

An introduction to MEDIA-BODIES: Matter and Imaginary

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The call for papers for issue 59 of the Journal of Communication and Languages, themed and titled *Media-Bodies: Matter and Imaginary*, offered some guiding questions that bear repeating, as a process of questioning that opens itself to a variety of essays:

Which media-bodies are being projected?

What matter produces these bodies and what imaginaries are claimed?

The term Media-Bodies does not make its first appearance in the context of this publication. Rather, it was originally attached to the research project with which this issue is associated: *(de)MONSTRAS: imaginários, corporalidades e materialidades anfíbias* [(de)MONSTRAS: imaginaries, corporalities and amphibious materialities]¹. The preparation of this publication has brought the term up for discussion and exploration,

¹ A one-year project that takes part in ICNOVA's internal competition for funding of short-term projects, financed by national funds through the FCT — Foundation for Science and Technology — UIDB/05021/2020. <https://demonstras.cargo.site>; this page will be continuously updated and developed. Researchers: Aida Castro, Ana Carolina Fiuza, Catarina Braga, Maria Mire.

looking at the academic publishing space as a receptacle for essayistic, experimental, visual and plastic contributions that can bring together interests and peers, thus also including the reviewers as participants. The reviewers who contributed to this issue are, therefore, the first readers of the set of proposals we have received and now gather here.

The notion of media-bodies is proposed in this issue as a test, a gesture that congregates potentialities and an operative term that is being studied and experimented with in various realms of practice and thought, with a specific focus on frontier, complex and problematic bodies. Not just those deemed monstrous², but also the prosthetic, non-normative, hybrid bodies, the ones that tread the frontiers, marking out the limits of the human and of experience: fragmented and unifying of materialities. The category of an essentially medial body is therefore assumed; one that renders its own methodologies of embodiment and revelation epistemologically operative and makes it possible to give form to and imagine further and other bodies.

Media-bodies are frontier bodies that operate in interval spaces. They are bodies that define and materialize themselves, that take form and install themselves in the crossings and, for this very reason, are open to the practices of the imaginary.

Media-bodies show their experiences and specific languages: they are their own mediation and their own essay and we can say that this emerges in the embodiment of the materialities they convoke, evoke or even in those that circulate and are imagined in the crossings.

Therefore, in attempting to devise an *archaeology of media-bodies*, which is the central aim of our ongoing research, we acknowledge the need to adopt hybrid methodologies, from essayistic writing to visual essays, as clearly presented by the articles published in this issue.

To better frame the term we also need to consider the media and the mediations as extended processes and productions, which go beyond their instrumental and functional vocation and call upon various organic, mineral and technical materialities in their productivities, manifestations and performances. For what the media, or the singular medium, allow above all is for materialities and the phenomena of experience to emerge and take shape, i.e., to *de.monstrate* themselves. Seeking to circumscribe media-bodies and to understand their figurations and forms is nothing new and has a relevant history that spreads across the experimentations spanning the entire 20th century. In today's technoscientific experiments, it seems urgent to return to the subject of the bodies, their crossings, their languages and edits, in order to understand, first and

² As discussed by the artist duo Sasha Litvintseva and Beny Wagner (2021), who consider the monstrous body a medium: "The word 'monster' comes from the Latin *monstrare*, which translates as 'to reveal,' 'to show,' or 'to demonstrate.' What did monsters show Early Modern naturalists?"

foremost, that what is at play there is a tension and a power that are revelatory of the social, cultural and political circumstances: indeed, various inscriptions, mediations and utopias exist as a force at play within the bodies. We recall a piece that has remained with us, titled *Corpo e Imagem* [Body and Image], by José Bragança de Miranda. It presents an in-depth and critical work of research on what we would venture to call the grafting of “mediating bodies”, in their technical and cultural relations:

The problem of our time is the event of technology, whose shock waves we barely foresee. Technologies continue to graft themselves onto the body, like clothes and occupations, and qualities in general (Musil³), in that part of it that belongs to the imaginary. But in doing so they drive it to the edge, deplete it, render it transparent. (Miranda 2008, 124)

Technologies are thus presented in a broad sense, from and through inscriptions on flesh and metal to the writing of electronic bodies⁴, the experience of which is gradually marking out limits. In fact, there is a footnote in this book, in reference to its writing, that warrants pointing out and is a source of inspiration for us:

No doubt some bright mind will counter that if ‘body’ is a word, ‘flesh’ too is another word. I merely ask that, provisionally, when we read ‘flesh’, something more than a word be read, undefinable though it may be. (Miranda 2008, footnote 157, 119).

The image we can propose for this quote is that of a tongue (both organ and language) or that of the “Livro de Carne” [Book of Meat] (1978-1979), by the artist Artur Barrio⁵, which we came into contact with as recorded in slides. This book made of meat is a media-body, at the very edge of the medial operations of writing, a book of common matter that imagines flesh as a body.

Does (in) a media-body vibrate the latency of its own temporality?

Back to the subject of technological connections, the cyborg, as presented by Donna Haraway in her famous manifesto, would then be a media-body *par excellence*, a modern archetype. This body, even if obsolete, is a still figure that can serve as a basis for reflection on the materialities of its appearance, in connection with the operations

³ Despite the absence of a note to that effect, we believe the author is referring to Robert Musil and his unfinished work *The Man Without Qualities* (1930-1943).

⁴ “The paradox there is that the flesh is emerging, side by side with new ‘objects’. Indeed, photography, cinema and video have filled our experience with new objects, a materiality that is foreign to us, giving our world a ghostly consistency. The Marilyn or Baudelaire of Nadar who circulate on telematic networks are more alive than the originals” (Miranda 2008, 125). This is why we wish to devise an *archaeology of media-bodies*, rather than opting for “bodies-of-the-media”, for example, which would somehow situate the debate within an idea of substitution.

⁵ We had the opportunity of seeing *Livro de Carne* again in the recent exhibition *Interminável* [Endless], by Artur Barrio (2023), held at CIAJG and curated by Luiz Camillo Osorio and Marta Mestre. <https://www.ciajg.pt/detail-eventos/20230325-inauguracao-exposicao-artur-barrio/>

of the languages of that embodiment. A point of interest is, therefore, the duplicity and simultaneousness of these bodies, full of attritions and desynchronizations. The term cyborg was coined in 1960 by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline in a technoscientific context (astronautics) and as a neologism for a self-regulated hybrid body, whether human or animal and technical, “(...), a sentient body altered so that it could live in hostile environments” (Biro 2022, 500), supposedly prepared to inhabit outer space. We have said it before: we are already cyborgs⁶; and we partly agree with the suggestions of Haraway herself, who rather installs this figure in a breach, an in-between space that is difficult to explain, full of computer cables, minerals and humus, human, technical and animal. The bodies that speak of that occupied breach, creatures and cyborgs that edit and process information (from home), are imaginary hybrids that destabilize marked distinctions and identities, which the author expounds on and gives shape to, greatly anticipating the critique of the structures, operations of control and power in today’s digital corporations and economies. There is, thus, an iconic and ironic meaning to the sentence with which she concludes her manifesto, preparing a body for the hostile environment installed upon the surface of the earth: “(...) I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (Haraway 1991, 181). By saying “we are already cyborgs”, we bring this figure to the current day, but we question whether we are again seduced by its productions, its matter, imagination and language.

Seduction of the Cyborg is, in fact, the title of one of the “historical capsules” in *The Milk of Dreams*⁷ (2022), the main exhibition of the 59th International Art Exhibition — La Biennale di Venezia, where artists are proposed as cyborgs:

(...) the included artists as cyborgs: hybrid bodies whose work engages concepts of the self that are extended, relational, or prosthetic — including, but also beyond, the idea of engineered prosthesis (Wallace 2022, 499)

We should mention that these capsules are autonomous mini-exhibitions that gather a series of found objects, from documents to artistic works seldom seen and recognized, which together gain their own arrangement, i.e., their own body vis-à-vis the main exhibition. They are very intense space and time capsules in the relationships produced by cohabitation, since they edit several subterranean conductors that underpin the entire biennial: therefore, we suspect that these capsules are producers of media-bodies. The text “The Cyborg as Producer”, by Matthew Biro (2022), is exemplary as an account of this poetic experimentation, drawing an analogy in counterpoint to

⁶ Castro, Aida e Maria Mire, eds. *Dead Link: mediações das práticas artísticas* [Dead Link: mediations of artistic practices]. See this issue’s two editorials, with the same title. <https://revistainteract.pt/category/34/>

⁷ Exhibition curated by Cecilia Alemani. See: <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/seduction-cyborg>

the well-known text “The author as producer”, by Walter Benjamin (1934): by circumscribing poetic operations that occurred in the beginning of the century (between 1910 and 1920), with practices that anticipated the methodologies associated with the cyborg theorized by Haraway; by pointing out the exhibitions of the Dadaists Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, in a performative and domestic version of cyborg production, and Hannah Höch, with pictorial fragments and montages, thus revealing the mode of production of a group of female artists, or rather cyborg artists, who are aware of their status as a chimera⁸:

They were advocates of revolution, both artistic and political; and as such, they were collaborative, technological-oriented, and dedicated to expanding the media of art and the audiences they touched. (...) They envisioned cyborgs in multiple media, and they sought to treat their ‘apparatuses’ — their modes of art making — in such a way as to turn their consumers into producers. (Biro 2022, 502)

We reply in the affirmative: we are still seduced by the imaginaries and productions of the cyborg, as explained here and as conductors of media-bodies; in the artistic productions they assemble and envision; in the scenarios they anticipate, which critically prepare our own bodies for a present that seems hostile and again uncanny.

In the realm of artistic practice, as we have seen, media-bodies often install themselves in the poetic experimentation associated mainly with the technologies that spanned the entire 20th century and expanded into the 21st century, focusing now on the crossings and the immersiveness of visual devices and the appearance of the ghosts they project. From an archaeological perspective, the fact of seeing spectral apparitions was explained by rationalist thinking based on two distinct lines of argument. One that identifies its technical nature, presenting it as the result of an illusory effect produced by an optical device, with a real, albeit diaphanous, presence. And another, as noted by Terry Castle (1995, 53), that alternatively assumes it to be a phantasmatic production of the mind, originating in a disordered psychic reality, which haunts us as tormented subjects.

In “Blue Dilemma” (1999), by Tony Oursler, an installation in the form of a “fantastical machine”, technological inventions seem to be incorporated into an invisible timeline, in which the visual media are historical bodies that narrate an (un)known archaeology. Such is, for example, the case of Stooky Bill, John L. Baird’s ventriloquist dummy, which in 1925 became the first media-body to be teletransported through the experimental

⁸ “The cyborg artist that appears when we trace feminine lineages in art since the historical avant-garde is a complex and powerful one, a chimera that recognises her position as both subject and object of representation, as well as a creator that seeks to heighten our awareness of the various signifying media that connect artist and audience (...)” (Biro 2022: 503)

mechanical system of transmission of moving images. This event, which eventually made television technically possible, came after a failure to identify the human face in that same process of teletransportation, due to its inability to be exposed to a sufficiently strong source of light, which was necessary for the shape to be recognizable by its contrast. This history of the media, put in place by Tony Oursler, is a narrative of uncanny bodies:

Blue is the media color for me, the flickering cold glow which one sees at night when passing the window of a house where someone is watching television: the corrosive, deadly, beautiful color of electronic waves washing over flesh. The devil too, and the different forms in which it has been depicted, kept appearing during my research with alarming frequency. I had to include this controversial figure that crops up whenever there are any new technological inventions.⁹

The disturbing sensation that emerges from the opacity of the modes of production of some of these media-bodies does not lie in the concealment of the technical means used to amplify the impact of ghostly apparitions, as was the case in the 19th and 20th centuries. Rather, it emerges from the fact that this mist that obscures the relations of production does not have an alchemical or scientific reason but serves a corporate logic and feeds the abstraction produced by a vectoralist class, as argued by McKenzie Wark: “If the capitalist class owns the means of production, the vectoralist class owns the vectors of information” (2019, 55). The emergence of information as a material force of production is discussed in *Capital is Dead: is this something worse?*¹⁰, which expounds the formation of this ruling (vectoralist) class that controls and owns the information, or rather, the vector in which the information is used and collected¹¹. That information is constantly being produced by the “mineral sandwich” (Wark 2019, 4) we keep in our pocket and in every “educational” conversation we have with the algorithm. With this proposal, the author identifies the opaque connections of information, employing a methodology she calls a “thought experiment”, as a poetic-critical gesture that experiments with language, actualizing in itself other poetic and historical languages, such as the writings of Karl Marx and Kathy Acker, among others. Therefore, to say that capital is dead makes it possible to test the figure of the vector as an avatar for the emergence of a new ruling class and circumscribe the productions of others, such as the hacker class. The avatar is also a phantasmatic graphic representation of circulation, whose operations and connections are opaque.

⁹ In “Blue Dilemma” (1999), by Tony Oursler. See: <https://tonyoursler.com/blue-dilemma-1>

¹⁰ As a continuation of the prior *A Hacker Manifesto* (2004). Harvard University Press.

¹¹ According to the author, the notion of vector was adapted from Paul Virilio, in *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (2009). See (Wark 2019, 174, endnote 12).

As media-bodies, ghosts continue to perpetuate the confrontation between matter and imaginary, and they surgically topologize that clash. Nowadays, the presence of new and more bodies seems to expropriate experimental artistic and archivist methodologies to feed, for example, the *modus operandi* of neural networks¹². The images produced by artificial intelligence are the new pictorial spectres in a technoscientific show. Now the *séance* is on a cybernetic scale and the media continue to haunt (Sconce, 2000), as we are nervously stunned by the possibility of no longer being able to distinguish an optical image from an optical simulacrum. A double that is now without a referent, imitating an axis (or a vector) between an apparatus and a body, there being no original body anymore, no corpse of this spectral image.

Visual technologies continuously produce spectral media-bodies that are sometimes confused with the (im)materialities of the media themselves. A prime example of this are the moving image and cinema, as José Bértolo and Margarida Medeiros (2020) recall in an editorial published in this journal:

Not only does the spectre inhabit cinema since its very beginning, but it also shares with it a fundamental characteristic of being a figure at the threshold of: life and death, the animate and the inanimate, the past and the present, the material and the intangible, belonging simultaneously to the domains of vision and the invisible. (Bértolo, Medeiros 2020, 18)

The questions we proposed as lines of intersection for this issue have elicited a broad set of proposals, which have now been organized into this publication. They encompass imagined corporalities in artistic practice; imaginary and posthuman poetics; critical posthumanism; critical thinking around visual production generated through artificial intelligence (AI) and broad thinking about technology and the bodies.

The articles begin with the text “**Tecnicidade originária, animanidade e usos do corpo**” [Originary Technicity, Animacy and the Use of Bodies], by António Fernando Cascais, whose work we are thrilled to publish and to whom we also feel indebted for the themes we explore. His academic thinking and his bringing together of “undisciplined” topics¹³ have always taught us about the hybrid and transdisciplinary methodologies to adopt, and this publication is an opportunity to extend a direct invitation into his current themes, which inevitably complexify our ideas about the technologically mediated and inscribed uses of the body.

¹² Wark further says: “The capitalist class eats our bodies, the vectoralist class eats our brains” (2019, 59), which means that the ruling classes, which emerge somewhere in the control of different materials and spaces in time and history, establish themselves in the body/mind dichotomy.

¹³ We refer here to one of the first academic works in Portugal to seek to gather the peers around *Indisciplinar a teoria — estudos gays, lésbicos e queer* [Undisciplining theory — gay, lesbian and queer studies] (2004), published by Fenda, under the coordination of António Fernando Cascais, affirming a specific and separate field that fosters research on and knowledge of its historical realities.

“**Bearing witness to ecological excommunication: reflections on oil in Salgado and Herzog through *Cyclonopedia***”, by Francisco Nunes, discusses whether this oily media-body provides a suitable basis for reflection on the idea of incommensurability, attempting to understand the philosophical and political potency and operativity of this concept in the various (artistic) mediations between ecological forces and human subjectivity. Sofía Balbontín expounds on the artistic and research operations of Juan Downey in “**Arquitecturas invisibles: Un escenario distópico de hibridación cyborg**” [Invisible architectures: A dystopian scenario of cyborg hybridization] to complexify the indissociable link between humanity, technology and environment, considering cybernetics as a macrostructure of invisible energy that the artist poetically proposes to capture through media-bodies that serve as conductors for electromagnetic waves, radiations and seismic vibrations that are already on the planet as “invisible architectures”. Yair André Cuenú-Mosquera, in “**Limbo of the gutters: The omission of color in the construction of afrolatinidad in Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse**”, discusses how the choice to introduce greater cultural and racial diversity in the context of this cinematographic work proves precarious as it perpetuates invisibilities in a character created under the aegis of afrolatinidad. In “**Atwood’s Dystopian Imagination and McLuhan’s Media Theories: Rethinking Transhumanism through Fictional Narratives**”, Christian Perwein looks at the dystopian and utopian visions that appear in the literature on the future of the media, returning to fiction as a narrative strategy and a cultural manifestation capable of accounting for the polarities that emerge in the transhuman spectrum. “**Artivismo: literacia colaborativa na cultura visual digital**” [Artivism: collaborative literacy in digital visual culture], by Rennier Ligarretto Feo, is the final article in this section, bringing the reflections to a close with an experimental educational practice, of educommunication, with testimonies and pedagogies that seek to revert programmes and foster other important “modes of reading”, which have already been introduced in an observant and critical community of students.

António Manso Preto opens the visual essays with “**Sobre a Língua: o Texto-Corpo**” [On the Tongue: the Text-Body], a montage verging on a moving image that causes text and image to collide. The pages are transformed into analogue bodies, whose physicality we can feel, forcing media-bodies to retreat from all digital environments: these libidinous pages bring poetic operations back to the inscriptions on skin, similarly to what Artur Barrio did in his “Livro de Carne”, mentioned above. The visual essay “**A Garganta**” [The Throat], by Catarina Patrício, is an *assemblage* that makes use of drawing as a catalyst for the virus of language. In it, the reference to William Burroughs is not purely literary, but also plastic, and the randomness of the cut-up technique materializes in images. Patrícia Bandeira closes this section with “**Cidades Fantasma: Rondologia e empreendimentos urbanos desabitados na Ásia**” [Ghost Cities: Hauntology and uninhabited real-estate developments in Asia], where she establishes a fictional algorithmic-based comparison between the circular images generated by

neural networks and the urban planning conceived by financial assets in building cities that are already designed by a ghostly future.

The issue concludes with a review of two books. Ana Carolina Fiuza proposes *L’homme-montage. Une figure de la modernité* [The Assembled Human. A Figure of Modernity], by Bernd Stiegler (2019), which looks at technical modernity as an assembling device for matter and imaginary. Beyond photography and cinema, technoscience is seen as a landscape for various assemblages that originate in “psychotechnology” or in “assemblages of the senses” and, therefore, the assemblage is presented as a technical and aesthetical tool for various groupings. In her review of the book *Laughing with the Trickster: On Sex, Death, and Accordions*, by Tomson Highway (2022) — in which this Cree author proposes to compare indigenous mythologies and Greco-Roman mythologies and Christianity, and their views of the world —, Susana Amante presents the trickster as a media-body, capable of crossing borders and thresholds, a part of the popular imaginary and, as he emerges from and unifies every part of the book, also the critical figure that makes it possible to interweave different cosmovisions.

When we started to work on this issue, we had an important interlocutor, Margarida Medeiros, who at the time was editor-in-chief of RCL, alongside Teresa Mendes Flores. Now, as we conclude our work, we are a little more alone. Although we cannot share these media-bodies with Margarida Medeiros, we wish to express our utmost gratitude for all her work, which often gifted us the text as an essay at a gesture, at a poetic openness in the pursuit of academic work full of hybrid methodologies.

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To cite this article

Castro, Aida, and Maria Mire. 2023. “An introduction to MEDIA-BODIES: Matter and Imaginary.” *Revista de Comunicação e de Linguagens* (59): 19-29. <https://doi.org/10.34619/httc-vtuk>.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.34619/httc-vtuk>

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