

# Intrusive gaze: Thoughts and glances upon a *ch'ixi* world

## *Olhares intrusos: Reflexões e miradas sobre um mundo ch'ixi*

■ PHELLIPY JÁCOME<sup>a</sup>

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Department of Social Communication. Belo Horizonte – MG, Brazil

JULIETA KAROL KABALIN CAMPOS<sup>b</sup>

Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Institute of Humanities. Córdoba – Córdoba Province, Argentina

BRUNO SOUZA LEAL<sup>c</sup>

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Department of Social Communication. Belo Horizonte – MG, Brazil

### ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the articulations between image and imaginary by problematizing the *gaze* as an epistemic category. Faced with complex and temporally diverse realities, we argue for contradiction as a productive condition. First, we comment briefly on Gonzalo Abril's reflections on the gaze; then, we explain, in synthesis, what Cornelius Castoriadis understands by *ensemblist-identity logic*, so we can then contextualize some propositions of Rivera Cusicanqui's work. In the dialogue and counterpoint between these authors, we seek to highlight the contributions of the Bolivian sociologist's intellectual production, exploring the powers and complexity of her *ch'ixi* proposal.

**Keywords:** Imaginary, gaze, visual culture, image sociology

### RESUMO

Esse trabalho reflete sobre articulações entre imagem e imaginário através da problematização do *olhar* como categoria epistêmica. Diante de realidades complexas e temporalmente diversas, defende-se a contradição como condição produtiva. No percurso argumentativo, fazemos um breve incursão nas reflexões do olhar propostas por Gonzalo Abril. Em seguida, buscamos, sinteticamente, explicitar o que Cornelius Castoriadis entende por *lógica conjuntista-identitária* para, então, situar algumas proposições da obra de Rivera Cusicanqui. No diálogo e contraposição entre esses autores, busca-se destacar as contribuições da produção intelectual da socióloga boliviana, explorando as potências e a complexidade da sua proposta *ch'ixi*.

**Palavras-chave:** Imaginário, mirada, cultura visual, sociologia das imagens

<sup>a</sup> Professor at the Department of Social Communication and permanent researcher at the Graduate Program in Social Communication at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG). Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6939-7542>. E-mail: [phellipyjacome@gmail.com](mailto:phellipyjacome@gmail.com)

<sup>b</sup> PhD student in Literature at the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, fellow student at Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (Conicet). Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1616-8815>. E-mail: [julietakabalin@gmail.com](mailto:julietakabalin@gmail.com)

<sup>c</sup> Professor at the Department of Social Communication and at the Graduate Program in Social Communication at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG). Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6937-6976>. E-mail: [brunosleal@gmail.com](mailto:brunosleal@gmail.com)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.11606/issn.1982-8160.v15i1p1-16>

V.15 - Nº 1 jan./abr. 2021 São Paulo - Brasil JÁCOME et al. p. 1-16

MATRIZES



INTRODUCTION

SOCIOLOGIST SILVIA RIVERA Cusicanqui worked for ten years taking photographs of the destruction of an old street in her hometown (La Paz, Chukiyawumarka) attempting to understand the confusing forms of the multitemporal landscape taking place there. In “Clausurar el Pasado para Inaugurar el Futuro: Desandando por una Calle Paceaña” (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2016), she emphasizes how different temporalities coexist in those spaces: since the 1970s, due to modernizing efforts, that peaceful street has been witnessing the demolition of numerous adobe houses and *tambos*<sup>1</sup> built by the indigenous and chola mercantile elite of the 18th and 19th centuries. Those buildings were made by combining native knowledge with appropriated colonial techniques, and were being destroyed to make way for “ordinary-looking concrete cubes that display a ‘modernist,’ imitative and caricatural aesthetic taste”<sup>2</sup> (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018, p. 23). The argument used by the modernizing project for such a radical intervention was the precariousness and deterioration of the place, full of tenements organized by occupations of difficult legal classification. According to Rivera Cusicanqui, those *casonas* (which housed artisans, traders, travelers) were spaces used to recreate urban communities that had great participation both in the economy and the processes of social activism in the city.

<sup>1</sup> A type of pre-Hispanic commercial warehouse that was incorporated by the colonial system.

<sup>2</sup> In the original: “Cubos de concreto de ordinaria factura y gusto estético ‘modernista,’ imitativo y caricaturesco.” This and all other translations, by the authors.

The existence of those spaces, chaotically subdivided, served as a patrimonialist argument – and capitalist reason – to destroy the *casonas*. The paradox is that this destruction only served to obliterate the democratic phase of its habitation – the tenement – and with it more remote colonial syntagms re-emerged, such as servile labor and exoticization<sup>3</sup>. (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018, p. 23)

<sup>3</sup> In the original: “La existencia de esos espacios, subdivididos caóticamente, sirvió de argumento patrimonialista – y de razón capitalista – para destruir las casonas. Lo paradójico es que esa destrucción solo sirvió para obliterar la fase democrática de su habitación – el conventillo – y con ello resurgieron sintagmas coloniales más remotos, como el trabajo servil y la exotización.”

In a temporally confusing way, the now modernized Illampu Street is full of travel agencies offering adventures to experience a remote and distant past, including tours to jungles and salt flats. As in many middle-class Brazilian neighborhoods and private condominiums, one notices the construction of apartments that offer, as standards for social and consumption discrimination, deferred areas to the working class where, as Rivera Cusicanqui (2018) notes, they offer “half rooms for half people”<sup>4</sup> (p. 24). An apparent modernity thus tries, unsuccessfully, to cover up old colonial practices, promoting the maintenance of strictly defined social hierarchies. Like the transformation perceived by Rivera Cusicanqui in Illampu Street, the result of modernizing efforts, many other territories in what has been called Latin America by

<sup>4</sup> In the original: “medios cuartos para medias personas”.

convention also reveal how ideals of progress try to erase other subjects and temporalities: “the internal market’s flows that once animated it have been replaced by a sort of colonial-style symbolic extractivism, which feeds global circuits of predation and unequal exchange”<sup>5</sup> (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018, p. 24).

Rivera Cusicanqui’s analytical gesture, however, does not intend to institute or restore unity in a complex visual landscape. Rather, her proposal goes in the opposite direction, making explicit the spatial simultaneity of distinct social realities, of diverse and unequal social forces and temporalities. In this imagistic practice, we see the construction of an imaginary that is incompatible with stable and definitive conceptions of identity. Considering the limitations of this paper, we will endeavor to explain some fundamental aspects of Rivera Cusicanqui’s thinking about a *sociology of the image*, understood as a particular way of working with images and imaginaries that does not converge opposites and divergences, does not produce synthesis, nor is reduced to seemingly conciliatory formulas.

Our argumentation will center on approaching a pivotal concept for comprehending visual cultures in communication studies: the *gaze*. First, we resume the contributions made by Gonzalo Abril, author of the seminal book *Cultura Visual, de la Semiótica a la Política* (Abril, 2013), to discuss how epistemic and temporal realities that arise from non-coetaneous historicities may require other considerations on the role of the body and the imaginary in the institution and analysis of images. To depart from a logic entirely centered on identity and ensemble, incapable of explaining the discontinuous social processes of our peripheral modernities, we briefly revisit Castoriadis’ (1985) critique of the concept of inherited ontology and show how Rivera Cusicanqui’s reflections on a ‘intrusive gaze’ can complexify the debate on visual cultures. By promoting this approach, our interest is to outline this analytical-theoretical path, respecting the potential and breadth of the ch’ixi proposal, correlating it as an instigating theoretical-methodological possibility for communication studies.

<sup>5</sup>In the original: “Los flujos del mercado interior que la animaron se han visto sustituidos por una surte de extractivismo simbólico de corte colonial, que alimenta circuitos globales de depredación e intercambio desigual.”

## VISUAL CULTURE: FROM WHOM, TO WHOM?

One of the contemporary challenges in thinking about visual culture is the need to broaden our understanding of its dynamics beyond those focusing on the visual text and its internal or intertextual articulations. Concepts like “textuality” (Leal et al., 2018) and “visual text” (Abril, 2007, 2013), among others, seek to reshape the seemingly obvious relationships, processes, boundaries and binarisms between word, image, visibility, visibility,



invisibility, and imaginaries, shedding some light on the communicational, political, cultural and epistemic dynamics that constitute visual cultures. Necessary questions (such as “an image of what, for whom?”, “visuality for whom?”, “whose visual culture?” etc.) arise, then, to locate and territorialize images, visual cultures, and imaginaries. This *who* is certainly not an abstract object, a character assumed in the visual text, but rather a historical-social construction and a subject capable of acting, endowed with knowledges and placed in the midst of an intricate network of relationships, affects, ideologies.

For Spanish researcher Gonzalo Abril, especially in his latest works, this *who* has a body, but is, above all, a *gaze* (*mirada*, in the original); the term, in his reflections, designates a modalized view and a cultural fact, for it is exercised based on knowledges, assumptions, previous information. In other words:

it involves not only perceptual and sensorimotor conditions (often the gaze requires bodily movement: raising or lowering the eyes, turning, etc.), but also technical conditions and specific symbolic structures. Articulated with certain positions and displacements of the body in a space, the gaze provides some of the most fundamental metaphorical configurations (as defined by Lakoff and Johnson, 1986) that shape our epistemic, moral and affective categories: “to look straight ahead” refers to a resolute disposition in the face of truth or in the face of threat (contrary to “look away”); “to look down on someone”, to an attitude of contempt towards others; “to fix one’s eyes”, to a threatening limit of attention or vigilance; “to suspect” comes from *suspectare*, “to look down”, as a cognitive and affective attitude related to mistrust or fear, etc.<sup>6</sup> (Abril, 2007, pp. 42-43)

As observed, Abril develops his reflections in close dialogue with perspectives derived from phenomenology (especially Merleau-Ponty), semiotics (both the Peircean and European schools, particularly the French and Italian ones) and image studies (such as Aby Warburg’s works, among others). For the author, the gaze is a historically and socially constituted stance that necessarily implies acting in a given communicational situation. There are certainly great benefits in Abril’s proposal, whether in articulating the gaze with the imaginary and the dynamics of visual culture, or in explaining its simultaneously corporal and epistemic nature, among others. In this sense, even though it refers to the eye, to vision, the gaze can be understood as a unique condition of perception and, consequently, for understanding the world. Evoking Walter Benjamin, Abril (2007) argues that the eye “also

<sup>6</sup>In the original: “no sólo involucra condiciones perceptivas y sensomotrices (frecuentemente la mirada exige movimiento corporal: alzar o bajar los ojos, girarse, etc.), también condiciones técnicas y estructuras simbólicas determinadas. Articulada con ciertas posiciones y desplazamientos del cuerpo en el espacio, la mirada proporciona algunas de las más fundamentales configuraciones metafóricas (en el sentido de Lakoff y Johnson, 1986) que conforman nuestras categorías epistémicas, morales y afectivas: ‘mirar de frente’ alude a una disposición decidida frente a la verdad o frente a la amenaza (contraria a ‘mirar hacia otro lado’), ‘mirar por encima del hombro’, a una actitud de desprecio hacia los otros, ‘clavar la mirada’ a un límite amenazante de la atención o la vigilancia, ‘sospechar’ procede de *suspectare*, ‘mirar hacia abajo’, como actitud cognitiva y afectiva relacionada con la desconfianza o el miedo, etc.”

became an epistemic, aesthetic, and moral organ of modernity”<sup>7</sup> (p. 22). But this gaze remains, on the one hand, imprecise, and, on the other, very abstract. Imprecise because – and this is the price of the propositional nature of a conceptual construction like Abril’s – it can be, at first, any knowledge, any position, any look; very abstract because, despite having a somatic dimension, the way Abril defines it, emphasizing its epistemic nature, leaves open the question of which body is gazing and what is its effective importance to these knowledge dynamics. For example, does a European male body gaze the same way as an Asian female body does? If we understand the body not only as a biological fact, but as a nodal point of human experience, being thus necessarily historical-social, it seems to us that just assuming its existence is insufficient. One must ask “whose body?”.

<sup>7</sup>In the original: “ha devenido también en un órgano epistémico, estético y moral de la modernidad.”

These imprecisions and abstractions underlie an apparent homogeneity or univocity of the gaze. Through a series of examples, Abril gives us a varied and suggestive range of knowledge/power positions, which makes his understanding of the movements harbored in the gaze, in their synchronic and diachronic forms, quite potent. We notice, however, that these positions are univocal: they act through a specific media, they insert themselves in a specific way, they know a specific knowledge. Hence, not only is the gaze *one*, but it seems to be constituted by and act upon a common background of cultural positions already stable and shared by all other agents and interlocutors. Abril’s proposal apparently has no room for distinctions between central, lateral, peripheral, anti-colonial or strabismic, multi-epistemic gazes. If Abril’s gaze is a metaphor, it seems to be instituted in the suppositions, contradictions, and dimensions of a single epistemic regime. Conflicts and power relations always take place in this territory that is supposedly common to all or universal.

Revisiting Gonzalo Abril’s concept of gaze gains more prominence not only for its implications, potentials, and limits, but also for the close bond it shares with the imaginary. For Abril, visual cultures develop in the articulation between *visuality* (relations of visibility, invisibility, sensitive qualities, and perceptual variables), *image* (iconic representation and imaginaries), and *mirada* (the subjects, times, and spaces of discourse). The dynamics of the gaze is, therefore, intrinsically linked to images and imaginaries, as well as to the cultural processes that institute visualities. Visual cultures are created and transformed from these (dis)articulations. When discussing his understanding of the relationship between image and imaginary, Abril (2013) states: “images always adhere to some social imaginary, they are both part and result of these imaginaries”<sup>8</sup> (p. 67).

<sup>8</sup>In the original: “Las imágenes siempre adhieren algún imaginario social, son a la vez parte y resultado de esos imaginarios.”



In dialogue with Wunenburger and Rancière, Abril observes that the interrelationship between image and imaginary allows us to work towards “recognizing the ‘functions’ of the imaginary and imaginaries: their *political* function or *practical institutive*... their performance in *play* and in *artistic creation*, and finally, their *cognitive* function”<sup>9</sup> (p. 67). Abril adds that, “by the very fact of both constituting and expressing social imaginaries, images are always historical”<sup>10</sup> (Abril, 2013, p. 67) and always in the midst of disputes over their social use and meaning control. Each text would thus be an index of its own historicity; this presupposes that the text is the provisional result of its insertion in a specific epistemic tradition, which emerges from an imaginary that articulates temporalities and produces a socially modalized and highly identity-related gaze.

By emphasizing the historical nature of images and imaginaries, Abril seeks to show the complexities of the gaze, requiring us to locate it within the political disputes of social use and meaning control that inform the visual culture processes it questions. On that note, we believe that Castoriadis’ work *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1985) gives interesting clues on the operational mechanics of the gaze, by critically noticing that the *inherited thinking*, basis of the Western knowledge tradition, is shaped by an *ensemblist-identitary logic*. In his defense of the *radical imaginary* and the possibilities of rupture and social creation, Castoriadis examines this logic that apprehends social relations based on identitarian operations where the *new* is produced by something that already exists, revealing itself as the current manifestation of virtualities contained in that society established by the imaginary.

Thus, the question of the unity and identity of society and of any particular society is carried back to the assertion of a given unity and identity of an ensemble of living organisms; or of a hyper-organism containing its own needs and functions; or of a natural-logical group of elements; or of a system of rational determinations. Of society as such in all this, there remains nothing; nothing that might be the being proper to society, nothing that manifests a mode of being any different from what we already know from elsewhere. Nor does there remain much of history, of the temporal alteration produced in and through society. (Castoriadis, 1985, p. 207)

A major part of Castoriadis’ work is devoted to a vehement critique of popular schools of philosophy in Europe during the 1970s, especially structuralism and functionalisms, just as it represents an important effort to

<sup>9</sup>In the original: “reconocimiento de las ‘funciones’ de lo imaginario y de los imaginarios: su función *política* o *instituyente* *práctica*... su rendimiento en el ámbito lúdico y en la *creación* *artística*, y, por fin, su función *cognitiva*.”

<sup>10</sup>In the original: “[p]or el hecho mismo de constituir y de expresar a la vez los imaginarios sociales, las imágenes son siempre históricas.”

renew Marxist traditions. Even when situating the feuds that move Castoriadis' thought with such intensity, one must consider that his ideas on the imaginary and on the ensemblist-identitary logic aim to achieve the diversity of ways of existing and the understanding of social life as a coexistence of differences. In this perspective, the ensemblist-identitary logic acts to fix and situate diversity as variations of the same temporal and identity principle, which defines the whole of society and its parts, as well as its limited possibilities of variation. After all, "society is thought of as an ensemble of distinct and well-defined elements, referring to one another by means of well-determined relations" (Castoriadis, 1985, p. 212).

From what Castoriadis states, it is clear that this ensemblist-identitary logic considers each *thing* (subject, object, event), each element of the social ensemble to have *one* fixed identity that distinguishes it from the others and to which society only confers variations. These determined and stable identities underpin the broader identity of the ensemble, be it a social group or a society. In the face of this drastic stabilization, diversity and the new are at most changes that occur on a common basis. Castoriadis (1985) argues that, under such parameters, "there is no way, within this limit, to think of society as coexistence or as the unity of a manifold" (p. 217). This requires, in his opinion, reevaluating the meaning of *being* beyond essentialities or a pre-social condition. For that, one would need to

consider terms that are not discrete, separate, individualizable entities (entities that can be posited in this way only temporarily, as markers), in other words, terms that are not elements of a whole, and that are not reducible to such elements; relations between these terms, relations that themselves are neither separable nor definable in any *univocal* [emphasis added] way. (Castoriadis, 1985, p. 271)

It is when the ensemblist-identitary logic is applied that the imaginary (the social-historical, the representation or the imagination) can be subjected to an inherited ontology, being instrumentalized in an inflexible manner, as if historicity were something linear and flat, the result of a single knowledge. It is no accident that we speak rather loosely of a *Western* or *Latin American* imaginary, for example, homogenizing subjects and erasing huge conflict zones. Castoriadis criticizes this stance, applying reflections that also concern time to question universalizing assumptions. For him, any society exists by configuring the world as its own world – and its particular world as *the world* –, establishing itself and others as parts of it; in other words, imagination



institutes society. But this act of openness can only unfold as confinement and closure, which is why imagination is a kind of inevitable aporia – the *new* institutes a society that then conceives itself from *sameness*. Castoriadis argues that different societies create distinct temporalities and historicities, which influence how these societies institute their cosmos and produce images in this world.

What happens, then, when we have an irreparable collision between these temporal forms, as perceived in the modernization phenomena that discontinuously mark Latin America? Since, as Castoriadis puts it, “change the scale of time, and the stars in the heavens will step to a dizzy dance” (1985, p. 221). In our opinion, Rivera Cusicanqui’s reflections on the *mirada*, based on the Bolivian case, epistemologically expand our ways of understanding, offering a powerful practical issue to help us reflect on the clash between irreconcilable imaginaries and world constructions. Her work finds an interesting reading and dialogue with the *epistemologies of the South*, as Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos names them. Let us recall the questions posed by Boaventura and Maria Paula Meneses in the introduction to the book they co-organized in 2009: “Why, in the last two centuries, has dominated an epistemology that has eliminated from epistemological thinking the cultural and political contexts of knowledge production and reproduction? What were the consequences of such decontextualization? Are there alternative epistemologies?”<sup>11</sup> (Santos & Meneses, 2009, p. 10). Rivera Cusicanqui’s work opens a path to these other epistemologies in restoring the cultural and political context in her reflections, questioning the dominant structures of Western thought. We believe that the *ch’ixi* perspective offers us a good outlook to critically organize visual cultures and reflect on other forms of gaze that emerge therein.

<sup>11</sup>About this dialogue, we recommend the recorded meeting between Rivera Cusicanqui and Sousa Santos in the “Conversas del Mundo” cycle (Alice CES, 2014).

## SOCIOLOGY OF IMAGES: POLITICS OF AN INTRUSIVE GAZE

Looking within Bolivia’s borders, the socio-cultural diversity of its territories, including their distinct historicities, seems evident. In fact, the government’s official discourse in recent years assumes multiplicity as a constitutive characteristic of the Bolivian context: comprising nearly forty ethnic groups and thirty-seven official languages, its official name is Plurinational State of Bolivia. But these different temporal densities that collide and convene, conforming an entangled and fractured everyday life, remain in conflict with discourses and practices that respond to the *ensemblist identitary* approach so recurrent in modernization processes.



The nationalist logic assumed during the 20th century and, currently, the conceptions regarding the capitalist principles of development, market and consumption presume a shared experience inflexible to other types of citizenship and social organization. As a warning grounded on this tension, Rivera Cusicanqui proposes a reflection on the images created by a collective and constant anticolonial practice that, less than organizing identities into a conceivable hierarchy, or taking them as something stable, seeks to produce strangeness and reflect on the potentials of difference.

Based on this sociology of image, Rivera Cusicanqui (2015) argues that, while we have a whole classical anthropological tradition concerned with understanding the dynamics of external societies, we need to develop an internal understanding as well. By incorporating the image component, the Bolivian author relates visual anthropology to an external *mirada* that observes and records the practices of others; in the sociology of image, in turn, the observer gazes at themselves and the social environment where their body is immersed as a constituent part. The relationship established between the observer and the observed in a research is key to understand the theoretical-methodological proposal of Rivera Cusicanqui's sociology. An introspective perspective to culture itself and to the social relations in which the researcher is immersed presupposes a political stance, considering that such gaze is embodied; this process subjectifies and distances the gaze from an ensemblist-identitary logic, assuming this internal gaze as an intrusive gaze at oneself.

Unlike an immersive action in unknown contexts often seen as exotic, the author's sociological gaze presupposes an effort to produce strangeness on one's own social environment, questioning the limits of what is known. Her main assumption is the imperative to work with the differences in non-contemporary spaces-times (*pacha*) and confront naturalized everyday meanings and practices. If visual anthropology requires familiarization – with culture, language, or territory –, the sociology of images entails denaturalization, producing strangeness in the ideological and the epistemic, in what is already familiar and well-known. It is not a participant observation, as it aims to analyze a reality in which the observer is inserted. Participation, according to Rivera Cusicanqui's sociology of images, is a presupposition that requires, through this intrusive gaze, problematizing its own internal colonialism. For this reason, the author argues that the sociology of image differs from visual anthropology in that

the latter focus primarily on producing registers (a photograph, a video, a film) of the societies it studies to present them to an urban and academic audience.



In other words, it is above all a practice of representation. In contrast, the sociology of image considers all representation practices as its focus of attention; it addresses the entire visual world, from advertising, press photography, press, image archives, pictorial art, drawings, and textiles, as well as other more collective representations such as the structure of urban space and the historical traces that become visible therein<sup>12</sup>. (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2015, pp. 21-22)

<sup>12</sup>In the original: “esta última se orienta ante todo al registro (fotográfico, videográfico, filmico) de las sociedades que estudia para mostrarlas ante un público urbano y académico. Es decir, es ante todo una práctica de representación. En cambio la sociología de la imagen considera a todas las prácticas de representación como su foco de atención; se dirige a la totalidad del mundo visual, desde la publicidad, la fotografía de prensa, el archivo de imágenes, el arte pictórico y el textil, amén de otras representaciones más colectivas como la estructura del espacio urbano y las huellas que se hacen visibles en él.”

In a context where the practice of written language functioned as a form of colonial domination of several different oral communities, the Bolivian author sees in visual compositions (as in the works of Waman Puma and Melchor María Mercado) a way to access temporalities that have been erased by official history and to create new relationships. In the drawings featured in the *Primer Nueva Crónica y Buen Gobierno*, the thousand-page letter written by Waman Puma between 1613 and 1615 and addressed to the King of Spain, Rivera Cusicanqui (2015) observes, for example, an imagistic theorization about the colonial system, characterized by the coexistence of seemingly antinomic relations and temporalities. At first, says the author, the chronicle visually shows different kinds of order: of ages, of streets, of the territorial distribution of urban centers, and of the ritual calendar. But

although it adopts the Gregorian calendar, this sequence shows us the order of the relations between humans and the sacred world, which accompanies both the productive work and communal coexistence and the state rituals... In this manner, *it highlights the centrality of food and productive labor in the indigenous cosmic order* [emphasis added]<sup>13</sup>. (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2015, p. 177)

<sup>13</sup>In the original: “A pesar de que adopta el calendario gregoriano, esta secuencia nos muestra el orden de las relaciones entre los humanos y el mundo sagrado, que acompaña tanto las labores productivas como la convivencia comunal y los rituales estatales... De este modo, se pone en evidencia la centralidad de la comida y de la labor productiva en el orden cósmico indígena.”

What would thus initially be seen as an apparent contrast between the colonial and colonizing order and the indigenous disorder, presents itself as a contemporaneity of distinct worlds (and their spatial and temporal orders), including their relations with the land, work, rituals, and the sacred. Rivera Cusicanqui’s *intrusive gaze* over these images does not disregard their power dynamics and historical-social hierarchies; rather, it makes these different orders emerge productively in their contradictions and *abigarramientos*.

The author points out that colonialism makes peculiar use of words: more than designating something they serve to cover up differences, separating public discourse and the beliefs that mobilize these practices. Words would be, then, a resource mobilized to elaborate ways of not saying. Such a context justifies Cusicanqui’s emphasis on the historicizing and multitemporal role of images, since the sociology of image, she states, could address everything

from the visual policy of urban transport drivers in La Paz to the visual memory of demolished ancient buildings on a street converted into an area for tourist exploration (as seen in her experiment on Illampu Street).

Suspicion over the written word strives to question the supposed transparency of records that certain modern traditions grant to the research act, where images and the imaginaries are often subjected to a single temporal logic. In our opinion, this is a great contribution to the perspective of the gaze for discussing the imaginary. If in Abril temporalities arise from a supposedly common historicity that tends towards the universal and identitary, the concept of gaze in Rivera Cusicanqui intends to act on images to promote a world of opposite mandates, recognizing the existence of a multi-temporality and of undigested traces of the past.

What we have is not a synchronic-diachronic endeavor, but that of perceiving, in the same composition, different achronisms. In fact, the main objective of her sociology of image is to decolonize the gaze,

to free visualization from the bonds of [written] language, and to update the memory of experience as an indissoluble whole, in which the bodily and mental meanings merge. It would then be a kind of a memory of doing, which, as Heidegger would say, is first of all a dwelling<sup>14</sup>. (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2015, p. 23)

A decolonial praxis of such composition presumes our capacity to work with other relations of the imaginary, capable of including difference, instead of appeasing or hierarchizing it. Rivera Cusicanqui's proposal for a *ch'ixi* gaze at the world heads in this direction.

Based on a critical and complimentary analysis of sociologist René Zavaleta's work, Rivera Cusicanqui reclaims the concept of *abigarramiento*, developed in the 1980s, in an attempt to understand the constitutive heterogeneities of Bolivian society. The metaphor-concept of *abigarrado*, which derives from the mining vocabulary of the Oruro region, sees the Bolivian context as a formation clad in diverse and juxtaposed temporalities. By observing the (often violent) contexts of economic and political projects that define his country's history, Zavaleta sees spaces and times being conformed in dissimilar ways, unable to produce a combined synthesis. In this same scenario, capitalist and feudal practices could be observed in an overlapping way, without establishing a linearity, with layers of time and history that still maintain the particularities of each region, with its series of languages and cultural practices that differ greatly from each other, which intersect without any of them being dissolved into another *universal*. This

<sup>14</sup>In the original: "liberar la visualización de las ataduras del lenguaje, y em reactualizar la memoria de la experiencia como un todo indisoluble, en el que se funden los sentidos corporales y mentales. Sería entonces una suerte de memoria del hacer, que como diría Heidegger, es ante todo un habitar."



agonic condition would prevent an even distribution of power, a condition Zavaleta considers essential for the proper functioning of democracy in a modern society associated with narrow concepts of nation and progress.

Rivera Cusicanqui's interpretation coincides with Zavaleta's acute understanding of Bolivian reality, not only for her emphasis on constitutive weavings and overlaps of time, but also for recognizing the diverse materialization embedded in the irregularity and disjunction of a scenario formed by such encounters. She distances herself, however, from the progressive bias that, in a way, condemns this irregularity and aims to overcome the phenomenon of *abigarramiento*. In this sense, Rivera Cusicanqui evokes another metaphor-concept borrowed from the Bolivian mining reality and cosmovision to understand the different historical realities entangled in the spatial diversity of Bolivia's everyday life. The Quechua word *ch'iqchi* – and its Aymara equivalent *ch'ixi* –, which can be translated as “gray with small patches of black and white intermingling”<sup>15</sup> (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2015, p. 326), is conceptually resumed to describe this constitutive heterogeneity without denying it, and then place it as a particular epistemic condition. To some extent, Cusicanqui's contribution shows how Zavaleta's thought is the result of a *ch'ixi* movement that he, for being bound by certain scientific assumptions, was unable to understand on his own. His unfinished last book, *Lo Nacional-Popular en Bolivia* (Zavaleta, 1986), published posthumously, serves as an example of the impossibility of synthesis between divergent epistemological matrices and theoretical resistance before this *abigarrada* evidence. According to Rivera Cusicanqui, his writing fails to reconcile the different paradigms, readings, experiences, and temporalities that coexist and overlap in his thought.

Faced with the irreconcilable diversity of Bolivian landscapes, dialoguing with and departing from a long research tradition on national identities in Latin American countries, the author ultimately asks: “Why do we have to make every contradiction a paralyzing disjunction? Why do we have to face it as an unyielding opposition? Or this or that?”<sup>16</sup> (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018, p. 80). These questions, which define the absorption of the concept of *abigarramiento* into the *ch'ixi* metaphor-concept, we believe, comes from breaking with the ensemblist-identitary logic identified by Castoriadis. While in Zavaleta and other Latin American intellectuals everyday heterogeneities should have been or were overcome by idealized figures (like the *mestiço* or a common national identity), in Rivera Cusicanqui we have a refusal of the pacifying synthesis and an attestation of agonistic coexistence as a form of existence and thought. Less than working with anthropophagy, her sociology

<sup>15</sup>In the original: “Gris con manchas menudas de blanco y negro que se entreveran.”

<sup>16</sup>In the original: “¿Por qué tenemos que hacer de toda contradicción una disyuntiva paralizante? ¿Por qué tenemos que enfrentarla como una oposición irreductible? ¿O esto o lo otro?”

of image is concerned with the undigested remains, with what was not and cannot be incorporated. It is no longer a matter of thinking (even if it is an ideal) about a fixed and stable unit or identity, but of thinking about everyday coexistence of fractures, contradictory identities, and diverse temporalities. In this perspective, a *ch'ixi* gaze implies recognizing and valuing not the gray (which can only be seen from afar), but the interweaving of many dots that both form the gray color and are other colors and shades as well.

### CONSIDERING THE CONTRADICTIONS

A more accurate understanding of the *ch'ixi* gaze (*mirada*) must include the colonial processes that have marked the Bolivian history, as well as the history of other countries in America. These colonization processes continued even after independence from the Spanish Crown, now in the form of successive modernization projects aimed at building Bolivia as a modern, western national state, whose remains range from monuments to ruins. The contradictions within these colonizing processes, which in the Bolivian case involved *ways of resolving* the presence of culturally ancient indigenous populations, result in their continuity (even as an ideal) and in unequal and heterogeneous cultural realities. A strong feature of these colonial processes, according to the author, lies in “a deeply internalized self-loathing practice, which has been reproduced for centuries in the colonized personality and runs through all layers of society” (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2015, p. 93), which she exemplifies:

I compared many *q'aras* and elite mestizos I saw on the subway trains in Paris or New York with those migrants from the Camacho province or the north of Potosí, who bring out their otherness to summon the philanthropy of strangers or the attention of those they consider superior in any kind of hierarchy (civilizational, stratification, class, ethnicity, or related to access to power). In those moments I was overcome by a confused feeling, a secondhand shame, but also a deep anger. Anger because those same bearded men would later come here to manipulate the rhetoric of identity to continue, in authoritarian or paternalistic ways, ruling over “this country of Indians”; shame because they inadvertently revealed themselves as unconsciously colonized people, for only by traveling abroad would they discover they were not entirely “western,” even if they never came to assume the practical consequences of such discovery<sup>17</sup>. (pp. 93-94)

This image textualized by Rivera Cusicanqui, with all its many problems, also fits Brazil. We are and are not Westerners, we are the colonized and the

<sup>17</sup>In the original: “Comparaba a muchos q'aras y mestizos de élite que vi en el tren subterráneo de París o de Nueva York, con esos migrantes de la provincia Camacho o del norte de Potosí, que sacan a relucir su alteridad con el fin de convocar la filantropía del extraño o la atención de aquél que consideran superior en cualquier orden de jerarquías (civilizatoria, estamental, de clase o de etnia o en relación con el acceso al poder). En esos momentos me acometía un confuso sentimiento, vergüenza ajena, pero también una profunda rabia. Rabia porque esos mismos barbudos vendrían después acá a manipular la retórica de la identidad con el fin de seguir mandando, autoritaria o paternalistamente, sobre 'este país de indios'; vergüenza porque mostraban la hilacha como inconscientes colonizados, pues tenía que ser viajando al exterior como descubrirían que no eran del todo “occidentales”, aunque nunca llegasen a asumir las consecuencias prácticas de dicho descubrimiento.”



colonizers – both at the same time. Our contradictions do not expire, and are an inevitable part of our existence. One example, among many, has its official landmark on September 12, 1897, when a robust modernization project was inaugurated. It embodied the mark of the recently proclaimed republic, which inspired by Paris and Washington sought to be the materialization of a modern desire for urbanization. Belo Horizonte, built to be the new capital of Minas Gerais, summarizes well the characteristics that, as a rule, define the modernization imaginaries implemented in our country – “imposed in an authoritarian, repressive, violent manner, but, paradoxically a planned, organized one” (Starling, 2002, p. 69). Designed to replace the decadent and colonial Ouro Preto, the city was built to expel the residents of the old village Curral Del Rey, a commercial stopover that served as a supply point for cattle dealers en route to Rio de Janeiro. Run by the building committee, the project also sought to purge any trace of the city’s past, be it the imperial, colonial, or *underdevelopment past* that, according to the modernizing impulse, plagued the region. As Starling (2002) points out, the construction of Belo Horizonte in the late 19th century represented an attempt by certain sectors of the Minas Gerais oligarchy, to politically and economically control and integrate a diverse state, “even if it was necessary to conceive an artificial and illusory modernization project” (p. 69). The idea of a city built without marks of certain traditions considered underdeveloped suggests an attempt to close pasts and their ability to affect us, to project an ever-changing horizon towards a supposedly communal progress.

Belo Horizonte’s foundational imaginary permeates its construction/deconstruction processes to this day, as it embodies the peculiar temporal consequences of our peripheral modernities. The elitist nature of the original project, which established the city limits around Contorno Avenue, did not include specific spaces for those who came to work on the construction of the capital, reason why several favelas and small neighborhoods have expanded this imaginary map and its subjectivation processes since then. Far from being able to eliminate the traces of the past, these persistent temporalities haunt the modernity of that project, creating a paradoxical, ghostly city. Wandering through the planned downtown today means walking along streets and avenues named after Brazilian states and capitals, streets that are designed for vehicles and built over countless invisible rivers (Borsagli, 2016), disrespecting their natural courses (even though they sometimes collect their land rights). Besides references to other national territories, street names of this modern city also cynically honor indigenous groups, as if they portrayed a single, harmonious nation-state. Since the displacement of street vendors

from downtown sidewalks at the turn of the century, different malls with the same names (Oiapoque, Xavantes, Tupynambás) have appeared in the urban landscape, rearticulating forms of popular commerce and, concomitantly, exemplifying the city's multiple and heterogeneous temporalities: with indigenous names, these malls are run by entrepreneurs of Eastern origin, selling the most varied products imported from China through loopholes in the tax systems, including IPTV devices to unlock soccer broadcasts, digital platforms, and audiovisual productions from Northern countries, which would otherwise be inaccessible to various segments of the population living on and off Contorno Avenue.

Like Belo Horizonte, we have Teresina, Manaus, Brasília, Palmas, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Recife... Throughout its national territory, Brazil lives daily with inequalities, heterogeneities, signs of modernization, *progress*, and *development* that shape our ways of inhabiting these landscapes. How do we gaze at this diversity, this heterogeneity? How to address the contradictory images and imaginaries that are made present and inhabit us? The implications of a *ch'ixi* gaze are far-reaching and it would be inappropriate to summarize them here, at the risk of depletion and inaccuracy. Concepts such as *abigarramiento* and *ch'ixi* not only recognize these contradictions, but regard them as a potential of thought. Aware of contradictions and different temporalities, of what becomes visible (albeit in a peripheral way, as resistance) and what escapes the efforts to control visibility, Rivera Cusicanqui and her *ch'ixi* gaze, which is embodied and multiple, also allow the emergence of imaginaries that go beyond any ensemblist-identitary logic. Searching for its own voice, the concept of *ch'ixi* assumes contradiction and images as sites of political thought and action, being able to connect the past with the urgency of the present. This is not an imprecise or abstract gaze. It is in the agonistic, historically situated coexistence that we gaze, exist, think, and act. ■

## REFERENCES

- Abril, G. (2007). *Análisis crítica de textos visuales*. Síntesis.
- Abril, G. (2013). *Cultura visual, de la semiótica a la política*. Plaza y Valdés.
- Alice CES. (2014, March 12). *Conversa del mundo – Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui y Boaventura de Sousa Santos* [Video]. YouTube. <https://bit.ly/3r6Srs1>
- Borsagli, A. (2016). *Rios invisíveis da metrópole mineira*. Clube de Autores.
- Castoriadis, C. (1985). *A instituição imaginária da sociedade*. Paz e Terra.
- Leal, B., Carvalho, C. A. de, & Alzamora, G. (Orgs.). (2018). *Textualidades midiáticas*. Selo PPGCOM/UFMG.



## Intrusive gaze

- Rivera Cusicanqui, S. (2015). *Sociologia de la imagen: Miradas ch'ixi desde la Historia andina*. Tinta Limón.
- Rivera Cusicanqui, S. (2016, October). Clausurar el pasado para inaugurar el futuro: Desandando por una calle paceña. *Agenda 21 da Cultura*. <https://bit.ly/2Plgw0I>
- Rivera Cusicanqui, S. (2018). *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible: Ensayos desde un presente en crisis*. Tinta Limón.
- Santos, B. S., & Meneses, M. P. (2009). *Epistemologias do Sul*. Almedina.
- Starling, H. M. M. (2002). Fantasmas da cidade moderna. *Margens/Márgenes*, (1), 66-75. <http://bit.ly/395UkPi>
- Zavaleta, R. (1986). *Lo nacional-popular en Bolivia*. Siglo XXI.

---

Article received on July 1, 2020, and approved on March 15, 2021.