

The Prison-House of Media: Emancipating the Spectator

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Medialogies: Reading Reality in the Age of Inflationary Media positions itself as a true intervention within Hispanism and beyond. *Medialogies* confronts those frameworks and academic stipulations that dominate the way we do research and think of our own fields of study. It creatively subsumes a diversity of approaches into a single volume authored by two scholars who share a desire to intervene “dramatically” and almost “performatively” in our profession. Two early modern scholars, David Castillo and William Egginton (C&E), insert themselves in the ongoing debates devoted to the powers of representation and the media, and do so from the fringes of a Hispanic scholarly tradition that over the years has tried to overcome the barriers imposed by other disciplines and humanistic endeavors. This new early modern Hispanism forces its way into wider discussions that affect the world we live in, bringing the Baroque to bear on current debates on the effects of media manipulation and neo-liberal market economies in our contemporary world.

Medialogies also needs to be situated in a long critical tradition focused on spectatorship, representation, the media, and the phantasmagoric manipulations of subjects. From this perspective, the focus is on how subjects have been subjugated, constituted, and at times robbed of their own selves and, in worst-case scenarios, reduced to zombies or coppertops (the latter is a reference to the function assigned by machines to human beings in the film *The Matrix*). This approach has a long and important genealogy that we may trace all the way back to Plato and the narrative of the cave in the *Republic*. The intellectual focus has all the elements of an ethical intervention that strives to illuminate all those who remain blind to their own realities. It also echoes the work of some of the members of the Frankfurt School, the Roland Barthes of *Mythologies*, Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, and recent media studies, to

A Polemical Companion to *Medialogies*:
Reading Reality in the Age of Inflationary Media
Hispanic Issues On Line Debates 8 (2017)

mention only a few of the most salient examples. Furthermore, it has a long tradition in Marxist theory, specifically the development of the concept of ideology as deception, distortion, alienation, illusion, and, ultimately, control. In general terms, the media behaves like ideology in the sense that it is designed to disseminate representations that help maintain a status quo. Mass media conceals the contradictions that structure each subject's way of life, making them live an existence that is not theirs to control. The genealogical framework of *Medialogies* follows the different versions of such a phantasmagoric manipulation of subjects, from the Renaissance's geometric perspective, the Baroque's powerful instrumentalization of visual spectacle, the history of the book, technologies of communication, Debord's spectacle, and recent media studies. *Medialogies*'s overall argument (with important distinctions that I cannot go over here) describes this progressive historical removal of truth from perception, a removal that is consistently described as manipulation, allowing for both controlling immense segments of the population as well as providing them with ready-made frameworks and narrative models that they can submissively follow. This sort of gigantic machine of manipulation at times can be contested by marginalized groups whenever they are able to identify the operations of control and resist them. For C&E, it is a matter of identifying the layers of representations and appearances without leaving the confines of the cave. In other words, we cannot take a leave from *simulacra*, since we do not have access to a reality somewhere outside, accessible to us. Any agency we may acquire has to come from within the world created by the media, since as they so eloquently state, we are unable to confront medialogy outside medialogy. The subject's capacities are limited in comparison to the forces confronted. In many ways, the overall approach undertaken in *Medialogies* is substantially ethical. By identifying those imposed frames of life and sketched narratives provided by the dominant empire in the early modern period, by modernity's manipulations of reality, or the rule of commodities and the market economy in the latter stages of global capitalism, we may recuperate an understanding of ourselves and the world we live in.

One productive way of approaching the issue of the constitution of subjects trapped by representations would be to find alternatives to critical thinking that do not pose an inevitable and inescapable immersion in deceit. In his book entitled *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière proposes a solution to what he calls the "disenchanted knowledge of the reign of the commodity and the spectacle" (32) that seems to consistently depend on a monstrous mediatic machine generating a spectacle defined as representations that lead to more representations. For Rancière, it is a question of responding effectively to "the law of domination as a force seizing on anything that claims to challenge it," with the danger of making "any protest a spectacle and any spectacle a commodity" (33). In other words, what I would like to

propose, following closely the arguments of Rancière, is that the intervention that can be made in the field of media and spectacle should strive to go beyond a “passion for deciphering” (44). This is what Rancière intends to do when he talks about “emancipation” and “dissensus” as critical categories that could begin to rescue a critique of art and media from its own impasse. In the traditional separation between spectators and actors in theatrical representation, in which spectatorship implies passivity, lack of movement and lack of knowledge of the performance, authors such as Brecht and Artaud strove to abolish the distance between performance and spectators. The idea behind these alternate conceptions responded to an “*a priori* distribution of the positions and capacities and incapacities attached to these positions” that had to do with viewing/knowing, appearance/reality, activity/passivity (Rancière 12). The “passive” viewer of the performance needed to be “moved” by refining the gaze (Artaud) and won over by empathy and identification with characters on stage, or by abolishing the distance that separated the spectator from the stage (Brecht). However, even here the performances were dominated by a desire to provide a directive to the audience on how to see and how to act in the world (Rancière 4–5).

For Rancière, emancipation means “challenging the opposition between viewing and acting,” realizing that the spectator does something and is never a completely passive entity (13). This identification of *a priori* distributions that affect our understanding of subjects positioned in a performance may lead us to reflect on what distributions are articulated by the media and how to reformulate them. To begin, we must avoid understanding the media as an all-too-powerful machine of representations. In addition, we do not need to postulate a subject that lacks agency in order to liberate her by means of our revelations of media manipulations. Such revelations and critiques do not need to postulate what Rancière has called the *ignoramus* (a subject transitioning from ignorance to knowledge). Emancipation means understanding the incapable as capable. The “scenes of dissensus” reveal that there’s no hidden secret in the mediatic machine, no fatal mechanism, no obscure cave, and no lost community. It is rather the free alteration of capacities and incapacities that can occur at any time with any subject (48–49).

Can we identify creative, improvised, and active re-articulations of the capacities assigned by social and political institutions in certain historical contexts? We certainly can. Many such strategies appear frequently in literary and artistic texts. Examples in early modern Spain abound, but we have to keep in mind their limited social and political effectiveness. Lazarillo de Tormes comes to mind as a character that is capable of reconfiguring the restricted capacities at his disposal for responding to a legal interpellation. We understand that, as a character from extremely humble beginnings, he should not be able to write such a sophisticated testimony of his life (or for all intents and

purposes, we shouldn't expect him to write at all). However, the picaresque fiction introduces this capacity, going beyond the existing potentialities that existed outside of fiction at that time. The picaresque narrative introduces to the world this new distribution of capacities afforded to the poor in order to respond to the powerful, expanding subjectivity at the level of representation. For Rancière, this is one of the fundamental political functions of aesthetics when reconfiguring and redistributing the sensible world.¹ Even in the realm of what subjects need to do in order to survive hunger and dispossession, Lazarillo never stops amazing others. In similar fashion, Sancho Panza amazes Don Quijote and others whenever he demonstrates ways of occupying space and acting in the world in unexpected ways. In other instances, literary works depict the virtues and disasters of assigned incapacities, such as the case of the Licenciado Vidriera. His madness allows him to acquire unanticipated verbal capacities that allow him to speak in another tongue. However, his fame as a mad man ends up substantially limiting his prospects, unable in the end to fulfill his educational dreams. The forces that define madness in a restricted fashion end up suffocating his abilities to transform his life as a *licenciado* in significant ways. We could also interpret the continuous disasters of Pablos in *El buscón* as the authorial insistence on depicting incapacities despite the fact that, like Lazarillo, the protagonist is able to “write” his own story.

As a baroque intervention on contemporary debates, *Medialogies* also depends on several strategies that I would like to highlight. It is characterized by a free-flowing eclecticism that combines myriad sources from early modern culture, philosophical debates, history of technologies, and others. The complexities of a high, intellectually challenging Baroque are combined with discussions of popular films and horror genres. It is as if the restrictions assigned to academic language by a particular field had to be altered significantly in order for a diversity of signifiers to have the freedom to sway in multiple diachronic directions. Interestingly, C&E do not propose this eclectic approach as a model to follow. Apart from a reduced number of allusions to traditional scholars of Cervantes, they refrain from directly attacking philology and the restricted requirements of academic writing. In other words, they don't need to construct an antagonist in order to justify their exploration of various fields and topics. The existence of *Medialogies* is rather more contextual, a timely response to a contemporary culture comparable to the Baroque's turn to spectacle.

A second strategy that they share with other scholars is the historical fluidity with which they traverse from past to present. In some instances, this fluidity allows for highly productive parallels between the baroque and contemporary manifestations of the media. Discussions of Baroque and Neobaroque are compelling in the book, as well as some discussions of popular culture and irony. At other times, this fluidity may generate problems. This is an aspect that needs to be further theorized among scholars, especially those

conscious of historical and genealogical approaches to our specific field. As an example, let me concentrate on the question of agency and possible alternatives to subject formation that are so central to *Medialogies*. In my opinion, there is a tendency to easily displace terminology from one epoch to another without making the necessary qualifications. This is more pronounced in the beginning sections of the book. The concept of the spectacle that informs both the baroque and contemporary media seems to be dominated by Debord. Maravall's conception of a "guided culture" serves as a bridge between the Baroque and Debord's "spectacle," allowing for parallel conceptions of the subject as subjugated.

The baroque constitution of subjects through the powerful and massive deployment of the *comedia* is compared with Debord's passive subject that succumbs to the powerful mediatic manifestations of capitalist society. Going back to the figure of the spectator discussed by Rancière, we could pose interesting questions for further reflection on these topics. For example, can the *comedia*'s "massive" deployment be compared to the massive media infrastructure in post-capitalist society? Were audiences so passive as to be manipulated so easily by dramatic performances during the Baroque period? Can we think of instances in which audiences reacted critically to the imposition of specific modes of being? Are there authors writing *comedias* with the intention of reconfiguring norms and impositions from above, rather than manipulating their audiences culturally and politically? Did the physical constitution of the *corrales* (the public theater) themselves promote behaviors that were not conducive to social guidance? What is the relationship between a politically instrumentalized *comedia* and the restrictions on theatrical representations proposed by moralists? I believe that C&E are aware of some of these issues. They address this impression of a dominating cultural formation by expanding on the concept of "minor strategy" in the last section of the book (part 4, chapter 18). This strategy is capable of revealing the "frames" that construct the strategies imposed by the elites, showing in the Baroque era that appearances only lead to other appearances without ever reaching the solidity of truth. They speak of warping, deflecting, and distorting these frames by lingering within the illusions. But can we think of "minor strategies" as capable of generating distortions outside illusion and, in fact, able to propose alternate distributions, as Rancière seems to be postulating? This could be a very fruitful question for further reflection.

The latest political events that we have experienced after the 2016 election in the United States are symptomatic of what *Medialogies* explores so well in our present. Despite the intelligent analysis offered in various publications in this country, the results remain puzzling and disturbing to me as well as to many others. What remains to be answered is how a candidate that displayed highly unpleasant and unacceptable behavior during the campaign was able to win the presidency despite a constant media assault on his persona. In other words, how

is it possible that a candidate who displayed such lewd behavior toward women in a recorded video, had a known record of racism, and constantly provided evidence of bizarre behavior, and who was such a non-marketable commodity of a human being, able to win the electoral vote? Hollywood celebrities, musicians, artists, talk show hosts, and a plethora of personalities, not to mention multiple newspapers and publications, rejected the candidacy of the Republican nominee. But despite a media assault that invoked all that is precious to the Humanities (diversity, difference, freedom of religion, womens' rights, sexual and gender rights, social justice, education), this was not enough. Apparently, for many voters, a very reduced number of factors dominated all other considerations: a highly negative perception of current politicians and an economy that left behind the manufacturing sector in key states.

The distinct impression I got was twofold. On the one hand, the major media outlets were unable to mold or guide subjectivities (voters). On the other hand, the troubling fact that a couple of issues in the minds of voters became so important that even if they voted for the previous president, they decided to cast their ballot for what could be considered a dramatically different candidate. I must say that my first impression (on the limits of the media) encourages me, because it postulates the limitations of "spectacular" culture (in Debordian terms). However, this comfort remains problematic due to the fact that this elected candidate presented enough of what I will dare to identify as an "essence" of his own personality that, surprisingly, remained unrecognized by many. Many thought that Trump would never dare to pursue the same policies that he was proposing. Despite the fact that he did not control his political performance (the control of his own self in situations that required strategic self-presentation), he was able to convince voters that somehow that "essential self" that suddenly appeared was still part of an image, a performance, a representation. It may be possible that this is an effect of inflationary media, but in a negative way: our incapacity to see a "real" and unintended display of self when it becomes visible. With regards to my second impression (of the reduced concerns of voters), it would seem that all that is dear to the Humanities falls back and melts away if compared to economic considerations. This is also highly dangerous because it may explain the intensification of protectionism, nationalism, and anti-immigrant sentiments that so dominate the neo-liberal world in recent years. It may be that the efforts to reveal what is hidden and the humanistic work on media literacy may not be enough, politically speaking.

I would like to conclude by celebrating this initiative of proposing a "Debates" volume entitled *Polemical Companion to Medialogies*. I took seriously the word "polemical" in the title and chose to praise as well as identify some problems for further discussion. The invitation to participate in such a volume generates the kinds of communitary efforts that we need in this age of inflationary media and political decay.

Notes

1. See Rancière, 2004, 2010, and 2011. In his book *The Politics of Literature*, he proposes that “literature does politics simply by being literature,” illustrating the fundamental importance of speech and who is qualified to speak about what is shared in a community (3–4). This is precisely the point I want to make with *Lazarillo*, especially the complex way in which he tries to justify his speech in the prologue.

Works Cited

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