

Latin-American Testimonials in Memory of Jesús Martín-Barbero

Testemunhos latino-americanos em memória de Jesús Martín-Barbero

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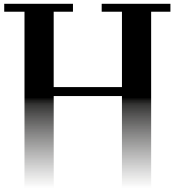
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VERY FEW LATIN American social researchers, and even fewer communication scholars, have achieved such a wide recognition, inside and outside the region, as Jesús Martín-Barbero throughout his long and outstanding career. Spanish by birth, but Latin-American by choice, he lived and worked most of his life in Colombia, from where he participated in numerous trips around the world, publications in different languages, and in the key debates (and *combats*) in the field of communication in the last five decades. His fruitful and polemical scientific work is a crucial reference to the study of communication, and a legacy that transcends its presence and extends its influence, although “times are not [yet] of synthesis”, “in the field of mass mediation, its production devices and its consumption rituals, its technological apparatuses and spectacular staging, its codes of assembly, perception and recognition” (Martín-Barbero, 1987, p. 9).

The four testimonials presented below were written by Latin-American scholars who, like so many others, enjoyed the close friendship of Jesús Martín-Barbero. They value his work and legacy of priceless contributions, worthy of continuing to be discussed and adopted in the field, as “investigating communication has become a strategic ‘place’ to rethink the meaning and scope of critical thinking, both in its epistemological relation and in its political insertion in our societies” (Martín-Barbero, 2002, p. 455).

Many other testimonies regarding Jesús’ departure, which were expressed in different media, could have been incorporated here as evidence of the strong imprint of his impact on several generations of Latin-American scholars. For

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reasons of scope, the testimonials by Eduardo Gutiérrez, Carlos Alberto Scolari, Omar Rincón, and Néstor García Canclini are included as examples.

MOVING THOUGHT: RE-READ *CARTOGRAPHER'S CRAFT*

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How can the text of the cartographer, who tells his own journey, be read? Has the territory undergone many changes and is it read as an old map of the destroyed city with visible fragments and ruins? Is it archaeologically explored to capture the signs and traces of places that were once inhabited territories? Is it construed according to the present to find early signs of some catastrophe, or indicators of a predicted and never realized future? Then is a by-then unpredictable genealogy perceivable from the cracks and voids. Is it then and now disclosed as a premonition of emerging geographies?

Resuming *Oficio de Cartógrafo* (Cartographer's Craft) (Martín-Barbero, 2002) almost 20 years after its publication is above all to inhabit Jesús Martín-Barbero's moving thought. To follow him on his journey. If *De los Medios a las Mediaciones* (Martín-Barbero, 1987) invited us to understand the map itself, here we have the opportunity to lose the object – the map – to win the process: the journey. It is no wonder that still in the introduction he shows us his double condition of cartographer and chronicler: of engaged thinker.

Thinking in movement is, above all, to be able to resume one's own paths and, in the present, move away from the debate that took place in the 1970s and 1980s about the issues of discourse and power, toward a way of historically reconstructing one's own debates in a 30-year context. It means verifying the aspects that, despite the enduring battle, remain as constitutive tensions in the field of communication: the utilitarian pragmatisms and the deterministic ideologies. Then, show the way out: the overcoming of dualisms through culture, and in culture through the popular.

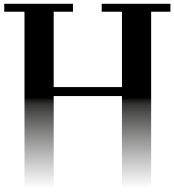
That is, the journey route confirms some of the deep scars of geography and, at the same time, unveils the burden that survives in the way it continues to think and act today. It is thinking about the self and on the change in the emerging field of knowledge. The specific reason that leads him to conclude this balance in the perspective of the 1980s may be the tension between technologies and appropriations, between determinisms and uses, that concludes the section, leaving open the debate that unquestionably suggests how

modernization and divergent modernity will shape the decades to come in the Latin-American context.

In the same vein, in the section devoted to the 1990s, the moving thought of Jesús Martín-Barbero takes up a more recent past, selects and assembles pieces of different puzzles, and makes up an attractive picture in which, in the fashion of cinematographic montages, different forms and densities are put in tension. By counterpoising plans, three topics are outlined: a balance of the constitution of the academic field in that decade; a new conceptual synthesis; and an agenda for the end of the century. All the three points deserve to be further developed.

The first one is, above all, the contradictory report of a decade that embodied the centrality of communication as a key issue of society and, at the same time, perceived its political and transformative meaning diluted among bureaucracies, the market and the asphyxiation of the voracious institutionality. The second one constitutes the very core of the book. In twenty brief pages, it presents an outline of what may be the way to think about the end-of-the-century mutations and the updating of the Martín-Barberian way of thinking mediations: the links between regimes that abound in technicality, institutionality, rituality, and sociality. The third one is to draft an agenda that reflects the set of scenarios in which, in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Martín-Barbero continued to work in order to think the present and understand and act toward what is lived in the very moment of the experience. Namely: globalisms concerning the ways of seeing, deterritorialization and the emerging worlds we inhabit; mutation of experience, sensorium and urban life amidst flows and networks; mediatization of politics in contrast and connection with the politics of communication; challenges posed by communication to education; and the still pending construction and recognition of the Latin-American cultural space.

There, the cartography that does not define absolute territories, but is the foot down record of experience in the reliefs, daring to think in changeable places and expose an agenda crossed by the contemporary debates. Keep up with the changes. For this reason, there is a reflective and even poetic power in the decision of closing the book with a space for dialogue gathering the collection of prologues written since the 1980s. At the same time, it is a journey through an anthology of texts and authors crucial to the inhabited cartography of communication-culture in Latin America. Signposts, meeting points that are also traced on the map, and speak to the journey of communication in culture. Compared to other works of the Martín-Barberian bibliography, this is a book to think with the author, to follow him on the path, to be a witness and embrace contradictions and doubts, free of fear. To contemplate the landscape or discover the trace. To welcome a way of seeing.



That is how the *Oficio de Cartógrafo* (Martín-Barbero, 2002), an expression of the moving thought that marks the legacy of Jesús Martín-Barbero, has this characteristic of ongoing work which does not only mean assuming, assessing and examining the change in one's own thinking – a valuable theme in itself – but above all the willingness to enter the dialectic between stubborn facts and ways of thinking. Keys to seeing with others, leaving dualisms or rereading, deterritorializing, and serving mutations are alive and evidenced in a work that is not an atlas, but a way to explore and exercise cartography as a handmade, precarious, and mutant knowledge. A polyphonic palimpsest of maps in constant construction.

READ JM-B

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How to approach the work of Jesús Martín-Barbero (JM-B)? How to read a textual corpus rich both in form and content, which went through different moments and met different listeners at each stage? When JM-B started to outline his thought late in the 1970s, many researchers of the critical-reproductive school, then hegemonic on the continent, frowned at a proposal that shifted the debate from the dual quality of media/ideology to the mass culture/popular culture axis. Some researchers, however, prefer to refer to the JM-B prior to the *epistemological chill*, that is, the one that continued to broadcast on the wave frequency of the traditional ideological criticism of French matrix. One should not be mistaken: JM-B is not AM.

If some read him as if he were the new incarnation of the report of monopolistic power of the media, we should remember that it was precisely JM-B who taught us to escape *dualistic reasoning* and not to fall into Manichean approaches. If we have learned anything from (with) JM-B, it is to look at the interstices, to investigate the borderlands (NGC *dixit*), and to get fearless inserted into those cultural territories that are neither solid nor liquid, but murky and muddy. Aware of his devotion to wordplays and his anarchist DNA, I have no doubt in saying that Jesús taught us to keep our distance from theoretical religions.

In my case, JM-B's gaze has served to rethink the relationship between (new) media and the collaborative cultures emerging in digital networks; at the same time, it allowed me to escape the cult of *new media* so in vogue since the beginning of the silicon revolution. Translated into JM-B's language, it was about losing the object (*new media*) to recover the process (*hypermediations*).

As I wrote in a book published in 2008, “without mediations there would be no hypermediations” (Scolari, 2008, p. 113). And, without JM-B’s work, today we would be much more lost and deprived of core analytical categories to understand what is happening in the world of media, communication and culture.

THE MARTÍN-BARBERIAN STYLE

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There is a *Martin-Barberian’s* way of thinking. A style unveiled in his ways of naming, writing, imagining, and falling in love. His way is from the south, but in dialogue with the north, the east, the many souths.

This style is stated in mantras that become a tutorial for intervening in the field of communication and culture: one must lose the object to win *the process*; to investigate communication is to *see with others*; it requires moving from media to *mediations*; one should seek neither effects nor audiences, but *acknowledgments*; we need to move from reasoning and illustrating to *narrating*; while commercial television is made for the consumer, open television addresses *the citizen*; the Internet is not a revolution of distribution (à la Gutenberg), but of writing, that is why we are writing in an *oral-visual way*...

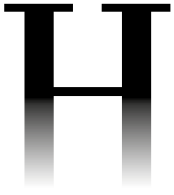
Mantras of communication that we repeat, but we really don’t get their meaning. And we don’t know it because the *Martin-Barberian* way consisted in provoking, exploding, bothering, but not defining: leaving the senses in the adventure, in the flow, in the essay. The *Martin-Barberian* style is materialized in five fields of experimentation:

Inhabiting the contradiction of modernity. Son of modernity and its enlightenment, its critical thinking, its perspective on rights, his original struggle is to be modern, fighting against its senses and hypocrisies, blowing it up to make it less white, less Western, less masculine. Blowing up modernity to produce a *jodernidad*¹, something tastier and more beautiful in the feminine, Afro, indigenous, gay, trans, young flavors...

Learn from the popular. The popular, that of the territories of identity and politics, but also that of the mass media and dance music, was his tactic to intervene in Modern and Western Cultures, and to challenge pop culture, the cultural industry and their obsession with the market. And his proposal is to think and produce knowledge in stories, to understand that people from lower classes have a speechless experience that is only told in the story.

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¹ In another text, Rincón (2018) defines this term as follows: “something like modernity that got screwed [jodió], broke, blew away... and also the playful, humorous, ironic, paradoxical way in which Latin America assumes and experiences modernity” (p. 224) (N. of the T.).



Listen to diversity. His permanent struggle is against moral dualisms (that of God and family) and ideological Manichaeism (that of left and right wings). His permanent quest is to inhabit ambiguity and diversity, to not even agree with himself, challenging himself to step out that moral and superior comfort found in the academia and theory.

See with the others. Keep the usual questions, but always changing their place. Look from the other side, listen to the youth, be a fan of experiments, and believe that from below, from communities, from others, one can think/ imagine more beautifully. And that is the reason for his proposal of moving from reasoning and illustrating toward narrating (telling-talking, telling-narrating, paying attention to and being taken into account).

Propose the mediations as the *coordination* between the movements of the industrial, the popular and the political.

Finally, the *Martin-Barberian* style proposes that every communicator should do three things: *think with their own head, have something to say, and be able to listen.*

“WE SHOULD RESONATE WHAT JESUS TOLD US...”²

NÉSTOR GARCÍA CANCLINI³

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Omar Rincón: What made Jesús uncomfortable?

Néstor García Canclini: I could mention misunderstandings and some that bored Jesús a little bit. For example, when he wrote an introduction for a reprint of *De los Medios a las Mediaciones* (Martín-Barbero, 1987), he told me that many people who had read the book didn't want to buy the new edition because they thought they already knew it, and so they kept asking him about positions he had changed or explained in the introduction. Yes, writing a book like that makes an impression. And even among those who will read other works later, on different topics, for example, the transnationalization of culture and the latest technologies, audiences and publics, few have grasped the changes. Jesús, on his side, clearly understood that rethinking was needed to understand contemporaneity.

OR: Among those misunderstandings, I think Jesús is quoted a lot, he is like a pop star, but his work is little read. Everybody talks about him, but few people read him...

² Excerpt from a conversation with Omar Rincón, held in Mexico City, July 1, 2021.

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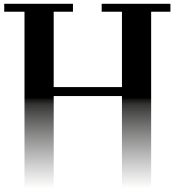
NGC: That is quite common. The misfortune of an author that reverberates so much in such a short time, as happened with Jesús with *De los Medios a las Mediaciones* (Martín-Barbero, 1987) is that although many people read him, they also turn him into a brand. In a meeting we attended together, a long time ago, in Montevideo, we talked a lot, but Jesús was very upset because they were forcing him to participate in two or three interviews a day on TV and with journalists from the print media, and then he had to deliver a massive two-and-a-half-hour conference. He told me “I’m not going to accept being treated like that anymore. They took me to a TV program where the interviewer hadn’t read anything of mine, and then they took me to journalists who, yes, had read my work, and I was already tired”.

OR: Both you and Jesús are intellectuals. I think there is a difference with other academics, because intellectuals think the world politically. In that, Jesús and you are similar.

NGC: And that has grown as the number of academics has increased, although few students get to work later in the university, because no new positions are created. But it seems to me that several decades ago, even in countries where intellectuals were heard as public voices, and one could fantasize that they could steer the opinion direction, as in France, today we no longer have that possibility. Since the massive diffusion of television, hardly anyone is driven by what intellectuals say. However, in some Latin-American countries some still believe that they can be influential interlocutors to change the course of the vote next Sunday. It is curious that this happens when fewer youngsters enter universities, when most of us who remain in research are voices that come from another era. I believe that Jesús was not deluded by this power of influence. He knew how to perceive situations where he could speak and say something that would be heard, for example, about the new Colombian constitution, that of 1991. But he was not interested in being invited to go on television this week. He also made contributions to the political field by helping to understand the relationship between culture and education. He was very aware of what the media was saying about these issues, but he was not eager to be seen on television or on the media. Instead, he would show up for the pupils and readers who quoted him. ■

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