

Mateusz Zimnoch
Jagiellonian University

Images embedded in reality

Nacher's book is an innovative study on a specific contemporary media phenomenon that exposes images as embedded in reality rather than referring to it in terms of the symbolic order. The starting point of the study is the important act of getting over the heritage of the poetics of representation and moving forward to an alternative paradigm where media are no longer reduced to the simple space of mediation between the signifier and the signified, but become equal actors amongst the social space. Not only do structural concepts such as the famous conduit metaphor have no right to strictly reflect in Nacher's concept, but also the dialectical criticism of poststructural thought (such as Baudrillardian simulacrum) is an intellectual space left by Nacher in search of the proper dictionary for contemporary media research. She announced that she would abandon the post-dualistic reflection to find a fair place for contemporary media, which are no longer the domain of epistemological „in between” (subject and object, symbolic and real, self and other, culture and nature, body and mind etc.), but rather separate and independent entities that transgress the simplicity of linear relations of cause and effect.

After the founding act of leaving the realm of representation, the book encounters the challenging task of describing the specificity of „the secret life of images”. The main concept is that images are not only signifiers of reality, but also its standalone elements that interact with the whole environment as well as with each other. As Nacher puts it, they are embedded in reality defined by the wireless network, as they are „flow concentrations of data, actors' energy, emotional engagement, and processes of socialization”. Nevertheless, those new forms of interaction used to be unstable and dispersed. Thus, she focuses on the process of ontogenesis of images which contingency and emergency remains of Plato's *chora*: an adaptable space for practices which produce objects. After Simondon, Nacher suggests that images and the data on which they are based, their media-environment, and practices which have an impact on their emergence create a system that is „on the edge of stability”. She refers to Latour

and Lefebvre to describe properly the character of mediasphere, which seems to be an emergent space of various abilities rather than a consistent system with strict rules.

What is important for Nacher is that media are not as ontologically strong as we are used to thinking. Referring to *Life After New Media. Mediation as a Vital Process* by Kember and Żylińska, which is one of the crucial points of reference in the whole of Nacher's dissertation, she emphasizes their soft and temporal character by making a shift between media and mediation. With this act, she moves from traditional, dualistic, representational ontology to the philosophy of process (mostly referring to Bergson and Deleuze, but also to James, Varela, Maturana and others). Those sources of inspiration, together with Simondon's philosophy of technology, Gibson's concept of affordance, and some minor elements of other theories (e.g. Bruno Latour's ANI), serve as philosophical guideposts which help the reader follow Nacher's concept and put it in a certain intellectual tradition, even though her path does not refer to it in strict terms, but rather moves through it transversally.

With this leading idea expressed in the introduction, Nacher outlines the territories of cybercartography in six chapters. Each is dedicated to a particular phenomenon. She starts with the problem of post-media as a basic term for all further reflection, which, according to her, is not always described thoroughly enough. Thus, she refers to classical works of Rosalind Krauss to mark the importance of the weak fundament of media ontology in the post-media environment, where the border between the semiotic and material/physical order is weak and blurred. As Nacher thinks of the wireless network as a crucial aspect defining such an environment, in the second chapter she moves to a distinction between media and mediation and focuses on the second term as being more adequate for describing the space filled with code (internet of things etc.). Then, she moves to locative media to explain some experimental artistic practices that meet mainstream technology.

In the next two chapters, in order to move to analysing the critical and participatory mapping phenomenon, Nacher focuses on more particular subjects that are the problem of artistic practices of walking (as an embodied cultural practice) and land art. At this stage, she definitely narrows down the area of reflection, limiting it to very concrete problems. It helps Nacher show how her quite theoretical concept works in practice. The final chapter leads to final remarks delineating the transductive theory of image based on two main points of reference: Simondon's concept of transduction and Gibson's theory of affordance. It resolves possible doubts about new metaphors suggested by Nacher and describes them thoroughly. According to her, such a theoretical construct helps us leave the post-representational terminology and metaphors behind and find a more adequate language for describing images as embedded in reality.

What might be interesting, although the main intention of the book looks quite telling and adequate, is that from time to time Nacher herself seems to escape from her own theory to find a more suitable descriptive language. The problem is that where she escapes is, paradoxically, a part of the realm of traditional dualism. Even though referring mostly to the non-essentialist heritage, she also needs some strict distinctions that could be questionable. For instance, just after a clear declaration of closing the radical dichotomy between image and reality, she makes in the very next sentence a distinction between imaginative and affective as well as between material and quasi-material. Whilst imaginative-affective opposition could be explained by Nacher's attitude towards radical empiricism, the same reason makes it hard to justify the sense of the second pair of oppositional terms. Nacher distinguishes material post-media condition from quasi-material coding operations, having said that they belong to different ontological realms. However, such a statement successfully corresponds with traditional language of the post-Platonic metaphysics. With no doubt, a radical distance from the post-representational paradigm is naive and Nacher knows it very well. This is why she tries not to neglect it, but to let it evolve. However, separating post-media conditions from IT operations just because no bits of information can walk on the streets might seem unjustified, especially considering the author's empirical mind-set and belief that the material world and post-media environment diffuse constantly.

Another possible doubt about Nacher's book is how far from being accessible to a non-professional reader it is. Those who are not very well oriented in contemporary cultural studies on media might even find it uncommunicative. Whether it is an advantage or not is a matter of a particular perspective, mainly because of fact that the book is at the same time a valuable contribution to a narrow, professional field of study. The reader, however, must be aware of facing the highly complex disquisition aimed not to expound a certain segment of knowledge, but rather to become an original part of the international discussion on locative media. That is why the main assumption of Nacher's contribution is that author and reader share the same canon. As a result, „Locative Media” might become a frustrating journey through hundreds of unintuitive terms and unfamiliar names, at least for those who are new to the subject, or to the research to which Nacher refers. The book will not serve as a students' course book, it is not any kind of synthesis, nor research dissemination: it is rather an experienced researcher's elaborate contribution to the particular field of study she is mainly interested in.

Having said that, it seems important to express another precariousness about the work: the incongruence between the book's aspirations and the language in which it was written. Even quick research shows that Nacher is situated in a relatively narrow group of Polish researchers interested in an equally narrow subject and with no doubt she remains an unquestioned leader amongst them. Thus, it might be quite reasonable to suggest that „Locative Media” could not gain the as much proper resonance if limited

to the field of Polish media studies as they could on an international level. The book itself is a part of a global discussion, but is at the same time expressed in the national language. Thus, it seems clear that in this case translation and dissemination amongst a wider audience is a natural need. Any kind of limitation on that field would be a significant loss for both the book and cultural studies on contemporary media development.

All things concerned, „Locative Media” is an example of significant contribution to a specialized field of media research. If it reached an international audience, it could have a positive impact on the development of the discipline; however, on the Polish field of study, it might be a little too hermetic and thus difficult even for many professionals. Some distinctions made by Nacher might also seem questionable as in some points they simply refer to the intellectual tradition that was to be left behind. Nevertheless, it still seems obvious that the book is essential for any researcher interested in new media, contemporary artistic practices, and cyberculture.

Anna Nacher, *Media lokacyjne. Ukryte życie obrazów* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego) (2016), ss. 233.