

Persistent impacts of mass culture on communication: the crisis of empathy and cognitive demotion

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Abstract

The text presents the results of a theoretical research conducted over the last years: the importance of empathy in communication. It also deals with what can be considered a crisis of empathy, generated by a century of mass communications, presenting relationships between physical/presential and electronically mediated communications, the loss of bodily proprioception (which is fundamental for empathy). The prevalence of electronic communication left its mark both in processes dealing with emotion and empathy, as well as in what we can consider a sort of cognitive debasement. Both of these processes are on the foundation of a social crisis of enormous proportions currently found in Brazil, which is brought out in growing social intolerance and how easily today's society is affected negatively by disinformation. The proposed pondering is based on multidisciplinary work ranging from conceptual tools in Communications and Media Studies, Psychology and Human Ethology.

Keywords: mass media. body. links. empathy. tolerance.

Introduction

In view of the challenges in communication studies in Brazil today, this reflection affirms the importance of considering the impacts generated by 100 years of mass communication mostly caused by the ubiquity of electronic media and its influence on the psycho-affective and relational dimension in communication. Far beyond the informational exchanges that were postulated as the center of interest for communication studies a few decades ago, the last 20 years and the impacts of digital social networks have alerted us to the relevance of affectivity and emotional processes for human communication.

Among these processes, the central nature of the emotional character of communication, which is increasingly imposed and pointed out by several authors as “affectivity”, has deserved greater attention, especially given the current discoveries in neuroscience (DAMÁSIO, 2010) that undoubtedly link emotion to any possible type of cognition.

This article thus contributes in this matter by presenting some of the results of theoretical research carried out in recent years on the centrality of emotions and empathy for communicative processes, highlighting the ideological use that Mass Culture makes of

these processes by implementing a specific aesthetics – and here we take the word at its root, as *aesthesia*, that is, senses.

The understanding of the emotional nature of communication and the processes of empathy requires a multidisciplinary view that, in addition to specific knowledge in the area of communication, allows to converge valuable contributions from Psychology, Ethology and Neuroscience in search for deepening knowledge and better understanding the theoretical object in question.

Mass Media today

The advent of the internet and the creation of a networked environment created the illusion that Mass Communication was outdated, or at least that its impact was significantly diluted. But it took two decades for us to realize that it was not so simple or linear as some considered when evaluating the new scenarios that the web communication brought with it. After practically 100 years of mass communication – and here I refer especially to the electronic communication that marked the 20th century, providing an enormous vascularization of the media through its technical means -, it was naive to believe that it would be possible to erase all aesthetic, cognitive and ideological programming generated by radio and TV, the heirs of cinema, and in Brazil, specifically Hollywood cinema.

Approximately 40 years after the popularization of personal computers and 30 years since the advent of the internet, there are still very few cultural and communicative uses that are truly original and transgressive of the previous order that we see reaching a high number of users. What was most radically new in this medium were the commercial strategies, providing more commercial resources for the market, confirming the action of economic globalization, enabling the survival of capitalism, and the social networks, soon to be applied also for economic and political uses.

Precisely for this reason, the criticism raised starting from the 1980s about the potential consequences of the increasing and indiscriminate use of electronic media was undue, especially those with easy portability – cell phones, smartphones, tablets –, which triumphed in the task of conditioning us to its uninterrupted use. The publicity and technologically-charmed discourse of the market triumphed and effortlessly convinced us of the need to adapt to new forms of interpersonal communication, which started to be guided more by electronic mediation than by immediacy.

Attempts on discussion held in academic spaces to question the apparent inevitability of their uses - or at least relativize them - were almost always rejected by the fascination exercised by all the apparent aspects of this new way of living: unlimited connection, destruction of space/time barriers, ease of information exchange, speed of exchange, in short, the list is long and we all know it since it was exhaustively propagated by advertising and defended by a series of studies aligned with a subservient thought to the interests of the global neoliberal electronics market.

As all virtualization harbors an abstraction, we have always been required to ask: what was abstracted? And the generalizing response, that what was abstracted, or rather, subtracted, was the concrete dimension, only hid the direct subjective implications of this process; it was in fact the erasure of the body and its role in communicative relations.

Kamper (1998), in his brilliant essay on how work has gained importance and appropriated all other areas of life, continued Weber's (2004) well-known reflection on protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism. The direction that unites these two studies points to the erasure of the body, instrumentalized by the techno-functional apparatus of the means of production.

As such, we seek to rescue the role of the body and communicative bonds in human communication, and this path led us to the diagnosis that we live a deep crisis of empathy, which can even be amply attested through observation and contemporary social experience.

Especially in Brazil, which is a country with high illiteracy rates¹, and where it is estimated that three out of ten Brazilians considered to be literate in fact are functionally illiterate²; Brazilian censuses indicate rates of 9 hours and 14 minutes per day of internet use between fourteen and sixty-four years³, and so we have to ask ourselves about the consequences of having a life almost exclusively on the internet.

We propose here that an association exists between this intensive use of telecommunications and the crisis of empathy and, consequently, with the ethical exercise of alterity in social relations, which is nowadays almost completely electronically mediated.

The role of bonds in communication

Studies related to Communication and Media theories have only started paying proper attention to issues related to bonds a few years ago. Even today, most of the studies on the topic are restricted to equating bonds to techno-instrumental connections. At best, we see, on the one hand, the social and political dimensions of communicative relationships, and on the other, their imaginary, affective, emotional and even religious nature; however, the relation between these issues has mostly been unaddressed, even considering the little rationality in the behavior of the "target audience" of mass media, or even given the enormous current adherence to virtual social networks and the ideological maneuvers they operate.

Boris Cyrulnik, in his research on the processes of resilience in the context of Human Ethology, has offered a fundamental contribution on the role of the bond in human

1 When assessing IBGE's illiteracy rates, the following is stated: "in absolute numbers, the rate represents 11.5 people who still cannot read and write. This rate is almost three times higher in the population group aged 60 or over, 19.3%, and more than twice as much among black and brown people (9.3%) compared to white people (4.0%). Available at: <https://agenciadenoticias.ibge.gov.br/agencia-noticias/2012-agencia-de-noticias/noticias/21255-analfabetismo-cai-em-2017-mas-segue-acima-da-goal-for-2015>. Accessed on: Nov. 20, 2020.

2 Available at: http://acaoaducativa.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Inaf2018_Relat%C3%B3rio-Resultados-Preliminares_v08Ago2018.pdf. Accessed on: Nov. 20, 2020.

3 Available at: <https://wearesocial.com/blog/2018/01/global-digital-report-2018>. Accessed on: Nov. 20, 2020.

relationships, going so far as to affirm that “not belonging to anyone is not becoming anyone” (CYRULNIK, 1995, p. 75). All of his work comes, in a way, from the realization that we have a nature that he calls “porous”, that is, we are living and open systems, and we constantly assimilate our environment in porous manner. This porosity is exactly what makes us empathic. Cyrulnik also tells us that: “The individual is both an indivisible and porous object, sufficiently stable to be itself when the biotype varies and sufficiently porous to allow itself to be penetrated to the point of becoming a part of the environment” (CYRULNIK, 1999, p. 92). Then, he proposes a precious term for understanding the centrality of bonds and the relationships that create it: “Of all organisms, the human being is probably the most gifted for porous communication (physical, sensory and verbal), which structures the void between two partners and constitutes *ligand biology*” (CYRULNIK, 1999, p. 92). What Cyrulnik calls “ligand biology” brings to our attention the role of communication in the processes of making these connections effective in the social sphere.

Morin (1988) utilized studies of living systems to build his proposal about the Complexity Method and since the beginning has highlighted the relational nature of the living world, proposing a vision of human centered on the constant exchanges with the environment, addressing from the beginning our relational nature, our codependency, especially since he considered that the maturation process of our species is longer than that of other species, what he called juvenilizing. This prolonged dependence regarding the social environment unites with the codependences of an imaginary character (the *demens* character), generating an intertwined network of bonds.

From the perspective of Archetypal Psychology, Hillman (1992) approximates bond to the term ‘necessity’, using the mythical image of the Greek goddess *Ananke* for this. Hillman emphasizes the meanings of yoke/collar/tie that the etymology of the word presents, and says that when we want to feel autonomous, we often are possessed by a deep agony because of this condition of being made to bond and being made of bonds. According to Hillman (1992), this psychological condition is the result of a lot of resistance, although it is intrinsic to the human being, making the feeling of belonging so important for us.

Baitello Jr. (*In*: MARCONDES FILHO, 2014) and the multidisciplinary studies of his research group⁴, as well as the latest studies by Muniz Sodré (2006), have shown the importance of the bond for Communication Studies, pointing to the emotional and binding dimension of communicative processes and dealing with the reflection about how the media space has – or has not – accepted bonding practices. The centrality of this discussion on bonding processes for media studies lies in rethinking the notion of communicative relationship, avoiding the concept that these relationships are mere informational exchanges that can be equated to commercial and instrumental relationships, and drawing attention to

4 Centro Interdisciplinar de Semiótica da Cultura e da Mídia – PUC/SP (www.cisc.org.br).

the importance of the processes of meaning and the sharing of emotions that are present in this relationship.

It will still be necessary to expand the discussion about how the process by which the social media filter out from the imaginary, from the noosphere, a series of contents and practices, reworking and reframing them, and then repurposing them to society, so as to present the importance of this relationship between media and the imaginary in contemporary times more clearly⁵. This imaginary universe replicated by the media generates a kind of imaginary sphere of its own, the mediosphere. This mediosphere is constituted by a type of bond centered on sympathy, as Morin (1986) demonstrated almost 40 years ago, and we can say that beings from the noosphere (at the imaginary level) are born from relations of meaning, always collective, in an environment sociability whose emotional character is intense and guided by the processes of empathy. These beings of the imaginary, from the noosphere, are created by empathic bonds, whereas beings from the mediosphere, of the imaginary proposed by the media, result from the relations of projection and identification, notoriously unconscious.

This distinction, in fact, must be carefully considered, above all because it brings into focus a central factor used to understand the nature of mass communication, the erasure of the body, and actual, concrete experiences.

The erasure of the body in media society

Damásio (2000) states that in the case of empathy we are dealing with *emotion*, not *feeling*, and this is because empathic processes, in some way, precede the brain functions involved in the conscious or intellectual cognitive work of the human brain. The unconscious character of emotions is pointed out by Damásio (2000) when he affirms that it is necessary to differentiate these cognitive processes from those caused by feeling, since what essentially characterizes an emotion are bodily/somatic reactions.

Damásio proposes the existence of two different types of emotion, primary and secondary, wherein the latter would introduce differential elements in relation to the first, which in turn are quite relevant and require a more in-depth reflection. He says that:

However, the process does not end with bodily changes defining an emotion. The cycle continues, at least in human beings, and the next step is the ‘sensation of emotion’ concerning the object that triggered it, namely the perception of the relationship between object and the emotional state of the body (DAMÁSIO, 1996, p. 161).

⁵ This is part of what the Grupo de Trabalho de Imagem e Imaginário Midiáticos of Compós has faced for 10 years.

This “sensation of emotion” includes a comparative element of the *relation* between subject and object that necessarily introduces the role of *consciousness*. That is why he affirms that feeling emotional states is equivalent to “affirming that one is aware of emotions” (DAMÁSIO, 1998, p. 162). He then argues that this awareness of emotions plays a fundamental role insofar as it “offers us flexibility of response based on the specific history of our interactions with the environment” (DAMÁSIO, 1998, p. 162). And, for him, this ability to “feel the emotions” more consciously is the feeling.

Carl G. Jung, on the other hand, warned of this difference between emotion and feeling, presenting an understanding that is practically equal to that of Damásio and referring to the theories of the Danish psychologist William James about emotion: “The word ‘emotional’ is invariably applied when a condition characterized by physiological enervations appears... And in that (emotive) moment there is a physical condition that is effectively tangible and observable...” (JUNG, 2008, p. 21).

Understanding emotion in its centrally somatic dimension, he also considers that the feeling deals with something more conscious, less atavistic, and more related to personal values. When considering feeling a function that houses a certain degree of rationality, Jung (2008) is stating that feeling belongs to the sphere of consciousness, whereas emotion has a more unconscious nature. He says that he considers that we can actually be “taken over”, “possessed” by emotions, including collective ones. This reflection on the power of emotions to overtake coincides with its predominantly unconscious character.

Regarding empathy, J. R. Goldim⁶, resuming Hume’s reflections on the subject, proposes a fundamental question: not only is empathy a central emotion for human relationships, but human’s empathic capacity allows to build “similarities” between members of the same society. On the matter, Hume (*apud*. GOLDIM, 2009) stated that it is likely that the empathic processes are responsible for the amazing uniformity of moods and ways of thinking in a given social group.

This association between bodily experiences, emotion and empathy helps us understand Manuel Castells’ statement that current identity communities have as one of the main strategies of their creation “self-definition by excluding others, those who are not like us. In other words, xenophobic distinction”. (CASTELLS, 2018, p. 85).

Face-to-face communication throws us into unavoidable emotions; the situation, the context evokes something, acts in such a way on us that we cannot ignore the existence of the appeal of the other that is present, even if we refuse to proceed and transform it into a more meaningful and responsible relationship. We all know how much easier it is to turn off or silence a communication device than to “get rid” of an inconvenient presence.

⁶ José Roberto Goldim, a researcher specialized in Bioethics, refers in his papers to the need to rescue the notions of empathy and sympathy, emphasizing how central these emotions are in the constitution of human relationships. Considering David Hume’s theory (*Tratado da Natureza Humana*, 1738), Goldim states that sympathy is something that bonds people to one another. Available at: <http://www.bioetica.ufrgs.br/compaix.htm>. Accessed on: Nov. 20, 2020.

When there is no possibility of full exercise of consciousness, we have the archaic wisdom of the body, of the species, of what on the one hand precedes the individual, but on the other hand transcends it. Perhaps this is why the gnostic tradition believed that this primordial reaction to the other was carried out by the liver, *hepatos*, which is the etymological root of the two terms discussed here. It is about the understanding that empathy is a visceral reaction, that is, it originates at the core of the body.

Goldim (2009) also states that empathy refers more to aesthetics than ethics, and, in this sense, the association between empathy and aesthetic experiences, understood as *aesthesis*, is indeed revealing when we consider that, for Francisco Varela, they are exactly the aesthetic processes that are implicated in something he calls “bodily enaction processes”, prerequisites for creating ethical notions. He proposes that adequate ethics cannot be created from enactive aesthetic foundations, which he presents as follows:

In summary, the enactive approach emphasizes the importance of two points linked together: (1) perception is formed by perceptually guided actions; (2) cognitive structures spring from recurrent sensory-motor schemes that enable perceptually guided action” (VARELA, 1992, p. 22).

With this, he reinforces the role of sensory-motor schemes for the cognition necessary for ethical notions to emerge. Without proprioception, there is no world to care about, there is no real demand that calls for a conscious or ethical decision about anything.

Considering active experiences then makes the empathy established in interpersonal relationships an emotion in the exact sense of the term, but makes the projective/identifying sympathy of the media culture (MORIN, 1995) almost like a simulacrum of emotion in which the body barely if ever is present at the scene, as occurs in the game of mutual contamination existing in concrete social practices. In the latter case, even if something does happen in the body, that event does not call for its concrete spatial-temporal performance, and what happens are inert crackles.

In the contemporary environment of the show, all of the spectator’s action can exist only in the sphere of virtuality, of disembodiment, as a distant reaction. This reactive position of the viewer of mass media was then ideologically directed towards a single meaning, consumption. Faced with the depotentialization of body action, consumption responded to this disempowerment, generating the illusion of power, as warned Baudrillard (2000).

Mass culture, internet and the technologies of distraction - the cognitive downgrade

If what we lost in proprioception and body awareness, and consequently in empathy, had been replaced by the development of an abstract cognition capable of adequately responding to the challenges of otherness through rational ethical principles, we might not

have been experiencing so much intolerance and xenophobia in the middle of the century XXI. However, given what the growing racial conflicts and the growth of a social sympathy for the partisan ideals of the fascist right reveal, as was attested in the 2018 elections in Brazil, we do not go exactly towards a mentality that we could consider enlightened about the complexity of social relations and the imperative of negotiation for maximum inclusion, inherent to social action.

Although the issue is complex and requires in-depth economic and political-ideological analyses, we cannot help but wonder about the role of mass media in creating this simplistic mentality that serves to address differences by exclusion.

Especially the fake news phenomenon, which guided the last elections in Brazil, and which is being majorly studied by specialists in the field⁷, presents us with an aspect that is directly related to the point that we have developed here. It is not just a matter of understanding the media machine that is the creation and operationalization of fake news, but of asking ourselves how thousands of people who had a relative level of education and who would have been expected to have the minimum critical perspective required to identify absurd and lying news showed an attitude of total credulity towards the most varied false and grotesque news.

In addition to the political-ideological clashes typical of a complex and troubled context like that of Brazil, with people believing in certain news that were released and electing candidates who could barely speak for 4 minutes without making grotesque errors of language and reasoning, made intellectuals, university professors and researchers wondered how it was possible that the extreme cognitive limitation of some candidates and the explicit contradictions in their speeches could not be perceived, even before one could question their political and ideological positions. The absurdities being spoken showed not only that it was fake news, but also called attention to another phenomenon that I consider more serious and that perhaps was not so clear until then: the current and extreme cognitive downgrade in the face of contagious emotional states promoted by the media. mass communication and social media.

We thought we had already overcome the state of blindness of the masses dragged by emotional contagions, as we had sadly observed in Nazi fascism, but what we saw was precisely new forms of the action of these contagions⁸, guided by an unimaginable cognitive downgrade so far, given that those were people constantly subjected to news programs and information networks.

Although there is a distinction that needs to be made between mass media and network communication, more aspects ended up bringing them closer than distinguishing them, considering the social uses of the internet and network communication, as we have

7 Many studies have been conducted about fake news, but some particularly concern what we are discussing here: <http://obs.obercom.pt/index.php/obs/article/view/1376>; <http://obs.obercom.pt/index.php/obs/article/view/1272>; <http://bibliotecadigital.tse.jus.br/xmlui/handle/bdtse/4813>; <http://portaldeperiodicos.eci.ufmg.br/index.php/moci/article/view/3760>.

8 On the matter of psychological contagions in means of communication, a specific thesis by Torres (2020) on the topic should be noted.

followed in the studies carried out on the topic. We cannot naively deal with the argument that the mass media are distinguished from network communication by the former dealing with a few central transmitters for millions of receivers, in a clearly vertical communication design, and the network dealing with point-to-point, horizontal communication. In the last decade news agencies have continued to centralize the production of information, and the commercial use of social networks has developed much more than the sociability tools themselves. As a result of the explosion of information at the end of the 20th century, we had a saturation of unforeseen information that made the constant checking of the credibility of sources an almost impossible task (SERVA, 2005), generating, on the one hand, the survival of the legitimating power of news centers that were already established with the old model, and on the other the nefarious phenomenon of fake news.

As such, despite the potential of network communication and the growth of social networks, mass communication and the processes of formation and deformation of public opinion generated by it continued to act strongly, and the good old model of television guided most of the individual production that we see in spaces like YouTube, for example. It would be too naive to think that the 100 years of aesthetic and ideological training operated by mass media would lend space to a new aesthetic and network mentality, more democratic and plural, without resistance and without leaving its marks implanted. For this reason, we can consider that several processes proper to mass communication are reproduced and are also present over the internet and in the communication of networks.

Going back to our question, we ask ourselves: how did the media participate in the process of creating this cognitive downgrade that we see in action?

Carr (2011), in a provocative book named *“The superficial generation – what the internet is doing to our brains”*, helps us to understand the relation between media and cognitive processes. Certainly, everything we have previously discussed about body sedation (BAITELLO JR., 2012) in the face of communication devices is essential to understand this process, but there is another aspect, to which Carr calls our attention, which also seems worthy of consideration. Carr states that:

Every intellectual technology incorporates an intellectual ethics, a set of assumptions about how the human mind works or should work. (...) It is the intellectual ethics of an invention that has the most profound effect on us. Intellectual ethics is the message that a medium or another instrument transmits to the minds and culture of its users (CARR, 201, p. 71).

When dealing with intellectual ethics, he is in a way pointing to the well-known question about the fallacy of technology neutrality and, consequently, of the communication that is established through a new technology. The internet has not only changed the ways we communicate, it has in fact changed the way we have been thinking. Carr says that the infinite windows we can open in overlap lead us to an implicit dispersion in the tool itself:

“The division of attention required by multimedia further stresses our cognitive abilities, decreasing our learning and weakening our understanding” (CARR, 2011, p. 180).

It is not new that the change in the perception of space and time alters the ways of thinking⁹, and the excessive use of virtual communication tools, as we pointed out previously, especially cell phones, smartphones and tablets, are changing human cognition; they are, as Carr suggests, generating superficial thinking, that is, we are losing “the capacity to know a subject by ourselves and in depth, and to build, within our own minds, the rich and idiosyncratic set of connections that give rise to a singular intelligence” (CARR, 2011, p. 198).

Thus, the ease with which private news agencies work to create trends in public opinion based on fake news is largely justified by the cognitive downgrade that manifests itself in the growing inability of the average citizen to develop more complex and time-consuming reasoning, which demands more logical connections, as well as impatience with the information received, since checking the credibility of the information and the legitimacy of the sources demands more and more time of dedication and, in a way, some expertise to separate “the chaff from the wheat” in this ocean of disinformation (MORIN, 2003). Ease, in fact, is a key concept pointed out by Carr:

The irony of Google’s effort to make reading more efficient is that it undermines the very different type of efficiency that book technology brought to reading - and to our minds - in the first place. By freeing ourselves from the struggle to decode text quickly - we read (if we do read) faster than ever - but we are no longer led to a deep, personally constructed understanding of the text’s connotations. Instead, we are rushed to move on to another piece of related information, and another, and another. The superficial mining of ‘relevant content’ replaces the slow excavation of meaning (CARR, 2011, p. 227).

In this scenario, affective response is quick and jumps ahead of any critical effort, which, incidentally, we are less and less accustomed to. We are left with affective responses and choose to believe in information that, in a certain way, confirms our worldview, reinforcing personal or group prejudices and beliefs. It is not uncommon for people who are consulted about why they believed false information to justify it by stating that they received it from a friendly and reliable person. The affectivity of the exchanges implanted in network communication almost always supersedes the will and the disposition for the long and laborious verification of the veracity of information and the legitimacy of sources. We are less driven by a rationality that we could trust than we like to believe¹⁰. The action of mimesis in social practices has been considered when talking about children, early childhood

9 All the work of educators and cognitivists such as Piaget and Vigotsky, for example, showed these imbrications, but the excellent work of Marshal Berman, “*Tudo o que é sólido desmancha no ar*”, addresses this issue in a clear and poetic way when dealing with the “adventure of Modernity”.

10 We have investigated the role and impact of emotions and mimesis on human thought and communicative practices for years (CONTRERA, 2012).

education and learned models, but we have underestimated this action when we think of adults, since, as Wulf and Gebauer (2004) have demonstrated, mimetic behaviors are also the basis of all sociability in the adult world, particularly in relations based on aesthetics, typical of media society, especially if we consider the relationship between people who live together and who have affective bonds of any kind.

We still have to consider that the phenomenon of super information is coupled with the imperative of speed, typical of our democratic times. Nothing that demands more time for dedication is attractive to contemporary man; let us call it liquid relations, as proposed by Bauman, or democracy, as proposed by Virilio, the fact is that the average citizen is not willing to “waste too much time” in dealing with information and news on subjects that go beyond their most immediate daily action. We claim that we do not have time, but what is revealed in fact is our growing predilection for swift relationships and information to then jump to another subject, another situation; something always appeals to us so that we do not stay on anything for too long, consumption temptations leave no time to linger or dare any depth: “it is difficult to resist the seductions of technology, and in our era of instant information, the benefits of speed and efficiency seem to be genuine, and desire for them, indisputable” (CARR, 2011, p. 304).

Final considerations

We like to think of human communication as something that is merely instrumental and does not directly interfere with the social relations of tolerance and empathy, but nothing has been shown to be more wrong than this alleged neutrality of the media.

The more than one hundred years of mass communication have left profound marks in western industrialized societies, and among them, the desubjectivation of the body¹¹ from the sedation practices brought by electronic media occupies a place of relevance. Without awareness and bodily proprioception, there is no living aesthetic, that is, a synesthetic response to the world, since the world itself ceased to matter as an experience. A world that I do not perceive or that is not the *locus* of my experiences cannot affect me to the point of awakening matters of ethical awareness.

Without concrete bodily experiences, empathic skills cannot be developed either, and since empathy demands sensorimotor mapping, it is a gesture of the body, as proposed by De Waal (2009), based on the action of self-regulation of bodies and the action of mirror-neurons in the construction of these couplings. And without concrete experiences it is also not possible to build or access emotions. Emotions are not mere affects, they are affects that drive us, that literally move us, in the space-time reality of the concrete world as well as symbolically, allowing us to exercise consciousness, as stated by Jung (2019) and Damásio (2000). Baitello Jr. tells us that: “If the body asks for a body and is not met, mechanisms

11 This concept is proposed by David Le Breton, in his book “*Adeus ao corpo*” (BRETON, 2003).

are created so that it is content with what it remembers filling in its lack. And, sometimes, it is content with images (internal or external), memories, remnants, forms of emptiness” (BAITELLO JR., 2012, p. 105).

This contentment, however, only furthers the anesthetic state that makes everything tolerable, but meaningless. The search for meaning, both by itself and for the world, ceases to be sought, it ceases to believe that any meaning is possible; only in the crisis of meaning intolerance can deepen and the propensity to adhere to delusional versions of reality is established.

Considering also the saturation of information generated in the last decades by the mass media and the cognitive transformations arising from new technologies, the internet and network communication, we come to the realization that we are facing a process of cognitive downgrade, typical of processes of swift information and mobilized by affects, which in turn stimulate all kinds of misinformation and prejudice.

This scenario proposes an enormous challenge to which we have not found unambiguous answers. At least we are beginning to understand how we arrived at this apocalyptic scenario, that is, at that state of affairs in which self-deception is no longer possible and we need to open ourselves up to an epiphany, in this case, the responsibility of the media and of everyone involved with them.

Contemporaneity imposes the observation that the old Judeo-Christian ethics has failed (NEUMANN, 1991); perhaps a new ethics can be built from the rescue of the body, the experiences, the empathy, and the reconquest of the slow time of thought and reflection. If this is not dealt with, I fear that the regression of consciousness and cognitive downgrade are in fact the processes by which the human being of the 21st century will become known to history, if there is anyone left to remember.

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