



Critical thinking in action

Pensamento crítico em ação



Lucia Santaella¹

¹ A Researcher at CNPq, full professor in the postgraduate studies in Communication and Semiotics and coordinator of the postgraduate studies in Intelligence Technologies and Digital Design (PUCSP). PhD in Literary Theory at PUCSP and Associate Professor in Communication Sciences at USP. Attended repeated postdoctoral internships abroad and worked as a visiting professor and researcher at several European and Latin American universities. Has evaluated 248 masters and doctor's thesis defenses. Published 51 books, as well as organized 24, in addition to publishing almost 500 articles both in Brazil and abroad. Honored with the Jabuti awards (2002, 2009, 2011, 2014), Sergio Motta award (2005), and Luiz Beltrão award (2010). Is currently a professor of the Oscar Sala chair at the Institute of Advanced Studies at Universidade de São Paulo (2021-2022).

Abstract: Far from the pretense of an impossible exhaustiveness, the question that this article aims to raise is the role played by some of Arlindo Machado's works in the field of communication. The objective, in the first place, is to discuss the pioneering character of the author's ideas, based on a unique ability to investigate referential sources and to evaluate the empirical works of creators, which made him renowned, even internationally, as one of the greatest scholars on image and audiovisual criticism. In addition, the article moves on to discuss Machado's acutely critical theoretical vein, a vein that has not been pointed out with the necessary frequency.

Keywords: research; evaluation; image; audiovisual; criticism

Resumo: Longe da veleidade de uma impossível exaustividade, a questão que este artigo visa colocar em pauta é o papel desempenhado por algumas das obras de Arlindo Machado no campo da comunicação. O objetivo, em primeiro lugar, é discutir o pioneirismo das ideias do autor, fundamentadas em uma capacidade ímpar de pesquisa de fontes referenciais e de avaliação de obras empíricas de criadores, o que o notabilizou, inclusive em plano internacional, como um dos maiores estudiosos e críticos da imagem e do audiovisual. Além disso, o artigo se encaminha para colocar em pauta a veia teórica agudamente crítica de Machado, uma veia que não tem sido apontada com a necessária frequência.

Palavras-chave: pesquisa; avaliação; imagem; audiovisual, crítica.

Introduction

I like to say that I met Arlindo Machado at República das Letras. It was 1979 and an article by his authorship entitled “O corpo bem temperado” (1975) caught my attention. By criticizing theoretical abstractions emptied of empirical lessons, the article anticipated that which would become the spirit of the 1990s: the body, a Gordian knot tying many of the discourses of the culture (VILLAÇA, 1999; SANTAELLA, 2004).

Fate brought our academic paths together shortly thereafter and, since then, out of unrestrained and deserved admiration, I have been very close and attentive to all of Machado’s intellectual production, as well as a curious witness to the rise of his career and the respectability that he earned both domestically and abroad as a theorist, critic, curator, and teacher. Therefore, I have a lot to say about his work. However, I chose a path of scoring some published works and curatorships carried out under the suspicion and due excuses that the selection arises from the fact that these are moments in Arlindo Machado’s career that approached my path. However, this selection will only appear here as an entry point for the discussion of a very recent work by the author, which I consider distinct from many others, and, unlike the others, is still little discussed. In it, Machado presents himself with an acutely critical view of the reality of the communication studies, not coincidentally entitled *Discursos contra a insensatez: grandezas e misérias da comunicação* (2019).

A couple of brilliant points

The sparkle of the first published book, *Eisenstein: a geometria do êxtase* (1982), part of the Encanto Radical collection, and published by Brasiliense press, showed that, despite Machado’s youth, it was the work of a mature thinker, based on an intimate knowledge of the cinematographic language, especially the Russian cinema, which founded some editing techniques that established a way of forming that Eisenstein took to admirable repercussions. The author’s style marks were notable in the book, revealing a sensorial intelligence, hybrid between reason and feeling, very close to the sensitive attributes of the object under examination; in this case, the films, translated into exquisite elegance and expressive sobriety.

Shortly thereafter the book *A ilusão especular: introdução à fotografia* (1984), a result of his master’s thesis defended the previous year in the postgraduate studies program in Communication and Semiotics at PUC-SP, was released. The subtitle does not do justice to its originality in dealing with the photographic issue. In the

early years of the 1980s within the group of researchers that Machado was part of, we were very impressed in that program with the theses defended in the dense and condensed first chapters of Bakhtin/Volochinov's book *Marxism and Philosophy of Language*, translated into Portuguese by the pioneering Editora Hucitec, in 1979. Issues related to ideology were obligatory topics in those years when the shackles of the dictatorship were beginning to unravel. Bakhtin/Volochinov shone new light upon the necessary revision of the concept of ideology:

The current absence of a definitive and universally recognized description of the specific reality of ideological problems in Marxist literature has made our task particularly complex. In most cases, these problems are perceived as manifestations of consciousness, that is, a phenomenon of psychological nature. Such conception raises a great obstacle to the correct study of the specific aspects of ideological phenomena, which cannot be reduced to the peculiarities of consciousness and the psyche in any way. Therefore, the role of language as a specific material reality of ideological creation could not be justly appreciated. (1979, p. 11)

From the detection of this problem, which presented itself as a true symptomatology within the Brazilian context at the time, the authors developed novelty theses on the semiotic functioning of ideologies and their effects on social reality. "Everything ideological has a meaning and refers to something outside of itself. In other words, everything ideological is a signal. Without signals, there is no ideology" (BAKHTIN, 1979, p. 17). The authors went even further: "a signal does not exist only as part of a reality; it also reflects and refracts another". Thus, "each ideological signal is not only a reflection, a shadow of reality, but also a material fragment of that reality". Signals are always materially incarnated and, because of that, can fulfill their functions as signals, whether they are sounds, "physical masses, such as color, body movement, or anything else" (p. 17-19).

First of all, there is the need to show how these Russian semioticians' theses anticipated current intellectual movements in defense of new media materialities. In the light of Bakhtin/Volochinov, the objective materiality is present from the outset in the very nature of the signals that run through the media. In the historical moment in which they were inserted, the authors were led to privilege language as the master ideological signal when they made their ideas public at the beginning of the last century. It could not be different, as the images, especially the photographic and, even

less, the cinematographic, while increasingly multiplying and spreading, had not yet taken part in reality, in evident competition with strictly verbal signals.

From a very early age, Machado's interests were focused on the universe of images, named technical images by Flusser (1985). Having lucidly absorbed the theses of Russian semioticians, Machado managed to stand out; he shifted them into images, namely, photography, developing his intelligent thesis on specular illusion with his own brand.

Every signal is ideological because, while reflecting what it indicates or represents, it necessarily refracts it. There is always a certain – either more or less intense – distortion, given the simple fact that the signal is not what it proclaims to represent. Even the mirror image to which the reflection idea fits perfectly inevitably undergoes distortions. “As a result, the refraction phenomenon prevents us from obtaining a ‘faithful’ reproduction of light signals, as it ‘deforms’ or ‘transfigures’ them according to the nature of the crystalline material interposed in its path” (MACHADO, 1984, p. 21), a principle that Bakhtin and Volochinov generalized to signify the inevitable modification of phenomena as they undergo the signal operation.

To that extent, the reflection/refraction duo applied by Russian semioticians as a paradigm for the functioning of ideology when applied to the verbal signal presents a metaphorical character, “since language does not behave according to optical laws”. However, and therein lies the creative displacement performed by Machado into the photography and, by extension, the cinema, or any figurative means. It is no longer a metaphor, because “the camera reflects (through the pseudo-mirror that is the film) and refracts (through the objectives, which break and reorient the sense of luminous information)” (MACHADO, 1984, p. 26).

Far from dwelling on the merely technical treatment of the apparatus, Machado tentatively advanced into the deconstruction of the mystique of automatic homology in each chapter of his book, dismantling the fetish of fidelity and photographic objectivity and showing that the photographic signal also works as an ideological signal, something evidenced in every facet of his composition, from the angle of the shot to the archetypes it feeds.

In the end, it should be emphasized that, given Machado's distancing from any episodic visions relating to the historical moment in which the book was written, in favor of a rigorously analytical and critical approach to the photographic phenomenon, despite all transformations that the photographic technique has undergone – like a virus mutating to survive –, and regardless over thirty years passing

by, the book remains actual. Everything discussed in it is still perfectly suitable for the analysis of digital photographs.

The digital shift

Almost ten years have passed. We were, then, in the first half of the 1990s. The digital universe was already bearing the first fruits of the social impact it was destined to breed. Machado did not take it for granted. In 1993, under Edusp's publisher label, he pioneered his book *Máquina e imaginário*, an ultimate guide, critically prepared to meet the challenges with which the shift into the digital era already punctuated the fields of communication, arts, and society. The preface calls for repeated readings; a rare gem of lucidity based on a deep knowledge of the intellectual, cultural, and artistic context of the time, both on national/international level, and, furthermore, revealing of an immense ability to predict the trends of the future.

It is worth remembering that, between *Ilusão especular* and *Máquina e imaginário*, he published *Artes do vídeo* (1988) as a result of his doctoral thesis. It is important to note the dates of the first editions of these works to allow for more accurate measurement of the daring courage (the tautology of the author) in opening paths in barely explored territories. For you to have an idea, at the dawn of the second half of the 1980s, Machado was already studying and publishing on topics such as the model in memory and the geometry of the disorder in the digital image. He was exploring the synthetic image, or infographic, as it was called at the time, from within, to the point of perceiving the opposite of anthropocentrism in it, a central subject decades later, for the confrontation of the Anthropocene crisis, the new geological period arising from the heavy and destructive influence of mankind over the biosphere. Incredibly, Machado's listening to the video's entrails brought the following words to surface in his critical thinking in 1988 (p. 131):

By dethroning the subject, the representation frees itself from the weight of an anthropocentric servitude that lasted several centuries. From now on, the figure – precisely, the human figure, this privileged objective of representation – is displaced from the symbolic scenario and, with it, its narrative supports, founded on nineteenth-century drama and romance. Reduced to points of light swept by electron beams and exposed as such to the viewer's decipherment, the human figure, human drama, the “human condition”, and all the great defining themes of bourgeois humanism, so dear to literature and cinema, are irreversibly compromised. Now, an artificially produced electronic interweaving comes to light within the

video's mosaic grid, which many claim to be a void.
A void?...

While Nam June Paik advanced his innovative flanks through territories now called the Global North, Machado countered and translated the front lines of artistic and theoretical creation with the fiber of anthropophagic lucidity, aiming at its fertilization in our country, now (2020-2021) so deeply sore and worn out.

With the same premonitory boldness of the technological times yet to come, Machado fertilized the explorations he carried out in *Máquina e imaginário*. Again, to make it clear that we shall not minimize his genius through euphemisms, one of the chapters of this book is dedicated to “watching machines,” another subject that would grow in size, until reaching its peak from the 2000s until now. So much so that the title of the book with which Zuboff gained recent celebrity is precisely *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019). A comparison between Arlindo's pioneering article and Zuboff's book should reveal the growing and increasingly complex paths of *pari passu* surveillance to the advances of technological platforms of large companies such as Google, Amazon, Facebook, YouTube, etc. While posting uninterruptedly on networks and generating huge data overgrowth, users are inadvertently subjected to a business model that feeds on such data and manipulates it through algorithms for marketing purposes. Personal data circulates freely within this perverse logic, breaching privacies.

Alternatively named data colonialism, this new means of capitalism has been sharply criticized by intellectuals aimed at denouncing the disastrous social effects of large platforms' ubiquity in personal and social lives. The judgments developed by Machado throughout his work concerning the multiple determinations and heterogeneity of the instances in action when it comes to technologies can serve as guides to understand, far from extremism, the insertions of technique in culture. “Between the exalted integration and the apocalyptic rejection, there is an infinite range of variations, impossible to map, and all the more problematic, the clearer it becomes that the instances shift from one side to the other, making any exhaustive or reductive positioning impossible” (MACHADO, 1991, p. 23). Enunciated nearly three decades ago, those words still stand as bastions for facing ambivalence, contradiction, and even paradoxes of the technological insertions into today's culture. We must not overlook that there is no human purity, an immutable essence untouched by techniques and technologies, as they are part of us as much as biology, making a hybrid out of the human being.

There is an expression to synthesize the central thread of Machado's thought over time: "technological poetics". Not any vision imprisoned within technology, or technological images, or the audiovisual itself, but within what technologies provide to creations that can lead to transmutations in culture and worldviews. His early familiarity with the inner workings of computational images, already announced in *A arte do vídeo*, then further matured in his chapter on the "Imaginário numérico" (numerical imaginary) is noticeable in *Máquina e imaginário*. Even more remarkable is the chapter on "O efeito zapping" (The zapping effect), in which the author captured and shaped a new videographic syntax in which the viewer assumed, via remote control, the authorship of "narrativas impacientes" (impatient narratives), which would become the new way of forming MTV programs and that Machado would once again explore in the language of the music video (2000, p. 173-196).

Based on those works, Machado's career took off and spread, both in terms of the recognition he gained abroad and the development of his talent as a curator, juror, organizer of art exhibitions, etc. His curatorial interventions, under the name *Emoção Art.ficial* (1997, 2001, 2003, 2004), placed Instituto Itaú Cultural de São Paulo, in those years, on the map of trends for the most advanced technological arts in the world. He was also theoretical with surgical precision, in impeccable speeches, free of any bloated rhetoric; with an enviable mental observatory for the empiricism of significant works from which he drew his competence for the curating, performed in a much more extensive way than one can imagine (CORSO; PAULA, 2020).

The hybrid mixture of bio and techno

While emphasizing the fertilization of the soil that Machado has sown over the decades, and before skipping to 2018 to fulfill this article's stated intention, we must draw attention to the chapter "Corpos e mentes em expansão" (Bodies and minds in expansion), from the book *O quarto iconoclasmo: e outros ensaios hereges* (2001). In it, the author relies on the discussion of the work of daring and celebrated artist Eduardo Kac to expose the ideas that are most in tune with the dimensions of creativity opened up by the biological front, namely, the matters of new biology, artificial life, and biotechnosphere.

After the generalization of *happenings*, performances, and installations, past the questioning of the white cube of the museums and into public space, employing all kinds of machines and technological devices, discussing human tragedy and laying bare the constraints, segregations, and the prohibitions derived from sex, race, geographic origins, and

socioeconomic situation, a certain number of artists seem to reorient their art towards the discussion of the very biological condition of the species. (MACHADO, 2001, p. 72)

Now, to discuss this condition within the realm of genetic engineering, cloning, biocomputing, and artificial biodiversity (creation of new species) is to awaken the apocalyptic powers against the possible complementarities between natural environments and technological devices. Once again, Machado was not intimidated. Without minimizing the problems and dangers of this new era, he penetrated the heart of the question about the life whose ambiguity technologies bring to the fore. Thus, neural networks, genetic algorithms capable of mimicking sexual reproduction and natural selection, computer viruses “that mimic real-life viruses in the way they reproduce and infect organisms” are themes with which Machado introduced his passage to examples in artistic works to dwell on the productions of Eduardo Kac, whose work is an exemplary synthesis of these trends.

It began with the mention of the microchip Kac implanted in his ankle at an event at Casa das Rosas, in 1997, in São Paulo. After explaining the entire process and the, let us say aesthetic, consequences of this act, Machado (2001, p. 79) pointed to “the difficult and uncomfortable topics of the ethical, philosophical, and scientific discussion regarding the future of mankind”. From this perspective, “Kac’s experience can be read as a symptom of a biological mutation that will soon happen when digital memories are implanted in our bodies to complement or replace our memories” (2001, p. 79). It was 2001 and Machado’s antennas were already on, long before transhumanism and its singularity thesis had reached the news media. Following Kac’s work, the remainder of the article navigates topics such as teleportation, robotics, virtual realities, a telerobot, to compose the telematic and transgenic art that opened doors for Eduardo Kac’s international fame.

The subtitle of the book – *outros ensaios hereges* – anticipates the sharply critical edge that would cut through his 2019 work, this time rising against nonsense; nonsense, by the way, whose denunciation had already been insinuated in the chapter “O quarto iconoclasmo” (The fourth iconoclasm), which also gives name to the book from 2001. The chapter is a long essay for the defense against the secular persecution of the image. At one point, this defense included a courageous critique of Debord’s (1997) notion of spectacle, so parroted by the so-called critical thinking. According to Machado, the word “spectacle” had been hand-picked to designate contemporary Evil. “Apparently, the entire tragedy of the contemporary world lies, according to Debord’s argument, in the fact that things become image, which seems to be a way of

hiding the true origin of problems and masking real impasses beneath philosophical chatter” (MACHADO, 2001, p.19).

The critical verve of the work here discusses was already anticipated there, a discussion that seems fundamental to me, given the fact that we must show that, in addition to being a theoretician and critic in the sectorial area of image and audiovisual that made him famous, Machado also expanded his critical thinking based on his conceptual and practical experience in the field of communication in general. This enabled him to measure forces with the unquestioned foreign reference sources commonly embraced within the country.

Communication in the hot seat

Said book, *Discursos contra a insensatez* (2019), opens up, as declared by the author, to a non-conformist spirit that dominates the whole.

While looking around, I notice that the so-called communication is a kind of subdiscipline dwelling between an attempt at a paraphilosophy, parasociology, or even a paranthropology, parasemiotics, or paranything, but it lacks an object, as an illness to the medicine, or a method, as experimentation to physics. Anyway, if the reflections developed here may or may not be accepted within the field of communication, that does not matter. What matters is that they disturb the thought. (MACHADO, 2019, p. 5)

The boldness of his criticism is explained in the opening chapter, which works as a brief treatise on theories and methods. First, the relevant distinction is established between, on the one hand, theories of a more general and abstract character such as philosophy, semiotics, logic, aesthetics; and, on the other, “specialized theories, aimed at examining a given object, such as language or linguistic theory, film theory, photography theory, legal theory, political economy theory, and so on” (MACHADO, 2019, p. 5). While the first deal with more formal and universal issues, such as truth, clarity, and objectivity of thought, the possibility of accessing reality, the mediations of language, and subjectivity, the second deal with the functioning and implications of their objects of study.

In this context, the precise understanding that Machado reveals of C.S. Peirce’s real proposal of semiotics is surprising for its rarity. Surprising because such understanding must have lingered across Machado’s mental cartography without having explained it as clearly as in the passages of the chapter in question, otherwise, let us see. The Peircean theory only makes sense from a logical perspective. “It

belongs to the domain of human cognition and exists to give thought, reflection on the world, a range; an elasticity that did not previously exist in classical logic restricted only to the consideration of issues of a symbolic nature” (2019, p. 9). From this perspective, the classifications of signals can expand the thought and open the perception to phenomena that did not lie within the range of philosophical and scientific concerns. It is a theory of knowledge and a methodology for investigating reality while “understanding reality as everything that exists and persists”. Outside this logical-philosophical framework, Peirce’s semiotics “runs the risk of degenerating into gross simplification”. Worse than that, under the banner of semiotics, often, “one continues to think within old schemes, with old methods, but with supposedly new names and an alleged semiotic nature” (2019, p. 9).

Even more incisive is the chapter on “A comunicação e sua retórica” (Communication and its rhetoric), which begins with dismantling some of Fredric Jameson’s customarily celebrated ideas. Regarding the phrase with which the author opens *As marcas do visível* (1995, p. 1), “the visuals are essentially pornographic,” Machado kicks into action his constant opposition to the abusive generalizations that abolish all diversity and any deviation, and which communication theorists often use. It is, especially this generalization of pornography, almost always accompanied by adjectives such as “diabolical” and “obscene,” of a moralistic discourse accompanied by “a rhetoric of dubious taste, a Parnassianism disguised as scientific discourse, capable of sacrificing all truth in the name of a catchphrase” (MACHADO, 2019, p. 14). Then, the dismantling of rhetoric approaches Baudrillard, an author against whom Machado did not spare criticism throughout his career.

The denunciation of the totalizing syntheses advances towards the rigid Adorn-oriented schemes which forced us to perceive “the media in general (the press, the cinema, the radio, the television etc.) as monolithic institutions, entirely controlled by powerful sectors of the elites and committed to the interests of global capitalism”. Without letting go of its legitimacy, this generic and abstract way of seeing things, “introduces clear limits when viewed from the most operative angle, aimed at understanding the real insertion of the media in contemporary life”. Machado resumes the dialectic of his argument to complement it with a harsh critique to the Machiavellianism that usually dominates the assessment of media whose discourses are more similar to

science fiction than a topic of objective analysis. They come up with a Machiavellian plot in which the villain acts in a kind of Big Brother, who controls everything thanks to his omniscience

and omnipresence, while dominating the thousands of mute and submissive slaves placed at his service across the world and determines what people around it should think and do. According to the analyst, it would be great if everything were as simple as that. (2019, p. 18)

The above passage is necessary, among other reasons, so that current views on social networks may escape unilateral extremism, inadvertently disguised as intellectual militancy. Machado's critique continues throughout the book to the point of reaching the "sacred" voice of Pierre Bourdieu whose work "On television" (1996) was deemed disastrous (2019, p. 23).

In short, I do not mean to follow up on the book continuity. The above exposed should serve as a warning signal for the recognition of the critical extension of Machado's thought and his capacity for fearless evaluation of voices considered untouchable. In the end, what should be, and needs to be expected, is that Arlindo Machado's thoughts are preserved in the memory of the Brazilian culture forever, as he deserves. That he may escape the plague – the endemic plague – of oblivion, brought by the appreciation of fleeting fashions, a key feature of the Brazilian culture. Octávio Paz used to say that the human being is a forgetful animal. In Brazil, this has always reached dramatic magnitude. As intellectuals, when faced with thoughts that dignify our culture, our task is to translate, resume, continually bring them to the surface forevermore, so that they uninterruptedly confirm their permanence within the collective memory.

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