

The Body in Religious Media Ecologies: The Case of Subaltern Latino Counterpublics

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This paper explores the body-schematic and body-imaginative processes that underlie individuals' participation in the public sphere via religious media ecologies. Utilising embodied cognition and social critique, the authors outline how subaltern counterpublics make use of the body to enact micro-oppositions to mainstream discourses. The paper also discloses the origins of higher objectivities (identity, sense of togetherness, justice, plausibility, opposition and openness) in embodiment. Discussing counterpublics through the prism of embodied cognition, as found in Latin religious media ecologies, constitutes a valuable alternative to the logocentric understanding of public consent. While the dominant discourse privileges abstract formal cognition, Latino subalterns use bodily, affective and enactive affordances given by religious media ecologies. The latter offer affordances and alternative strategies for enacting social imagination, bridging the personal and the public in physically choreographed joint intentions. Embodied participation suggests a constitutive process of public meaning that makes use of the body as the most fundamental medium of communication.

Keywords: embodied cognition, the body as medium, religious media ecologies, public sphere, subaltern counterpublics

INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITION OF TERMS

The aim of this paper is to consider the embodied cognitive strategies afforded by media as an alternative to the dominant logocentric understanding of participation in the public sphere and everyday practices (Kraidy 2013, Durham 2011). We focus on religious media, and more specifically, we want to show that the use of the body as medium in Latino Catholic religious experience may be regarded as a mechanism to challenge, if not overcome, marginalisation. To do so, we need to first define what we mean by logocentrism and other related notions that will be used for the progression of our argument, before describing the media ecologies and bodily affordances of religious practice, especially in the context of Latino subalterns. Finally, we will explore the embodied-enactive origins of publicly relevant phenomena – such as perceptual phantasy, collective memory, temporal intentions, intersubjectivity, and, above all, a kind of paradoxical subaltern identity. In doing so, the research draws on and originally contributes to both the study of bodily-mediated religion (Coakley 2000, Bynum 1995) and

postcolonial studies as an *ongoing* paradigm, one that reveals how subaltern counterpublics and embodiment can pose a challenge or alternative to the dominant logocentric understanding of the public sphere. To our understanding, the reflection on the Latin American case provides a rich example of the lively present-day religious practice that was both originated by media domination (Peters, Wickberg 2022) and appropriated by bodily-mediated contestation (Ricard 2018). Despite a long standing critical tradition towards the logocentric thinking, it still lacks the input from the embodied cognition paradigm. On the other hand, the enactive arguments of embodied cognition are still being developed in a more general manner, thus forgetting that there are the specific culturally conditioned ways of embodied oppression and opposition. This article aims at bridging these gaps.

By the controversial term 'logocentric' we mean not only the superiority of the rational, but also a dualistic forgetfulness of the embodied dynamism of human subjective and inter-subjective reality, which is often substituted by fixed, finalised meanings, depictive narrative imagery and socio-political hierarchies. Simultaneously, we use 'embodiment' here in a phenomenological-enactive sense as a correlation between the body-image (*the body as cultural symbol and the meanings of social praxis*) and the body-schema (*motor synchronisation according to and participation in those symbolic realities*) which is embedded in both a physical and a cultural environment (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Varela et al., 1991; Froese, Stapleton 2016; Gallagher 2017). This environment, in turn, can be seen as the syncretic conceptual unity between the 'Lebenswelt' (Husserl 1970), 'Umwelt' (Uexküll 2010) and a 'media ecology' (McLuhan 2003), serving as the field of 'affordances' (Gibson 1950) for human embodied cognitive and/or meaning-making strategies. In our view, utilising this understanding of human embodied social cognition, religious events, as a unique media ecology, have a great theoretical and ethnographic potential.¹ At the same time, we aim to show that for subaltern publics, the body remains the principal and indispensable medium.

Central to making good on this potential is the enactive approach, which we will adopt here. Enactivism argues that we bring forth experiences by engaging with the world and others, where cognition and action in a physical but also socially structured environment are indivisible (Noë 2006; Gallagher 2017). Here, cognition is understood as a temporally extended sensorimotor dynamic and as an ongoing adaptive regulation (Froese 2016). Such a continuous dynamic of regulating and adapting the body in sense-making also entails the concepts of value and situated affectivity (Colombetti 2017; Gallagher, Varga 2020). Media ecologies in general (and religious ones in particular) and relevant affordances influence these self-regulatory processes of communication, for example, by providing senses of well-attuned proprioception in playful action or togetherness. Regarding the latter, since we argue that the social originates in embodied experiences, some other mediating experiential structures are also discussed, first of all, the constitutive role of embodied (perceptual) imagination (Husserl 2005; Noë 2012). We show how the phenomenological-enactive take on imagination is productive in understanding the human urge to project and participate in shared meanings via affordances structured by media ecologies where social integration appears not as a system of representations, but as a teleological movement and action.

¹ By religious events as an instant of religious media ecology, we mean such public bodily and socially choreographed celebrations as Easter Mass, Carnivals or even secular events, for example, the El Grito tradition during the Mexico's Independence celebration. It is also important to note that drawing a sharp and clear distinction between the religious and the quasi-religious would be a major sign of the logocentric approach.

Religious rituals, in turn, offer alternative opportunities to observe and analyse various individual and social trajectories (Wilson 1982). While religious discourse, in theory, privileges the verbal means of communication (sacred texts, sermons, etc.), in practice there have always been alternative ways and forms of religious communication. Music, dance, images, rituals, and so on add new layers to the verbal fundaments of world religions. In this regard, part of our aim here is to shift the focus from the theological meaning of the ritual as the rationalisation of the sacred to its ecological openness of embodied affordances to invite and extend certain values and to consolidate a certain, if momentary, feeling of community.

This opens up the possibility of relating religious symbolism to alternative strategies of personal integrity within certain social environments. For these later reflections we use (and extend) the Nancy Fraser's (1992) vocabulary here, insofar as she refers to these (alternative) publics as '*subaltern counterpublics*', since they comprise parallel arenas that circulate counter-discourses in which members of marginalised and subordinated groups formulate their own interpretations of public matters and try to advance their interests.

LOGOCENTRIC PUBLIC SPHERE AND ITS LIMITATIONS

As a dominant Western intellectual paradigm, logocentrism focuses on methods and topics which form the basis of rational knowledge and action. By this definition, logocentrism lacks many dimensions that reverberate more adequately with the human being and excludes the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt* [Husserl 1970]) participatory strategies of those who are usually excluded from public participation.

Among the many quests for a solid intellectual foundation for the study of communication and media, a consequential episode occurred in 1989, when Habermas's work *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, originally published in 1962, was translated into English. The publication sparked a wide international discussion (Calhoun 1992) of Habermas's understanding of the role that media played in both the historical transformation of society and the possibilities of social agreement and democracy. Essentially, structural changes in the 18th and 19th centuries produced a transition from feudal societies to a bourgeois liberal political order in which public opinion and publicity were key factors. The public sphere became an institutional mechanism that rationalised political domination and rendered the state accountable to citizens participating in public discussions. It also implied some discursive interaction that ideally, in Habermas's account, was accessible to all.

In Habermas's view, the dialogic or communicative dimension of reason dispenses with the solipsistic idea of the subject and replaces it with an intersubjective domain that he calls 'communicative reason'. The intersubjective dimension guarantees that the world is shared by people engaged in a conversation while providing reasons so that agreement can be established. Following further in the footsteps of phenomenology, from which he borrowed the idea of intersubjectivity, in the early text *Legitimation Crisis* (1988), Habermas described modern society in terms of a distinction between the lifeworld and the system. Communicative action is the medium of the lifeworld, while instrumental and strategic actions are typical of the system.

While Habermas makes an important move in relating the living environment, language and communication to social questions (order, cooperation, etc.), he still leaves out the body as the necessary constituent of any organism in any (including social) environment, since the Habermasian theory of communicative action amounts to a theory of argumentation that neglects other forms of communication (Ramsey et al. 2003).

Critics (Fraser 1992) have pointed out that the idealised understanding of the public sphere accounted for a hegemonic public (in Habermas's account, it was bourgeois, European, male, white, wealthy, educated, etc.) that was not *the* public in its entirety. Since societies are always stratified to some degree, the idea of a single general public makes it almost impossible for members of subordinated social groups to partake in public discussion.² The marginalisation of part of the public was carried over to all members of subordinated social groups, which in response would constitute an alternative or counterpublics.

For Fraser, publics are not just arenas of public discussion; they also provide grounds for the enactment of (subordinate) social identities. M. Warner (2005) would later develop several of Fraser's ideas to explain the constitution and interactions of queer counterpublics. For Warner, the dominance of a hegemonic public made the relation between different publics always contentious, since counterpublic expression could be one considered indecorous or received with hostility by the hegemonic public, but he makes the point that it was usually bodily expression that was deemed scandalous. Warner crucially notes that counterpublics do not share the 'ideology of reading', and thus the use of media, which was widespread among the dominant public (particularly in the US and Europe). For Warner, from the 17th century onward, reading was a 'technology of the self' that involved not only literacy, but also spiritual development, and thus had a religious dimension. If reading is understood as a media-afforded practice, Warner's argument sheds new light on the different media uses that counterpublics display in their adversarial relation to the dominant public. Let us, then, examine some of the features that are unique to religious media ecologies and their associated bodily affordances and practices beyond the logocentric understanding of religion.

EMBODIED CHOREOGRAPHED RELIGIOUS COGNITION AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO RATIONAL CONSENSUS AND AS STRATEGY OF OPPOSITION

Culture, of which religion is a significant historical and conceptual part, is not only a text, object or product; it is also an action; it is enacted. We argue that what is delivered through religious media is not discursive thought, but the 'drama of the body' through which important social relations are dramatised. The world is social, but its drama is embodied. This is yet another way of seeing the close relation between social reality and embodied participation. Moreover, as we will see, it presupposes that participation in the public realm, whether to understand, resist or escape oppressive circumstances, is necessarily embodied.

It is important that not only ideas and values, but also human bodies, despite their significant similarities, are shaped by culture into certain meaningful, although pre-reflective, habits, postures and compartments (Fuchs 2017). As such, these modes of embodiment presuppose and are 'ready' to enact certain, socially crucial, intersubjective components, such as 'attitudes of dominance and submission, approximation and distance, appreciation and devaluation, benevolence or resentment, and the like' (Fuchs 2017: 333). On the other hand, as reality is socially constructed, general words and symbols reduce the world into the manageable unity (Wuthnow 1992). Unity consists of universes, which are families of symbols that work in an embodied-pragmatic way. According to Berger (1967), one of those 'symbolic universes' is religion, which was established by *human action*. This fact does not presuppose its subjective character; rather, it speaks to the *embodied* active nature in encountering symbolic ecologies. However, in the analysis of religion, 'the relationship of humans to their own

² Nancy Fraser primarily wanted to explain how women were excluded from arenas of deliberation.

bodies and the bodies of others is remote or altogether absent' (McGuire 1990). This implies that a number of aspects peculiar to the embodied transformation of a lifeworld in religious media ecologies may have been overlooked. In order to bridge this gap, let us take as an example a popular annual religious event that takes place in the neighborhood of Iztapalapa, Mexico City.³

During the Holy Week, the Mexico city's residents replay the Jesus's route to Golgotha. Iztapalapa 'becomes a provisional Jerusalem' (Villoro 2021: 240).⁴ The ceremony began in 1843 when a terrible cholera epidemic had been in progress for ten years. Decimated by poverty and sickness, the eight neighbourhoods of Iztapalapa sought consolation in rehearsing the last days of Christ. To deal with the challenges of staging the play, 'the Christ of the day trains like a boxing champion' (Villoro 2021: 240). On some occasions, he 'suffers the combined tortures of sun, falls, water deprivation, beatings, the weight of the wood, the air rarefied by dust and fried food, and faints only to regain consciousness at the hands of the Red Cross' (Villoro 2021: 240). Villoro's description continues: 'There's no disputing the seriousness of a celebration that puts into play the physical stamina of the participants and depends on a rigorous selection process' (2021: 240). The event also evokes a temporal dimension as many family members and neighbours who have participated in earlier versions of the great event are united with those continuing the tradition in the present.

Another important aspect of this media is that actors make use of everyday objects: 'The angels wear wings with feathers gathered from poultry shops, the swords and helmets are made by honest metalworkers, Judas tosses chocolate coins, the crown has acacia thorns, and the helmets of the soldiers are adorned with bristles taken from brooms' (Villoro 2021: 240). In the same way that no angel is as close to us as the one with chicken feathers on its wings, so this domestic dimension draws the epic closer to the people. In a double game, the neighbours affirm their belonging to the Christian faith and to the town of Iztapalapa, recognising the sacred nature of that which is close at hand.

In this example, as indeed in any other, it is tempting to view the image from the point of view of logocentric cognition. Any cognition of a physical medium (from images to theatrical performances) suggests three layers of apprehension: physical substrate; 'aboutness' or imaged object; and the referent or image subject (Husserl 2005). In the logocentric approach to images, the first two layers are no match for the importance of the third (the true logos, the structure-giving essence of this image in the communication process), hence those initial two possibilities (of enaction) become irrelevant and neutralised. However, from the perspective of embodied cognition, precisely these first two levels constitute the possibility to perform *alternative* usages (and even appropriations) of certain images, for example, for the aforementioned strategies of micro-opposition. The potential for contestation of the Iztapalapa reenactment of the Passion is shown by the fact that throughout its history several attempts were made to subsume it under clerical and state authorities with the purpose of making it 'less

³ Religious rituals are not the only ways of opposing the mainstream or the best way to do so, but we think that in the case of Mexico and Latin America it is a matter of scope and reach. Religious rituals work since they are extended over great sections of the population (different class, genders, races, etc.) and are very stratified in their hegemonic and subaltern enactments (Iztapalapa play takes place in Iztapalapa barrio, not the Cathedral or other upper class boroughs).

⁴ Such religious events could be described as media. They process, store and transmit information, yet over longer timescales compared to other media. In addition, they rely heavily on embodied participation.

irreverent' and 'less grotesque' (Trexler 2003). To sum up, religious or quasi-religious media can reveal and dramatise important social relations and truths. Thus, the social originates in embodied experiences that acquire their meaning from a certain type of imagination: perceptual phantasy.

In the case of perceptual phantasy (which is enacted during the Iztapalapa event and importantly does not rest on the pictorial similarity principle), the so-called 'images' are produced by a whole range of means (Husserl 2005: 617) that change the attention-apprehension structure typical of depictive media and deliver social drama through the embodied impressions that provide affordances for different sensorimotor operations. In *joint intentions*, the world is experienced as perceptually available for a plurality of agents. But this is so in an embodied, rather than rational, way. It is the experience of being-with-others – evident in acts such as play, rituals, or any kind of engagement in a collective action or projects (Gallagher 2010; Fuchs 2017).

To understand how different experiences of one's own body participate in the constitution of more complex intentional and pre-intentional acts and higher-order objectivities (identity), we need to now turn to the phenomenological-enactive distinction between the body-schema and body-image (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Gallagher 1986) as the difference between a perception (or conscious monitoring) of movement and the actual accomplishment of movement.

The body-schema is the ground of the dynamic sensorimotor functioning of the body in its environment, whereas the body-image is the condition of the realisation of one's connection to that environment. The body-image, consisting of a complex set of intentional states, perceptions, mental representations, beliefs and attitudes – in which the intentional object of such states is one's own body – involves a form of reflexive or self-referential intentionality, while the body-schema remains unthematized in a cognitive action (for example, feedback about the task at hand). We can see in the previous example of Iztapalapa that religious media and events modify the body-image and afford its connection to the tacit performances of body-schema. Moreover, the body-image (percept of one's body) enables one to imitate the novel or traditional movements (schema) of others performing social rituals. Also, as already mentioned, the distinction presupposes an important temporal dimension as the individual bodily synchronises *in-order-to* intentions (pre-reflective embodied coping with the environment and others) with *because-of* intentions (long-term values and meaning-sustaining life choices) (Schutz 1967).

Most importantly, the modified body-image and correlative schema presuppose the importance of phantasy, which gives a spectrum of possible perspectives and ways of participatory understanding of social meanings (i.e. affordances for dramatisation). It is phantasy that gives a narrative cohesion to causal-impressional experiences since people rely on phantasy to apprehend a certain object in a certain cultural symbolic horizon. To put it simply, even if we have a bodily state, it is not unconscious; it requires at least a minimal articulation and arrangement. Phantasy, while correlating the body-schema and body-image, makes sense and makes environments habitable. Phantasy is social; its structures allow access to perceptual data (schema) by constituting an image and narration (role of an image) in the environment (religious media ecology). Moreover, phantasy positions for the action, which is not a rational pro-positioning, but rather a motivating scene, sequence, staging, and enabling of different perspectives on the socially relevant matter. As the ground of media experience, phantasy is

not about representation or depiction, but movement and action. In this sense, phantasy staging is the reuse of primitive bio-causal encounters. And as one was previously on a different receiving end of causal impressions, the subject is not static in phantasy, but is distributed by it across the situation.

It opens up the way to view the body in religious experiences, enabled by relevant media, as a means to overcome marginality and to bridge individual concerns with the public sphere in a society characterised by *heteroglossia*.⁵ The history of religion in most Latin-American countries after the arrival of European colonisers in the 16th century is full of examples that show how the indoctrination of indigenous populations entailed a collision and assimilation between logocentric verbal religious understanding by religious orders and micro-oppositions exerted by the illiterate subalterns that came to be Christians by the use of the body as the primary religious medium in rituals that involved dancing, singing, and theatrical representations (Ricard 2018).

CONCLUSIONS

The logocentric conception of public consensus excludes those who do not have a social and/or intellectual access to the established take on symbols and narratives. Subaltern individuals, however, pre-reflectively engage in strategies of resistance which are comprised of micro-oppositions as they oscillate between everyday habitual movements and special public events. Such strategies presuppose the non-representational body-schematic usage of relevant media, body-image and redefinitions that are constitutive of *public spaces*.

Throughout this article, we have tried to show that pre-linguistic, spatial, interactional and imaginative (and thus embodied) understanding of religion never entirely left the region of Americas, despite the efforts of logocentric colonisation. One of the defining features of such counterpublics is a kind of alternative media use that goes against that of the dominant public. Embodied cognition, not rational discursive thought and institutional identity, is still made possible by religious media ecologies. The latter give affordances to enact a sense of identity, togetherness and consent in an alternative, embodied, non-logocentric manner for subalterns. Paradoxically, while literary-centered religion is diminishing in its historical and metaphysical authority, bodily-focused forms of religious symbolic praxis are becoming more powerful in communicating social values.

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⁵ Heteroglossia – the presence of two or more voices or discourses – simultaneously expresses alternative or conflicting perspectives.

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Kūniškumas religinių medijų ekologijose: subalternatyvios opozicijos Lotynų Amerikoje atvejais

Santrauka

Straipsnyje, pasitelkus kūniškojo kognityvumo paradigmą, analizuojami prasmę konstituojantys bei objektyvuojantys procesai, kurie savo ruožtu palaiko individo dalyvavimą viešojoje sferoje. Šią sferą tam tikrų marginalių grupių atžvilgiu struktūruoja religinės medijos ekologijos. Tokia perspektyva leidžia tematizuoti alternatyvias šių grupių mikroopozicines strategijas dominuojančio diskurso atžvilgiu. Straipsnyje pateiktoms idėjoms iliustruoti pasitelkiama lotynų religinės medijos specifika, kartu išryškinant kūniškojo kognityvumo bei tokių objektyvacijų kaip tapatumas, intersubjektyvumas, teisingumo, tikrumo, nesutikimo, atverties bei kitų patirčių sąryšį. Vitališkos lotyniškojo pasaulio religinės medijos kūniškos apropiacijos atveria kultūrinės-socialinės alternatyvas abstraktų viešą sutarimą privilegijuojantiems diskursams. Kūniškas intersubjektyvus dalyvavimas įprasminant viešuosius procesus liudija kūno, kaip pamatinio komunikacijos mediumo, vaidmenį.

Raktažodžiai: kūniškas kognityvumas, kūnas kaip medija, religinės medijos ekologijos, viešoji erdvė, subalternatyvi priešprieša