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MEDIA, DIVERSITY AND GLOBALISATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

The issues of cultural diversity and the plurality of voices in the current digital and global environment are raising new challenges beyond those already identified in the context of migration from classical media to the internet galaxy. If, with traditional media, a closing logic under "the same" prevailed, with digital media we started to believe in the "apotheosis of the dream of diversity" (Curran, 2008). But the truth is that the elimination of the old filters of information and distribution does not seem to be happening. New "gatekeeping" surrounds human intervention, with current information dissemination systems having an algorithmic basis and artificial intelligence, biasing access to news and reducing space for cultural diversity or even censuring the plurality of voices and cultural expressions.

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*The power we will gain in the twenty-first century
may well upgrade us into gods,
but we will be very dissatisfied gods.*

Yuval Noah Harari

Introduction

What does it mean today, at the height of the great digital platforms and the internet, to analyse the problem of diversity – cultural diversity, diversity of cultural expressions and pluralism – in the global context? At first it seems a contradiction, it seems to make little sense considering the mass of information circulating in the internet galaxy. However, in this age of reproducibility and automatism of algorithmic techniques, new problems emerge, including "fake news", which had never been a cause of great concern in the media age.

On the other hand, post-media and the new and complex contexts of the digital age, when thought about globally – in all extensions of the concept – show, for example, the emergence of what we can call the "cybercitizen" – that is the cyberspace citizen, or at least a "produser" of the digital world, which is generally characterised by not being subject either to physical boundaries or to old, mitigated and reconverted models of production or distribution. This also happens to space and territory in an increasingly unrestricted manner, be it in economy and finance, in politics, in the context of climate, or even in the general (mis)information that spreads and short-circuits the mediation process, be it in traditional or digital media.

Our starting point has previous milestones: in two previous articles in the generic scope of this theme, we analysed, in a first approach (Cádima, 2010), cases demonstrating different fractures of a hypothetical global communication media model, namely in the television sphere, a model that, in terms of content itself, does not exist, especially since it is, in practice, fundamentally local or regional – in signal distribution, geopolitical and geostrategic logic. In other words, even when technological conditions allow it, political conditions, political pressure and interest groups preclude a clearly autonomous and independent local/global publishing strategy.

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In a second approach (Cádima, 2016), we thought more specifically about the European context and the dynamics of the European Union, demonstrating that the lack of cohesion of the European project, especially since the creation of Television without Frontiers Directive (1989), was largely based on the collapse of the spirit of law and the European strategic project and ideology, originally set out in the directive. From both the point of view of communication strategies and of public policies for the European audio-visual sector, in particular the policies and monitoring directed at public radio and television systems in Europe, it is evident – and we will try to prove it in this article – that Europe succumbed to its own (and apparently insurmountable) contradictions, being unable to claim in a space of excellence – the public service of media – its cultural heritage and its project of transboundary unity and cohesion for the diversity of its experiences and cultures.

In this research I have sought, in a complementary way to the previous works, to find answers to two issues: first, to know if a true alternative model to what is called the "mainstream" media – sometimes also referred to more critically as the "hegemonic media" – was found at a global level since the emergence of the internet, and more specifically, since the mid-90s; second, to understand the post-media phenomenon as a whole, also in the global context, and to think if this whole complex system of post-media communication – from local systems from the analogue age to global digital networks and platforms, including transcontinental broadcasting systems – has been compatible with this other idea/model of globalisation and cultural convergence that has, to a certain extent, reached everyone on this planet in the last decades.

Globalisation and regression

To contextualise the emergence of globalisation and its cultural contexts in history, let us turn to one of the founding texts of the 1980s and the debate by Fredric Jameson (1984). His proposal, a criticism of the trends of that time related to the crisis of the great narratives as a trend of postmodernism, led him to characterise the new concept as something that would have emerged in the context of a historicity crisis:

> *There no longer seems to be any organic relationship between the American history we learn from schoolbooks and the lived experience of the current, multinational, high-rise, stagflated city of the newspapers and of our own everyday life"* (Jameson, 1984: 22).

The question for him was paradoxical and somewhat ambivalent, that is he considered cultural evolution in the framework of "late capitalism" as both catastrophe and progress. This is a duality that reappears in other texts of his approximately twenty years later,[2] now approaching the theme of political resistance to globalisation and its analysis in its economic, political and technological interdependencies, warning about the dilution of the cultural in the economic, or by summoning this "historical dissociation" between two

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[2]   See especially Fredric Jameson (2000). "Globalization and Political Strategy". New Left Review 4, July-August 2000; and (2004) "The Politics of Utopia. New Left Review 25, January-February 2004.

distinct worlds: one that exposes what it considers to be the "social disintegration", and the other, the one of the societies of abundance, largely fuelled by technology.

The consequences of an open market, especially for employment and democracy, were already identified at the end of the last century by several authors, such as Schumann and Martin (1998). It was obvious then that global markets were generating more and more unemployment, leaving serious doubts about the type of economic development generated. In a sense, for the first time in the history of capitalism, employment was not being generated, thus appearing the first human costs of globalisation. In this free trade logic, economic-financial systems arose, but the distribution of wealth of the global economic machine left out the new disowned of the land. In addition, faced with the crisis of the old social structures and with the crisis of solidarity, waves of aversion against foreigners and the economically weak emerged. It was just a short step from this point to the emergence of protectionism and nationalism. The European project seeks to rebuild itself from this first clash in the post-Brexit era. For this reason, it would be useful to recall Bourdieu, remembered by Schumann and Martin (1998: 241):

> *We can only effectively combat technocracy if we challenge it in its field of choice, the economic sciences, and if we put up knowledge that respects the people and the reality they face against the mutilated thinking technocracy resorts to.*

In this context, it was obvious that the transformation of the globalisation of injustice into a process of mutual compensation, thus seeking to achieve efficiency gains for all citizens, could also aim to legitimise the advantages of the open market. The problem is that on top of this wave of late capitalism there was a new technological dynamic, whose impacts were not completely recognised in the beginning.

For Vidal-Beneyto, the association between wealth creation and the increase of inequality is also a consequence of a deregulated technological development and, above all, the evident economic dysfunctions and structural determinations of the global system in the emergence of the new century. In any case, according to Beneyto, transnational citizens' movements and citizenship initiatives, which, in a global context, constitute spaces with some autonomy – spaces of interaction and promotion of solidarity – emerge as a new perception in this global world of fragile and precarious equilibria, forming what he calls a "global civil society" (2004: 22). Vidal-Beneyto considers, however, that it is through the new globalised systems of mediation that this global civil society can be strengthened and consolidated in the context of policies de-legitimised by the "markets" and faced with an unregulated globalisation process.

Appadurai (2004) presents a point of view that is different from that of Jameson or Beneyto, considering, in his anthropological perspective, that taking into account the new contexts of globalisation and the complex interactions between global, national and local contexts, cultural homogenisation is not necessarily established; nor can it be considered that through the new mediation processes (electronic or digital), any type of hegemonic media is configured, and therefore the globalisation of culture is mainly determined by the "cannibalisation" of similarity and difference, which interact reciprocally, and by the deterritorialisation of cultural identities, which is not exactly the same as the

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homogenisation of global flows. It is obvious, for Appadurai, that although nation-states still offer some resistance in seeking to maintain unified and continuous identities in their territorial spaces, the truth is that this reality is now surpassed either by intercontinental migratory dynamics or new technological systems of intermediation, or even by digital platforms. Thus, basically we are mainly in the face of communicational transversalities and hybrid identities, being that, in the digital context, identity traits of communities that reconfigure and recycle themselves do not have a precise territorial belonging. Neil Barrett (1997) saw this in his work on "cybernation", in which he proposed precisely that the "old" modern specificity of the nation-state would irreparably be confronted with its own limits in the age of the internet.

The updating of the problem of globalisation made by Appadurai in a text entitled *Une fatigue de la démocratie* (Appadurai et al., 2017) reinstates the question of the loss of economic and/or political sovereignty by modern states, reconverted again into a principle of exclusion and a strategy for conquering an "ethnonational" sovereignty, asphyxiating internal, intellectual and cultural dissent. In the same work, Zygmunt Bauman considers, however, that the sphere of culture tends to progressively become a definitive character as a "cultural heterogeneity" without this meaning the end of the exclusion or social regression of this age of uncertainty. Other proposals in this reference work of these agitated times, from Krastev to Van Reybrouck, from Streeck to Nancy Fraser, among others, refer fundamentally to what seems to be a preliminary refusal of the global market model instituted, given the populist reversal that has been established, the refusal of the "other", of the foreigner, refusal of the participation in electoral processes by a public that is increasingly victimised by its own cultural, religious, demographic and labour fears, which in a way has been transforming the vote into a kind of weapon against democracy. Thus, new hegemonies of the old majorities are consolidated in new contexts, whether resulting from "democratic fatigue syndrome" or those that are reconfigured in the "post-truth" era and in political fraud, which already subsume this hegemony as a "post-democratic" age, in the words of Wolfgang Streeck. New data from the recent *World Values Survey*[3] make this scenario a bit more chilling: less than half of young Europeans do not consider it essential to live in a democracy . . . to deconstruct this globalisation, considering the evident ongoing crisis of the European project and the current context of "post-truth" and "global regression". But the great question of uncertainty, that is to know if radicalisms and populisms are in fact a new trend that is already questioning the continuity of liberal democracy as we have known it since the eighteenth century.

Diversity in the digital age

Our perspective in this research is to assess, above all, the dimension of the communicational and cultural diversity of globalisation – not losing sight of the dimensions of cultural and post-media pluralism – and to understand the context that is essentially marked by the new digital age and its impacts. First, let us look at how this complex impasse in the domain of pluralism and diversity cultures arose during digital emergence, trying to establish the model of globalisation based on what we might call the "algorithmic turn" – big data, AI, machine learning, etc., with very complex

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3   WVS, Wave 6 (2010-2014). http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org

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implications at different levels of society, but especially in the spheres of economy/employment and science/knowledge and information.

First, let us consider the question of the genealogy of pluralism and diversity in the European context, particularly in the context of the mission and practices of public television services, which are responsible for making a difference in view of what general television offers. The culture of duality or "tension" verses economy/commerce (Lowe & Bardoel, 2007; Cádima, 2007; Novak, 2014) has always been onerous in the European audio-visual experience and has been highly critical, especially for the developing countries. The recognition of diversity has never risen to the dignity of either "common heritage of humanity" or of European cultural heritage in the audio-visual context of the EU. In general, even in the community context, cultural and media diversity have always been relatively quite, subject to the laws of free trade and not so much to identities, values and senses; in other words, they have rarely been able to promote effectively a diversity of cultural expressions, including in the public media systems. In fact, and according to Mattelart (2006: 16),

> [Unesco's] *views of culture, identity and cultural heteronomies challenge the conservative and patrimonial vision of "European values" that marked the construction of the single market.*

Therefore, cultural and media policies cannot be separated because the basic principle of both still is the diversity of sources of information, of media ownership and of the independence of public service.

Will digital media be different from classic media regarding cultural diversity (using the concept in a broad sense) on the cultural, socio-economic and political spectrum? More specifically, in the context of the diversity of voices in the network, of political diversity and "polarisation", of the degree of concentration of news platforms on digital media, and in what is already strictly digital, but which seriously interferes with the issues of freedom and human dignity, in the issue of tracking, in the control of the digital footprint and finally in the (un)protection of personal data.

In summary, it could be said that in terms of the diversity of voices, thinking first and foremost of the social movements of the "indignant" and the Arab revolutions, we agree with Castells (2012) that the fundamental thing is to recognise the social and historical nature of these movements and their impacts; that is in our perspective, to realise the extent to which we can speak of "liberated voices" or of openness to the plurality and diversity of voices of the communities of citizens in these new contexts. In networks, there will always be an imperfect form of representativeness, if not for the fact that we are faced with platforms filtered by algorithms. And, therefore, they are still "conditioned voices". As mentioned (Cádima, 2015), they are conditioned by access – the digital divide, on the issue of net neutrality, but also because they are monitored by tracking systems, bots, analytical information devices and because they intersect fake profiles, fake news, censorship, etc., making these voices more quickly trapped in virtual control than free in the internet galaxy.

Also regarding the concentration of ownership of media companies and digital platforms on the internet, the first known data was not at all favourable. Hindman (2009: 18)

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referred to the existence of "powerful hierarchies" that shaped the digital media, not only its barriers and who can enter, but also economic concentration and content, traffic, search engines, software, etc. Therefore, he concluded, "news and media consumption is more concentrated online than off-line" (2009: 96). Still in terms of concentration, and given the known data, it can be said that the diversity of media and content in the context of migration to new media, together with the consolidation of a broad and autonomous "inclusive" public sphere and the issue of citizen participation and collaboration in the context of an "open" internet, which is framed by the principles of "net neutrality", are topics that still are not completely assimilated by current network practices.

It should also be pointed out that net vigilance and other intrusive forms of virtual control have increased dramatically in recent years, exposing, sometimes publicly, the private information of citizens, thus denouncing mainly the weaknesses of democratic societies (Mattelart, 2010) that were shattered when faced with the new global security logics and their links to interest groups and to less transparent political and economic powers. Thus, new data capture and control logic converts the user, the cybercitizens of the world, into a kind of amorphous "internet of things" terminal, that is a dehumanised physical receptacle exposed to a complex and invisible system of control. The consequences of this reconversion of the "human" into a statistical subject in the age of big data is therefore extremely critical.

Dataism and polarisation

Today, at the global level and regarding media, digital platforms and information, we discuss and try to understand the impacts of fake news, distorted information as well as bots and the consequences of social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, but also Google and Microsoft, who effectively have a responsibility for formatting and "editing" current public discourse and its impact on the political and electoral sphere. In any case, despite the siege imposed by the new speeches encapsulated in the "post-truth" age, according to scholars such as Jonhattan Zittrain, we are still in time to rethink what is truly at stake and, so to speak, in time to take a step back:

> *There are thoughtful proposals to reseed the media landscape of genuine and diverse voices, and we would do well to experiment widely with them as the clickbait architecture collapses on its own accord* (Zittrain, 2017).

Computing, information, biotechnology, data and artificial intelligence are dramatically recomposing human landscape and geopolitics, leading scientists such as Stephen Hawking[4] to dramatically shorten their predictions of humanity's "life expectancy" in this new context. The estimate for the next hundred years is that the planet will go through difficult trials, namely dangers caused by climate change, overpopulation, epidemics, underemployment, possible nuclear wars and even asteroid strikes on earth. This is the reason why the colonisation of other planets is fundamental to ensure the survival of the

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[4] See: "Stephen Hawking now says humanity has only about 100 years to escape Earth". Chicago Tribune, May 5, 2017. http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/science/ct-stephen-hawking-escape-earth-20170505-story.html

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species. This is one of the revisions of the story by Hawking, although his predictions have been quite different in the recent past. In 2017, in a documentary for the BBC series *Tomorrow's World – Expedition New Earth*, he says that he believes that humankind has already created enough technology to destroy the planet, but not to escape it.

The same happens in the field of computing: technology, algorithms and machine learning progressively make their way without any real regulation or clear guarantees that this path is ever closed to the "creator" or at least that humankind can rest easy and comfortable in the face of any unforeseen event. In fact, this is already happening in areas as important as information, especially when we think of news rankings that the feeds of digital platforms, news aggregators or search engines organised according to the profile of each user. "Dataism" will be a new legitimation narrative in the post-truth age (Harari, 2017), a comprehensive and "sacrosanct" fiction that, according to the author of *Homo Deus* (2017a), will have as a discursive clutch the "non-conscious algorithms": "If you leave it to market forces to choose between intelligence and consciousness, the market will choose intelligence". These "unconscious" algorithms, or at least "market-conscious" algorithms, are a subject for reflection and, above all, of concern, since they are configuring what some authors call the "algorithmic turn" in science and knowledge; in other words, a "physics of culture" (Slavin, 2011) that can range from entertainment to finance, from retail to journalism.

The term "dataism" was first coined by an American analyst, David Brooks (2013). It was Steve Lohr, of the *New York Times*, who published a book on the subject in 2015. Based on case studies and not neglecting a reflexive assumption – which constitutes a critique, though veiled, of the big data phenomenon – Lohr essentially describes this new age in which vast data sets are used by science or markets, enhancing forecasting and decision-making in virtually every field, analysing the challenges, hazards and impacts that dataism contains. In an already fully digital context, this extension or "remediation" of computational information announces a new level of algorithmic inflexion that means that the power of computing in the management of large masses of biometric data is no longer dependent on human being in such sensitive matters as electoral processes, financial flows, or in the management of news information, that is human "processing" of such databases is progressively becoming a mirage:

> *Nobody understands the global economy, nobody knows how political power functions today, and nobody can predict what the job market or human society would look like in 50 years.* (Harari, 2017a).

It is precisely this shift, this tension between the creator and his Frankenstein, between computing and its algorithms, that today must deserve the full attention of science and of the legal-political system in general, preventing dramatic consequences – which would result from the loss of that control – for the whole of humanity. This is because technology gurus and Silicon Valley prophets are creating a "universal narrative", or even a "creed", which has legitimised big data's intrinsic logic:

> *Just as free-market capitalists believe in the invisible hand of the market, so Dataists believe in the invisible hand of dataflow* (Harari, 2016).

One of the most dramatic current effects of dataism regards what is called the polarisation in the sphere of politics and civic participation, the antithesis of diversity in politics. Thus, thinking about politics today means starting with the consequences of new online communication strategies that have come to use so-called "filter bubbles", opinion filters, "echo chambers", etc., as well as the entire toxic field of fake news, whose sources are very diverse. The new North American political landscape (such as Brexit or the presidential election in France in 2017) is thus involved in this complex whirlwind of (mis)information, in which social networks, search engines, information aggregators and online platforms in general are clearly involved.

These echo chambers of social networks are a very strong point of attraction for users that end up corresponding naturally to the algorithms that reorganise information according to profiles, interests and beliefs of those users. This means that there is a strong tendency for users to fundamentally promote and redistribute their favourite narratives and thus form polarised groups through what may be called the continuous creation of polarised or thematic "information cascades". And once inside the "bubble" it will be very difficult to get out of it. In research conducted by IMT's Advanced Studies Group in Lucca (Bessi, 2016) that analysed the behaviour of 12 million Facebook and YouTube users between 2010 and 2014, the research team followed the "likes", shares and comments on YouTube videos, which were incorporated into 413 different Facebook pages. There were fundamentally two types of categories: "conspiracy" and "science", and in general almost all users became highly polarised; that is more than 95% of the comments, shares and likes were in a single category of content, in an ideological echo chamber, and once polarised, users became even more polarised; that is the user no longer has any adverse opinions or any kind of discussion about the issues at stake that may bring other perspectives.

We can identify various types of asymmetries in information and news in the context of the initial convergence of traditional media and in the digital age. Basically, we speak of the various profiles and mutations that the "spiral of silence" of the media age presents in its eternal struggle with the open forms of freedom of expression and information, with pluralism, diversity of contents and voices as well as censorship. From false news and counter-information to fait-divers, sensationalism and "alternative facts", all these themes of the classical media age reappear in the digital age, and it is now largely through social media that false news is validated. This is a new fact, which is shifting from the classical "source" to the origin of sharing – that is the original source of news seems to be increasingly subordinated to the author, to "popularity" and to the number of online shares (AAVV, 2017). Even more interesting is that, in general, at the time of confirming and sharing, people do not distinguish between known and unknown sources, or worse, invented ones. For example, some studies about diversity in the context of traditional news information point to a decrease in pluralism and diversity when supply has grown exponentially, especially after the massification of the internet in the late 1990s. This is the case of a study on newspapers in Flanders, Belgium (Walgrave et al., 2017). Based on an analysis of the longitudinal content of nine Flemish newspapers at four periods, it

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has been verified that, over time, similar newspapers or newspapers belonging to the same media groups have become less diversified regarding the news they cover.

The problem of diversity and pluralism is dramatically re-emerging in the current context of the new asymmetries of the digital age, in which social networks and digital "gatekeepers" are replacing old press editors, reorganising information through the logic of "clickbait". It is also problematic that 51% of internet users prefer social networks to access the news, usually via mobile phones, to the detriment of traditional media, according to a study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Newman, et al., 2016), University of Oxford, based on more than 50,000 interviews in 26 countries, where Facebook is the most used platform in news consumption since many users prefer the selection of news made by algorithms.

In the case of the polarisation of information, which is more specific to electoral periods, it generally ends up existing throughout the whole news production/reception cycle. And in the case of media, particularly in its relationship with new digital intermediaries, access to information by the user/reader acquires new complexity, although the polarisation here is the same determined by the algorithms of the same platforms, now transformed, therefore, into news "gatekeepers". This intermediation entails new risks for the democratic system, not only in the political or electoral sphere, as we saw before, but in the informational daily life of the population in general.

Nielsen and Ganter (2017) point specifically to traditional media relations with digital intermediaries, noting that the information cycle is increasingly dependent on platforms, and therefore these intermediaries, such as Facebook and Google, given the power they currently have in this domain, have increased responsibilities. In their study, it was concluded that the relationships between media companies and platforms are generally characterised by a tension between short-term operational opportunities and long-term strategic concerns, but more specifically marked by a balance of forces and an asymmetry that highlight the risk of the mainstream media becoming secondary to digital intermediaries.

Conclusion

Misinformation, polarisation, disorientation and uncertainty are some of the recurring concepts that are characterising the present times, the "ethnic landscapes" of the present, as referred to by Appadurai (2004). If this is the configuration of the politics of the age, in terms of culture and information, we see, on the one hand, the issue of diversity and plurality of voices being indexed to algorithmic logics, filtered and tracked by complex internet control systems and/or network operators, which mainly determine a censorship of the voices and not freedom of expression. On the other hand, the old agenda-setting model, due to the recycling and realignment of informative material by digital platforms, spread according to the profile of each user, appears to be a process with an increasingly limited impact in the context of global information flows.

In terms of information, the strong penetration of the internet on a global level and the exponential growth of news websites and digital platforms since the late 1990s ended up not being an alternative communication model to the traditional media discourse since the evolution established began by indexing the information according to the model of "winner takes it all" (Hindman, 2009), passing through the model of "filter bubbles"

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(Pariser, 2010) to end with the gatekeeping of algorithms of big platforms such as Google and Facebook (Bessi, 2016).

On the side, reception by publics, and in particular by younger audiences, especially in more developed countries, there has been a gradual shift towards digitalisation and not only a decrease in politicisation (Prior, 2007), but also a critical trend of greater political polarisation. This is even more serious in the younger age groups, especially among adolescents and young adults, where there is another problematic trend: attributing greater credibility to friends on social networks and largely shared posts than to credible sources of information.

Cosmopolitanism and global interconnectivity (Woodward, 2008), coupled with the experience of citizenship and its physical and virtual networks also expose other digital fractures, for example, at the individual level, in the peripheral community or in geographically isolated cultures (Norris, 2008), through forms of identification, behaviours and belongings that transcend borders, by cultural rupture or convergence between local and global contexts, and especially by large groups of threats to some of the opportunities discussed in the course of this reflection.

Although the media and digital landscape is full of black clouds on the horizon, the truth is that the potential of the digital age must be considered as strategic for global citizenship. Threats are a fact, but there are also some "opportunities", some interstices of freedom, precisely in the field of cultural diversity, so that different communities come to know each other and interact in a global context. It is important not to overlook this potential for the permanent safeguarding of cultural diversity, tolerance and intercultural citizenship (Zayani, 2011) at this critical stage of globalisation. It may still be utopian, considering the dystopias of the globalisation and the digital age, now recovered from Orwell or Huxley, but if, as Jameson (1984) says, there is still a social function for this peculiar entity which is utopia, it is so that the historical dissociation between two distinct worlds – the duality of catastrophe/progress – which globalisation may have accentuated, may also have its inflection. The truth is that, by the "archaeology" known up to now, this inflection will certainly be in an individual or local context, it will hardly be global.

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