) for the comparative analysis of journalistic coverage of climate change across different countries, the original model of this methodology integrates: (i) news framing analysis (Entman, 1993), (ii) narrative analysis (Wolf, 2018), and (iii) visual analysis of images illustrating the journalistic text (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011).

To understand online communicative exchanges and the particularities of digital platforms, we propose an analytical framework that encompasses: (i) frame analysis focusing on processes of politicization and depoliticization; (ii) visual analysis based on the image content expressed in relation to the private, public, and governmental spheres; and (iii) analysis of the interlocutors' performance

(user analysis, considering the design and affordances of the platforms, distinguishing between the actions of individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions). Before describing the categories of types of politicization/depoliticization and illustrating the operationalization of the three units of analysis (i.e., text, user, and image), it is necessary to briefly characterize the case of street sexual harassment, also known as sexual misconduct, since some examples of the application of analytical operators are problematized based on this topic.

In our researches (Orlandini, 2023; Orlandini & Maia, 2023, 2025), the discussion around sexual harassment on social media raises crucial concerns related to the safety in the appropriation of public spaces and the preservation of individual choices. This phenomenon has been the subject of various debates on social media and is routinely defined as a form of harassment and misconduct of a sexual/verbal nature that occurs in public or private environments. This type of harassment includes actions such as catcalling, honking, uncomfortable staring, unwanted conversations, and sexually suggestive gestures.

### **Frame analysis**

Frame analysis presents a variety of approaches concerning the components to be examined in empirical investigation. Goffman (2012) treats the concept of framing as a process inherent to the structuring of experience and meanings based on specific situations. Simply put, framing is the way a situation is defined when we ask ourselves, "What is happening here?" According to Goffman, we use frames of reference to elaborate our response. These frames are socially constructed and transform alongside social developments, through collective and everyday experiences. In the author's words, "frame analysis" is a perspective that explores the structuring of experience (Goffman, 2012, p. 34). Frames essentially serve as mechanisms of interpretation, enabling individuals to understand, perceive, and discern events, phenomena, and issues unfolding in the world.

One of the widely used operationalizations of framing, especially in the fields of communication and media, is formulated by Entman (1993). In this perspective, framing studies generally investigate how a given problem is defined, what its causes are, the moral evaluations, and the possible solutions proposed. In our research on the debate regarding sexual harassment on social networks (Orlandini, 2023; Orlandini & Maia, 2023, 2025), we constructed categories to capture politicization/depoliticization processes in Instagram posts as well as statements on Twitter. It is important to note that the listed options are not exhaustive. The description of the categories primarily aims to identify how the concepts of politicization/depoliticization provide guidance for the construction

of categories, translated into substantive terms of the chosen topic—which can be used in studies addressing other themes.

(a) *Problem Definition*: According to Entman (1993), what is understood as a problem—damages, costs, failures or harm, deficits in actions, etc.—is implicitly or explicitly articulated (and evaluated) based on shared cultural values. With regard to politicization and depoliticization, it is necessary to consider how the problem at hand can be apprehended, in reference to the spheres (private, public, or governmental). In our research, the definition of sexual harassment as a problem was categorized based on different understandings, that is, frames of meaning (Table 2). To construct the categories, it is important for the researcher to become familiar with studies on the chosen problem through a careful literature review in order to grasp the cultural and historical meanings involved in the issue.

**Table 2**  
*Politicization/depoliticization operators for problem definition*

Process (type of politicization)	Reference sphere (to which realm the problem belongs)	How it manifests itself (how the problem is understood)
Politicization type 1	Accountability in the private sphere	Understanding of sexual harassment or bullying as inappropriate or unacceptable by those affected
Politicization type 2	Accountability in the public sphere	Understanding harassment or bullying as a public problem, is unacceptable to those affected, those concerned and a wider group of citizens
Politicization type 3	Government accountability	Understanding the action as a violation or crime that can be punished by law
Depoliticization type 1	Unaccountability of the government sphere	Pestering, although seen as a problem (harassment), should not be criminalized
Depoliticization type 2	Unaccountability of the public sphere	Harassment is not seen as something of social relevance, of common interest, because it is up to people to define preferences and coordinate actions
Depoliticization type 3	Unaccountability in the private sphere	Harassment is not seen as harm or a problem, but as something natural and inherent to social relations

(b) *Diagnosis of causes*: Entman (1993) argues that framing consists of identifying the forces that originate or motivate a problem. Taking as an example the case of street sexual harassment (Orlandini, 2023; Orlandini & Maia, 2023, 2025), questions were raised regarding the attribution of responsibility for harassment.

Consideration was given to which sphere the blamed party refers. Therefore, it is essential to reflect on the context in which the individual or group held responsible is situated, considering that ordinary citizens tend to be associated with the private sphere, whereas public and social issues are typically situated within the public or governmental spheres, as illustrated in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
*Operators of Politicization/Depoliticization for Diagnosis of Causes*

<b>Process (Type of politicization)</b>	<b>Sphere of reference</b>	<b>How it manifests itself (who is held accountable)</b>
Politicization type 1	Individual (private sphere)	Man (men should not harass under any circumstances)
Politicization type 2	Society/collective (public sphere)	Society (the patriarchal society as the driving force in shaping sexist men). Understanding harassment or sexual misconduct as a social problem, for which everyone is coresponsible in preventing or restraining such harmful behaviors and actions.
Politicization type 3	Rulers/laws (government sphere)	Institutional/State (laws and public policies must intervene through actions), and male harassers should be subjected to sanctions and punishments provided by law.
Depoliticization type 1	Rulers/laws (government sphere)	Displacement of responsibility from governmental institutions, suggesting that public agents should not be involved, but rather the family, churches, or relevant groups, without relying on the State.
Depoliticization type 2	Society/collective (public sphere)	Individuals must act autonomously and guide their behavior in a singular and individualized manner, such as women taking care/not taking care of their own safety.
Depoliticization type 3	Individual (private sphere)	Men and women have their behaviors justified by biological factors or the harassment is not held accountable.

(c) *Suggestion of solutions:* Entman (1993) argues that frames present approaches to perceived problems from a specific perspective that already signal or anticipate the desired or preferred resolutions. In our study, these solutions were categorized only within the processes of politicization, since depoliticization involves the non-recognition of harm. In other words, there is no reason to propose a solution to something that is not seen as a problem. Within this

dimension, it is necessary to discern how the solution is presented and to clarify which arena/sphere is responsible for its execution. Individual and isolated actions fall within the private sphere, whereas actions requiring collective support fall under the public sphere. Suggestions that call for institutionalized actions, in turn, fall under the responsibility of the governmental sphere.

**Table 4**

*Operators of politicization for suggestions of solutions*

Process (type of politicization)	Sphere of reference	How it manifests itself (Who is responsible for solving the problem)
Politicization type 1	Private sphere	The resolution falls individually to women (strategies for them to avoid harassment and unwanted sexual advances, for example: not going out alone at night, not wearing short clothes, not drinking excessively, etc.). Individual responsibility of men (men need to become politicized to prevent these situations).
Politicization type 2	Public sphere	The resolution involves a set of voluntary measures in the workplace or education sectors (informal programs, professional protocols).
Politicization type 3	Government sphere	Laws and government actions to implement programs, awareness campaigns by official agents, etc.

(d) *Moral judgments*: Entman (1993) states that framing performs a critical and evaluative analysis of the causal agents and their effects. Some studies did not identify this class of elements because they considered it difficult to apprehend, as in the study by Wessler et al. (2016). However, depending on the topic under analysis, it is feasible to construct a framework that takes into account the processes of politicization and depoliticization, as well as the positive and negative evaluations associated with these elements.

As we have mentioned, Entman (1993), in developing the categories described above, intended to conduct studies on media content, such as news and reports. However, these categories can also be employed in the analysis of other types of content, such as the processes of politicization/depoliticization of online discussions. Once the elements are identified, it is possible to quantify them, perform analyses and comparisons among them, or even use them to identify broader frames.

**Table 5***Operators of politicization for moral judgments*

Process	Express meaning	How it manifests itself (what is the source of demand)
Politicization type 1	Private sphere (individual)	Positive evaluation or judgment that considers personal stories.
Politicization type 2	Public sphere (society/groups)	Positive evaluation or judgment that considers claims made on behalf of groups/ third parties.
Politicization type 3	Government sphere (public policies)	Positive evaluation or judgment that considers claims for the improved functioning of public policies.
Depoliticization type 1	Government sphere (public policies)	Negative evaluation or judgment involving depreciation or criticism of public policies (such as statements that belittle the effectiveness of the Maria da Penha Law or argue that the State should not be involved in such matters).
Depoliticization type 2	Public sphere (society/groups)	Negative evaluation or judgment regarding social movements (criminalization).
Depoliticization type 3	Private sphere (individual)	Positive valuation of harassment (harassment as a form of compliment).

### Identification of interlocutors

The “complex ecology” approach in the context of the interconnected media environment offers a valuable starting point for understanding the actions and interactions of users. It is important to note that various digital applications and platforms create distinct opportunities and constraints while simultaneously establishing interconnected conversational spaces. First, since digital networks are intrinsically linked to the ever-changing dynamics of technological innovations, understanding these environments and how users engage with them is, to some extent, equivalent to understanding the transient and ephemeral nature of these spaces intended for entertainment, information-seeking, socialization, political discussions, etc (Maia et al., 2015, 2022b; Van Dijck, 2013). Second, users must be seen as agents involved in various social practices such as posting, commenting, sharing, liking, and many other available interactions. Third, online discussion is shaped by the design and purpose of the platform, as digital spaces are also largely governed by norms and behavioral expectations shared by users. Thus, the logic of interactions is associated with the nature of the environments. To assist in understanding how users and networks influence the processes of politicization/depoliticization, the following items should be observed:

(a) *Types of users*: To systematically explore different types of users, researchers can construct classifications that refer to different spheres: (i) those who speak on behalf of the State, encompassing executive, legislative, and judicial sectors, distinguishing secretariats, police departments, institutions, and official political representatives (elected), who play a fundamental role in echoing the perspective of the governmental sphere in online conversations; (ii) those who represent organized interests of civic associations, religious entities, identity groups, media organizations, and market and private sector agents; (iii) ordinary individual citizens, those who speak for themselves (and not on behalf of organized interests).

(b) *Reach indicators*: Unlike participants in face-to-face discussions, those involved in digital environments “like” posts and also share previous comments, enriching the content with their own perspectives and arguments (Maia et al., 2022b). Variables in the coding scheme may include metadata to understand the reach and repercussions of a given content. By examining “likes” and shares, for instance, we can infer the reach and scope of a specific discussion within the digital environment.

(c) *Level of identifiability*: By level of identifiability, we refer to users’ presentation. On digital platforms, this implies the use of profiles that may operate under real identities, pseudonyms, or even nicknames without any identifiers. The level of identifiability employed affects the user’s political participation and behavior (Asenbaum, 2018; Maia et al., 2015, 2022b). Thus, codes can capture both the lack of identification, such as user anonymity, and, on the other hand, identity confirmation, which can be verified through account verification badges provided by the platform itself.

### Visual analysis

Visual communication, by definition, carries multiple meanings, not always evident at first glance, and offers various elements related to political stances, emotional reactions, feelings, and multilayered information (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Regarding images and political communication, non-verbal forms are studied from different angles. In deliberation studies, visual communication can reveal, for example, processes of justification, inclusion or exclusion of marginalized actors in public debates; and also induce, reflect, and stimulate new ways of thinking about public controversies (Mendonça et al., 2022). In research on activism and political mobilization, images help uncover framings and reframings of complex messages, with varied effects on media agents, groups supporting the cause, and opposing groups (Karabelnik, 2021).

In our study on sexual harassment (Orlandini, 2023; Orlandini & Maia, 2023, 2025), we proposed, as a first step, a distinction among images related to the private, public, and governmental spheres.

*a) Images from the private sphere:* This category includes images that depict individuals' bodies (images with a sensual tone, using the body to express a message) or individual facial presence (selfies, for example).

*(b) Images from the public sphere:* This category encompasses images that depict expressions of collectivity (images showing groups), content with an informative and/or educational character (images that include infographics, diagrams), publicity (posters and promotional cards for events and actions), among others.

*(c) Images from the governmental sphere:* This category refers to images that provide information about laws and actions from the executive, legislative, or judiciary branches. It includes the dissemination of information about public policies, government campaigns, and official events. Additionally, it includes images showing direct interaction between government representatives and the community, such as in meetings, conferences, legislative sessions, or other events associated with the governmental sphere.

We begin with the premise that the “expressed meaning” through images is complex, with specific nuances and meanings (Rizzoto et al., 2021). In our research, the categorization of visual content, although relatively simple, proves highly promising when combined with the analysis of verbal and user content. This is because the image typology (private, public, and governmental) is integrated into the analysis of the three types of politicization and three types of depoliticization, and also examined in relation to the usage by different categories of users.

This scheme allows for multiple combinations. Through this integrated analytical framework, the researcher can systematically handle textual and visual elements based on evidence to uncover statistically significant patterns. It is thus possible to explore these dimensions in detail, highlighting how images reflect correlations with different realms and processes of politicization and depoliticization. This integrated analytical framework also enables the generation of new inquiries regarding the relationships among these different units of observation (user, text, image), paving the way for future investigations.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The debate on politicization, depoliticization, and repoliticization involves highly complex issues in terms of content. Few empirical studies have developed

appropriate methods to systematically observe and quantify the dynamics of politicization and depoliticization. Although many studies employ sophisticated concepts, the investigations tend to be limited to descriptions and interpretations. To address this gap, our approach aimed to introduce a methodology capable of systematically identifying processes of politicization and depoliticization within communicative interactions that occur in digital environments.

The methodology proposed in this article allows for an adaptation of multimodal news framing analysis, with the purpose of apprehending such processes within online discussions. We hope to have demonstrated that the types of politicization/depoliticization can be operationalized through: (a) framing analysis capable of discerning between different types of processes and levels across the private, public, and governmental spheres; (b) analysis of social media users; and (c) visual analysis aimed at discerning the content of images associated with the private, public, and governmental spheres. Notably, the inclusion of visual analysis, which is concerned with incorporating pictorial content, is essential to understanding and interpreting the dynamics through which content is shaped by the logic and design of platforms and by user interactions. The combined analysis of text and images allows for a more nuanced and coherent engagement with the politicizing/depoliticizing nature of images in specific situations and contexts. Problematizing the type of user—official representatives, civil society actors, market agents, and ordinary citizens—by revealing who is speaking, the level of identifiability, as well as the reach and impact of their interactions, may provide valuable insights for understanding these dynamics.

The methodological proposal presented here also represents an effort to trace claims of suffered harm, aiming to understand how the actors involved recognize or fail to recognize the alleged problems, and/or how they contribute to the politicization or depoliticization of the debate. In the contemporary context of democratic legitimacy crises, erosion of foundational consensuses, and setbacks in institutionalized arrangements for inclusion and rights, seeking tools to observe and analyze how these processes may occur simultaneously seems both urgent and essential. ■

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# Polarization on social media: measuring segregation of political communities

## *Polarização em mídias sociais: medindo segregação de comunidades políticas*

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### ABSTRACT

In social media studies, polarization has been generally understood as the segregation of users into two homogeneous information circuits. There has been little debate, however, on how to measure segregation to analyze its evolution over time. In this work, we review the two most influential measurement proposals in literature and argue why one of them is more appropriate. Based on Facebook data, we show how polarization emerged in Brazil in 2014 in a simultaneous process of separation and combination of political communities. Then, based on data from Twitter, we show how segregation in the digital public sphere was consolidated in 2018 and has remained polarized over time, with small statistical fluctuations.

**Keywords:** Polarization, public segregation, social media.

### RESUMO

Nos estudos sobre mídias sociais, a polarização tem sido geralmente entendida como a segregação de usuários em dois circuitos informacionais homogêneos. No entanto, há pouco debate sobre como medir essa segregação para analisar sua evolução ao longo do tempo. Neste trabalho, revisamos as duas propostas de medição mais influentes na literatura e argumentamos por que uma delas é a mais apropriada. Com base em dados do Facebook, mostramos como a polarização surgiu no Brasil em 2014 em um processo simultâneo de separação e combinação de comunidades políticas. Em seguida, com base em dados do Twitter, mostramos como a segregação da esfera pública digital se consolidou em 2018 e permaneceu polarizada ao longo do tempo, com pequenas flutuações estatísticas.

**Palavras-chave:** Polarização, segregação de público, mídias sociais.

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## INTRODUCTION

POLITICAL POLARIZATION IS a polysemic concept that can refer to several, rather distinct phenomena that may or may not be connected to each other. They include, for example, the tendency for political opinions along a spectrum to concentrate at the extremes, creating bimodal distributions over time (DiMaggio et al., 1996). Authors have extensively discussed whether opinion polarization is predominantly a mass phenomenon or confined to political elites, such as in the well-known debate between Fiorina et al. (2004) and Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) in the context of the United States in the 2000s. More recently, literature has made a distinction between ideological polarization, characterized by differences of opinion, from affective polarization, in which there is animosity between individuals who identify with opposing political and social identities (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2018).

In the field of communication studies, the prevailing hypothesis on political polarization is that the proliferation of social media platforms has led to the creation of filter bubbles or echo chambers, in which users would be enclosed in information circuits that would reinforce preexisting dispositions (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017). This process of segregation, which divides the universe of users into two distinct homogeneous political communities, can in and of itself be considered a form of political polarization. However, literature is inconclusive on whether or not such phenomenon of audience segregation is correlated with the types of polarization—ideological and affective—analyzed in political opinion and social identity studies (Boxel et al., 2017; Cho et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2017; Lelkes et al., 2017).

While audience segregation in digital platforms can be seen as a structural condition for political polarization, it is crucial to distinguish it from the processes of community formation and polarization itself. Segregation refers to the measurable separation of groups within a network, often driven by homophily and algorithmic filtering, which reduces cross-group interaction. Community formation, on the other hand, is a broader phenomenon that involves the clustering of actors based on shared informational preferences, social ties, or thematic engagement. Polarization, particularly in its affective and ideological dimensions, goes beyond segregation by not only reinforcing in-group cohesion but also intensifying out-group hostility.

There is compelling evidence now showing that social media users are consistently exposed to content that aligns with their ideological preferences as a result of two complementary factors: the influence of social media algorithms—known as *pre-selective exposure*—and homophily within their social networks—often referred to as *selective exposure*. Studies on Twitter, such as

the one by Conover et al. (2011), showed a high degree of segregation in retweet networks according to political party affiliations. Similarly, Bakshy et al. (2015), examining internal Facebook data, found that users are more likely to find content that aligns with their political ideologies, which is primarily due to political homophily in their social networks and, only secondarily, to the action of algorithms.

It should be highlighted that segregation in online interactions is not necessarily greater than the social segregation in “offline” settings. Literature on this is even less conclusive. Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011), for example, conducted a comparative analysis using several offline measures of social segregation, such as social interactions with friends, colleagues, and neighbors, as well as traditional, offline news consumption. These measures were juxtaposed with online segregation data obtained from social media platforms. The mixed results suggest that the internet does not appear to be increasing segregation. That study faced significant methodological challenges in standardizing measures of online and offline segregation, but credit should be given to it for drawing attention to the sometimes-overlooked fact that homophily in “offline” social relations predates the advent of social media (as shown by the careful review by McPherson et al., 2001).

Although the analysis of audience segregation remains critical to studies on political polarization on social media, a standardized approach for its measurement is yet to be established. Studies such as those conducted by Conover et al. (2011) and Guerra et al. (2013), Barbera et al. (2015) and Benkler et al. (2018), bring different contributions on how to measure polarization in social media graphs. The methodological differences across such studies revolve around three main aspects: the definition of the universe of accounts that function as nodes in the graphs, the methodology used to assign weight to the connecting edges, and the calculation to measure the distance between clusters. The present article will address the first two points when we present our two studies. On how to measure the distance between clusters, authors usually take one of two stances.

Conover et al. (2011) conducted a seminal study on the quantification of polarization (segregation) in social networks, focusing on measuring polarization in Twitter networks. The methodology used in their research can be described as follows. First, the authors identified political hashtags and used them as the universe to be analyzed. Then, they selected profiles that used those hashtags and established connections between them if one retweeted the other, thereby creating a network of retweets. Finally, a polarization index was calculated based on such network. The polarization measure was based on the concept of

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## Polarization on social media: measuring segregation of political communities

network modularity, proposed by Newman and Girvan (2004). The authors used a technique to mitigate the effects of a potential discrepancy in network sizes.

Taking a polarized graph with two main communities, the modularity measure ( $M$ ) quantifies the disparity between the number of edges within the groups and the expected number of edges in an equivalent random network. Thus, the modularity of the partition of a graph into two clusters can be calculated in the following way: let  $m$  be the total number of edges in the graph,  $d_k$  the degree of the node (*i.e.*, the number of edges bound to  $k$ ),  $W_{jk}$  the weight of the edge between nodes  $j$  and  $k$ , and  $c_k$  the cluster index of  $k$  ( $-1$  if in one of the clusters, and  $1$  if in the other). Then the measure of the modularity of the partition is calculated as follows:

$$M = \frac{1}{4m} \sum_{jk} (W_{jk} - \frac{d_j d_k}{2m}) c_j c_k$$

Guerra et al. (2013) presented an alternative approach to that of Conover et al. to calculate polarization in a graph with two clusters, which focuses on the boundary between the two communities. Assuming that the graph can be split into two distinct communities, namely  $C_1$  and  $C_2$ , the boundary is determined by the nodes that connect them. Thus, nodes can be categorized into four groups: nodes internal to community  $C_1$ , nodes internal to community  $C_2$ , nodes located along the boundary of community  $C_1$ , and nodes located along the boundary of community  $C_2$ . The authors argue that in a polarized situation, boundary nodes are more likely to have edges connecting them to nodes within their respective community than to boundary nodes of the other community.

Let  $F$  be the set of edges on the boundary between the clusters of a partition,  $i_k$  the number of edges connecting node  $k$  to another node in the same cluster as  $k$ , and  $f_k$  the number of edges connecting node  $k$  to a boundary node. Then, polarization index  $P$  is calculated as:

$$P = \frac{1}{|F|} \sum_{k \in B} \left( \frac{i_k}{f_k - i_k} - 0,5 \right)$$

Thus, studies that attempt to measure community segregation can emphasize two things: only the separation of clusters, or both the separation and internal cohesion within clusters. According to Guerra et al. (2013) what determines cluster polarization is weaker connections between different boundary nodes

and stronger connections between boundary nodes and nodes at the core of the community. Thus, stronger links between internal nodes only do not affect the polarization index. On the other hand, when polarization is evaluated through the modularity measure used by Conover et al. (2011), the index increases in two scenarios: when the connections between the two polarized communities weaken, and when the internal connections within each community strengthen. In our opinion, this approach aligns most closely with the existing literature on ideological and affective polarization, which defines polarization as a simultaneous increase in antagonism between groups and cohesion within groups.

In polarization studies based on opinion polls, one of the forms of polarization is alignment—be it between opinions and identities (for example, when those who support legal abortion also see themselves as left-wing), or between different identities (when those who consider themselves feminists also see themselves as left-wing). These alignments would indicate not only ideological coherence, but also an intragroup cohesion accompanied by an exacerbated antagonism against the opposing group.

In Mason's (2018) study, for example, it is the alignment of identities that promotes hostility between opposing clusters: as people on the left see themselves simultaneously as liberals (according to the word's meaning in the US) and Democrats, hostility towards Republicans/conservatives/right-wingers grows. As the case of Facebook in Brazil shows in the next section of this study, in the polarization process, groups involved in social movements, NGOs, and left-wing parties merged, and at the same time a sharp divide was created from the other cluster, which in turn was formed from an amalgamation of anti-corruption and criminal punitiveness groups and right-wing politicians. There was, therefore, a movement of combination and separation of clusters that seems analogous to the process of affective polarization described in the literature: on the one hand, the alignment of identities and, on the other, the expansion of hostility against opposing identities.

## OUR STUDY

Until recently, the literature on political polarization in Brazil focused mainly on electoral polarization, with limited attention paid to the phenomena of ideological and affective polarization (some exceptions are Mignozzetti & Spektor, 2019, Fuks & Marques, 2022). In the realm of communication studies, some articles have examined the role of segregation in politically homogeneous groups of people who consume news on Facebook (Santos Jr., 2023) or information related to the pandemic on Twitter (Recuero et al., 2020). However,

there remains a dearth of literature on the evolution of segregation in political communities in social network graphs. It is such gap that this study aims to fill.

If we consider that one of the meanings of political polarization is the increasing separation of social media users into politically homogeneous communities, it is imperative that a methodology be created to quantify the extent of such divide and its progression over time. Then, we will be able to assess whether this polarization is becoming more entrenched and widespread or regressing. Furthermore, this would allow future analyses on potential correlations between its evolution and indicators of other types of political polarization.

### **Political polarization on Facebook, 2013-2016**

In our first study, we analyzed the evolution of the pattern of user interaction with political Facebook pages from 2013 to 2016. To create a homogeneous analysis universe, first we surveyed Facebook pages in 2016. We then manually selected the most relevant political pages from the larger group. Taking this selection as our universe, we investigated the patterns of user interaction with posts on the pages at different times between 2013 and 2016.

The construction of our analysis universe begins with a survey of Facebook pages that were active in 2016. We took a random political page as a starting point and collected all the pages it had liked in a database. From each of the liked pages, we collected the pages that they, in turn, had liked and successively repeated the process in an order by size—number of followers—until reaching and processing small pages, with 8 thousand likes. The total number of pages collected was 66 thousand.

We then created a graph in which the nodes represent those pages, and the edges indicate the connections resulting from likes between the pages. In a network analysis, we clearly identified a cluster that encompassed pages related to politics. This cluster consisted of 14.7 thousand pages, i.e., approximately 22% of the total. To refine our selection, we sorted the pages within this cluster by size, and then conducted a manual selection to ensure that the pages met the criteria for inclusion in the study, i.e., that they were related to politics at the national level. We thus defined our study universe, which consisted of 398 relevant political pages in 2016.

We then proceeded to collect likes on posts from these pages during six different periods between June 2013 and March 2016. Our choice to collect likes on posts (rather than page likes) emphasized actually active users. The graphs gather information from 12 million active users who interacted with at least two of the pages in our universe during the periods investigated. Based on this data on post likes, we created six graphs in which the nodes represent the pages in

our universe and the edges represent the common users who liked their posts. The edges were calculated based on the Jaccard index, i.e., the weight of the edge was calculated as the ratio of the intersection between the group of users who liked posts from both pages and the group of users who liked posts on either of the two pages. This method is similar to that used by Benkler et al. (2018).

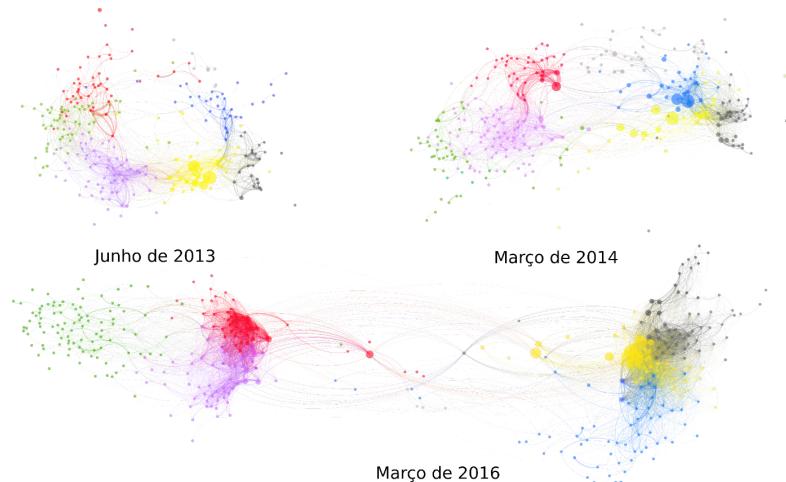
Figure 1 shows the formation and consolidation of political polarization on Facebook, with the gradual merging of the six clusters in 2013 into only two bigger clusters, one on the left and one on the right. In Figure 1, based on data from June 2013 (the month of the large street demonstrations known as “June Journeys”), we clearly see six interconnected clusters in a horseshoe shape. At the left end of the horseshoe, there is a red cluster containing the pages of left-wing parties and politicians (Lula, PT, PCdoB, etc.). Right below and connected to it, there is a green cluster with pages of environmental and human rights NGOs (Greenpeace, IDEC, Amnesty, etc.). Further down, connected to the green cluster and, to a lesser extent, to the red cluster, there is a purple one with the pages of social, feminist, black, and LGBTIQA+ movements (Movimento Passe Livre, MTST, Geledés, etc.). Surprisingly enough, next and connected to it, the yellow cluster contains pages of the anti-corruption movement (Movimento Contra Corrupção, Anonymous Brasil, etc.). Intertwined with it, in black, is a cluster of conservative and criminal punitiveness pages, promoting tougher policies on crime and celebrating police brutality (Direita Conservadora, Eu Nasci pra ser Polícia, etc.). In blue, intertwined with the black and yellow clusters, there is a cluster of pages of right-wing—or what was considered right-wing back in 2016—politicians and parties (PSDB, Aécio Neves, etc.).

In 2013, we clearly see six clusters, which indicates that each of the six themes described above contained a more or less separate user community, with some intersections. The position of the clusters on the graph is what indicates these intersections. This means, for example, that there was a well-organized and distinct community of users that interacted with social movement pages, but also that part of it, at the same time, interacted with pages from the anti-corruption movement. In fact, it is at this intersection that we see the highest level of activity in June 2013. From 2014 onwards, this once-relevant intersection completely dissolved, breaking the six clusters into two sets of three in the first half of 2014. From the second half of 2014 onwards, the three clusters on each side started merging to form just two large clusters, one on the left and one on the right. This means, for example, that from the second half of 2014, the community of users who interacted with pages of feminist movements also interacted with pages of left-wing parties. From 2015 onwards, they practically form a single, overlapping, intertwined community. The two communities had merged. The

same happened with the community that interacted with the pages of the anti-corruption movement and right-wing parties. By 2015, they had also merged.

**Figure 1**

*Social graphs representing user interactions with Brazilian political Facebook pages in June 2013, March 2014, and March 2016*



The way polarization was forged in political Facebook pages in Brazil bears witness to the importance of a polarization measure such as that of Conover et al. (2011), which incorporates both the rupture between clusters and the enhanced connections within them. The Brazilian case shows clearly that both things happen at the same time. What once were reasonably separate thematic communities merged to the point of indistinction, while at the same time drifting apart from others, weakening their connections with pages of what became the opposing camp.

We can hypothesize that when communities around pages on feminism, the black movement and left-wing parties (and, to a lesser extent, NGOs) form a single information circuit, the identities of their users will probably also mix, creating one single audience that is simultaneously feminist, anti-homophobic, anti-racist, and left-wing. Therefore, the combination of communities in social media graphs would be the communicational expression of the alignment of identities described in studies such as Liliana Mason's (2018) in the United States. Along the same lines, the tremendous divide between the left and right circuits would be the expression of the antagonism captured by studies on affective polarization. The massive chasm between communities created by

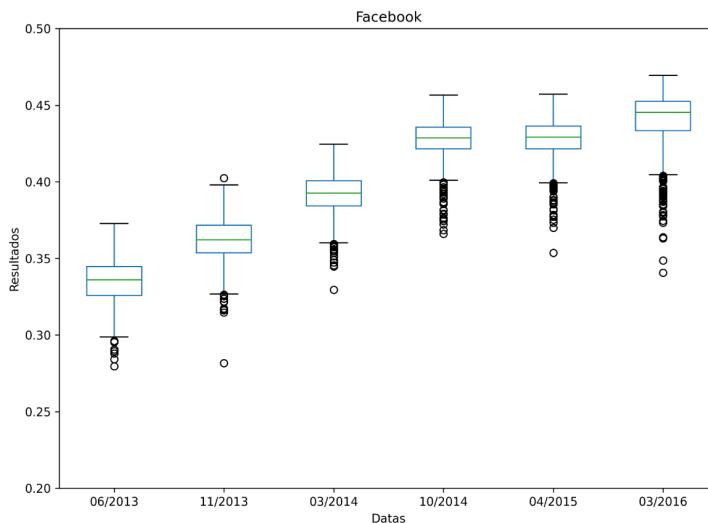
the lack of interest in engaging with the opposing political camp could be the communicational expression of the contempt and hostility brought about by affective polarization.

To calculate the polarization index, we replicated the methodology described in Conover et al. (2011), with adaptations to accommodate weighted graphs. We partitioned the graph to optimize modularity using the Louvain algorithm, which considers edge weights, and eliminated communities with fewer than 5 nodes. We then grouped the communities into two clusters, again maximizing the value of modularity. We repeated the process 100 times to ensure robustness. We then took the consensus partition among all partitions. Given the potential variation in graph sizes across different periods, we calculated the polarization index on a random sample of 1,000 subsets of the same size: 200 graph nodes. We calculated the modularity of the consensus partition in each of these sub-graphs again using the Louvain algorithm. The polarization index adopted is the mean of these values.

Figure 2 shows a boxplot of the modularity calculated for each of the graphs. The result shows a growing process of polarization from June 2013 until the first half of 2014, with a consolidation movement starting in the second half of 2014 until the last point in March 2016.

**Figure 2**

*Polarization index of political Facebook page graphs in Brazil, 2013-2016*



### Political polarization on Twitter, 2018-2022

An intrinsic limitation to the universe selection method in the first study is that the set of pages considered relevant was defined in 2016 and, subsequently, those same pages were retroactively used to create the graphs of previous years. However, we cannot guarantee that the pages selected in 2016 were the most relevant to the debate in the three preceding years. Thus, in our second study, conducted in early 2023, we adapted the method to ensure that the accounts in the universe were relevant throughout the entire period analyzed.

We used the Twitter-Trending Archive political hashtag database, which records popular hashtags starting on November 26, 2018, making it the oldest public archive of trending topics on Twitter. Because different political hashtags attract different sets of accounts (e.g., feminist hashtags mobilize different accounts than environmental hashtags), we collected popular hashtags in Brazil on 100 days each year, from 2019 to 2022, as well as on 10 days in November and December 2018. This approach ensured a diverse range of political hashtag topics spread over time. Out of that hashtag database, we manually selected political hashtags based on a previously established definition of politics. From each selected hashtag, we extracted the 500 accounts with the most retweeted tweets, creating a comprehensive database of politically influential accounts. From this set, we took 2,580 accounts that engaged in several political discussions and remained relevant at different times between November 26, 2018 and December 31, 2022. We further refined the selection by choosing the top 520 accounts that appeared most frequently throughout the course of the study. So, we selected a subset of influential accounts that actively tweeted about diverse political topics and consistently demonstrated relevance across different time periods.

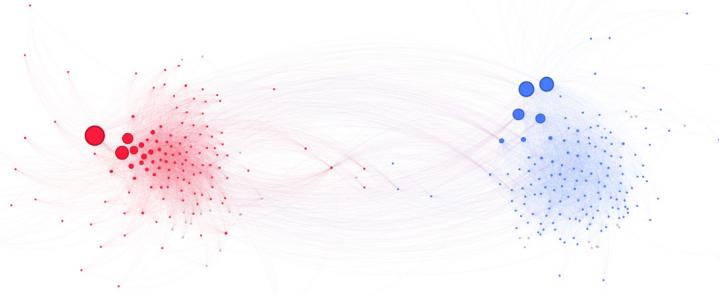
After defining our universe of accounts, we proceeded to collect all tweets from such accounts, along with the identifiers of the accounts that retweeted them over 10 days randomly selected from each half of the years 2018 through 2022. We strategically chose this time interval that would allow us to analyze the progression of polarization between left and right political groups, starting just before the 2018 Brazilian presidential election campaign—which resulted in the victory of Jair Bolsonaro—and extending until shortly after the 2022 presidential campaign, won by Luis Inácio Lula da Silva. Although quantitative studies on the impact of Bolsonaro's election on political polarization in Brazil remain limited, qualitative literature shows how Bolsonaro polarized public discourse by politicizing responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and engaging in culture wars (Nobre, 2020, Rocha et al., 2021, Cesarino, 2022). So, we had a theory—which was not confirmed—that polarization during the period had grown.

In our study, each node of the graph represents an individual account selected according to the criteria described above. To establish connections between nodes, we again adopted a methodology similar to that used by Benkler et al. (2018). We calculated the weight of an edge connecting two accounts based on the number of users who retweeted content from both accounts (the intersection) divided by the number of users who shared content from at least one of the accounts (the link). Therefore, the weight of an edge between two nodes is determined using the Jaccard index applied to the set of users who retweeted from each respective node within a specific period of time. The weighted edge ensures that the influence and retweet activity of highly influential accounts do not disproportionately affect the overall network structure. The weight accurately reflects the level of proximity between the accounts' audiences. To calculate the degree of polarization we followed exactly the same method as in the first study.

Consistent polarized structures were observed in all of our graphs and, for illustration purposes, we will present only one case, since the others are very similar. The selected graph (Figure 3) represents the first half of 2018 and is representative of the overall pattern. The polarization index of this graph is 0.45. The graph displays two clearly distinguishable user communities, with left-leaning users in red and right-wing users in blue. This distinct separation emphasizes the presence of polarization within the network.

**Figure 3**

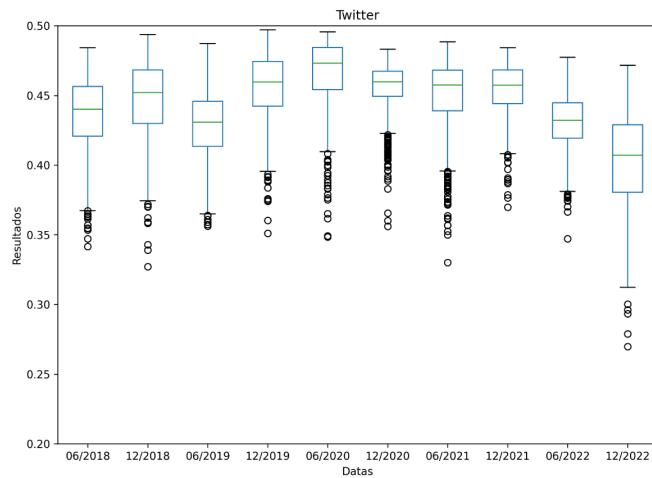
*Social graph representing retweets by users of political Twitter accounts in Brazil in the first half of 2018*



As in the first study, in the second one we also calculated the polarization index for each graph based on the methodology of Conover et al. (2011), with the appropriate adaptations to accommodate weighted graphs. Figure 4 shows the progression of the polarization index on Twitter over time, revealing a small variation in values as time went by, but always at an elevated level.

**Figure 4**

*Evolution of the polarization index of political Twitter accounts from the first half of 2018 through the second half of 2022*



The measured index fluctuated around 0.45 from the first half of 2018 through the second half of 2021. Starting in the first half of 2021, the index began to decline slightly, reaching 0.40 in the second half of 2022. Contrary to our expectations, the first years of the Bolsonaro government did not lead to an increase in polarization on Twitter, but rather to a kind of consolidation of the polarization that already existed by 2018 and that remained high, with slight fluctuations (very similar to the index we measured on Facebook in 2016).

The drop observed in the polarization index during the first and second halves of 2022 has two possible explanations. The variation in the first half of the year can be attributed to stochastic fluctuations, since the index values showed considerable variability from one half to the next (the 0.43 index for the first half of 2022 is very similar to the 0.43 for the first half of 2019, for example). The second half of 2022 appears to show a decline outside the index's fluctuation zone in previous years and may indicate a drop in polarization in the year half in which the Brazilian presidential elections took place. This hypothesis is in line with the results of opinion polls that indicated a decrease in negative sentiment towards the Workers' Party in the second half of 2022 among voters who had voted for Bolsonaro in 2018. It is important to highlight, however, that this single outlier does not allow us to state that there is a downward trend in polarization on Twitter, as this reduction may have been isolated and offset by some type of increase in the first half of 2023.

Although our primary focus has been on the evolution of political segregation in social media, it is important to consider the structural differences between the platforms analyzed. Facebook, centered on user connections and interactions with pages, fosters stable communities over time, which may explain the cluster fusion observed between 2013 and 2016. This suggests that polarization on Facebook was not just a process of separation but also of identity consolidation. In contrast, Twitter's more fluid dynamics, driven by ephemeral interactions and viral content, could indicate greater volatility. However, our results show that segregation on Twitter was already established in 2018 and remained largely unchanged through 2022. Despite their structural differences, both platforms facilitate closed informational circuits and reinforce polarization patterns. Ultimately, our findings are consistent: polarization increased from 2013 to 2016, leading to a sustained high level of segregation with no signs of reversal.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study reviewed methods for measuring polarization, i.e., the degree of segregation between communities on social media platforms. We started with two seminal studies on the subject, Conover et al. (2011) and Guerra et al. (2013). Based on an analysis of how polarization took shape on Brazilian political Facebook pages between 2013 and 2016, we show that the approach of Conover et al. appears to be the most appropriate as it measures both the decline in connections between the two polarized clusters and the increase in internal connections within each cluster. In our two studies, we made slight modifications to Conover et al.'s methodology to accommodate the graph weighting that we adopted from Benkler et al. (2018) and that prevents very large nodes from distorting the network. Additionally, in our second study, looking at the evolution of polarization on Twitter between 2018 and 2022, we proposed a methodology to standardize the universe under analysis, ensuring that the nodes used in a temporal comparison are relevant throughout the entire period. Our objective with the two studies is to contribute to establishing methods for measuring polarization that allow us to assess its evolution over time. Furthermore, our analysis of the formation of polarization on Facebook allowed us to see how the segregation into two politically antagonistic communities is not only a process of separation, but also of merging. Many consequences can be drawn from this observation and will be the subject of future considerations. ■

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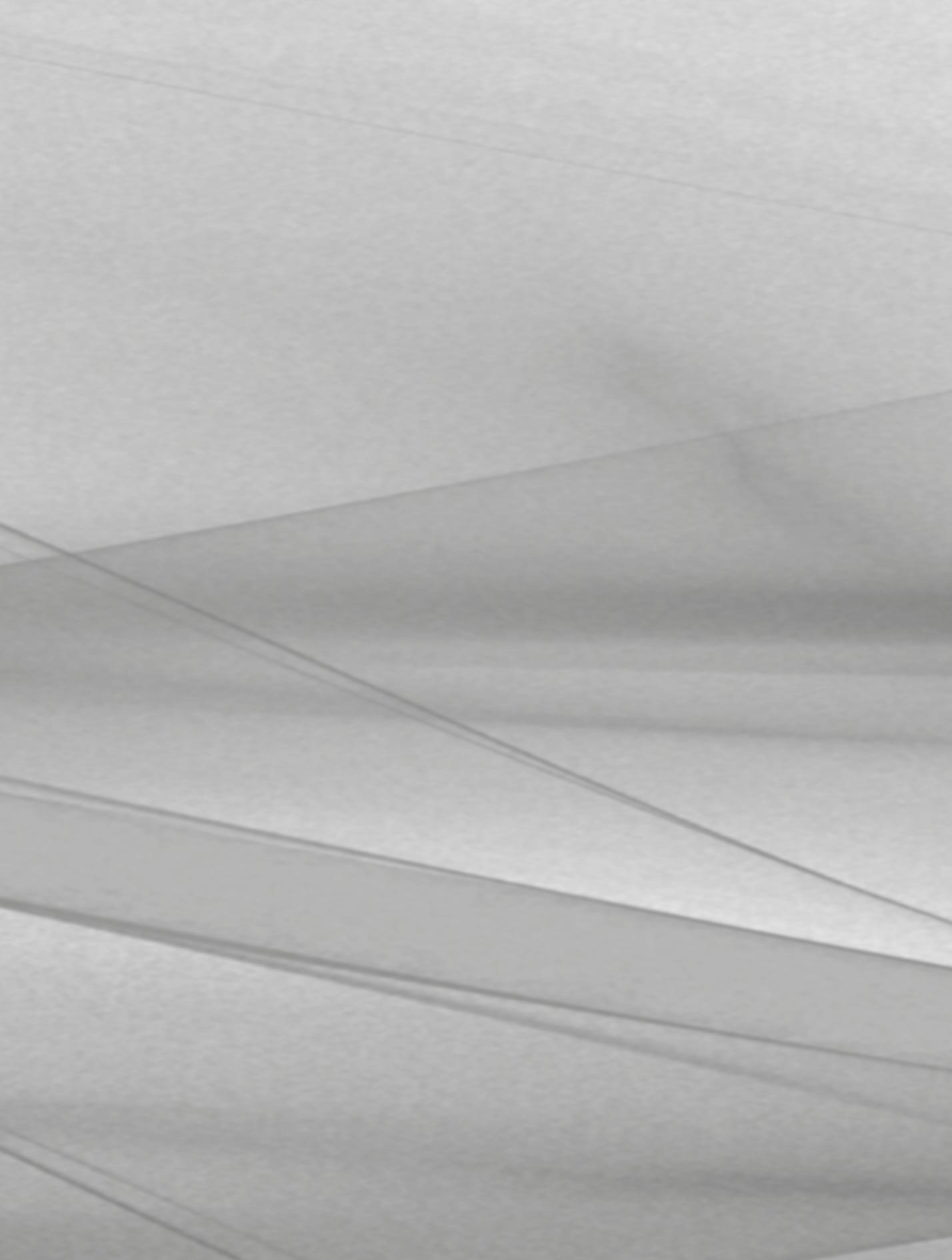
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REVIEW



# Muniz Sodré: the common of a disruptive school made by the hands of axé

## *Muniz Sodré: o comum de uma escola disruptiva feita por mãos de axé*

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### ABSTRACT

Following the cartography of Muniz Sodré's thoughts on Communication, I present a book review of *Muniz Sodré: uma escola disruptiva*, organized by Zilda Martins/ Marcello Gabbay and published by Mauad X (2022). The work, divided into 5 parts/24 chapters, brings criticism, interviews, chronicles and testimonies in the rhythm of a syncopation for the common place of the encounter. Across Brazil, Latin and North America, Africa and Europe, the authors celebrate the 80th year of this sociologist, journalist and Professor Emeritus of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, through what echoes in disruption made from the *terreiro*, through the body and the smallest gesture that is written by the hands of *axé* and unfolds as *Arkhé* to come.

**Keywords:** Muniz Sodré, communication, culture, common, *Arkhé*.

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### RESUMO

No sentido de acompanhar a cartografia do pensamento de Muniz Sodré na Comunicação, apresento uma resenha do livro *Muniz Sodré: uma escola disruptiva*, organizado por Zilda Martins/ Marcello Gabbay, e publicado pela Mauad X em 2022. A obra, dividida em 5 partes e com 24 capítulos, reúne crítica, entrevista, crônica e depoimento no ritmo de uma síncopa pelo lugar comum do encontro. Entre Brasil, América Latina e do Norte, África e Europa, os autores celebram os 80 anos do sociólogo, jornalista e professor Emérito da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro através do que ecoa em disruptão que se faz desde do terreiro, pelo corpo e do menor gesto que escreve por mãos de *axé* e se desdobra como *Arkhé* por vir.

**Palavras-chave:** Muniz Sodré, comunicação, cultura, comum, *Arkhé*.



## INTRODUCTION

“THIS BOOK IS not a tribute,” states the first line of the presentation of the work *Muniz Sodré: uma escola disruptiva*, organized by Zilda Martins and Marcello Gabbay and published by Mauad X Publishing House in 2022. Paraphrasing the surrealist Magritte, the authors further insist that the book is not even a traditional collection. After all, what is this work about Muniz Sodré? A book about a thought or a wisdom. It is no coincidence that the work revisits the field of Communication through someone who weaves it based on what is common, being published in the same year that this thinker celebrated eight decades of life. A Northeasterner, born in Bahia, sociologist, journalist, writer, Emeritus Professor at the School of Communication (ECO) of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), full professor at the Institute of Advanced Studies at the University of São Paulo (USP), member of the Bahia Academy of Letters (ALB), and the first obá of the Axé Opô Afonjá Candomblé *terreiro*, Muniz Sodré has contributed to the epistemology of Communication in Brazil through the “through” of a disruptive school. He served as President of the National Library Foundation (FBN) from 2003 to 2009, an agency linked to the Ministry of Culture (MinC); received the title of Doctor Honoris Causa from the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) in 2008; the Medal of Recognition for his participation in the Council for Economic and Social Development (CDES) in 2010; the Tiradentes Medal; and the Marielle Franco Human Rights Award in 2022. He is currently a columnist for Folha de S. Paulo and has published around 40 books in the field of Social Communication, his most recent being *O fascismo da cor: uma radiografia do racismo nacional*, published by Vozes Publishing House in 2023, where he substantiates the idea of “institutional racism” in Brazil.

The purpose of the book is to make Muniz Sodré the compass of a communication map in movement. Whether as a young researcher at the Sorbonne in Paris, shortly after May 1968, attending Roland Barthes’ last lecture and sharing a seat with colleagues like Baudrillard and Maffesoli; as a thinker of Brazilian cultural policy alongside figures such as Gilberto Gil and Juca Ferreira; or even from his apartment view in Cosme Velho, receiving visits from Lázaro Ramos, João Bosco, and many other personalities. Far from being a memorial, the work uses criticism, chronicle, interview, and testimony as ways to evoke Muniz’s oeuvre in its current relevance.

To understand the book’s proposal, the authors guide their readers through a brief journey of Sodré’s thought, beginning with *O monopólio da fala* (1982), which marks Muniz’s first book of media critique. Since then, through works such as *A comunicação do grotesco* (1983) and *Televisão e Psicanálise* (1987), he

expanded the debate around television language through a sociological lens. In *O terreiro e a cidade* (1998) and *Samba, o dono do corpo* (1998), the author addresses corporeality through territory and shows how bonds are communicational in constructing the popular. Nagô thought also begins in *Claros e Escuros* (1999), although it branches throughout his work via an Afro philosophy. However, the organizers consider *Antropológica do espelho* (2002) one of the author's major contributions, with the 2000s marking a period where Muniz's thought gained stronger flight, as seen in *As estratégias sensíveis: afeto, mídia e política* (2006) and *Reinventando a educação* (2009). In the following decade, *A narração do fato* (2012) proposes a revision of the myth of supposed journalistic objectivity, while *A ciência do comum* (2014) reorients the field of Communication. In *Pensar nagô* (2017), we find the possibility of thinking Communication transculturally, through the Arkhé as origin and destiny, a passage that continues. In his latest works, he explores racism and society, both in *Sociedade Incivil* (2022)—a work marking an important period when the author overcame COVID-19—and in *O fascismo da cor* (2023).

Just like Nagô thought, the book features a continental journey across a group of authors from different regions of Brazil and from countries in Latin America, North America, Africa, and Europe. Thus, the book is divided into five parts, each based on a continent, with 24 chapters contributed by authors from their respective countries. In the first part, there is a subdivision among Brazil's five regions, starting with the Southeast axis and the chapters of three professors from ECO-UFRJ: Professor Marcio Tavares D'Amaral in "Muniz Sodré e a Filosofia/Muniz Sodré and Philosophy," where he explores the philosophical foundations of the author's reflections; Professor Mohammed ElHajji in "Retrato de um Homem-orquestra/Portrait of an Orchestra-Man," where he identifies Muniz as an "orchestra-author" for his capacity for estrangement and wonder between world and theory; and Professor Eduardo Granja Coutinho in "Muniz Sodré: a regência da alegria/Muniz Sodré: The Conducting of Joy," who presents the idea of "conducting joy" as a protest against real misery, citing Caetano Veloso when speaking of the samba's enchantment of festive and profound enjoyment. Next, the administrator Anelise Pacheco in "Um Vento Sagrado/A Sacred Wind" and former student Raquel Souza in "Eu sou porque Muniz é/I Am Because Muniz Is" demonstrate the author's legacy as an "elder" who paved the way for students, masters, and doctors. The text by Dênis de Moraes from the Fluminense Federal University (UFF), entitled "O intelectual crítico na cena pública/The Critical Intellectual in the Public Scene," emphasizes the intellectuality of an author who refuses to merely gaze at the sky awaiting rain and instead makes it rain. Emmanuel Carneiro Leão, Emeritus Professor at

ECO-UFRJ, in “*A violência hoje/Violence Today*,” revisits a publication originally written for the author’s 70th birthday during the Muniz Sodré Week Seminar held in 2013 at UFRJ, exploring the dimension of violence from the author’s sociological perspective.

In the second part, focusing on the South axis, Juremir Machado Silva from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUC-RS) opens with the reflection “*Fato e narrativa na obra de Muniz Sodré/Fact and Narrative in the Work of Muniz Sodré*,” focusing on the journalistic dimension through the narrative of events. Antônio Faustino Neto from the University of Vale do Rio dos Sinos (Unisinos), in “*Trajetos: o bios midiático, a guerra e a realidade da construção/Trajectories: the Media Bios, War, and the Reality of Construction*,” introduces the concept of media bios to consider the contested real. Along the Center-West axis, authors Ana Carolina Rocha Pessôa Temer and Simone Tuzzo from the Federal University of Goiás (UFG) in “*Entre Muniz e Picasso: o espetáculo da incivilidade/Between Muniz and Picasso: the Spectacle of Incivility*,” discuss the grotesque in television journalism against the backdrop of civility between society and the State. Furthermore, Venício A. de Lima from the University of Brasília (UnB) presents “*Breve memória de um passado presente/A Brief Memory of a Present Past*,” recounting meetings with Muniz that evoke the author’s enduring legacy. In the Northeast, Antonio Albino Rubim and Linda Rubim from the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) focus on “*Muniz Sodré: estudioso de culturas/Muniz Sodré: Scholar of Cultures*” on the cultural modalities woven into Afro-Brazilian culture. Noamar Almeida Filho, also from UFBA, in “*Muniz Sodré e a ecologia de saberes: notas para pensar a crise da universidade/Muniz Sodré and the Ecology of Knowledge: Notes for Thinking About the Crisis of the University*,” discusses the author’s thought as a mobilizer of a “protopia,” that is, a realistic and feasible project capable of reaching a modest utopia. Finally, along the North axis, Otacílio Amaral Filho from the Federal University of Pará (UFPA) articulates in “*Os artifícios da cultura e da resistência pelo pensamento criativo/The Artifices of Culture and Resistance through Creative Thought*” a “mediated Amazonian culture” based on the concept of Arkhé, while Manuel Dutra, also from UFPA, presents an interview with Muniz Sodré in “*Network Journalism Is Still a Society of Masks*,” reflecting on the future of journalism in social networks.

In Part Two, focusing on Latin American authors, Javier Protzel and María Teresa Quiroz from the University of Lima in Peru write in the eponymous text “*Muniz Sodré*” about memories of moments they shared with the author in a candomblé *terreiro*. Luciano Arcella from the University of L’Aquila in Italy and the University of Valle in Colombia essays on Odysseus and Polyphemus

in “*As prejudicais verdades de Odisseu/The Harmful Truths of Odysseus*,” viewing Muniz’s thought in perspective. The third part continues through North America, beginning in the United States with John Murungi from Towson University contributing “Muniz Sodré: a philosophical observation,” where he develops a philosophical reflection based on corporeality, a central theme in Muniz’s thinking. In “*O efeito Muniz Sodré: uma homenagem quixotesca/The Muniz Sodré Effect: A Quixotic Tribute*,” Eduardo Neiva from the University of Alabama revisits a correspondence with Muniz, in which he asked for his opinion on Don Quixote within Cervantes’ contradictory world. From Africa, the fourth part of the book begins with the text “*O pensamento de Muniz Sodré e as lutas sociais contemporâneas/The Thought of Muniz Sodré and Contemporary Social Struggles*” by Angolan writer João Melo, who reflects on the social struggles embodied in Muniz’s works, such as anti-racism and the role of communication in building bridges of identity.

The fifth and final part, centered on Europe, begins in France with the text “*Un anthropologue pas comme les autres/A Different Kind of Anthropologist*” by sociologist and former director of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Henri Pierre-Jeudy, in which he recounts a moment when Muniz told him he was writing about joy through a rhythm that escaped the theory-building narrative. In “*Moralisme dramatique et éthique tragique/Dramatic Moralism and Tragic Ethics*,” sociologist and Emeritus Professor at the Sorbonne, Michel Maffesoli, evokes the friendship and presence of Muniz in thought: “I am, in its strong sense, only an amateur, but is that not what we live and see in Candomblé and other expressions of Afro-Brazilian cults of which Muniz, indeed, is a true and profound connoisseur?” (Maffesoli, 2022, p. 312, our translation). In Portugal, José Rebelo from the University Institute of Lisbon, in “*Os media e a inscrição social da ideia de crise/The media and the social inscription of the idea of crisis*” brings forth the debate on the concept of minority as the voice of dissent and the idea of crisis. Finally, author Márcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback from Södertörn University in Sweden, in “*Sobre o axé da Arkhé/On the Axé of the Arkhé*” highlights Muniz’s idea of *Arkhé* through the metaphor of the knot between comma, dash, and question mark, as a type of breath from an ancestral body.

Therefore, when I reread these authors who reflect on Muniz Sodré, I realize that I have traversed a map crafted not only by him but by an entire collective thought shaped in the rhythm of joy as regency. In fact, I look at my bookshelf and, among all his works, I find myself most deeply affected by *Pensar Nagô* (2017); I open the book and recall that one day he signed it with the following dedication: “with hands of axé.” I do not hesitate to think that

this disruptive school called Communication is forged by a hand moved by wisdom. “The proposal of communication as a science of the common means the production of knowledge with wisdom, speech with dialogue, action with pause and reflection: a field of transitive meaning, recognizable by the Other” (Sodré, 2023, p. 27, our translation). Although I conclude this review, I see that Muniz Sodré’s thought continues and will perpetuate through the lightness of an *atabaque* drum, the turning of a game of búzios, and the body that fulfills itself in the gesture of a learner who will always have the *Arkhé* as the guiding star of something unknown, yet close, like the common that surrounds us. M

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