

The other Pandora's box

A outra caixa de Pandora

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ABSTRACT

As a result of previous studies, this research aims to study the cultural consequences of digital technology and their interference on communication by developing a necessary and urgent distinction between mediation and interaction. Therefore, the subject of this study is to investigate to what extent communication can overcome the linear dimension of simple transmission and be sensitive to contemporary social transformations that allude to political roots of communication and redefine it as a scientific area.

Keywords: Communication, epistemology, politics, power

RESUMO

Como desenvolvimento de trabalhos anteriores, são estudadas as consequências culturais da tecnologia digital e o modo como interferem na comunicação ao desenvolver necessária e urgente distinção entre mediação e interação. Portanto, este trabalho tem como questão saber até que ponto a comunicação pode superar a dimensão linear da simples transmissão e ser sensível às transformações sociais contemporâneas que apontam para matrizes políticas da comunicação e a redefinem como área científica.

Palavras-chave: Comunicação, epistemologia, política, poder

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The other Pandora's box

Some epigraphs evoke thoughts:

Under Jupiter's orders, all gods contributed to the birth of Pandora, the first woman. I will gift men, said Jupiter, with an evil with which everyone will be happy to engage, with love, with all their hearts, their own misfortune.

(Laffont, 1969: 578)¹

1. Original: "Tous les dieux, sur l'ordre de Zeus, concoururent à la naissance de Pandore, la première femme: Je ferai présent aux hommes, dit Zeus, d'un mal en qui tous, au fond du coeur, se complairaient à entourer d'amour leur propre malheur".

All those who reflect are interested in the mirror. By definition, the mirror is an instrument of reflection, speculation (from the Latin word *speculum* = mirror).

We are no longer interested in the reflexive face of the mirror. Our interest lies on the other side [...]. We are inverting mirrors. Inverted mirrors is one of the hallmarks of our time [...]. I believe we all stride in the region that lies beyond, the otherside of the mirror. This is what separates us from our ancestors. We are interested in the region behind the mirror. We inaugurate a new era. An era of inverted mirrors.

(Flusser, 1998: 67, 71)

The spectacle, which inverts what is real, is actually a product. At the same time, the reality that is experienced is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle, and takes upon itself a spectacular order to which it positively adheres. Objective reality is present on both sides. Thus established, each concept can only be established through its passage to the opposite side: reality emerges in the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and the basis of existing society [...]. In the truly inverted world, truth is a moment of what is false.

(Debord, 1997: 15-16)

HETEROTOPIC PANDORA

IMAGINATION IS NO LONGER neglected; it is being rehabilitated as twin sister of reason. It appears as the inspiration for invention, as a stimulus for encountering ancient myths, and for the birth of modern myths. Myths feed the imagination and open the doors of knowledge for the unknown, or rather for the discovery of what appears as a horizon of expectations, and leads to the hidden origins of action. In the epigraphs that gave rise to this work, we confront translations of the same myth, which places men at the center of their choices, however alienated, as the full aspects of choice are not shown; on the contrary, they are hidden as a mystery, in an inverted mirror. In the contemporary world, this is the surprising issue, which we cannot avoid, even when it is presented as ambiguous, inverted.

If the word *medium* (from Latin *medius*) refers to that which is in the middle; as the exact half of a whole, or a point equidistant from two extremes; the noun *mediation* (from Latin *mediatio, onis*) recaptures the meaning of the first word and adds another dimension, giving it the character of intercession, intended to produce an agreement driven by mediating action.

In this sense, faithful to the administrative and functional origins of communication, made official by technical media, and developed empirically in the modern world, mediation refers to the fundamental sense of communication, perceived as that which produces an effect, depending on which, it is administered and expressed. Communication, as a planned effect, adjusts to the eminent and is ready to reproduce the effect, which confirms the intended agreement. As in a real mirror, communication is revealed in its entirety, and reflects the intention to create patterns and opinions, ready to be consumed, repeated and imitated. This mediatized effect defines communication as a performed spectacle, creating a type of homonymy between communication and its effect, which transforms the relationship among men, in alienation, and between men and nature, in utopia.

The word *interaction*, however, expresses an action or experience, which takes place in an interval; a unique happening (*événement*), which takes place in a space *in-between*, an interrupted time, or more properly said, unfinished time that registers the singularity of the interactive action, of which it is an essential element. This action/experience *in-between* is marked by a singular articulation, that without being an invariable of the space or time in which it is present or happening (*événement*), marks space and time through the emergence and actualization of a multiple singularity.

With no plans, intentions or predetermined paths, interaction is opposed to mediation, and naturally, as a singularity of space and time, it is an experience that marks the communication process. It is a transformation, which in an undetermined flow, naturally promotes change in that *in-between* space/time at the very moment it takes place. Being unique, such actions can give rise to a network of singularities that come in contact, in the flow of their tracks (threads), from which they originate, and that even though are woven as a net, are equally unique, exclusive, untranslatable.

An *in-between* place, of undefined space, and similar to what Foucault (2009) called heterotopia or heterotopology of spaces which are absolutely other-spaces. If, in the field of communication, the charge of mediation is the intended effect, the role of interaction is to create otherness, always vague and imprecise, of those indeterminate, heterotopic spaces and times. However, make no mistake: this does not mean creating the innocuous and paradoxical

D

The other Pandora's box

polarity of opposing pairs between mediations and interactions. On the contrary, it is necessary to understand that between mediations and interactions other times and spaces emerge; which being heterochronic and heterotopic, can only be understood in the continuous rhythm of the change that takes place between mediations and interactions. The study of these times/spaces requires them to be clearly contextualized, both historically and philosophically, so that their consequences for contemporary communication can be seen as a scientific field, through the more or less decisive alteration between mediation and interaction.

CHANGE AS AN ARTIFACT OF PANDORA'S BOX

Interaction occurs as a woven network in the space/time of its singularities, but is not restricted to them; on the contrary, it exceeds them as continuous possibility. Accordingly, although marked by the *in-between* space of the instant in which it occurs, it requires the attention of a continuous present, without past or future: a simultaneity without sequence. An action charged with intentionality without predetermined plans or effects, a space *in-between* actions, a time *in-between* intentions, which transform it, while being transformed, often mark the history of humanity. A Pandora's box.

Change stems from actions, which mark a historic change, and, in this sense, interaction is an agent of transformation that takes place in spaces *in-between*, marked by the span of their occurrence. One can define/characterize/comprehend examples of this interactive transformation: marks of such action can be found in the passage from culture to civilization, or the transformation of life, which shifts from the countryside to urban areas. Without detailing the profusion of issues examined by Vilém Flusser, for the purposes of this study, some such issues will be highlighted and listed. The first refers to the transition of Western civilization from an agricultural world to the city, or the transformation of nomadic into sedentary culture, the transformation of artisanship into technological work:

Culture is a product of agriculture. It is a "gathering" (from Latin *colere*) of things reaped from nature. Civilization is a product of urban life. It is an attempt to inform significantly the life of "citizens" (from Latin *civis*). It is formation, not harvest. (Flusser, 2007: 23)

In line with this observation about the interaction between culture and civilization, there is another issue, which concerns the production of knowledge:

The following propositions can be compared: “God created the world so that men could inhabit it”, and “the world came to be 6 billion years ago as a result of the Big Bang”. Both propositions are about the same topic, the origin of the world, but they are answers to different questions. The first: “what is the purpose of the existence of the world?” and the second: “why does it exist?” [...]. In the beginning of history, there were queries stated as “what for?”, which were then followed by queries starting with “for what reason? [...]” according to that thesis, the first proposition would be a “final explanation”, and the second a “programmatic explanation”. (Id., 1983: 41-42)

These two examples show the sequence of changes on the way we understand communication in the axis of human transformation. On one side, those changes ultimately led to the passage from the agricultural culture stage to urbanized civilization; on the other, science sojourned between functional explanations of phenomena, which respond to final inquiries, and utilitarian, that answer questions that require definitive answers, because they are instrumental. In the era we inhabit, of technological civilization and historical philosophy, we are before mirrors that seem reversed; in this crossroads, we must head the need to know how science can take place.

In order to understand the meaning of both examples, it is necessary to overcome the phenomenological emergency of recurrent facts, in a chain of causes and ends. In the case of culture it is necessary to know the possible, though not necessary, consequences of the transition from an agricultural world to urban transformation; in the case of science, it is necessary to understand not the causes and objectives of knowledge, but the way knowledge may interfere in civilization. In both instances, it is necessary to overcome the mere phenomenological observation of facts in order to build history, which becomes knowledge, and perceive interactive traits that give rise to possible answers to the changes in the world.

PANDORA'S BOX AS A MENACE

The Greek myth of Pandora, who by opening her mysterious box would be responsible for spreading pain and evil throughout the world, resurfaces whenever humanity is faced with realities that tend to change the future deeply. The transition from the long-lasting and sedentary farming world to industrial society caused tension, as it gave rise to profound changes that transformed ancient culture into civilization, and manual skill into mass production; and assembly lines operated by machines, which,

D

The other Pandora's box

little by little, replaced human labor with automation; and creativity with automatic technology.

The end of the XVIII and XIX centuries witnessed this clumsy or hopeful opening of Pandora's box, triggered by technology, and by human ability to transform machines in a means of production of wealth.

In the 1960's, the first oil crisis, the rise of the middle class, the negotiation of labor rights, the intellectual revolution against classical paradigms of knowledge, constituted profound change and disturbing happenings. The mysterious box seems to open again, making new threats and promises. The concentration of three-quarters of the world's population in cities poses an inalienable threat of shortage in housing, food, culture, and welfare. However, this threat of change points to a concrete fact: it is not for humanity to decide on everything; and through more or less rational plans, define positions and controls for humanity, and the machines we conceived ourselves. Today machines inhabit the world alongside men, and to facilitate coexistence, it is necessary to revise or build social associations: the XXI century, made of men and machines is unique and, as such, must be operationalized and studied. If technical means, transformed into politics of power, posed a threat to humanity that submitted to them, constituted the greatest debt of the XIX and XX centuries, the challenge of the XXI century is to seize and face this reality, and the promise of the opening of another Pandora's box.

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF COMMUNICATION AS PANDORA'S BOX

In the transition from the XX to XXI century, the communication process appears in definite acceleration, and characterizes a world that bursts with possibilities, deriving from the web of relationships of an open system, that gives rise to a new era. According to Lazzarato (2006: 39), "Our time is the explosion of these different worlds constantly updated, which leads us to view politics, economy, life and conflict in a different way". This emergence of possible worlds, updated by contemporariness, transforms communication into a process that marks daily life, that is, *we do not communicate*; we are in communicability, which seems to be a contemporary happening (événement).

The category for analysis proposed by Foucault (2011: 57-58) in his famous lecture at the *Collège de France*, on December 2, 1970, defines happening (événement) as follows:

Surely, the happening (événement) is neither substance nor accident, neither quality nor process; the happening (événement) is not in the order of the body.

However, it is not immaterial; it is always realized in the context of materiality. It is effect; it has its place and consist of interface, coexistence, dispersion, profile, accumulation, selection of material elements; it is not the act or the property of a body; it is produced as an effect of what is material and its dispersion. Let us say that the philosophy of the happening (*événement*) should advance in a paradoxical direction, at first glance, an incorporeal materialism.

Evolving within the inferences allowed by the definition above, this renowned concept has been transformed into a mode of perception of contemporariness. This theme emerges in the works of several scholars who, while analyzing contemporariness, do so under the aegis of the happening (*événement*), whose definition does justice to the complexity of the world that harbors it. Besides the particular and distinct pathways through which it is possible to achieve the concept of happening (*événement*), it suggests that we understand it within the realm of contemporariness, which, in turn, must also be traced within its possibilities of understanding.

When defining contemporariness, Agamben (2009: 57) was radical in demanding that the understanding of that category makes us “contemporary to the texts and authors we examine. Both their stature and success will be measured by their – our – ability to live up to this requirement”. This means that, understanding contemporariness requires us to partake its lifestyle, and its social, cultural and technological complexity, but without getting involved with them, or be submissive to them. To understand contemporariness, one must be heterotopic, in order to maintain an unbiased and disassociated view, to see beyond the time that appears as mere chronology of acceleration:

Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, *it is that relationship with time that adheres to it, through disjunction and anachronism*. Those who coincide too closely with their time, or adhere perfectly to it in all respects, are not contemporaries as, for this exact reason, they cannot see it, cannot keep a fixed gaze on it. (Ibid.: 59)

Alongside the concept of contemporariness, the happening (*événement*), takes on dimensions that, in our time, are key to the ability to understand the concept, however not in the sense of deciphering meaning; but of proposing happenings, which are inserted in the core of the happening (*événement*), as merely possible understandings, intelligibilities, never necessary or definitive. Taking Foucault as starting point, Deleuze (2009) also devoted himself to the

D

The other Pandora's box

task of defining happening (événement), and gives it dimensions of ambitious philosophical analysis, however contemporary, by requiring that we understand the ambivalence of what is, at the same time, immanent and virtual. This seems to mean that contemporariness is that time, which cannot be narrated, as its history, has no teleological narratives, but rather, in contemporariness everything is waiting for a happening (événement) that evidently updates it, but lasts only one digit:

Life only contains virtual entities. It is full of virtualities, happenings, singularities. What is called virtual is not something that lacks reality, but rather, by following the plane of its own reality, it is committed to an updating process. The immanent happening (événement) is updated as a state of things, in a state that is experienced, which makes it occur [...]. The happenings or singularities give the plane all of its virtuality, as the plane of immanence grants virtual happenings with full reality. (Ibid.: 40)²

2. Original: "Una vida sólo contiene entidades virtuales. Está hecha de virtualidades, acontecimientos, singularidades. Lo que se denomina virtual no es algo que carece de realidad sino que, siguiendo el plan que le da su propia realidad, se compromete en un proceso de actualización. El acontecimiento inmanente se actualiza em un estado de cosas y em un estado vivido que hace que ocurra [...]. Los acontecimientos o singularidades le dan al plano toda sua virtualidade, así como el plano de inmanencia le da a los acontecimientos virtuales una realidad plena".

The confrontation between the concepts of Foucault and Deleuze, associated with the contemporariness of Agamben, leads to the observation that we find ourselves in the same web of relationships that, in their nodes or tracks, are the core of the complexity of phenomena that characterize the current world. Within this world, communication and its epistemology, entangled between mediations and interactions, require an essential relation between history and philosophy.

As communication, its production and dissemination, submits to the controls of spectacular mediating devices, and rarely interactive devices; it is necessary to develop another reflection: the political dimension of that epistemological reality can emerge as another place, a cognitive heterotopia or happening (événement) that, in contemporariness, subverts theories, fixed methods, or subjects of study, supported by spectacular mediation, in order to provoke the unforeseen interaction, which may result, but not necessarily, from technological supports, that can be observed through their social and cultural consequences, as McLuhan (1969: 21-22) has claimed since the 1960s.

If mediation is useful to reach a receiver seen as a mass or public, docile to the politics, which uses communication as a tool; interaction, by contrast, proposes a relational activity that requires observing political communication as a scientific field of study; and asks to what extent communication can overcome the linear dimension of simple transmission, or media devices, that characterize it as an instrument of power, to be sensitive to the social transformations of our time, which require another epistemology, attentive to the political con-

sequences that science itself develops. Therefore, a politics of communication emerges, but not one that transforms mediating conditions into appropriate settings for their own interests: thus, the politics of communication and the politics that occurs in communication are opposite. It is urgent to understand how to define the dimensions that characterize communication, and their conceptual derivations, when they turn to the political matrix of communication itself, and radically redefine it, as interaction, inserting other spheres of study and research in its epistemology (Ferrara, 2015: 11).

Therefore, interaction leads us to believe that the epistemological politics of communication does not consider the politics that, while spectacular as image and message, insists in self-seeking mediation, in service of strategies and devices of power. An epistemology of interactive communication, on the other hand, can propose the construction of a new kind of politics, which allows communication to review its scientific object and its pragmatic exercise in a constant process of attainment. We are led to yield to the evidence that it is the role of communication to consider, not the science that one wants, comfortable, with theories and methods determined to be scientifically valid, but note that the epistemology of communication is directed to the apprehension of an uninterrupted and contemporary exercise between minds and ideas.

This epistemology requires viewing politics as its constitutive element because it proposes another way to engage in communication as an exercise, not only scientific, but as communicating routine that is the architecture of a science, less safe perhaps, but certainly more exciting. Epistemological attention is necessary to grasp the social and cultural environment produced as a result of the capabilities of technological means, especially but not exclusively, digital, so that we are able to surprise, and/or be surprised, by an environmental reality, in which everything communicates and affects us, creating another mental ecology, in which nothing is ready to be used and applied, but everything is available for the attention that, being alert, is in communication.

The difference between the empiricism of mediations and interactions is, in the first case, the strong phenomenological appeal imposed by the communicative transmissive nature itself, and constitutes the main manifestation of mediations. In the second case, and considering their empiric nature, interactive manifestations demand archeological attention, not in order to seek the inexhaustible source of interaction, but the barely perceptible traces within such manifestations, which enable us to imagine that the discourse that expresses them does not have discernible statements, on the contrary, it exhibits discursive formations that, being historical, are not enunciated by the actions of a sender, but display previous occurrences, not always clearly understand-

D

The other Pandora's box

able, but that can be identified in other happenings. That is, in the discursive formation of an interaction, communication may highlight, or not, some verbal contents, while others are hidden in brief and unexpected cracks, which conceal, but do not obliterate them. Therefore, it is necessary to discover the history, which stretches beyond ordinary events, and the communication constructed beyond the message.

When Foucault (1966) proposed releasing the episteme of simple statements of almost always anthropocentrically based demonstrations, to join an archeology that does not seek to find in the history, the spectacle of its events, but happenings, which being reiterative, seem to be the immanence of life itself, he makes it clear that it is necessary to find, in the traits hidden within the interactions, the discursive formations that constitute their foundation. Unlike the phenomenological view, it is possible to distinguish in mediations the political submission of communication to technological devices (Agamben, 2009), and its unequivocal media interests, which emerging as instruments at the service of capital and power, make interaction and the actual exercise of the communicative happening (*événement*) impossible.

A political epistemology of communication implies considering: a) three evidences: the differences between mediation and interaction, the impossibility of transmitting the message, the environmental ecology of communicating minds; b) three incongruities: the stable definition of the scientific object, overcoming the method that goes beyond the proposed methodology as a given, and the attentive indetermination of the communicative occurrence, which emerges as a specter of scientific certainty; c) three promises: the emergency of another way of researching and understanding communication, communication as a social action and radical politics, and the possibility for its historical construction.

THE PROMISES OF THE OTHER PANDORA'S BOX

An empirical process arises under the influence of resistance associations among connections studied by Bruno Latour (2006) while proposing the concept of actor-network. It is willing to understand ambivalences, and not reduce communication to a pattern of a simple technical mediation. In this environment, the definition of knowledge and the definition of communication itself as a scientific area come together.

If in contemporary reality, on one hand, the determination that communication is a power device is constant; on the other, it is possible to learn from these same technological devices, fixed and/or mobile, an associative poten-

tial of unprecedented proportions, which, paradoxically, brings to light and substantiates power, as a political reality, that is transmitted and imposed, through its communicative media dimensions.

However, that substantiation fosters possibilities for resistance, which, though apparently fragile, spontaneous and trivial, suggests subtle distinctions between the communication which is disseminated and that which is acted out and built throughout daily life, which encompasses communicability and builds radical resistance of associations, currently considered as another social analysis category with deep communicative consequences (Latour, 2006; Lazzaratto, 2006; Laclau; Mouffe, 2010).

The exercise of distant associations of the practices of official communication, highlights the endogenous and undisputed political-interactive dimension of communication, arising from resistance, which occurs virally between minds and bodies, in continuous reflection, and who seek to build a common environment, that is not restricted to media communication, but harnesses the power to transform it, and create other chapters in the science that is being shaped, in a century that promises to become a breeding ground for happenings.

In this contemporariness, the inevitable crisis of representation emerges, which communicates and leads us to observe that the mirrors, where we once saw and recognized ourselves, are reversed, while submissive to a communication, which was reflected by its effects. The mirror is inside out. It used to reflect productive and reproductive techniques, which developed more significantly during the second half of the XX century. The mirror shows the persuasive image of a society of spectacle, increasingly alienated from the cultural consequences of its actions, and alienating, saturated by the reduction to mere entertainment. If we consider the 1960s, especially the events of 1968, as a turning point, which signals a definite attempt to overcome the modernist movement, and its ideological, social, economic and political consequences, in order to achieve modernity, it is apparent that the communication that takes place and is being studied must alter its programmatic fundamentals and, above all, its epistemology. The long and exhaustive reflection that requires reconsidering communication as scientific object thus begins. That old alienated and alienating mass media entertainment object is replaced by a communicating relationship, which is vague but not empty, as it constitutes the difference that inaugurates a communication that, though common and routine, is merely possible. A new territory unfolds for the epistemology of communication. The issues are no longer what communication is, or what it is for; the question is how and when communication happens. Commu-

D

The other Pandora's box

nication which is not validated by its effects, but by the multiple and imprecise ways through which it occurs. History is reinterpreted beyond its brief or long duration, as by overcoming time, it is assumed with no surprises, and is located in the dynamic of happenings that occur in a continuous, timeless, process. Fundamental notions for current history emerge: “time and past are no more, but change and happenings” (Foucault apud Dosse, 2013: 159) that occur in new communicative sites, without geography or territories, as stated by Flusser (2002: 177):

One should not conceive the city to be designed as a geographical place (such as a hill near a river), but rather as a fold in the intersubjective relational field. This is what it means to claim that the future civilization must become “imaterial”.

Under the impact of change, sequential order is definitely disrupted, so that there is no way of looking for causality or explanatory progressions. Such change is unforeseen and unplanned, but it is within the range of discontinuity, because it follows the happening (*événement*):

This is not about the succession of instants in time, or the multitude of thinking subjects; this is about the disruption that breaks the instant and disperses the subject in a myriad of possible positions and functions. Such discontinuity undermines and hinders the traditionally recognized, or easily challenged, smaller units: the instant and the subject. (Foucault, 2011: 58)

Corroborating and enhancing the previous position, Lazzarato (2006: 32-33) extends the meaning of change to the ways of living and feeling, and transforms the discontinuity of the happening (*événement*) in a way of understanding a world, which is prone to change, and transformation:

A world is a multiplicity of relationships, which do not depend on a core, but of a happening. The relationships presuppose the happening, which acts, transforming the feelings, that is, the desire, beliefs and affections [...]. The expression and constitution of ways of feeling, rather than depending on the modes of production, predate the operation of economy [...] it is through cooperation that one can conceive an economy of affects, an economy of sensitivity.

From an epistemological point of view, this new economy or this other mode of production proposes a different political role for science and the epistemological actions of researchers:

The role of the scholar is no longer to take a position “a little ahead, and a bit to the side” to tell the silent truth of all: but it is to fight against forms of power where they are, at the same time, the object and the instrument of it: in “knowledge”, in “truth”, in “conscience”, in “discourse”. In this sense, theory will not express, translate, or engage in practice, it is non-totalizing [...] practice. (Foucault, 2010: 39)

In this scenario, a communication that announces a politics comprised of the lack of presupposed messages emerges, in a way that makes it possible to consider the way things happen, which dispersed in everyday life, emerges as a possibility of action among men. In this sense, a political epistemology of communication would also be alert to the effects, however not to the plane that transforms technical media in its instruments, but to the unforeseen manner through which communication, technological or otherwise, may occur. An epistemology that considers communication attentively will be surprised by bodies and minds in communicability, without assumptions, which turn communication into an agent of change in the world. We stand *before* another Pandora’s box. Now, it no longer unleashes evils or delivers blessings, but opens as a pressing suggestion of change and action.

From the promises of the twenty-first century, one must consider that, in face of an era marked by a definite representation crisis, technical media no longer constitute mirrors, in which we are reflected, willing to imitate their models. Before the reversed mirrors, the mysterious box of Pandora opens once again, and it is possible to see that communication is not the model before which we stand alienated. We must understand communication that, however scattered and fragile, emerges as a promise of another image of man for humankind. This is the antispecular and political construction of our century. ■

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D

The other Pandora's box

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