
**MATERIALISM AND MACHINES OF SIGNIFICATION
— READING OF THE BOOK *CONSTELAÇÕES: ENSAIOS
SOBRE CULTURA TÉCNICA NA CONTEMPORANEIDADE***

**MATERIALISMO E MÁQUINAS DE SIGNIFICAÇÃO — LEITURA DO LIVRO
*CONSTELAÇÕES: ENSAIOS SOBRE CULTURA TÉCNICA NA CONTEMPORANEIDADE***

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“One of the most striking phenomena of Modernity has been the sudden and unexpected appearance of an immensity of machines” (p. 119) which, standing between a multiplicity of events and historical inlays, reveal the “emergence of technique as a constant presence” (pp. 105–106). This is the point at which the abyss opens up and whose symptoms are analysed in *Constelações: Ensaios Sobre Cultura e Técnica na Contemporaneidade* (Constellations: Essays on Contemporary Culture and Technique). Opening up a fissure in culture, because they work simultaneously with nature and history, we need to think about the machines that produce language sequences: photography, as a machine for producing and reproducing images of nature and history, and the general archive, as a machine for re-distributing the archived, unfolding new possibilities for production and reproduction.

There will be other furtherments to these productive machines. But assuming that every event depends on the way it is seen and how it will be historically inscribed and preserved, this diagnosis opens the way to two epistemologies that co-implicate each other: that of the *constellation* and the *refractions* that its effect in the archival logic. Following the first formula, Bragança de Miranda assumes the constellation approach as a contemporary method. Starting from Benjamin’s reading that “ideas relate to things like constellations to stars” (Benjamin, 1928/2004, p. 10), Bragança de Miranda finds in the potentiality that the constellation’s productive force draws, “the non-calculable instant in which the constellation enters life, which is the mark of its *Jetztzeit* [now time]”¹. Driving and guiding current readings, the constellation effect shatters and adds, because it productively brings into play everything that has been done. The constellation precedes the connection because it makes it possible. To draw the line that lets it be seen, and that makes it function as a figure, is to create a slice to make events reappear as machines

¹ Note 113 of the first chapter “A Constelação Como Método do Contemporâneo” (The Constellation as a Method of the Contemporary): “there is a messianic reading of the *Jetztzeit*, not least because Gnosticism has always been popular in the contemporary - the mortal sin of ethics - but it is the non-calculable instant in which the constellation enters life that is the mark of its ‘now time’” (p. 67).

— there, where images and their event logic “are also part of the struggle for the appropriation of common productivity”².

In the second formulation, as definitive as a sentencing, the constellation programme makes the opening of the archive hang over history — these are its refractions. This is one way, certainly not the only way, of making the archive resonate in the present, to let it produce in a kaleidoscope of images, sounds and words, what we take to be contemporary.

Working under the sign of the constellation and its refractions, the essays gathered here present the final version of conferences and texts, some of which have been expanded, and which give an account of Bragança de Miranda’s thinking in recent years. *Da Constelação* (From Constellation), the first part of this collection, begins with the essay “A Constelação Como Método do Contemporâneo” (Constellation as a Method of the Contemporary). If *the real is the fixation of a fiction* — an aphorism by Mallarmé is used to illustrate the productive potential of the inscription, as it shatters the possibility of achieving totality — this is because the constellation confers a new productivity on what is there, in the general archive we call “history”. Bringing together what is dispersed, capable of simultaneously touching the archaic and the contemporary, the constellation lends itself to “a certain temporality of the ‘now’ [Jetztzeit], which is only possible when history passes from unconscious to conscious, that is, when it can be considered as a total ‘object’” (p. 46). By commenting on the influence of the allegory of the “divided line” in Book VI of Plato’s *Republic*, Bragança de Miranda explains how the dialectical presentation of *Previous History* (*Vorgeschichte*) and *Later History* (*Nachgeschichte*) in Benjamin lives from the power of the “slice” in the *substance of the world* (*Weltsubstanz*), where the absolute present takes priority. The *now*, thus instantiated, reveals how neither concepts nor laws can serve at all times: the criterion for the existence of ideas is the connections that hang over things.

In “O Duplo Movimento da Constelação” (The Double Movement of the Constellation), the following essay, it is with Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs*, which “explodes into a constellation, disintegrating into concept, image and object”, that Bragança de Miranda realises the “logical of the empirical saturation of the concept” and how this is a symptom of the “post-Hegelian moment of art and the general critique of the conceptual distribution of the real that is mistakenly confused with ‘device’” (p. 78). But for a *reconversion* — *Umfunktionierung*, the proposal of Benjamin’s essay “O Autor Como Produtor” (The Author as Producer) for a working activism, based on constellation strategies of assembly, redistribution and also destabilisation — is to carry out the double movement of the constellation “in the object that appears, saturating productivity, and in productivity, which only exists as long as that object sustains it” (p. 84), motivating countless others that interoperate unpredictably.

The “speculative wound” that photography inflicts on modernity is dealt with in “Fotografia e Arqueologia do Materialismo” (Photography and the Archaeology of Materialism), the third essay in the collection. As an event that dictates the end of the symbolic logic that sustained totality as a cement or ligature, photography establishes a radical

² Comment taken from Note 68 of the chapter “A Constelação da Técnica em Heidegger” (The Constellation of Technique in Heidegger; p. 141).

opening. This is a metaphysical shift that “is far removed from the Hegelian pretence of absolute knowledge, which subsumed nature and history entirely under the domain of the concept, of ‘knowing’” (p. 92). Succeeding the rigidity of the symbolic, the fluid or potentiating magma of the speculative shreds the veil that allowed thought to coincide with reality, the so-called “correlationism”, a scheme of thought that photography came to decisively disrupt — “against perspectivism and the insanity of conflict opened up by humanist presuppositions, the new speculative aims at the Absolute, based on a background that precedes humans and will remain even when they disappear” (p. 92). This is photography’s profound materialism: “before it, everything is ‘fossil’” (p. 95).

The essence of technique as *Ge-stell*, that is, as an absolute device that captures everything, is problematised in the essay that closes the first part. In “A Constelação da Técnica em Heidegger” (The Constellation of Technique in Heidegger), the structure that Heidegger had thought of in “The Question of Technique”, a late essay in which he reflects with the greatest reservations on modern technique, will be dismantled. As Bragança de Miranda says, “there is no point in retreating from ‘nature’ to Physis and from Physis to ‘Being’, or in taking the opposite route from ‘forgetting being’ to ‘physics’ and from physics to *Ge-stell*” (p. 141), when nature always exceeds us, and human technique, as production, will always be “a kind of extension of nature within history” (p. 130). Recalling Benjamin (1928/2013) when he says that “technique is not the domination of nature: it is the domination of the relationship between nature and humanity” (p. 68), or Simondon (2014), for whom technique appears as the *third term* that mediates the relationship between humans and nature, Heidegger’s concerns reveal an illusory sense of control. Even so, Heidegger’s essay preserves the aggregating potential of technique as *Ge-stell*, which clearly traces the general productivity brought about by the connection of all the particulars in a technical constellation that the notion of “device” hints at.

The second part, *Refracções* (Refractions), which deals with the plasticity of the materials that inhabit the general archive, begins with the essay “Entre Próximo e Distante, Lógicas da Apropriação” (Between Near and Far, Logics of Appropriation). To present the structure of the “aura” is to note how it corresponds to the departure from a political theology — univocally symbolic and governed by the transcendence of the high-low axis — and how the auratic veil opens up in modernity to the immanent experience of the near-distant. Neither sublime nor divine, the tension is now between the private, distant and untouchable, and the common, close and attainable. But by prohibiting touch, the structure of the aura incites desire — not preventing strategies of appropriation (such as assembly) or operations of re-distribution (such as reproduction). Basically, before the aura, its “profanation, defined as the return of the separate to the common” (p. 166).

“O Fim da Distância: A Emergência da Cultura Telemática” (The End of Distance: The Emergence of Telematic Culture) problematises the most recent effects of the shortening that Paul Valéry (1928/1960) perceived when he predicted that things *will no longer be just in themselves, but wherever a device is*. In an archaeology of distances, Bragança de Miranda notes how the impossibility of approximation that aura establishes is ultimately achievable through an economy of the common: the auratic object is subsumed

in a medial network “that conceals its belonging to the logic of property” (p. 192). It’s a way of liberating them, allowing them to move freely. However, somewhat erratically, this gave rise to “the awareness of a new lightness of objects and subjects, giving the feeling that everything is possible” (p. 203). This is not only a feature of the constellation scheme, but also has the greatest consequence for the archive’s refractions: neither close nor distant, “it is this apparently chaotic coexistence that seems to be the final form of the ‘tele-relation’ that constitutes the experience” (p. 201).

In “A Interatividade: Da Mimesis Tecnológica” (Interactivity: From Technological Mimesis), Bragança de Miranda shows a different reading of interactive arts: as simulacral formations that tend to recover the idea of a total work of art — totally perceived and participable — the strategy is distorted when “the growing integration of technologies into an increasingly immaterial device” wants to determine, through technical mimicry, “the constitution of experience in its entirety” (p. 207). Such an endeavour is, as we know, unattainable. But there is no reason to regret this metonymic error: let the line be retraced and let interactivity be reattached to its materialities — “the ‘immaterial’ are only not ‘matter’ for those who see matter as something ‘dense’, ‘opaque’, ‘resistant’, in other words, according to the old Greek term *hylé*” (p. 209, Note 12). Enabling the connection for a single work, or for total interactivity, if it exists, can only be kaleidoscopic and expandable to all materialities, radicalised in the apostrophe of the documents from the general archive in the vertical moment, or slice, in which they transform the passive spectator into an active operator.

Finally, the archive’s refractions are closed, raising the issue of its permanent updating. In “Da Virtualização do Arquivo” (On the Virtualisation of the Archive”, implementing an epistemologisation of the constellation method, Bragança de Miranda revises his dilation of the digital as a scheme hostage to its classical delineation when “the decisive phenomenon is that of the growing indifferentiation between archive and life, between action already done and action to be done, between the ephemeral and the lasting” (p. 248). To collapse the historical hierarchisation of memory over the archive is to recognise another ontology in absolute exteriority: a mutation of technique already reticulates the remainder of what is to come.

Translation: Linguamundi

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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