

# Transplanting Subjectivities

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**Standing in the street market the Congolese immigrant told me the messenger mask he was selling me was supposed to establish a connection between different worlds. He repeated "before we had internet and cell phones, we had only such masks to talk to other worlds." This image of the African Mask as an intercessor between here and there was so strong and beautiful that it reminded me of the layers that link telematics to ancestral rituals to connect to the spirits and to the dead. This peculiar conversation in French between two foreigners in Berlin inspired me to create a performance associating ritual masks, video circuits and a projection screen, exploring the possibilities of becoming another through the process of communication. This article is a theoretical reflection on this ongoing practice based artistic research, bringing together Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's Amerindian perspectivism, Vilém Flusser's technical image and Gilbert Simondon's concept of techno-aesthetics.**

*Ritual Masks. Perspectivism. Technical Image. Techno-aesthetics. Performance.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the 19th century scientific techniques and procedures for measuring reality, modelling it, and expanding human perception multiplied in the Americas and Europe, in a heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory way. The discovery of phenomena related to electricity and radiation produced a vast field of experimentation, from the development of medical therapies to astronomical observation. The very idea of mediumship, in the sense of a supernatural communication, is related to this context, and the concept of media - as the Latin plural of medium - arose during this period: in English and French it originates in sociology and communication studies, whereas in German, in philosophy and literature (Groys, 2012). It is therefore an ambiguous notion, used both to define sociotechnical tools as to express forms of contact with occult forces, that cannot be seen, but intuited.

The possibility of overcoming the frontiers between life and death through telecommunications alludes to a belief in its mediumistic potentialities.

(Gunning, 2012, 2014). This type of approach, very common in the beginning of the 20th century, was accentuated by the disassociation between voice and body produced by inventions such as the phonograph and the telephone (Sconce, 2000). In this context, the dream of a telecommunication device capable of shortening not only terrestrial or spatial distances, but between our world and the hereafter reappeared in experiments by inventors such as Nikola Tesla, who claimed to have maintained contact with other planets in 1901, or Thomas Edison, with his research of a telephone to speak with the dead in 1920 (Wills, 2009).

Tesla (1901) recognizes that "the idea of communicating with the inhabitants of other worlds is an old one, but for ages it has been regarded merely as a poet's dream, forever unrealizable." It is interesting to note the vocabulary used by the inventor to refer to his research, as if its achievements were a matter of believing, made possible by the "conversion" through science and its controlled experiments.

Many persons in my own profession have wondered at them and have asked what I am trying to do. But the time is not far away now when the practical results of my labors will be placed before the world and their influence felt everywhere. One of the immediate consequences will be the transmission of messages without wires, over sea or land, to an immense distance. I have already demonstrated, by crucial tests, the practicability of signalling by my system from one to any other point of the globe, no matter how remote, and I shall soon convert the disbelievers." (Tesla, 1901).

Twenty years later, in an interview to the *American Magazine*, Edison (Wills, 2009) comments on his advances in the creation of an apparatus to establish the communication "with those who have already left the earth", not before saying that this would be a scientific experiment, not the result of hallucinations or even work of impostors. He was possibly referring to Tesla, his rival throughout their lives, and also to the emergence of an actual "soul market" that took place across the US based on the "scientific" doctrine of spiritualism. "The methods and apparatus commonly used and discussed are just a lot of unscientific nonsense", he argues. But where precisely lies the difference between nonsense and scientific apparatus? Or between a technical device and a ritual object?

The necessity to affirm scientific methods as an absolute value over other systems of knowledge explicits not only a separation between the material and the spiritual but also a hierarchy amongst western and non western epistemologies. Media genealogies usually place telescopes, daguerreotypes, chronophotographies, gramophones, and other "novelties" one after another in a timeline that illustrates a linear progress towards perfection in the future, thus creating a model for understanding technology. Emerging from this world vision, along with the many inventions produced by the expansionist and colonial capitalism in the 19th century, Anthropology evolved as a social science.

Rooted in the western myth of progress, based on its evolutionary logic, early Anthropology collaborated to define western science as the paradigm of civilization, classifying alterities in a subalternating way (Strain, 1996). On the one hand this new discipline tested and verified technical devices to conquer nature and people on earth; on the other hand it created a discourse to legitimate cultural subordination. Intensified by the advent of electricity, communication technologies have spread this world view in the expansion of the telegraph lines, as the one promoted by the

Rondon Commission in Amazonia in 1917 for example. Major Luis Thomaz Reis headed its Photographic and Cinematographic Section, serving both as an ethnographer and officer on a scientific and "civilizing" expedition to the Bororo people living in the Forest.

Before genocide or extinction, non western culture or even human beings were turned into collection items in Cabinet of Curiosities, *Wunderkammeras* and Museums in Europe and the US. The technocapitalist colonization of other worlds and subjectivities, categorized as uncivilized or primitive by the science of Anthropology, produced a barbarian imaginary of the otherness, turned into a souvenir or an attraction to western spectators. As part of this exotic market, one particularly intriguing object of desire was and still is the Ritual Mask. Deprived from its ritual significance and reduced to a decoration object, this artifact played a central role not only for the "primitivism" in the European arts in the early 20th century, but also to a scientific - and speculative - dialogue between materiality and spectrality, subjectivity and objectivity.

## 2. RITE WITHOUT MYTH

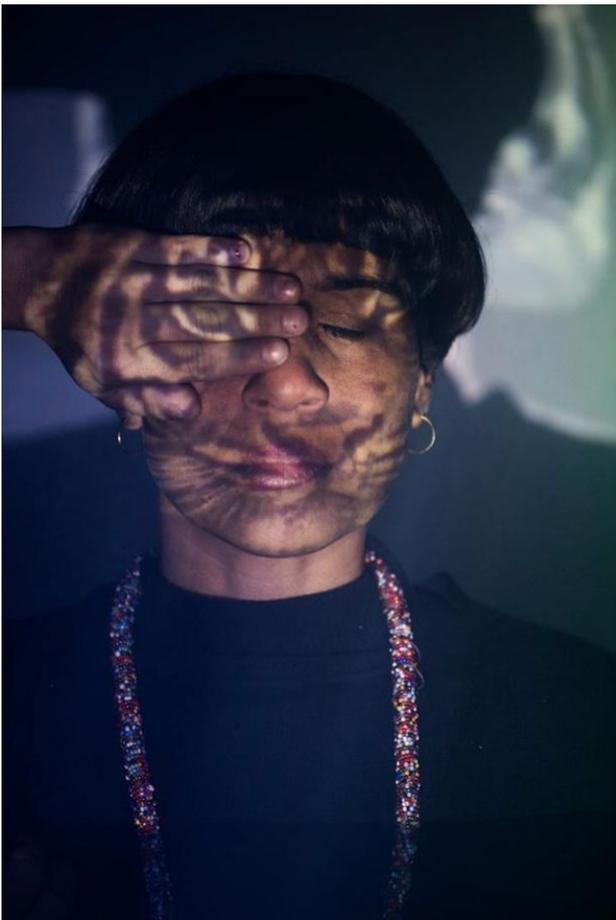
But as a paradox, the complex meeting with otherness also reconfigured the identity of the western ethnographer and anthropologist, changing its forms of approach. There is no possibility of affecting without being affected, since the contact affects both sides. An inherent circularity belongs to the process, where one becomes the other for another. This shiftings were discussed not only within the fields of anthropology and ethnography but also with theorists of information and communication, creating what became known as the first wave of Cybernetics in the 40's.

This interdisciplinary study of the relationships between living beings, machines and societies received an important contribution from biology in the 70's, redefining paradigmes for the sciences (Von Foerster, 2003). The objectified relationships of 19th-century scientific positivism could bend over themselves, based on circulatory feedback systems that supplant dichotomies between nature and culture as well as hierarchies amongst fields.

From a cybernetic viewpoint, considering that a Mask "calls" a divinity, it is a communication device. We could compare spirit communication with a kind of telecommunication channelling, as well to consider science the functional equivalent of indigenous shamanism. "It's the scientist, it's the laboratory of high-energy physics, it's the particle

accelerator. The shaman's rattle is the particle accelerator" (Viveiros de Castro, 2007, 45). This enigmatic idea suggests not only a sort of equivalence between magical powers and technology, but also the symbolic dimension of science, as a system of knowledge expressing human desire of understanding and explaining the universe. It also underlines a new position in ethnography and anthropology, turning the usual subject (the scientist) into the object of study.

Perspectivism, defined by Viveiros de Castro as an amerindian cosmivision, is the process of placing oneself in the skin of another, an objective interchangeability of bodies founded on the subjective equivalence of the spirits.



**Figure 1:** Work in Progress "Downloading Souls". Tests made during "Electric Ladies" workshop in São Paulo with polish artist Kasia Justka.

Lévi-Strauss (2000) understands that magical thinking can be studied both by anthropology, as suggested by Mauss, and as by aesthetics or technique, thus bringing myth and science close together. His interest in the theories of communication and information contributes to a

philosophy of decentralization of the subject, which could be thought in terms of a system or structure, analogous to how mythic thinking works. Lévi-Strauss's interest in adopting mathematical models for research in the social sciences is a neglected aspect of his work (Almeida, 1990; Lafontaine, 2004) and provides clues to the "anthropological and materialist" understanding of technology suggested by Benjamin's (1989) reflection of surrealism, as to Flusser's media theory:

If we unravel the knots of relations that we are made up of, then there is nothing left to hold on. To put in another way: The "I" is then that abstract point at which concrete relations intersect and from which concrete relations begin. We can then of course 'identify' ourselves with these knots of relations within ourselves: for example, a heavy body (nodal intersection in the electromagnetic and gravitational fields) and as an organism (nodal intersection at the genetic and ecological fields) and as a 'psyche' (nodal intersection in the collective psychological field) and as a 'person' (nodal intersection at the mutually intersecting social and inter-subjective fields). Instead of a 'person' one can also talk of a mask. What was formerly called 'identification of the self' can now be better identified by reference to a mask (or to several interchangeable and superimposed masks). (Flusser, 1999)

According to Lévi Strauss (1982), Masks produced by different people in North America (Iroquois, Pueblos or Navahos, amongst others) were designed for various purposes, genders and situations, these were made from supple skin, rigid leather or sculpted wood. But aside from the materials, processes and effects assembled, the common trace lays on how their magic is embedded in their design, in a way that they are "given life". Masks have to be "fed" and prayed, and re calibrated before and after use. It is a divinity itself and needs the proper treatment to operate within a ritual as a medium and as a message. Masks are thus designed according to a detailed ritual "program", and if we cross media and anthropological perspectives we can also understand the "apparatus as Orixá (or Exu)" (Flusser, n/d).

Masks are not fantasies, but instruments. "They look more like diving equipment or space suits than carnival costumes" (Viveiros de Castro, 2002, 394) and are endowed with the power to metaphysically transform the identity of their bearer, when used in the appropriate ritual context.

The act of dressing a Mask is an act of animation and communication with an interstitial space, as experienced in the *Sensorial Masks* proposed by Brazilian artist Lygia Clark (1980). The engagement demanded from the participant of the “ritual without myth”, as defined by Clark, approaches her work to techno-aesthetics thinking, as conceived by Simondon (2012) since “(...) contemplation is not techno-aesthetics’ primary category. It’s in usage, in action, that it becomes something orgasmic, a tactile means and motor of stimulation.”

The way Simondon describes the design of technical objects accentuates possible lines to trace between ritual aspects and technical functions. Aesthetics being their intersectional node.

There is a continuous spectrum that connects aesthetics to technics. A simple cadmium nut and bolt offers iridescences and variations that remind one a little of the colors of fluoride lenses: they’re the colors of a pigeon’s throat, which sparkles. There is an aesthetics to consider in the cables of a radar. No object is indifferent to our aesthetic need. It is perhaps not true that every aesthetic object has technical value, but every technical object has, from a certain perspective, an aesthetic tenor.”

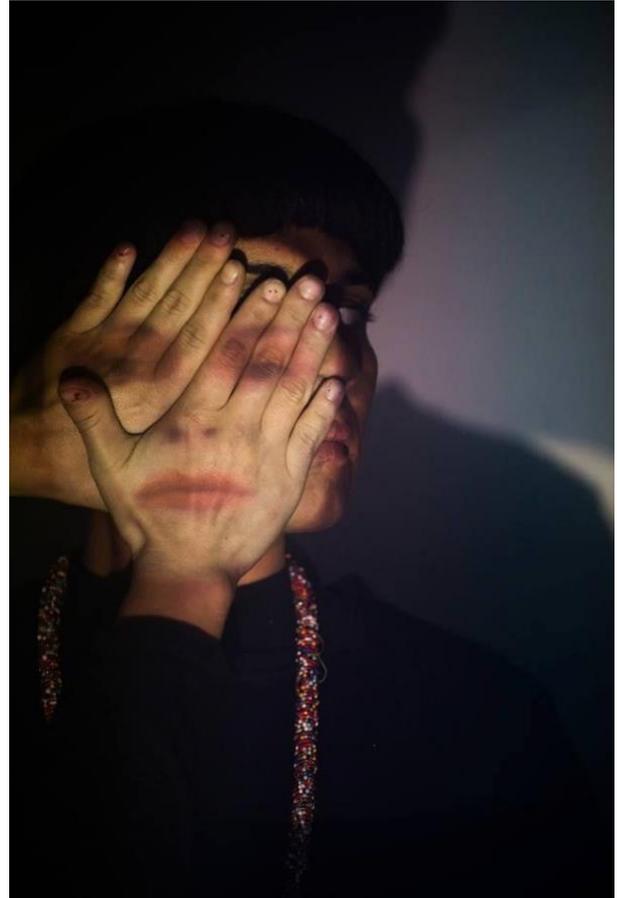
(Simondon, 2012)

A Mask is an aesthetic object, with a very precise technical value, unknown by those who do not master its magic, but evident to their creators. Paraphrasing Viveiros, we could say that the shaman’s Mask is our VR helmet. Amerindian cosmovisions converge with contemporary technoscience in many aspects and this affinity may be the starting point for the conception of a new aesthetic of technical objects and of nature itself, as proposed by Santos (2013).

Considering the idea of machines as agents and the way we delegate technical objects tasks, not to mention symbolic values acquired by different apparatus such as cell phones and cars, which give their owners status and power, we can think of many layers of convergence between connectedness to the spirits and technological quest.

### 3. BRAZIL, LAND OF THE FUTURE

In his essay "Macumba, Church and Technocracy" (1981) Flusser makes distinctions between mythical, historical, and post-historical regimes. He



**Figure 2:** Work in Progress “Downloading Souls”. Tests made during “Electric Ladies” workshop in São Paulo with polish artist Kasia Justka.

relates the first to a magical, circular way, without beginning or end, whose world image would be the scene. Relating to our reflections here we could say that Masks emerge from this scene. The second regime is the linear one, based on one-dimensional time established with writing. Its world image is the drama of progress, and following our parallels we could say that modern media emerge from this context. The third regime, post-historical, collapses historical linearity and implodes in a zerodimensional world of calculation, as a field of possibilities inscribed in a program. We would like to consider the conditions of possibilities of this regime to think of Masks as Media, converging rite and apparatus.

In this same text Flusser describes Brazil as a place where the three regimes cohabit together, demonstrating that more than historical or epistemological, it is through an aesthetic point of view that the world can be experienced in its superimposed temporalities.

Although Flusser praises the Brazilian mix and sees the country as a symbol of the search for a new human society, he maintains a European centrality that must be confronted in order to radicalize his own thinking. Like Flusser, Suely Rolnik (1998) also envisages the producing power of a new subjectivity in Brazil. A subjectivity emerging from a time of loss of fixed identities, operating through anthropophagic deglutition, in a decolonial perspective.

In the late 1920s Oswald de Andrade brought the concept of anthropophagy to the terrain of culture, thinking of it as a mode of cultural production that has been practiced in Brazil since its foundation. There is no possibility of purism in Brazil, hybridized from the origin. This cultural contamination is taken up by Hélio Oiticica in the 60's, proposing anthropophagy as Brazilian modernity, reaching everyone, erudite and popular. There is no hierarchy in the antropofagic cauldron, it is important to emphasize. Anthropophagy is carried out according to strategies of desire, selecting what will be swallowed and what will be discarded.

The photographer- ethnographer Curt Nimuendajú, the German thus baptized by the Apapocúva-Guarani in 1906, could be regarded as an interesting example of this complex production of subjectivities. Transformed by the people he was documenting, devouring but also being devoured by their culture, becoming another in a process which can not be seen only as an objectification but rather as a transsubjectivation. Or how we would like to propose here, in terms of a performance, as a *Transplant of Subjectivities*, an anthropophagic way of understanding intersectional exchange.

#### 4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Intersectionality recognises that subjectivities are shaped on the crossroads of multiple identities: gender, generation, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion and socioeconomic background among others.

Having this in mind we have started a collection of virtual Masks, constituted by video portraits of diverse people presenting themselves and answering to the same questions about identity. Close-ups from Scientists to Griots, from Drag Queens to Black Women of Candomblé, from Syrian Immigrant Men to Brazilian Middle Class Housewives and from Children to Homeless people. This heterogeneous database is mixed in a

video projection mapped over the performer's Mask, including also the image of the spectator's face, captured in real time during the performance, as well as archives of another talking heads considered pertinent to our purposes.

Through this ongoing research, anthropological, artistic, media practices and theories merge to create a common basis where different identity Masks interplay. This produces our transplant of subjectivities machine, and denaturalizes the Mask that "protects the white subject from listening to 'Other' truths and from acknowledging 'Other' knowledges" (Kilomba, 2008, 24).

On the one hand, we are all aware of the discourse that promises us that distances would be shortened by technology. "Connecting people" resumes the slogan of a well known mobile brand. On the other hand we are all witnessing the closing of borders and the walls built by nations in order to restrict free circulation of subjects and immigration.

In such a context *Transplanting Subjectivities* dialogs with our present paradoxes, offering a possibility to place oneself in other shoes, to see the world through other glasses. In a panorama where the "other" - non white, non male, non heterosexual - is still considered a threat and an object to be controlled, our performance can be seen as an exercise of empathy, where one can exchange his skin and become another.

Technology could thus be experienced, rather than a tool of domination, scrutiny and objectification, as an instrument of connectedness and empowerment, transplanting subjectivities of the scientific, ethnographer or contemporary artist into those of the indigenous, hacker or ancestor.

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