

Imagery of abortion and medial communication

Imaginário do aborto e comunicação medial

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ABSTRACT

This article aimed to present abortion as an aesthetic experience in which a medial communication flow is interrupted. To show how mediality occurs in the female body, we searched for possible sources of fear in the almost absence of mythical representation of abortion and resorted to the concept of “nobjects” (blood, sounds, amniotic fluid) to identify a type of relationship between mother and fetus in which both are indistinguishable. We conclude that the body plays a converter role in dealing with the suffering generated by the rupture of the medial flow. Finally, we addressed the need for further exploration on the theme, which constitutes a discursive interdict, although tolerated in most traditional societies.

Keywords: Abortion, communication, media, body, woman

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RESUMO

Este texto visa apresentar o aborto como uma experiência estética em que um fluxo de comunicação medial é interrompido. Para mostrar como a medialidade se dá no corpo feminino, buscamos as possíveis fontes do medo na quase ausência de representação mítica do aborto e recorremos ao conceito de “nobjetos” (sangue, sons, líquido amniótico) para identificar um tipo de relação entre mãe e feto em que ambos não se distinguem. Concluímos sobre o papel de conversor do corpo para se lidar com o sofrimento gerado pela ruptura do fluxo medial. Por fim, abrimos o texto para a necessidade de maior exploração do assunto, que constitui um interdito discursivo, todavia tolerado na maioria das sociedades tradicionais.

Palavras-chave: Aborto, comunicação, mídia, corpo, mulher

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But we shall do what we have always done: whatever one casts into us, we take down into our depth – for we are deep, we do not forget – and become bright again. (Nietzsche)

¹ Abortion or miscarriage is the process of voluntary and involuntary termination of pregnancy up to the 20th week or with the fetus weighing up to 500 grams, when the gestational stage is unknown (Rocha & Andalaft Neto, 2003).

² In the Yoruba language, àbíkú means “born-to-die”, or “children are born to die many times” (Verger, 1983).

³ We designated as infra- and suprasensible the levels of reality – to resume an expression developed by the transdisciplinary physicist Basarab Nicolescu (2009) – immediately below (infra) and above (supra) what we are given to experience in our physical reality; they are the psychic perceptions of the invisible, impalpable, inaudible and that, however, through some developed sensitive faculty, become accessible and are perceived, such as premonitions, intuitions, inspirations, clairvoyant phenomena, expansion of consciousness, etc.

⁴ We used the notion of chiasm, employed by Kamper (2016) in the sense of something that is cross-disposed and cannot be read except in two directions, at the same time united and contradictory.

IN THIS ARTICLE we aim to present abortion¹ as a phenomenon of interruption of the medial communicational flow, using the category proposed by Sloterdijk (2016) of mediality. In this reflection, we started from the media-body, a traversed body, a place for the passage of positive and negative forces that affect us. We assume that the media-body (Baitello Jr, 2014; Pross, 1972) is a living, dynamic and fluid body, participating in a cosmic universal order/disorder, but also in a planetary, physic, biological order. We look at the abjection (Kristeva, 1980) that we qualify as energetic-spiritual although it is physically manifested in the women’s body: the abortion of a fetus, the birth of a dead child or of an àbíkú², a child destined to die before its parents. It is death, but it can only happen if preceded by life; therefore, we consider that it is a phenomenon of *life/death in the female body*. Menstrual blood carries with it the stigma not only of the uselessness of waste, but also of potential death within the female body; something that can be morally considered a mistake. However, we sought to detach the phenomenon of premature life/death of a fetus or a child from any moral issue linked to failure, weakness or error, whether moral or physiological. We think in energetic and also communicational terms, attempting to disassociate the notion of negativity and death from the moral notion of evil.

The notion of medial communication, which happens in and among bodies, is situated in the perspective of an observational and analytical exercise of phenomena that we qualify as extended communication (Dravet, 2019; Marcondes & Dravet, 2021) because it passes through the infra and suprasensible levels of reality³. These are levels that the imagination can reach and bring up in speech, gesture, images, and every form of expression that it is possible to use. We are interested in thinking from the experience of the body, what is lived, felt, and perceived with the phenomenon of intrauterine life/death and the birth of a being that dies prematurely. We deal with sensibility between beauty and ugliness, and what causes pleasure and repulsion. We try to understand what happens beyond morality, with the body in chiasm⁴, investigating communication in aesthetic terms.

In this perspective and in search of concepts that can feed a theory of body-media and extended communication, we bring the proposal of Peter

Sloterdijk (2016) who elaborates a “medial analysis” of the “nobjects” of the body: blood, sound and breath. Regarding these “nobjects,” there is a concept he himself found in the works of Thomas Macho⁵, the philosopher wrote:

Nobjects. These are entities given in a spherically enfolding way that, in the mode of non-confrontational presence, glide as beings originating from proximity, in the literal sense of the term, before a self that does not face back, precisely the fetal pre-subject. Its being near (which is not yet a demonstrable being) is transmitted to the child above all by the first gift made to it: the placental blood. (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 268) (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 268)

⁵ Austrian philosopher, born in 1952 in Vienna, he holds the chair of Cultural History in the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies at Humboldt University, Berlin.

The “medial analysis” takes place in terms of non-separated and non-separable dyads, in which no subject-object relationship can be established without taking away its intrinsic condition of dyad, dual unity, one duality, which implies “reciprocal dissolubility”. The fetal condition, as a vital experience, although prior to birth, is one that, to be treated in relational and communicational terms, needs what Sloterdijk (2016, p. 269) calls a “regime of radical mediality”, in the fluid realm of corporal “nobjects.”

This article follows a three-step organization: 1) The female body as a place that not only historically, but also atavistically, inspires fear for its relationship to the negative part of the world. By way of contextualization, the telluric images of the cave and the womb, and aquatic images and their connections with the moon in the mythical imagery are resumed here. 2) The event of life/death in the female body in abortion and stillbirth, phenomena that are absent from the mythologies of archaic societies and representations. 3) A communicational perspective of the female relation to life/death in the body, in which this is conceived first as a force of inversion that runs through the female body and second as a force of regeneration.

FEAR AND THE EUPHEMIZATION OF THE NEGATIVE

The imagery of evil has placed woman as the agent of Satan, and we know that Western Judeo-Christian history took this misogyny to its highest degree of accusation and concretization with the witch hunts during the Middle Ages. But that was not all. It is possible to consider, as does Jean Delumeau, regarding the female body, that we are in presence of a “spontaneous fear”, distinct from the historically constructed “reflected fear” discourse.

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At the beginning of the Modern Age, in Western Europe, anti-Judaism and witch-hunting coincided. It was not by chance. Like the Jews, women were then identified as a dangerous agent of Satan; and not only by churchmen, but also by lay judges. [„] We need to clarify this complex situation and, furthermore follow, from a new example, the transformation by the ruling culture of a spontaneous fear into a reflected fear. (Delumeau, 1990, p. 310)

It is of our interest the “spontaneous fear” that can have aesthetic characteristics, linked both to the telluric images of the bottom of the earth mystery, and the aquatic images of the also mysterious oceanic universe. A primordial imagery capable of tormenting men by presenting itself not only to their field of vision, but also and above all to their internal vision, inhabiting their dreams, reveries and fantasies; instigating their curiosity, inciting their desire and causing them repulsion. These original images of atavistic power cross times and historical, social and religious processes; they are independent of cultural interpretations, artistic and literary creation, and political discourses, theoretical discussions, and their notions of freedom and equality. The hypothesis of a spontaneous fear implies that, before all these historical and interpretive issues, psychic images already existed and that, amidst the whole cultural process, they remain active.

Gilbert Durand (2002) called the “nocturnal regime of images” the set of psychic images linked to the descent into the universe of the night, the abyss, the cave and the oceanic depths. In his anthropological conception of the way images constitute a structured system in human consciousness (in myths, art, and literature, for example), euphemization and conversion are the two forms of symbolic approach to this nocturnal universe of descent. It becomes evident when reading Durand’s study that the nocturnal imagery presents a destructive and annihilating potential, the potential of the fall, which makes this whole set of images something unbearable for the human mind and psyche. A series of literary, artistic and mythological subterfuges allow us to mitigate the negative effect of images of death, abyss, hellish cycles, infinite, unknown, etc.

⁶The expression “unlearning fear” is originally used by Mircea Eliade in his book *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1958).

It is about “unlearning fear”⁶. This is one of the reasons why the imagination of descent requires more precautions than ascension. It requires armor, or a mentor to accompany it, a whole arsenal of machines and machinations more complex than wings, so simple an appanage for taking off. This is because descent risks becoming confused and turning into a fall at any moment. It must continually reinforce itself, as if to reassure itself, with the symbols of intimacy. (Durand, 2002, p. 200-201)

The black hole associated with the female interior universe and the return to the origins (the vaginal opening and uterine cavity), as it implies a fall into the abyss, is euphemized by the image of the cave which, little by little, is transformed by narrative production and artistic representation into a protective womb where a fetus is maternally generated. The imagery of the woman then becomes that of the archetypal figure of the great mother with her protective bosom, with consoling and comforting virtues and gentleness, etc. But what is at the origin of the cave and the womb-cabinet is, in fact, the great fear of the unknown mystery, of the night, the fall and the abyss.

Along with the conversion of the fall into a slow descent, the association between death and rebirth is also a way of euphemizing conversion. There is death, but always compensated by a birth.

It is impressive that caves are precisely the proper places of the cults of death and rebirth: caves of Demeter, Dionysus, Mithra, Cybele and Atis, catacombs of the first Christians; churches, basilicas, cathedrals are man-made caves, but obscure, naked and resounding like the natural cave; they carry within them, as a uterus in a womb, the subterranean crypt. (Morin, 1997, p. 123)

As in a perception in negative – or through a system of compensation – it is possible to see the imagery of the cave and its relations with the female chthonic deities and the alternation life/death as a universal complex of conversion of the great original fear related to what is feminine, to its deep, empty and annihilating dimension. The jagged vaginas, present images in several archaic myths and that can be understood as representations of the fear of the castrating woman, were gradually replaced by rounded wombs and breasts, by wide hips and by all the symbolism of what is round. The images of the plenilunium and the rounded womb of the pregnant woman stereotyped the maternal archetype. “And in the rounded landscape, everything seems to rest. The round being propagates its roundness and the inside it” (Bachelard, 2003, p. 241). The woman-mother and the earth-mother are one, both venerated and revered in the caves, like Demeter, the great agricultural provider, who also, in her archaic versions, swallows the dead to make them reborn.

The exhibitionist myth of Baubo, the personification of the female sex taken from the Orphic tradition, is situated exactly in the interstice of the death/life relationship attributed to the goddess Demeter. She weeps, lamenting the disappearance of her beloved daughter, Persephone, taken to the realm of Hades. In despair, she refuses to eat and drink. Baubo her servant, trying to console the

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goddess, lifted her dress and showed her vulva. The young Iacchus was there, half born from the vulva of the old Baubo, waving his arms, flashing his smile in a comic and grotesque scene that makes the goddess laugh. Comforted, she accepts the drink that Baubo offered her.

The founder of ethnopsychiatry, Georges Devereux, spent 50 years working on the Baubo myth. His perspective was to show, among other things, that the female sex was an object of worship, but was largely disowned by phallogocentric cultures. It was a cult linked to laughter arising from exhibitionist sexual provocations among women. Devereux notes that such provocations are still very well received by mourners like Demeter, and that laughter offers powerful therapeutic solutions. The argument is logical and simple, yet it seems to be part of a way of thinking and acting that the prevailing morality makes us keep silent. Regarding Baubo's power of consolation, Devereux interprets:

It is this precise spectacle, evoking a birth that animates Demeter again, reminding her that, although she has lost Persephone, who descended to the Realm of the Dead, nothing prevents her from giving birth to another child. We know, on the other hand - and this is a capital detail - that precisely during her mourning and her wandering, Demeter, metamorphosed into a mare, became pregnant by Poseidon in the form of a stallion. (Devereux, 2011, p. 50)⁷.

⁷In the original: "C'est ce spectacle précis, évoquant une naissance, qui ragaillardit Déméter, car il lui rappelle que, bien qu'elle ait perdu Perséphone, descendue au Royaume des Morts, rien ne l'empêche de donner naissance à un *autre* enfant. On sait alors - et c'est là un détail capital - que, *précisément* durant son deuil et son errance, Déméter, métamorphosée en jument, fut saillie par Poseidon sous la forme d'un étalon."

If death implies rebirth, female regeneration also implies annihilation. Menstrual blood, a potential of life, is also morbid dejection when it is monthly evacuated, in an abject and useless leftover, dangerous and threatening to the generational order of life expectancy that reigns in the diurnal universe of images: ascending, luminous, positive. Life is celebrated on cards announcing happy births, but death, potentially contained in the menstrual blood that flows out of the female body is rejected, attesting the failure, the non-generation, a kind of small death remembered at each lunar cycle. The female attachment to the moon then corroborates the original fear of the mystery of the night.

It is not only the chthonic image of the cave that torments human beings in their perception of feminine strength and energy. Water also carries with it the frightening imagery of depth, the currents, the darkness and the mysterious silence that leads to the Kingdom of the Dead. Also, and with the same ambivalence, water is the cradle of embryonic life. Life and death are linked in the mysteriously contradictory figure of the woman-mother.

Waters do not evoke death just because they are dormant, and birth just because they are fertile. They bring with them a cosmomorphic beyond that moves the

deepest in man: they speak of the language of origins, which is maybe confusedly recognized. This does not mean that man has kept the memory of his intramarine, intrauterine life in the exact sense of the term. But maybe the reminiscences of those lives are still felt. (Morin, 1997, p. 128-129)

The universe of maternal intimacy is aquatic and there is no human being who has not passed through it to come to the world. In the next section we address the presence of death in the female body, no longer from the point of view of interpretations and the converter and euphemizing subterfuges of the imagination, but from the absence of images of the experience of the negative.

LIFE/DEATH IN THE FEMALE BODY – THE GREAT ABSENTEE OF REPRESENTATION

Although menstrual blood is always the sign of non-generation and implicitly reminds of the potentiality of life (woman at childbearing age) as much as of death (she is not giving birth), the interruption of a pregnancy with an abortion, no matter whether provoked or spontaneous is the most evident experience of the presence of death in the female body. That this is perhaps one of the most absent themes in anthropology, and it is not due to a prejudice of science and anthropologists, but to the lack of mythological evidence and representations in the set of available references on archaic, ancient and modern societies. Apparently, there is no explicit system in the imagery on what is feminine that allows “unlearning the fear” of life/death in the female body

According to Luc Boltanski (2012), Devereux’s study, a study of abortion in primitive societies, published in 1955, constitutes one of the most complete surveys ever done on the theme, based on the Human relations area files, at Yale University, and on research data directly collected by the author. The main observation is that in all studied societies (more than 400 pre-industrial societies) the possibility of removing fetuses from the womb before birth to intentionally destroy them seems to be part of fundamental frameworks of human existence in society. Also according to Boltanski:

In most societies in which information is available, it seems that the means used to perform an abortion are of *common knowledge*, even if some people (who generally act as midwives) are held to be more knowledgeable or more skillful than others. In fact, many of the means employed to induce an abortion are difficult to apply and known to be more or less dangerous. They cause fear, but that does not prevent anyone from resorting to them when the need to abort seems to impose itself. (Boltanski, 2012, p. 210)

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Even so, practice is not reflected in myths, rituals, or representations of archaic societies. There is almost no social mechanism to address the theme collectively. We have a very small *corpus* of myths associated with aborted fetuses and stillbirths, or children born to die early. We discussed some of them here. But what seems more important at a first moment is dealing with this absence of representation. It brings us back to the realities of the occult realm, that must remain quiet and silenced, whose revelation appears as uncomfortable and inconvenient, perfectly framing abortion in the universe of the disturbing, presented by Sigmund Freud as the notion of *Unheimlich*:

We are reminded that the term *heimlich* is not univocal, but belongs to two groups of ideas which, not being opposites, are alien to each other: that of what is familiar, cozy, and what is hidden, kept concealed. *Unheimlich* would normally be used as an antonym of the first meaning, but not the second. Sanders told us nothing about a possible genetic relationship between the two meanings. Our attention is attracted, on the other hand, by an observation by Schelling, which brings something entirely new and unexpected to us. *Unheimlich* would be everything that should remain secret, hidden, but appeared [...] Therefore, *heimlich* is a word that develops its meaning in the direction of ambiguity, until it finally coincides with its opposite. *Unheimlich* is in some sense a kind of *heimlich*.” (Freud, 2010, p. 254-256)

Abortion is therefore, like a woman’s vagina and vulva, a familiar and unsettling reality at the same time. Women have abortions, either clandestinely in countries where, starting in the 19th century, abortion became a legal object and was massively forbidden, or discreetly in countries in which the practice is legal although socially reprehended. In both cases, it is not talked about, such experience is not narrated. The same happens when it comes to spontaneous abortion. Clandestine or discreet, the death crossing the female body is something that is kept hidden, remaining only in the most recondite psychic images.

In modernity, abortion as a theme appears in the context of political claims, either for or against the woman’s right to practice it voluntarily. In Brazil, according to Luna (2014), in an article on the representations of abortion through images in Brazilian documentaries, it is in the cases of pro-life discourses that fetuses are represented: “In order to formalize the denunciation of abortion as a practice of evil in absolute terms, pro-life documentaries and slides resort to so-called realistic images of the remains of whole fetuses or shattered embryos” (Luna, 2014, unpaginated).

Although weakly, fetuses have also come to be represented by medicine or the biological sciences in the didactic-pedagogical context:

In fact, apart from the dolls and images intended to instruct doctors and midwives, which multiplied especially from the second half of the 18th century on, the fetus is strangely little present both in visual representation (rarity of religious images, representing Christ in the womb of the Virgin, as a fetus) and poetry, literature, myth and general discourse. (Boltanski, 2012, p. 221)

It is known that in China and Japan, voluntary termination of pregnancy and infanticide have been common practices over centuries. According to research conducted by Jolivet (2004), especially in Japan, until the 19th century and to a lesser extent still in the first half of the 20th century, abortion and infanticide functioned as a demographic control measure by the adult population, amid poverty in rural areas and the threat of overpopulation in the archipelago. However, to ensure the life of the mother, who represented an indispensable labor force for the family, infanticide soon after birth was more common than the termination of pregnancy, as it was considered dangerous. Only the wealthiest women could resort to professionals who performed abortions in a way that was considered safe. On the practice of *Mabiki*, Jolivet wrote:

The term *mabiki* (...) is a euphemism referring to the act of thinning a plant. It was a practice considered an unavoidable evil, intended to ensure the survival of the other members of the family. In the same state of mind, the life of the elders was “shortened”, as witnessed by “the mountains from which old people were thrown” (*ubasuteyama*). (Jolivet, 2004. p. 101)⁸

In this context, the instruction of Buddhist religious in favor of life took place through engravings depicting scenes of abortion and infanticide, displayed in the temples. According to the researcher and her sources, the display of such depictions inside temples had a double effect on society: on the one hand, it frightened women by causing them guilt and repentance (they were depicted as ogres or suffering in hell), on the other hand, it trivialized the theme. According to Boltanski (2012), regarding the little representation of abortion in culture, Japan is one of the rare societies in which there is a mythological being representing dead fetuses and newborns, with a cult and ritual to be fulfilled to avoid its wrath. It is the kappa, described by Jolivet as follows:

⁸In the original: “Le terme *mabiki* (...) est un euphémisme qui renvoie à l’acte d’éclaircir un plant. Il s’agissait d’une pratique considérée comme un mal inévitable, destiné à assurer la survie des autres membres de la maisonnée. Dans le même état d’esprit, on “abrégait” la vie des plus âgés, comme en témoignent “les monts où on jetait les vieux” (*ubasuteyama*).”

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About the size of a child, this mythical being is represented with a slimy body, usually covered with scales and a tortoise shell. Amphibious and vampire-like, it haunts the ponds and rivers, on the prowl for some living being whose blood it seeks to suck. Some representations of kappa *disturbingly evoke* [emphasis added] an unfinished fetal body, mummified or in a relative advanced degree of decomposition. (Jolivet, 2004, p. 118-119)⁹

⁹In the original: “De la taille d’un enfant, cet être mythique est représenté avec un corps visqueux, généralement recouvert d’écailles et d’une carapace de tortue. Amphibie et vampire, il hante les marécages et les rivières à l’affût d’un être vivant dont il cherche à sucer le sang. Certaines représentations de kappa évoquent de façon troublante un corps de foetus inachevé, momifié ou dans un état de décomposition plus ou moins avancé.”

To prevent an aborted child from becoming a “daughter of water” (possible interpretation of the origin of the word *kappa*) and probably also as a way to appease the parents of the returned children before they were even born, they wrote *koema* or letters addressed to the gods or to the spirits of the aborted children themselves. Some temples specialized in rituals for babies and cases of problematic motherhood still display them. Here is an example of the messages these letters might contain, quoted by Jolivet:

Forgive me/ for not being able to give birth to you/Rest in peace....

(With a note from the father below)

I ask for your forgiveness/I hope one day you will have the chance to be reborn/
And watch over our happiness.

(Jolivet, 2004, p. 126)¹⁰.

¹⁰In the original: “(Zôjôji, Tôkiô) (De la part de Jirô e Yurika): Pardonne-moi de ne pas avoir pu te mettre au monde/ Repose en paix... (avec, en bas, un mot du père) Je te demande pardon/ J’espère que tu auras l’occasion de renaître un jour/ Et veille sur notre bonheur.”

The researcher’s article on abortion and infanticide in Japan ends with a reflection on the effectiveness of these rites – which are still currently used – in the psychological treatment of women who abort. Having a way to express something to the child who was not allowed to be born and was not welcomed into the world seems to act not only as a spiritual ritual to keep the kappa away, but also as a therapeutic ritual to diminish the parents’ guilt.

Given the weak mythology of abortion in culture, it is worthwhile to also address the existence of a myth of the stillborn, the *àbíkú*, in Yoruba African culture, especially in Nigeria. Information about this myth and its related rituals came to Brazil through the studies of Pierre Verger (1983).

It is believed that the *àbíkú* form societies in heaven and from time to time they are taken to earth to bring some teaching to their mothers, causing them the pain of loss by dying early and then returning to the region they inhabited in heaven. The *àbíkú* come into the world repeatedly and always through the same mother. The myths narrate that at the moment of descending to earth, these beings promise their companions that they will return and establish the term of their stay with their mother:

When *Aláwaiyé* first brought two hundred and eighty àbíké into the world, they had declared, upon passing the barrier of heaven, how long they would stay in the world (VII, 4, 10). One of them would propose to return to heaven as soon after seeing its mother (VII, 10); another would wait until the day its parents decided it should marry (VII, 11); another would return to heaven when its parents conceived a new child (VII, 15); one still would wait no longer than starting to walk (VII, 16). (Verger, 1983, p. 139)¹¹

Verger then tells us of a series of rituals done by the parents of these children, prescribed by the *babalawô*¹², to make them forget their promises of return, forget where they came from and remain on earth. But it is not always that the àbíké companions in heaven accept to lose their brothers. It is often that they come down to rescue them

The members of the àbíké society, *egbé ará òrum*, come from heaven to reside in the marshy places (II, 28) or in the gullies (II, 46; V, 20), whence they call the children who want to stay in the world. They also go to the foot of the walls (II, 47), there where they go to empty the dirt (II, 48). They stay in the rooms where people wash themselves (*balüwe*) at the back of the houses (III, 63), which are cool places where *owo*, the placenta of the newborns, is buried, placed in an *isàsún* vase, covered with shredded palm leaves, called *mariwó* and *cauris* (cowries). (Verger, 1983, p. 142).

It is almost immediate to notice the similarity between the habitat of the Japanese *kappa* and that of the àbíké who live in places of still water such as swamps, ponds and gullies. The slimy body of the *kappa*, its putrefying state, and the dirty habitat of the àbíké refer to the condition of the uterine origin of the aborted and stillborn fetus, dark and abject. They also refer to the negative condition of death and interruption of the course of life. These very rare representations show that, in a certain way, and even with all their euphemizing strategies, there are ways to face the problem of the death of the fetus and newborn child, and ward off the negative consequences of such events. The existence of these two images allows us to glimpse ways to “unlearn the fear” of this kind of death experience.

According to Diniz et al. (2017), from the National Abortion Survey 2016 (PNA 2016) study:

Abortion is common in Brazil. The numbers of women who declare having had an abortion in their lifetime are eloquent: roughly speaking, by the age of 40,

¹¹The numbers in parentheses refer to the reference *corpus* of the researcher's texts, the Ifá stories, the Yoruba divination system.

¹²In Yoruba culture, *babalawô* are holders of the secret, those who read the Ifá oracle and know how to advise people on the ritualistic ways to conduct their lives.

almost one in five of Brazilian women have had an abortion; in 2015 there were about half a million abortions. Considering that a large part of abortions are illegal and therefore are done outside full conditions of healthcare, these magnitudes indisputably place abortion as one of the biggest public health problems in Brazil. (Diniz et al., 2017, p. 659).

Currently, the intrauterine death of the fetus is, a reality experienced by millions of Brazilian women. As it constitutes an abjection so difficult to deal with, and amidst the absence of anthropological data that would allow dealing with the psychic images produced from it, we proceeded to inquire what kind of process take place in the most recondite obscurity of the already obscure uterine universe: the death of someone so deeply connected to herself? Would it be possible to establish some relation of familiarity for the phenomenon of uterine life/death to become less disturbing and come out of obscurity, since it directly affects thousands of women and, indirectly, all of humanity? We now propose an attempt to create a theoretical instrumentation capable of understanding the phenomenon of life/death in the female body in terms of medial aesthetic experience of ethical consequences.

VITAL FLOW INTERRUPTION: INVERSION AND REGENERATION

Every flow implies the possibility of its interruption, every interruption of flow implies the possibility of the generation of a new flow. In a *radical medial analysis* of the flows established there, we first try to perceive the kind of relationship woven between mother and embryo/fetus in the first instants of conception and throughout the stay in the womb. The reality is that we do not have a relationship between mother and fetus right away, since the process of implantation and development of the embryo in the mother's body from conception on, takes place in a relationship that we called *nobjetal*, resuming the above notion of *nobject* proposed by Thomas Macho and developed by Sloterdijk.

A *nobjetal* relation is an exclusively medial relation in which it is not possible to distinguish subject and object. There is no possible differentiation between the subject mother (who is fully constituted, externally and internally) and the object that is at that moment projecting itself: the embryo, supposedly a future fetus to be born in the form of a newborn child. There is no possible confrontation, although the co-presence is total and intimate. In the phase before nidation when, around five to fifteen days after fertilization, the embryo moves from the fallopian tubes to attach itself to the uterine wall, the pregnancy is still called chemical pregnancy by scientists. Any failure of the process in this period

is very common and is not considered an abortion. Many times such pregnancy failure is not even noticed by the woman who, in fact, may not have been aware that she was pregnant. From the medial point of view, the less molecular transit between the mother and the fertilized egg, the more discreet and less sensitive becomes the interruption of this transit. What we do not know is what happens during its displacement from the fallopian tubes to the uterus from the embryo's point of view. How does this descent take place, which fail in many cases? What kind of strength does the embryo need to release to overcome this first stage of its development? And what kind of impression does this initial challenge of life leave on its psycho-emotional constitution?

What goes on after implantation is the development of the embryo, which becomes a fetus and continues to establish with its mother an intimate relationship of increasingly intense exchanges that take place through corporal nobjects: placental blood, amniotic fluid, and sound. The fetus itself is considered a nobject since it is not possible for any subject to look and directly confront it. No matter how developed uterine imaging techniques are, they still bring the observing subjects images and sounds of the fetus, but not the fetus itself. It is still neither possible to exchange glances, nor to touch it.

In its nobject condition and in the medial relationship that then takes place between it and its environment (the maternal interior environment), the bond established with the mother is paradoxical: "what the mother has to give to the fetus is nothing more than what the fetus gives to itself through the mother" (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 280). But if she is not in a position to offer it the elements it needs, or if by some original malformation it is not in a position to give itself what is vital to it through the mother, then the fragile cycle of life breaks down.

During the period of intrauterine life, blood and sound are the driving elements of the first fetal nobjetal relationship. If the medieval imagery – which lasted to some extent until the 19th century as far as fetal development is concerned – massively spread the idea that fetuses survived and developed in utero by drinking their mothers' menstrual blood. It is now known that placental blood is the means of nourishment for the fetus, ensuring the metabolic exchanges between it and the mother during pregnancy. Nutrients, antibodies, and oxygen pass from the mother's bloodstream to the placenta and flow into his body through the umbilical vein. At no time does the mother's blood mix with that of the fetus. Neither is it an exchange in the sense of a dialogue, but a fluidic communion, an immersive sharing. Inside the amniotic fluid, the fetus experiences during intrauterine life the perception of the mother's sound world and especially her voice. Sloterdijk calls this "psychoacoustic initiation" and shows how much this experience of being-in-the-sonosphere seems to determine

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the affective relationship that the individual will have with the sound world outside the womb, music heard together being a kind of fundamental germ for the formation of communities and for psychosocial life.

Children already listen remarkably well inside the womb, thanks to early ear development – perhaps from the embryonic stage and certainly during the second half of gestation. Moreover, striking observations attest that this early hearing capacity does not lead the fetus to passively surrender to its mothers' inner sound life, to voices and external noises filtered through water; rather, the fetal ear already develops the ability to actively orient itself in an aggressive and incessant sound environment by means of active and autonomous listening and counter-listening (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 454).

Mother and child constitute a dyad. The mother nourishes herself and the fetus takes some of those nutrients from her for its own development. There is a dual vitality there that implies the symbiotic devouring of vital energies (internal and external) and the constant nourishment throughout the successive cycles of the development of the life that is constituted. The mother is fertilized and the cycle of conception begins. The embryo overcomes the first cycle with nidation. The mother is pregnant and the embryo becomes a fetus, the second cycle, in which miscarriages become rarer. The fetus wins the third cycle with birth: the mother is lactating and the newborn continues its vital cycle outside the womb in a medial connection, no longer of blood exchange, but of milky, sound and magnetic exchange: the magnetism of gaze and sound being two fundamental vectors for the establishment of the affective post-birth relationship between mother and child.

In terms of physical, biological and psychic energies, generation seems to be a story of anthropophagic vitality. However, in any of these cycles, the vitality can be abruptly interrupted. And the relationship between mother and embryo, mother and fetus, or mother and newborn may be reversed. We will now try to reach the impact of the disconnection caused by the death of the fetus as a form of interruption of flow, contamination of vital energy, and necessary expulsion.

From a social, cultural and moral point of view, there is an obligation for the pregnant and nursing mother to transmit happiness. Such happiness passes through sound conduction, when the welcoming vibrations of the mother's voice repeatedly greet the arriving child and make it participate in a close relationship of the promise of happiness. But when the fetus dies, or when the mother's will does not meet the general expectation, nor her own, what happens to the ongoing medial relationship?

We identify three phases in the process of the interruption of the gestational experience: first, a sudden reversal from the anthropophagic vital image to a morbid and melancholic one. What was once positive turns into negative, the vital flow is interrupted and becomes a biological threat of contamination and infection of the mother's intimate environment. In the medical context, this is verified in the practice of aspiration or curettage, surgical interventions that consist in, immediately after the abortion, removing the dead fetus from inside the uterus, whose fragments are discarded in the hospital garbage, without the mother, then generally under the effect of anesthesia, accompanying this removal. In psychic terms, the inversion affects the mother, and may generate a melancholic feeling, a sense of failure, of loss, or even a dramatic inner experience that may lead her to a depressive state.

Normally, when the dead fetus is not removed by medical operation, a second phase occurs: the biological organism recognizes the presence of death and naturally expels it along with the whole gestational apparatus (the placenta and the surrounding tissues) through strong contractions. The abortive woman who experiences this process then lives for some weeks with the dead fetus inside her body, which can generate anxiety for the expulsion, in the expectation of getting rid of a failed medial relationship and the possibility of contamination.

One can say that during this period the uterus becomes a real sarcophagus that the woman carries within herself. In an ideal situation, she would then respect her state of death and negativity and calmly await the time of expulsion. It would be a matter of facing two successive pains: that of mourning for the loss of the nobject, because whether it was desired or not, whether it was a happy or uncomfortable presence, the feeling of loss and failure in the vital exchange relationship hitherto underway is what most commonly happens; it is mostly a melancholic mourning, a feeling of emptiness that, like all melancholy arising from the loss of a close being, according to Sloterdijk (2016, p. 416), is "the psychic trail of a twilight of the gods in an individual case".

The second pain is the physical expulsion followed by the unsettling experience of feeling and identifying amidst the clotted blood, the tissues that constitute the dead fetus. For the pain of loss and expulsion to be bearable, one would need the wisdom of facing death, not denying it. Such wisdom seems to be taught by the Baubo myth quoted and commented above, as a promise of regeneration. After the loss of an aborted or stillborn child, it will be possible to procreate again. Lamentation and depression are then transformed into therapeutic laughter. For this, it is necessary to pass through the third phase: regeneration, as the myth seems to teach.

The therapeutic effect of regeneration is often limited to the idea of replacement associated with the possibility of generating again. According to Boltanski (2012), many women attribute the pregnancy following an abortion to the coming of the same being, a sign that a successful pregnancy comes to replace the failed one. In any case, to generate again, one must go through a purification process that, in the modern context, tends to be understood in biological terms. The regeneration of the woman's uterine health thus depends on the successful expulsion of the fetus and the entire gestational sac. This will be followed by a long period of bleeding, a moment of cleansing of the uterine environment. Medicine prefers to guarantee this cleaning through an artificially monitored hygienization process: aspiration, curettage, ultrasounds and transvaginal examinations guarantee the woman's physical safety after an abortion or the birth of a dead fetus. The post-abortion period is treated as a period of safeguarding the female reproductive system.

As we have seen, the myth of Baubo weakly survived the supremacy of the luminous and positive imagery of the modern era. In modern philosophy, only Nietzsche makes reference to Baubo in the preface to *Gay Science*: "Perhaps truth is a woman who has reasons for not letting us see her reasons? Perhaps her name is-to speak Greek-Baubo?" (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 38); the author hints that there is something to apprehend about truth in hidden knowledge, not by lifting the veils of the hidden, but recognizing that rebirth comes from pain and depth.

As we have seen, abortion and early death are not represented and present weak mythology. This is a theme that remains hidden and quietly silenced even among those who practice it. The aborted fetus is neither seen nor spoken about except in the sphere of abjections. We suppose that this may be related to the horror of blood as a noobject capable of deeply connecting every being to its mother. Thinking in terms of ancestry and origin, every human being has been connected to his mother in the uterine envelope, establishing with her a noobject relationship hardly apprehensible to a thought whose tradition is limited to the objective conception of knowledge.

The lack of concepts to deal with this kind of relationship is a sign of the lack of possibility or will to understand the nocturnal and disturbing phenomenon of life/death in the female body. To understand this, one must go back to the history of the horror of maternal blood, the unbearable witness of the reproductive act, the fertile age of the woman and the exclusive intimate relationship she establishes with her child, which can be assessed by the following passage from the defamatory handbook of the world, *De humanae conditionis miseria*, by Lothario of Segni, the one who, in 1198, would become Pope Innocent III:

Observe what food the fetus is nourished on in the womb: certainly menstrual blood, which is interrupted after conception so that the fetus may be nourished on it, and of which it is said to be so disgusting and filthy that ‘in contact with it the fruits do not germinate, the bushes dry up, the plants die, the trees lose their leaves, and the dogs that eat it become rabid’ (Segni apud Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 556).

As dated as such a quote may seem, it is clear that it is accompanied, as we saw in the first part of this text, by a whole imagery of the spontaneous fear of the cavity represented by the woman and its liquid environment. Blood and its viscosity, when associated with loss, form a set of psychic images that are unbearable enough to make the task of “unlearning fear” pointed out by Mircea Eliade unfeasible until it becomes the object of massive deconstruction.

A wisdom of confronting death and abjections can be glimpsed in the Nietzschean proposal of *Gay Science*, from which the incipit of this article is taken: “But we shall do what we have always done: whatever one casts into us, we take down into our depth – for we are deep, we do not forget – *and become bright again*. [emphasis added]” (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 341). That is the proposal of regeneration. To let oneself be affected by death, filth, vile thoughts, and all sorts of abjections is part of the human condition, a deep condition whose origin goes back to the beginning of time and which has always had to go through the successive cycles of life and death. To enter and allow oneself to be contaminated by the abject reality of dark universes is proper of beings who, like oysters, welcome the diversity of the world in all its aspects – positive and negative, superficial and deep – and set out to regenerate them, through a sometimes lengthy but necessary process of purification.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In an attempt to disentangle the issue of abortion and premature death from its moral interpretations, we have tried here to treat the female body as if in a chiasm, a place of mediality in which the relationship established between the mother and her child is constitute in a radical dyad, which will remain for the entire life of the adult subject. This original dyad allows the development of the subject’s experience in relation to the mother, in an indissoluble way, but it can also be abruptly interrupted by the death of the fetus or the newborn child. We realize there seems to be no possibility of confronting the primordial fear of the death of the fetus, which is the ultimate concretization of the fear pertinence. One dies from trying to live. One suffers from trying to give birth

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or from not wanting to give birth. However, such death and suffering is not collectively taken care of.

For this reason and to conclude, it is necessary to make an observation about the converser role assumed by the female body in the establishment of a compensatory order, which ratifies the notion of body-media.

The experience of generating is one that, in biology, is feminine. Female bodies pass from the status of uterine content (when they were generated) to that of continent (when they generate), i.e., through a process of role reversal, an inversion of place. Nathan (1988), in his book *Le sperme du diable. Éléments d'ethnopsychothérapie*, brings several cases of trance treatment by body inversion. For instance, cases in which the body of a person agitated by a trance is slathered with the blood of a sacrificed animal whose entrails are then turned over and tied to the body of the patient in crisis. This treatment recalls the need for conversion and corporal inversion, the inner parts exteriorized from a therapeutic perspective. There is then the perception that possession crises – which usually affect more women than men – and hysteria crises can be linked to this traumatic uterine experience.

The converser body, in the case of a hysterical crisis or trance, becomes the media that connects two worlds: the inner world and the outer world; the feminine depth and the masculine exteriority. Two heterogeneous worlds, Nathan would say. In the case of the abortion experience, it is also about connecting two heterogeneous worlds: the world of uterine life and the world of uterine death. Such a conversion can only take place through a complex therapeutic process that, with the end of cults to female divinities, our scientific and disenchanting societies are far from being able to achieve.

It would take an effort of imagery construction so that the aborted being, until now almost totally absent of representation and denied by mythological narratives, but also kept silent by social structures, could begin to appear and come out of its hidden condition.

Some artists, such as Frida Kahlo (1907-1954)¹³, Tracey Emin (1963-)¹⁴ and Paula Rego (1935-)¹⁵, are among the few who dared to produce poetic representations of their painful experiences of miscarriage and premature loss. The production being almost inexistent and belonging to the domain of the disturbing, it would be worthwhile to dwell a little on it, in a perspective of imagery construction in search of “unlearning the fear” of life/death in the female body and, little by little, being able to face it as a traumatic reality lacking adequate therapeutic solutions. ■

¹³ Among other works in which the artist refers to her abortion experiences, in *Frida y el aborto* (1932) the Mexican painter draws herself with a baby in her womb: an umbilical cord ties the already developed fetus to the mother's leg; on the other leg, blood drips and seeps into the earth – “from dust we came, to dust we shall return. Tears decorate the face of the childless mother.

¹⁴ In 2007 the English painter presented 27 watercolors about her experiences with abortion in the series entitled *Abortion Watercolours*

¹⁵ In 1998, when the proposal to legalize abortion in Portugal was defeated in a first referendum, the painter Paula Rego produced a series of ten pastel paintings that bluntly depict women experiencing abortions. An analysis of Paula Rego's work *UNTITLED* can be read in Leitão (2008).

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