

COMMUNICATION AS CONTAGION. SOCIAL IMAGINARY, METAPHOR AND COMMUNICOLOGY.

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Abstract

Communicology has a great development of message analysis research in all its aspects and levels. This way of dealing with the communicative phenomenon has led to reading the theory of the imaginary as if it were only an instrument of content analysis, forgetting its constitutive anthropology and ontology.

An essay is proposed in which, first, a presentation of two traditions of the imaginary is made: that of Gilbert Durand and that of Cornelius Castoriadis. From this situation, a field of investigation of the imaginary is proposed, which, without resolving the epistemological tensions that constitute it, contributes to a creative and critical investigation of communication. Secondly, it is presented as a path of heuristic metaphors to seek an alternative to the use of the imaginary as a mere tool for the analysis of messages. An elucidation of communication is presented from the imaginary of the contagion that emerged unexpectedly during the confinement of the Covid-19 pandemic. The experience of collective confinement "saved" by general shielding allows us to (re)think communication from the imaginary of airing and air, breathing and conspiracy, infection, and immunization from which to postulate a biopolitical atmospheric imaginary. In this sense, rehearsing the

explanation of communication as contagion shows the possibilities of metaphor and the imaginary in a mutant world.

Keywords: imaginary, metaphor, technology, technoculture, social theory.

1. Communicology: the interpretative bias of the imaginary

Communication studies tend to focus on the analysis of the products of the communicative process, especially in the media. There is an impulse to comprehend what is said, represented, transmitted, shown, discussed, and exchanged. All of this is through different media, mostly focused on the visual, be it writing and image, and on the auditory, music, effects, and voice. In this impulse, communicology becomes an interpretative discipline that transits the search for meanings and representations in relation to individuals and societies. Depending on the discipline on which the communicological research is based, the interpretation can be semiotic, hermeneutic, mythological, symbolic, iconological, linguistic, etc. But the impulse will be to analyze, describe, relate, decipher, and translate a given visual and/or auditory corpus, in the best of cases, in relation to a state of culture, politics, and society. The imaginary, as a field of concepts and theories, has been read and is used in communication as a field of possibilities of interpretation of public discourses, mainly media. Thus, it has become an analytical tool that, in many cases, is cut off and separated from its anthropological and ontological basis.

This has led to at least two outcomes. The first is the transformation of the theory of the imaginary into yet another theory that prioritizes the analysis of the message, similar to other communication theories and methodologies like agenda setting, framing theory, content analysis techniques, or discourse analysis. All of these approaches and theories, despite their epistemological differences (which are often overlooked), can complement the theory of the imaginary. This approach also seems to have relinquished the interpretation of the 'continent', the medium itself, leaving it to other disciplines such as media ecology.

The second consequence is the diminishing heuristic potential of the theory, which now solely focuses on the activity of interpretation, neglecting the conceptualization and explanation of, for example, communication itself. We are yet to develop a comprehensive theory of communication from the standpoint of anthropology and the ontology of the imaginary, one that encompasses various aspects of the phenomenon, not just the content of the message. There is barely any interest in applying the theory of the imaginary to the definition that includes the material dimensions of the social and cultural. A theory of the imaginary of communication in all its aspects, such as innovation, design, production, circulation, and socio-cultural consumption. Such an approach would be of great importance for a communicology that is not centered on messages but on interactions.

The separation of the analytical-instrumental from the epistemological base responds to the impulse of communicology, but it is true that it finds fertile ground in the very theories of the Social Imaginary where the methodology and/or interpretations that help to understand the relevance and specificity of the view that the imaginary promises are scarce (Sánchez-Capdequí, 1999).

First, the tensions of the theories of the imaginary embodied in the anthropological work of Gilbert Durand and in the political ontology of Cornelius Castoriadis are briefly presented to show a field of theoretical tensions within which the imaginary allows understanding and explaining the phenomenon of communication. Secondly, a conceptualization of communication from the imaginary of contagion will be outlined. Although contagion has served, at least since modernity, to explain communication, it is in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic that it has re-emerged with special explanatory power for communicative phenomena.

2. The field of the imaginary

The word "imaginary" used in relation to academic disciplines has a negative charge because it is considered an abstract, imprecise, and/or theoretical appellation. And in many ways the blame for such contempt has to do with the use of the term, which fluctuates between polyvalence -which would allow it to be placed in any context- and indefiniteness -which would make it easier for everything to fit within it-. This confusing situation constitutes a real stumbling block.

Unlike its everyday use where "imaginary" is used as an adjective that qualifies a reality as invented and non-existent, in philosophy, psychology, or social sciences, "the imaginary" is used as a noun to designate what has to do with "imagination" understood as a faculty of representing things independently of reality. Thus, imagination turns out to be a creative capacity of what is not real but can also be realizable (Ferraris, 1999). Unreal is not only illusion or deception; it is, above all, a capacity for creation and creativity, therefore, possibility for alternative existences that are different from the given ones. This capacity is expressed in images in their broadest sense as representations (graphic, sound, etc.) or as language games (metaphors, metonymies, etc.). And it is this "materiality" that allows us to speak of the imaginary in almost exclusive reference to the constellation of the image (in the sense of product and content) and, only derivatively, to the imagination (as power and capacity). Research seems to focus on "content", be it noematic, representational or

ideational, and thus relates it to concepts such as ideology, symbolic universes, collective representation, etc., which have a long tradition in philosophy and social sciences, and which it often replaces without, therefore, being clear what it refers to in each case.

The reconsideration of the imaginary as a noun has as background the fact that, ever since antiquity, the concept of the imaginary has been linked to the dynamics of Eurocentric dichotomous representations that tend to oppose the real to the imaginary, reason to imagination, objectivity to subjectivity. At the bottom of these dichotomies could be found a certain intellectual universe of Greek philosophy, contrary to Chinese or Indian thinkers, which assumes a radical dichotomy between being and becoming, the intelligible and the sensible (Lizcano, 1993). Something similar occurs with American cultures that, governed by duality and relationality, push away dichotomies (Esterman, 2009; León-Portilla, 1993).

In this text, we will first refer to the imaginary in its own fertile Eurocentric tradition (Sánchez-Capdequí, 2003) in relation to the theoretical tensions behind the concept as it appears in the confrontation of the two most cited traditions.

3. The imaginary: two traditions

The 1960s culminated with the slogan "imagination to power", coinciding with the moment of the philosophies of the imagination. Whenever the term "imaginary" is regarded, the bibliography cites two books and two authors who have become true classics of twentieth-century thought independently and without referring to each other. The first is Gilbert Durand with his book *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*, published in 1961, which marked a consolidated moment in research groups with international reflection networks. For his part, Cornelius Castoriadis, from the militant reflection of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group, in 1965 finished publishing in issues 36 to 40 of the group's journal a series of articles that later became the first part of *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, published in 1975.

Both perspectives have very different concerns and assumptions (Cabrera-Altieri, 2008; Cristiano, 2012). G. Durand's question and concern are directed towards the creation of a hermeneutics of the imaginary understood as an interpretation of the set of images in a transcultural and, in many senses, transhistorical key (Sánchez-Capdequí, 1997). Castoriadis finds in "the imaginary" an answer to think not only social change but above all the creation and self-institution of society. His thought is presented as a philosophy of the

imagination understood as the power, individual and social, of radical creation. Although he seems to take the expression "the imaginary" from the psychoanalytical context, he overflows it completely towards an ontology of being as *for-being* and an anthropology of man as *doing-itself* (Cabrera-Altieri, 2009).

3.1. Gilbert Durand: imaginary/image

Gilbert Durand defines a theory of the imaginary as "set of images and relations of images that constitute the thinking capital of *Homo sapiens*" (Durand, 2004, p. 21) or also "the museum of all past, possible, produced or to be produced images" (Durand, 2000, p. 18): Which supposes "the faculty of symbolization from which all fears, all hopes and their cultural fruits emanate continuously for about a million and a half years, since *Homo erectus* has risen on earth" (Durand, 2000, p. 135).

By imaginary, then, he refers to a "set or collection" of "images" formed by sedimentation throughout the history of humanity and "images" that are fundamentally myths and symbols of different cultures. They are inherited representations and, therefore, possibilities of representation. The Durandian hermeneutics of the imaginary (Durand, 2000, p. 119) has three levels: a general theory of the imaginary, the formative levels of symbolic images, and the search for the structures of the imaginary, "a general archaeotypology" (the subtitle of *The anthropological structures of the imaginary*) which, starting from a classification of images, establishes a hermeneutics that is both demythologizing and remythologizing. Methodologically, he bets on a mythocriticism and a mythoanalysis to constitute a mythodology (Durand, 2003, p. 171). Mythocriticism is a continuation of the various literary and artistic critiques of the twentieth century:

It evidences, in an author, in the work of an era, and in a given environment, the guiding myths and their significant transformations. It makes it possible to show how a personal trait of the author contributes to the transformation of the dominant mythology or, on the contrary, accentuates one or the other of the dominant guiding myth. (Durand, 1993, p. 347).

The critique continues in a mythoanalysis, which is to the analysis of a given cultural and social moment what psychoanalysis is to the individual psyche: "because mythical instances are often latent and diffuse in a society, and even when they are 'patent', the choice of one or another explicit myth escapes clear consciousness, even if it is collective" (Durand, 1993, p. 350).

The main, but not only, ascendants in Durand's thought come from the philosophy of Bachelard (1993) and the Eranos Circle (Ortiz-Osés, 1994, 1997, 2004). Its influence allows us to take it as a fundamental reference for theories centered on the imaginary in relation to the image, proposing a plural understanding. In this sense, the study of the imaginary can be approached, following Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, according to three ways of considering images: the *reproduction image or imagery* in relation to the set of mental and material images, the *substitute image* in relation to the absent, disappeared or absent real, and the *object image or imaginal*, which are autonomous and give sensible content to thought (Wunenburger 2005, pp. 31-32). The latter constitute schemes, geometric forms (triangle, cross), archetypes (androgynous), parables, and myths and are the authentic original plane of symbols.

Wunenburger considers that the three categories of images are imbricated one within the other in mental experience and his distinction aims to "rehabilitate it as a mediating instance between the sensible and the intellectual" because "images thus constitute the first, polymorphous and plastic iconosphere, from which all consciousness weaves its relations with the world and with meaning" (Wunenburger, 2005, p. 32).

The map of images and the imaginary allows Durand to refer to the destiny image has had in the Cartesian, scientific, and positivist iconoclasm where the banishment of the image is the initial criterion for "scientific thinking" (Durand, 1971, 2000). Therefore, he states that today's explosion of images is a perverse effect of the "techno-scientific iconoclasm, whose positivist pedagogy is the triumphant result" (Durand, 2000, p. 46). Or, as Wunenburger comments, the "asthenia of images, which is nourished only by external artifacts (audiovisual media, games, organized trips, etc.), engenders a psychic malnutrition, even a real affective underdevelopment" (Wunenburger, 2005, p. 312).

The anthropological hermeneutics of the imaginary would consider this iconoclasm and asthenia as a key to interpreting culture and society in a transhistorical key by establishing the courses and transfers that can explain the sets of images, myths, symbols throughout history and the different cultures.

3.2. Cornelius Castoriadis: Imaginary/Imagination

The imaginary of which Castoriadis speaks is far removed from all this. Image-centered conceptions of the imaginary, while recognizing the role of the power of the imagination,

aim to establish an anthropological, sociological and psychoanalytical interpretation of history, society, culture and individuals. Castoriadis states forcefully, "the imaginary of which I speak is not an *image of*. It is an incessant and essentially indeterminate (social-historical and psychic) creation of figures/forms/images, from which it can only be 'something'" (Castoriadis, 1993, p. 10).

The concept of imaginary in Castoriadis' work arises as a necessity to explain the possibility of a radically creative political action, that is to say, one that does not repeat under various guises solutions already experienced (Poirier, 2006). Thus the problem of social autonomy is also the problem of the autonomous action of individuals. The "solution" aims to explain the non-causal and random elements in history and the presence of tragedy in human action. Therefore, the hermeneutics of the imaginary derived from what really interests him, a theory, a permanent elucidation, to explain social creation, the autogenesis of society. And that is not a constant task that, on principle, cannot end and that Castoriadis calls elucidation "the work by which men try to think what they do and know what they think" (Castoriadis, 1993, p. 11).

The social and human action thought not as repetition, nor renewal, nor change but as creation, that is, as indeterminate alteration; in other words, the emergence of something that is not reasonably explicable only with its premises and antecedents with respect to which it implies an ontological leap.

The social (or historical) contains the non-causal as an essential moment.... It appears as behavior not simply 'unforeseeable' but creative (of individuals, of groups, of classes, or of entire societies); not as a simple distance in relation to an existing type, but as the position of a new type of behavior, as the institution of a new social rule, as the invention of a new object or a new form - in a word, as emergence or production that cannot be deduced from the preceding situation, a conclusion that surpasses the premises or the position of new premises. (Castoriadis, 1993, pp. 75-76).

The imaginary in Castoriadis' thought is, above all, a way of making human creation thinkable in the most radical sense, not as a gathering or combination but as a position of new forms. The subject of this creation is the anonymous collective and the psyche, and it is visible in the emergence of new social institutions, in culture, art and the sciences. "Being is creation, *vis formandi*: not creation of "matter/energy", but creation of forms. For that

creation there are always necessary, but not sufficient conditions" (Castoriadis, 1998b, p. 250).

This ontology of creation or genesis is Castoriadis' substantive contribution to current philosophy. His work walks in the opposite direction of most of the main authors of the imaginary. He is not interested in a hermeneutic, neither sociological nor cultural, nor even psychoanalytic. His goal leads him towards an explanation of the human world starting from the initial chaos. Chaos understood in the Greek sense as empty or bottomless and not in the usual sense of disordered or disorganized. For Castoriadis, autonomous action and the historical-social are only possible if it is assumed that what exists comes from chaos, from the abyss, from the bottomless (Cristiano, 2009).

The Castoriadian theory of the imaginary constitutes in the first place a political ontology and, only derivatively, a hermeneutics. Institutions and meanings are networks to cover the bottomlessness, the chaos, the void over which human civilization rises. Human works are a demonstration that one can "create meaning by dwelling on the edge of the abyss" (Castoriadis, 1997, p. 84).

The architecture of his work is built from two poles: the autonomy of the human as a historical condition and project, and the ontology of being as for being. In the first place, the project of autonomy, as our historical condition that does not allow a founding answer to its why, is a central nucleus of the modern-contemporary social imaginary. In second place, its ontology of being as magma that cannot be understood either with conjunctarian-identitarian logic or with irrationalism. This ontology has as category the creation, being-for-being, the emergence of the totally new, not as repetition or combinatory. The most important creation of all is that of the senses and significations, and hence the importance of radical imagination as a permanent flow of representations, affections, and desires, dimension of the psyche and key to the interpretation of the subject. And the social imaginary as a frontal dimension of the social-historical, a non-psychological, collective and anonymous imagination. This imaginary -of the subject and of society- implies a play of the instituting and the instituted and in this sense, it is the primary source of creation, that is to say, the distinction between real and imaginary is an opposition that stems from radical imagination.

Castoriadis' reflection points to an elucidation that is neither interpretation, nor theory, nor hermeneutics in the usual sense because "the very idea of a finished and definitive theory is chimerical and mystifying" (Castoriadis, 1993, p. 219).

3.3. Imaginary between anthropology and ontology

This brief presentation allows us to understand that we are in front of two ways of conceiving the imaginary. Durand's proposal implies an anthropology that epistemologically allows for a semiotics and a hermeneutics. A structural semiotics from various disciplines (linguistics, literary criticism, anthropology, etc.) and a more or less "religious" symbolic hermeneutics (Jung, Bachelard, Eliade, Durand). In this context, psychoanalysis has its own place as a discipline of interpretation in relation to images (Jung, 1991), as an interpretation of the procedures of transformation of the unconscious imaginary into conscious imaginary, or as a process of formalization (Lacan) (Wunenburger, 2008, p. 30).

Wunenburger summarizes this theory of the imagination and the imaginary, of G. Durand but also Gaston Bachelard or Henri Corbin, as follows: **(1)** not all representations of images have an empirical origin, **(2)** the imaginary is inserted in the body and in meanings of a transcendental imagination such as Bachelard's reverie or Durand's myths; **(3)** the imagination produces figurative, connotative, open representations that rationalization then reduces to univocal meaning, **(4)** the imaginary is inseparable from mental or materialized works that serve to construct the meaning of life, and **(5)** the imaginary is presented as a set of ambivalent representations and affects (Wunenburger, 2008, p. 25).

On the other hand, Castoriadis conceives a theory of the imaginary as a key to investigate the foundations of ontology (Castoriadis, 2004, 2006). Imagination would be the primary source of creation, understood as the capacity to bring forth what is not given, the capacity to propose new forms. Conceptually, radical imagination is synonymous with imaginary first, the capacity to create significations (visual and acoustic images, ideas, concepts, etc.) through which the world acquires form for the human being. The radical imagination gives origin to that from which the schemes that condition representations and thoughts arise; it is the transcendental condition of what is thinkable and representable. This imaginary first has an individual, psychic aspect, the radical imagination, and another collective one, the instituting social imagination; both dimensions are irreducible.

Castoridian ontology thinks of being as self-creation, as indeterminate and determining power. Being as the emergence of the other, of radical novelty, that is to say, that cannot be produced or deduced from other forms. Therefore, time is alterity-alteration, inexhaustible source of novelty, power of immanent creation, it is being that is always to be. Hence, the subject and the social are understood as projects of autonomy as a product of the capacity to self-institute in a conscious and deliberate manner (Joas, 1998).

The tensions of these two modes of understanding the imaginary could be summarized, as Javier Cristiano does, as the tension between meaning or abyss, the bottomless; structural persistence or radical novelty; universalism or elucidation; ecumenical humanism or revolution (Cristiano, 2012, pp. 104-106).

The objective here, in a work of communicology, is not to take sides for one or the other line of the imaginary but to highlight a space of constitutive tensions in the field that, far from confusing, expresses its richness. All this is on the condition that it is taken seriously as an anthropological and ontological approach to communication and not as a mere functionalist space of interpretation of media contents. In any case, assuming the hermeneutic hypotheses implies understanding the phenomenon as such, in its cultural historicity and its social specificity in such a way that a further step can be taken from sociological concepts such as "collective representations" or "ideology" (Thompson, 1982; Baczko, 1990).

4. Imaginary, communication and metaphor

Between the Durandian imaginary/image and the Castoridian imaginary/imagination, different paths to think about communication can be presented (Pintos, 2005; Dittus, 2006; Cabrera-Altieri, 2019, 2022b), but perhaps the path of metaphor (Lizcano, 2006, pp. 37-71) is one of the most productive. Nietzsche understands truth as the insensible fixation of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms (Nietzsche, 1970). Lakoff and Johnson (2009) showed the cognitive role of metaphors in everyday life. In any case, the metaphor that has been cornered to its status as a rhetorical trope has an important place as a form of knowledge, moreover, as "the engine of thought", since "without concepts there are no thoughts and without analogies there are no concepts" (Hofstadter & Sander, 2018, p. 21). The "living metaphor" that refers to the power of discourse to "rewrite reality" and, therefore, the possibility of occupying a place in the verb that signals, in a double movement, the "is not" and the "is as" (Ricoeur, 2001, p. 13). In this movement, the metaphor refers to social and cultural contexts, to the experiences of the subjects, to their moods and interests.

The metaphor transports, in multiple paths of comings and goings, statements, images, meanings, etc., towards the imaginary.

Communication has been approached from the metaphor mobilizing diverse social imaginaries such as the orchestra, transmission, content/continent, hypodermic needle, magic bullet, network, etc. (Krippendorff, 1997; Hjarvard, 2016, pp. 34-37; Cabrera-Altieri, 2022a). But also, communication and metaphor share an imaginary, alchemical, transformative journey between the determinate and the indeterminate, between the definite and the indefinite, of meaning (Cabrera-Altieri, 2022b, pp. 77-96). Communication/metaphor indicates both the metaphorical essence of communication and the communicational key of metaphor. In both cases, their meaning refers to the possibility of transferring -driving- meaning from one side to the other. They refer to the ambivalence of the human, to the need to meander culture to see the connections of meaning that work always in motion. Communication and metaphor insist on meaning as permanent movement that seeks to present itself as frozen, still, and stopped and, therefore, as given meaning. In the face of this, communication and metaphor postulated from the imaginary insist on the search for what is in movement in the stony presence.

5. Metaphor in a mutant world

Metaphor and communication share the idea of transfer, of movement, of contact between different, distant and, in principle, unrelated realities. Signal -that which is carried- and its transport have occupied a privileged place in the definition of communication. That which bears a sign, that which carries, that is, semaphore, from the Greek prefix *sema*, sign, signal, and the adjective *phoros-phorein*, to carry, to bear. The traffic light¹, the device that regulates urban traffic, no longer carries signs but signals. No longer messages but coordination orders (Cabrera-Altieri, 2022b, pp. 18-20).

The word semaphore recalls the relationship between the sign, the signal or code and its transport and, with it, the correspondence between communication and distance. It is not surprising then that the definition of information coming from computing and the telephone industry (Claude Shannon's famous "mathematical theory of information") appears

¹ Translator's note: 'semáforo' in Spanish.

triumphant as an explanation of the phenomenon of human communication. Information quantified in bits and related to entropy, probability, non-certainty, chaos (Gleick, 2012, pp. 207-235). Information as semaphore, un-signified signals. Which coincides with the cornering of the word metaphor in academic specialization. However, metaphor is that which carries beyond (Greek prefix *meta-* beyond or after, and *phoros-phorein*: to pass, to carry). Communication/metaphor carries -transports beyond- meaning, sense. It breaks clear and distinct boundaries. Semaphore, that which conveys signals, points; but metaphor carries beyond it.

Perhaps the denial and concealment of these dimensions is part of an interpretation of today's society as dysphoric (Preciado, 2022, p. 23). Dysphoria, from the Greek prefix *dys-* that withdraws, denies, indicates difficulty and *phoros-phorein*. If the semaphore disappears as semantics of the imaginary of communication and the metaphor is cornered as a rhetorical figure, we are left only with dysphoria, difficulty or miscarriage, the generalized disorder of communication by the power of technologies and the dispossession of human agency in its capacity to communicate, that is, to creatively transgress the limits of reason and the imposed order. A dysphoric world in constant search of literality, of a univocal, clear and distinct communication/code, and in which the need to rescue the metaphor as a path towards the interpretation of the imaginary of communication stands out.

Paul B. Preciado in *Dysphoria mundi* (2022) describes the current world as something that has happened or is about to happen, but something that is happening with changes in all spheres. In his philosophical project, he seeks to "displace and resignify this notion of dysphoria in order to understand the situation of the contemporary world as a whole, the epistemological and political gap, the tension between emancipatory forces and conservative resistances that characterize our present" (Preciado, 2022, p. 25). Generalizing the notion of dysphoria, Preciado relates the way in which the pandemic announces the dissolution of a capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial regime. It also highlights the need to bet on a new way of life, which even until now is disqualified as unproductive and abnormal (Cabrera-Altieri & Angulo-Egea, 2023).

This article is inscribed in the diagnosis of a mutant world (Angulo-Egea & Cabrera-Altieri, 2023) where it is necessary to search for an imaginal metaphoric that proposes new possibilities to (re)think current communication. This path has already been exposed in

relation to the textile imaginary of communication (Cabrera-Altieri, 2019, 2022a). In the following, the imaginary of contagion is examined in order to think communication.

6. Communication as contagion

The theories of the imaginary allow us to test an interpretation of communication as contagion without the need to focus on messages and explicit contents, but rather on the fact of interactions, on the phenomenon of pandemic screening, which is, in itself, the emergence of an imaginary. To this end, we will take into account Durand's imaginal dimension, Castoriadis' instituting dimension of the imaginary, and the diagnosis of a mutant world.

6.1. Transmission: the emergence of other meaning

The possibility of the creative transgression of the communicative phenomenon was manifested globally in the context of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus and, once the health emergency was overcome, it has been normalized in the spectrum of the different types of flu that are active in today's society. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), SARS-CoV-2 flu is an infectious disease which, for most of those infected, is experienced as a respiratory illness with some complications in older people and those with underlying diseases. The WHO asserts that the virus is spread "from the mouth or nose of an infected person in small liquid particles when coughing, sneezing, talking, singing or breathing." (<https://www.who.int/es/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>). Consequently, at the time of the pandemic it forced the modification of all social relationship guidelines based on legal regulations of isolation, confinement, recommendations of physical distance, and the use of facemasks to cover the mouth and nose. The pandemic health emergency was decreed by the WHO on January 30, 2020 and ended on May 5, 2023. The disease currently presents as a variety of flu with symptoms such as fever, cough, and shortness of breath.

The experience of the pandemic, with its sense of threat and the political and social responses it generated, paradoxically reminded us that living is *with-living*² and that this means breathing together and, therefore, communicating is sharing air and breath. Communication was revealed as breath, air and vibrations coming out of the mouth in the

² Translator's note: "vivir es con-vivir" used as wordplay.

form of sound. To communicate as sharing those aerial or ethereal vibrations. Sharing the breath of the one who speaks close, but also of the one who kisses and is kissed. The atmosphere as the material support of communication. Not an atmosphere defined as electromagnetic waves but a much more basic one, as air with particles. The idea of communication as "space-between" (Silva-Echeto, 2014, pp. 31-35) recalled again the materiality of the aerial support. This experience re-opened a field of analogies that lead or re-lead to a creative and critical imaginary of human communication as contagion where the aerial does not mean immaterial as the metaphor of the "cloud" used for *Big Data* seems to suggest (Mosco, 2014).

6.2. Communication is air and conspiracy

In his research on the imaginary and the air, Bachelard (1993) analyzes the poetic images that relate to it. Among them, flight, wings, imaginary fall, blue sky, clouds, constellations, nebulae, wind, movement or freedom. The key to his interpretation is found in the "oneiric flight" (Bachelard, 1993, p. 58), in the ascensional movement: "flight is a transcendence of greatness" (p. 84). His romanticism, even his Platonism (Durand, 2003, p. 134), privileges the ascent centered on the splendor of the sky, the purity of air and light (Bachelard, 1993, pp. 94-95) and therefore, "the imagination of the fall as a kind of illness of the imagination of the ascent, as the *inexpiable nostalgia of height*" (p. 120). Durand takes up this idea in his interpretation of "ascensional symbols" (Durand, 2003, pp. 131-150). In this sense, we can affirm that communication is involved in the aerial condition and is related to conspiracy.

Communication is air, both in an ascensional movement and in a much more basic sense; sound waves do not propagate in a vacuum. In everyday use we say that we "inspire" someone, a person or the soccer team, understanding that "to inspire", to give breath, is to give life and vitality. To inspire is an invitation to rise from the ground, to get up, to stand up, therefore, to be human, biped animal. Mythologically, the soul, vital breath, was breathed into creation when God breathed into his creature and it came to life (Gen. 2:7), therefore, the air has been considered as the materiality of the soul of the human being that, at death, exhales or expires, that is, breathes out the last breath, the last air.

The spoken word, the meaningful sound, takes place between the air breathed in by the divinity and the final exhalation. Speaking and breathing are vital movements. To speak is air and is life. To engage in dialogue with others is to share the atmosphere: life. To speak is

to produce waves in the shared air because air is the first material support of communication. Mayan codices represent it through volutes, comics do it with a balloon containing what is expressed. Air as a shared medium of communication, the substance of the bond.

To communicate is to breathe together, to generate a common atmosphere, with its fumes, smells, and contaminations. That is why, at least in Spanish, when a couple or close friends do not want to see each other for a while, it is said that they "need some air" or that they want to "look for other airs"³. That is to say, breaking a relationship of loving communication, even temporarily, is diagnosed as the shared air being perceived as *rarefied*, and difficult to breathe. Therefore, the solution is to move away from that atmosphere to look for other air: fresh, new, "more oxygen".

Communication is, therefore, conspiracy. Its etymology makes clear the danger of sharing the same atmosphere where a "we" exchanges words in closeness, in trust. "Con-spirare", *spirare*: to breathe, to exhale air from the body, to *breathe with, together with*. To conspire, to aspire, together something else, another situation, another policy. *To aspire* in mythology leads to upward movement, in politics it warns about *being together*.

Power has always been suspicious of groups that share complicity. "They are too close", amongst "themselves", and "we cannot hear what they say". Especially if the groups are composed of "others" with linguistic, ethnic, or gender differences. Groups that meet in their own space have always aroused suspicion because they speak in mutterings that are not understood, because they have a different skin color or because they are "talking their business".

Shared air, *breathing-with-others*, is frowned upon when it comes to the powerless: the poor, the racialized, women, workers. Conspiracy is applied to them as an accusation. On the contrary, the powerful have their own luminous architecture to share breathing rooms and halls where they meet, not to conspire but to do politics and business. The powerful and the representatives of power, political and/or economic, can meet to share air, breathe

³ Translator's note: equivalent to the English "to look for greener pastures".

together and aspire to improve their situation without it having negative or suspicious connotations for "society".

Sharing the air when one has no power appears threatening and subversive. The atmosphere of the poor and the racialized smells bad, because they *tran-spire*, that is, they smell because they draw their air through the pores of the skin. Communication is to breathe together, to share the atmosphere, but also in this there is social inequality, some are suspicious and threatening, others, on the other hand, make decisions about what should be done.

Today, closed Facebook, Whatsapp or Telegram groups, have become key elements of disinformation and political polarization (Pariser, 2017). The algorithmic management of digital communication, unlike the old alternative political groups, distances from the conversation (Turkle, 2017) and reinforces bias and conspiratorial denialism, as demonstrated by the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal in the context of Donald Trump's campaign in 2016. In these groups, configured as private, members are protected by the anonymity afforded by the social network and can be used as a meeting point for them to overcome physical distance and loneliness by reinforcing their beliefs. The privacy settings of social networks are useful for the creation of a conspiracy space.

Communication and odor

Human communication smells: the smell of loved ones, the smell of childhood food, the perfume of lovers. Being close to each other and sharing the air, we feel each other's body odors. Smell is the most basic sense of human beings, the one that preserves the oldest memory of human life. Smell often appears imperceptibly, almost unconsciously. It is a fundamental aspect of communication, but one that we experience most of the time imperceptibly. "Smells are silenced, ignored. And in certain cases, they are despised and plunged into the abyss of shame" (Kukso, 2022, p. 14).

Smell has social classes, ethnicities, and gender: perspirations differentiate us, bind us, and repel us. Sharing air and breathing together confronts us with the phenomenon of smell with its social classes and its racialized and gendered bodies. Corbin referred to "the pestilence of the poor" (Corbin, 2005, p. 158) and Orwell wrote that "the lower classes smell". "The real evil was done, in his (Orwell's) opinion, when workers were said to be dirty by nature: physical repulsion represented an insurmountable barrier" (Kukso, 2022, p. 238).

The deodorant industry with its perfumes, soaps, shampoos, antiperspirants, toothpastes, sells and promotes strategies to improve the atmosphere. Perfumes are communication tactics for the improvement of work, family and couple environments. Dictionaries say that deodorant is "that which destroys annoying or noxious odors" and "a product used to suppress body odor or the odor of an enclosure". Society decorates the odor to make it more acceptable and, above all, uniform.

Odor and deodorant became in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries part of the "hygienic reforms (that) aimed to improve the health of citizens" (Alvarez-Barrientos, 2017, p. 89) and were based on a common belief of the time:

that the air directly influenced the organism because it carried miasmas or because its excessive coldness, heat, dryness or humidity were transmitted to the organism and, finally, because the air exerted, by mechanical action, a direct pressure on the body (Foucault, 1999, p. 378). Air was considered one of the major pathogenic factors (Foucault, 1999, p. 376).

The solution to such a problem was the opening of "arteries" and "roads" -following the metaphor of the city as a body- (Álvarez-Barrientos, 2017, p. 86) knocking down the obstacles that prevented a good circulation of air which, together with that of water, would guarantee a healthy environment. All this meant a true perceptive revolution in which smell occupied a central place. Strategies such as paving, drainage, ventilation, disinfection, etc. shaped a new society where smell, whether public, class, urban, domestic or intimate, was a center of action. All this has been analyzed, from the history of perceptions and the social imaginary, by Alain Corbin, who affirmed that, between 1750 and 1880, "excrement, mud, sludge, the corpse arouse madness. Anxiety flows from the top of the social pyramid revives intolerance to stench" (Corbin, 2005, p. 247). Smells of the proletarians and the people, the secretions of misery. The bourgeois undertakes the perceptive change that includes the reform of his own house with the transformation of latrines, kitchens and toilet cabinets. Just as isolation and isolation were strategies against the contagion of Covid-19, modernity turned the circulation of air, aeration, into a sanitary strategy through urban planning and architecture.

The imaginary of circulation began to take shape in relation to the discovery of blood circulation throughout the sixteenth century, explained in the seventeenth century by William Harvey. Human anatomy became a key and matrix of interpretation of the "social

body": "to the discoveries of blood circulation we owe the paradigm of body mechanics with its law of functional physiological necessity" (Mattelart, 1995, p. 35). Then capitalism turned it into the key to globalization as the free circulation of capital. Circulation without barriers for financial capital and police-controlled for people. The air circulation of architecture and modern cities is located in this genealogy of communication (Mattelart, 1995, pp. 19-110) of a modernity whose common experience was that of the vanishing of everything stable (Berman, 1988).

6.4. Contagion and technological screening

The aerial condition of communication appears in full clarity in relation to contagion. In the "speaking to the air" appears the classical possibility of understanding communication independently of the dialogic or dissemination model (Peters, 2014). Communication is the atmosphere of contagion. Every family that has or has had young children has experienced the family contagion of a flu when school starts for the first time. And then the whole family becomes contagious. The family or the lovers live in a distance of contagion because the air of the body is not only air, it is also small liquid presences as in perspiration and in the microdroplets that we give off when we speak.

The pandemic reminded us that talking is contagious because the micro droplets of saliva that come out when we talk in closed places remain in the air for several minutes. Talking produces thousands of droplets of oral fluid per second and these can harbor respiratory pathogens.

Communication means inspiration/expiration, good or bad, pleasant or not, but, above all, the possibility of contagion. Contagion of good and bad. Contagion as contact and relationship. "Contagion" is also letting oneself be influenced by the presence of the other, by their words, their request, their ideologies and beliefs, their actions.

The pandemic took up again the idea of communication as contagion and medical science asked from us as a solution strategies of distancing ourselves from each other, so that we do not *conspire* or *get the contagion*. Strategies consisting of covering nose and mouth so as not to breathe the bad-air together and to distance ourselves, to distance ourselves physically, from each other so as not to share the common atmosphere.

Faced with the prohibition of sharing common airs we locked ourselves in the screens of digital devices connected to the internet: phones, computers, tablets. The imaginary of a world of omnipresent screens (Vizer & Carvalho, 2019) was becoming a reality. Education, work, leisure, relationships with friends, with strangers... all daily life, in a few days, moved to the screens. The confinement behind the screens turned them into a defense against contagion and generalized a new communication. "New" because it went from being a practice of individuals and groups according to their concerns and needs to a survival policy in many populations.

The pandemic led to an intense and generalized life in and for the screens as the only possible sociality in the days of confinement. The "screen" protects (the face, the eyes) but also hides ("smoke screen"; "served as a screen"). A curtain is, according to the dictionary, a "cloth that usually hangs from doors and windows as an ornament or to insulate from light and foreign eyes". In the pandemic, screens allowed us to live "protected" and also isolated and "hidden". Screens as surfaces where spectra were projected on an increasingly intangible canvas. Planes and surfaces made of dots and pixels (Silva-Echeto, 2014, pp. 31-35). Screen, in Portuguese "tela": surface of the front of the television, computer or similar device where the image is formed. In Spanish, we speak of "telón" in relation to the theater to refer to the curtain that separates the stage from the audience. The expression "se levanta el telón (*the curtain goes up*)" means that the show begins (theatrical, sporting, etc.) and can connote the idea of "something begins", a public work, for example. The expression "se baja el telón (*the curtain comes down*)" synonymous with "the show is over", is used figuratively as "to put an end to something". Digital screens protected from contagion and allowed contact with others. A cloth, a curtain, a mantle, protecting not only from the gaze, but above all from the possible contagion by contact with the other.

"The digital age is the pinnacle of the olfactory silencing process that began two hundred years ago" (Kukso, 2022, p. 373). The world of digital screening communicates without sharing air. In the digital world, the sight has images and colors, the hearing has words and sounds, but the smells are their own. As the pandemic showed, the digital makes us suspicious of shared air, and with it, of smells. The digital body turned into an image has no scent (there have been and there are multiple technological projects to integrate smells, but they have not yet been successful). Digital communication converts the body into an image by taking advantage of the waves through which it is transmitted, but the body that smells emits molecules.

Communication without breath, without air, without atmosphere began at least with writing, which made it possible to transcend space and time. However, reading, which for centuries was oral and shared, returned the message to a shared physical environment. Solitary and silent reading, promoted since romanticism, encouraged the speaking of the conscience, the inner dialogue without air. Then, electrical technologies with their *tele-*distance prefix and in their historical succession of graph, sound and image (telegraph, telephone and radio, television) reinforced the possibility of a type of communication without the risk of contagion of bodily diseases, but with an increasing capacity of effects, of diffusion and reinforcement, of beliefs and world visions.

In the pandemic, *tele-technologies* were the key to sociability. A new situation for humans forced a disembodied communication, without synchronizing the air we breathe, without touching each other, without smells nor aromas. And the solution was to become screen pixels to be saved from contagion. The screen functioned as a prophylactic, suggesting the perception that with it there was no contamination. The use of the screen appeared as a form of purity, of immunity. Reinforcing the idea of the technological as effective and efficient and, above all, as neutral. A neutrality promoted as immune transparency. However, without perfume, without air, without touching, the purity of interaction does not become purity, but its transformation into connection as a technological mode of sociability. The algorithmizing of interactions and the screening of bodies.

6.5. Communication and social immunity

Roberto Esposito (2006) has developed an immunitarian model of modern politics in reference to the "increasingly strong tendency to protect life from the risks implicit in the relationship between men, to the detriment of the extinction of community ties" (p. 10). Thus, in order to defend against contagion, social life is "immunized" in such a way that its sense of "commonality" is denied.

The use of strategies and control devices "allow men to "live close" without touching each other, that is, to expand the sphere of individual self-sufficiency through the use of "masks" or "armor" that defend them from unwanted and pernicious contact with the other" (Esposito, 2012, p. 41). Following Luhmann, in his theory of society as an open system, he considers that "communication in itself is immunization... or, in a complementary way, immunization is the very form of communication" (Esposito, 2002, p. 70).

Communication is contagion. In its appearance of refuge behind the screen, it becomes immunization. If during the pandemic the lack of air was the symptom of individual contagion, screened communication was a manifestation of communication in its capacity for human proximity without contact. Of a society that became an image, without a body. Masking against the virus and human connection, that is, of biopolitical strategy.

In an age of "air conditioning" and "air purifying" technologies, it may be worth remembering that "the pure" in which, for example, Bachelard dwells, is in no way a way to understand communication. The protections against impurity and airborne disease are not understood with the poetic-mythic strategy of the ascensional but of the "inside-outside" movement of immunization and contagion. In the way Paul B. Preciado, following Burroughs, understands writing as a virus that has reached a state of symbiosis with the human body. Writing as a transmissible virus, communication as viral transmission, as contagion.

Preciado (2022) highlights the political potential "of thinking of language as a parasite that colonizes our nervous system" (p. 71). Communication is contagion because "writing or speaking is not transmitting information, but contaminating. Writing is always infection" (Preciado, 2022). An infection that is transmitted to the central nervous system through the interconnected screens. Contagion, which also shows another dimension of "consumption" as devouring. A path explored by iconophagy (Baitello, 2008) that analyzes the link between images and bodies: bodies that consume images (through screens) and images that consume bodies (transforming them performatively) (Silva-Echeto, 2018, 2019).

7. Conclusion: the imaginary and communication

In 1983, the term "virus" was used in public for the first time as applied to computing. It was a strange usage of the word, but "coincidentally," it coincided with the time when the virus of a new disease called AIDS had been isolated. The computer virus was a code that infected a computer and was considered a serious security problem (<https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/tecnologia/mundo-digital/la-historia-de-los-virus-informaticos/>). An approach from the imaginary understands this metaphoric as the emergence of senses of the threatening for human life towards the technological threatening and, in short, towards what worries a society called, at that time, "of risk" (Beck, 1998). Since then, contagion has been around the imaginary of relationships and human contact.

The aerial condition of communication concentrates all the ambivalence of modernity (Bauman, 2005). To conspire is to be together, but also to threaten; smell attracts and seduces, but can be a reason for aversion; viruses infect, but allow for vaccines; they threaten, but to go viral indicates success in communication; needing air can be a symptom of suffocation, but also a possibility of growth. The imaginary of communication as contagion allows an elucidation of the transformation of the corporeal condition of sociability, its algorithmizing, and screening.

Beyond the instrumental use of social imaginaries for the analysis of the content of media messages, theories of the imaginary present the possibility of understanding the communicative phenomenon in a mutant world. New metaphors for new concepts are possible and necessary to position ourselves from the cracks, silences and negations in which subaltern and liberating meanings are cornered.

The comparison of the two main traditions in social sciences, G. Durand and C. Castoriadis, shows that the imaginary designates different levels of understanding of this reality. The tradition of the Grenoble School with a structuralist bias aims to understand human culture, and in them, we can locate communicational productions in their relations with the image in a broad sense that encompasses iconic, scriptural, sonorous, transmedia elaborations, in relation to the social production of meaning from historical, mythical and symbolic wells and basins.

Castoriadis' philosophy postulates the background of meaning as the radical imaginary, condition of production of the concrete and acting social imaginaries. The human capacity, irreducibly social and individual, which explains the arbitrariness of meaning and, therefore, the possibility of critique and creativity in the struggle for autonomy.

The metaphor, understood as an epistemological analogy, makes it possible to establish a bridge between both approaches to take into account both the arbitrariness of meanings and the historical-cultural background. When applied to communicology, it leads to consider alternative definitions for new human relationships and connections.

Communication as contagion, hidden by the computer concept of virus and the positive use of viralization, resurfaces from the setback of communication, from the prohibition of being together in order not to be infected. In view of the permanent search to turn bodies and

societies into digits and pixels (Virtual Reality, Metaverse, 5G, etc.), it would be convenient to retake the experience of confinement in order to think communication from the imaginary of airing and air, breathing and conspiracy, infection and immunization.

Far from prophylactic communication, the digital, with its algorithmizing and screening, constitutes a new social ontology that redefines the real. With their halo of objectivity and neutrality, of effectiveness and mystery, they present themselves as the realization of a promise of a safe atmosphere, of pure air and contact without infection. They invite us to surrender to it in a confident and unquestioning way in order to create a safe space that would protect us in the face of a social world threatened by inequality, poverty, violence, and lack of resources. To disarticulate this imaginary means to discuss and dispute the real in relation to the project to which it belongs (Castoriadis, 1998a, 1999, 2000).

The evolution of communication technologies shows a trend towards contact without breathing or smelling bodies. The inhaling and exhaling body seems to be destined to be eliminated from sociability through the technologization of communication, interaction and human relation (Cabrera-Altieri & Angulo-Egea, 2020). The pandemic has shown society that human communication can be deployed with almost no corporeality through screens. In this sense, the so-called "Zoom fatigue" that awakened nostalgia for physical presence (in education, work, and affective and sexual relationships) can be seen as a reaction of subjects whose bodies have not yet fully adapted to the lack of shared air and breath. Perhaps it is worth asking whether the new generations, locked in small rooms while interacting and relating through networked screens, are part of a biopolitical experiment where bodies would no longer need to share a common atmosphere. It would be a biopolitical atmospheric imaginary that would definitively separate humans from their earthly condition because in that case, in the technosphere room or in a spaceship trip, the vital connection would not require sharing the air with others.

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