Digital Ubiquity in the Anthropocene:
the non-anthropocentric anthropology of Massimo Canevacci

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Transdisciplinarity – Digital Ubiquity – Anthropocene – Communicational Metropolis	*Massimo Canevacci's work goes beyond multi and interdisciplinary. The transversal connections he makes across a multiplicity of epistemologies are truly transdisciplinary, both epistemologically and methodologically. His trajectory of scholarly inquiry, according to his own definition, is undisciplined. It respects no disciplinary boundaries and creates an open field of investigation in which the dimensions of the human and the post-human are fully explored without any pre-conception. This interview explores the subtle nuances of some of his most important concepts in the context of the Anthropocene, and lays the emerging contours of Canevacci's non-anthropocentric anthropology.*

Introduction

The work of Massimo Canevacci is undoubtedly one of the most compelling examples of transdisciplinary thinking when applied to the interdisciplinary effort of expanding the boundaries of a discipline. His work engages with geography, art, technology, media, psychology, etc – a true kaleidoscope of perspectives. The synapses created by the transversal connections he makes across a multiplicity of epistemologies are catalytic. To follow the logical itinerary created by his scholarly inquiry is to be taken on a journey that leaves none of our pre-conceptions untouched. The myriad of concepts designed by him in his ongoing attempt to make sense of the challenges faced by the human within the complexity of the contemporary is as sophisticated as the questions he brings to the fore. When exploring urban life in the metropolis, he articulates the importance of media ecology by expanding the definition of metropolis into that of a *communicational metropolis*. When facing the challenges of the micro-fragmentation of narratives via digital media, he describes it as a new kind of *polyphony*. When addressing the complex layers of identity of the diasporic self in the context of digital ubiquity, he crafts a new notion of multiple subjectivity in the *multividual*. When trying to go beyond the classic divide between subject and object, he frames it against the dimension of fetishism and reframes it as *metafetishism*. These examples are only a few, but they serve as a tiny *dégustation* of his exquisite menu of transdisciplinary fusion that gives a fresh new taste to traditional anthropology. As a transdisciplinary scholar myself (and one who has been constantly experimenting with ethnography as a practice), I was thrilled to have the opportunity to discuss with him his views on the dilemmas

of the Anthropocene.[1] This interview explores the various and subtle nuances of some of his most important concepts, and tries to illuminate possible relationships between these concepts and other crucial notions such as the concepts of *multinatures* and *multispecies*. The result is a lively scholarly conversation that becomes provocative of a new angle on the emerging face of a non-anthropocentric anthropology that is, simultaneously, a non-anthropocentric media theory.

Renata: In the context of the Anthropocene, how can we situate your concept of a communicational metropolis?

Massimo: The most significant aspect of my research about the communicational metropolis, which was based on my ethnographic exploration of the city of São Paulo (1993), was about understanding that communication, from a period that began in the 90s, was playing a role that was much more important and extensive than it was within the industrial society. I can honestly say I did not know the precise definition of the concept of communicational metropolis in relation to city of São Paulo, however in that context I came to the understanding that communication was more important to a city like São Paulo (a city that in many ways is almost identical to a city such as Rome, for example) due to the very particularities and differences in identity that made it a unique urban centre. I came to the conclusion that urban communication was its most significant element of differentiation. I then tried to deepen the analysis of these elements, because at the time the idea of a communicational metropolis wasn't fully developed yet. At the time I was more interested in the development of an anthropology of visual communication. The idea of a communicational metropolis became more central to me in the beginning of the year 2000. I had a vibrant research group at the University of Rome with architects, sociologists, psychologists, who were all very interested in the relation between anthropology and communication, and understanding the metropolis was at the core of our research. It would be impossible to try to understand the metropolis from a disciplinary point of view, we all know that. Creating a multidisciplinary approach, or what I like to call an *undisciplined* approach, is necessary to go beyond the limitations of monodisciplinary thinking. We are currently undergoing a process of transition that is quite strong in which the industrial city, in its classical definition, is vanishing. I'm not saying industrial processes have come to an end, they go on and are still very important, but they are not central anymore. Industrial processes were central to modernity, they were at the heart not only of the city but also of politics, of dialectics, of conflict, etc. All of that was very clear to me towards the end of the last century. Since then, factories remain important but are not at the centre of our lives. The question that is at the centre of our lives today seems to be: how does a metropolis communicate? I'll give you one example of what I'm trying to address with the concept of communicational metropolis. I just came back from the National Gallery of Victoria here in Melbourne, a place that still has a structure that looks industrial, a big square of concrete, in which an exhibition dedicated to Andy Warhol and AI Weiwei was taking place. I was impressed by the enormous amount of people there, a true global display of cultural diversity, and also by the fact that it is open 24 hours per day. What does that mean? It means that the public that is present there represents something extraordinary: it represents the human driving force of a metropolis. This art exhibition is an example of an act of creation: the creation of a communicational metropolis. The communicational reach of an event such as this goes beyond the local into the glocal. The creative power of a communicational metropolis makes it global and local at the same time and it comes from communication, but a communication that is understood as a new form of architecture that leaves behind industrial aesthetics and classical geometries. The communicational aesthetics of the glocal metropolis creates a new style and a new worldview that is centred around communication itself.

My favorite architect, Zara Hadid, has created a post-Euclidean architecture. Her structures were not Euclidean. How was she able to see the world in a way that goes beyond traditional geometry even before the advent of the internet? Her work exemplifies a process of logical abstraction that is, in many ways, prematurely "digital" in its aesthetic. "Digital" architecture, experienced in the works of Zara Hadid, is a kind of architecture that transforms and expands our body sensibility, and also our cognitive sensibility. A person that experiences these new forms of post-Euclidean architecture is also transformed, there is a subtle change in their identity. This process generates a kind of flexibility in relation to identity, something that gives rise to the possibility of a *multividual.* In the industrial era a person had one job, one family, one territory for their entire life. Now, with the flexibility we are experiencing in this moment of transition, everything is subject to a constant process of transformation. This can, of course, be problematic at times, but such is the beauty of our challenge. The metropolis of our present is in continuous transformation, and this transformation comes from its communicational dimension that is digital without letting go of the analogical. There is a steady exchange between what is digital and what is analogical in our cities, but the digital is becoming more and more embedded into everything.

Renata: But what about the Anthropocene?

Massimo: Anthropology is, still, anthropocentric. And I say Anthropos in its etymological meaning from Greek, which refers to women as well as men. The whole world is anthropocentric because it is organised around the centrality of Anthropos. I believe this centrality is coming to an end. It needs to end. The Anthropocene requires an anthropology that is non-anthropocentric. What would that entail? What it means is that we must extend the right to a subjectivity from the sphere of humans to the sphere of objects and things, be they living or not. A non-anthropocentric anthropology addresses the current challenges of the Anthropocene: a digital ecology (an eco-communicational culture) must be affirmed and practiced instead of an insistence on "purist" kinds of environmentalism that are by definition regressive, based on a dated understanding of nature as a "pure" and authentic realm that should not be contaminated and that should be restored to its original "motherly" goodness as an eternal, unchangeable quality. We must go beyond the waste of energy implicit in the polarity of widespread conflict versus the repetitiveness of the idea of non-violence, which makes us incapable and coward to imagine and design alternatives. Here we go into the territory of immanent metaphysics. We are moving toward immanence as a process, and to me this movement is, perhaps, the greatest challenge that our politics and culture must face in the contemporary. Our greatest challenge is to expand the realm of subjectivity. We must extend the same level of proximity and intimacy of our relations with humans into our relations with objects and things. This idea is related to the concept of *meta-fetishism.* Fetish has been gravely misunderstood by hegemonic culture. The Latin origin of the word comes from *facticius,* something artificial, man-made.

Renata: Italian thinkers seem to have a fetish for etymology!

Massimo: Yes, it is a kind of obsession. I find etymology to be very important. This dimension of the fetish that is wild, savage, we can find in the work of Marx, who gives to commodities an autonomous power of alienation within which value exchange turns into an enigma, and also in Freud, to whom the fetish was a sexual conditioning in which males tried to find their own penis in the body of women, finding the image of a penis within feminine objects such as a shoe. These processes were intensified by digital fetishism, in which these desires become virtual journeys through online porn. However all of that is superficial, because the fetish has enormous potentialities when it comes to the mixing of what is organic to what is inorganic, of subjectivity to objectivity, and of nature to culture.

Fetishism shifts the relation between nature and culture so that it ceases to be considered as a duality. The many potentialities of fetishism can help us in imagining a world that goes beyond duality and dichotomy. *Meta-fetishism* (2008) goes in this direction. It elaborates a complex strategy to move forward from the old dualism between subject and object, and this takes us to a non-anthropocentric perspective on anthropology. If we can elaborate the view that objects and trees and animals have a right to liberation we move into a new conception of human freedom that is extended into everything else. A fundamental perspective on this movement is given by the work of Gregory Bateson (1972).

Renata: Do you believe that the imminence of environmental collapse that now faces humanity plays any role in relation to these processes?

Massimo: The imaginarium of catastrophe belongs to a profound dimension of human experience, to a cosmogonic tradition that is present not only in western culture but in most cultures around the world, not just imagined as the apocalypse. In many cultures around the world, not all, but in many, there is a cosmological belief that the world is moving towards a big catastrophe. If all of this refers only to the realm of culture then it becomes very difficult to analyse its implications. I believe that the general idea of catastrophe is related to entropy, understood not simply as a property of thermodynamics but also as a property of human relations. We must keep in mind that Lévi-Strauss explored both anthropology and entropology. In *Tristes Tropiques*, he states that there is an immanent, destructive tendency within the transformational dynamics of contemporary cultures. I'd like to say I understand these questions but that at the same time I have a critical vision of them. Our media is radically transforming these processes. Mass media belongs to the past. The idea of the "mass" was a sociological and political obsession in the last century. What happened to the "mass"? It is now transfigured into a multitude of different, fragmented, publics. Their subjectivities are also fragmented and this changes the way in which history is created. Traditional broadcasting has always mediated whatever is produced by cultural industries and this has always been instrumental to shape a homogenous mass. The traditional structure of mass media, and that clearly still remains, but at the same time we are now part of a network. Digital culture and communication are vectors of a new configuration that is gradually eroding the structures of mass media. Digital culture brings with it a kind of narrative modulation that each person is able to navigate with their own compass. Mass media meant a common agenda: everyone was exposed to the same content on one day and on the next day we would talk about it. This does not happen anymore. I now have my own media profile and it constantly mutates, I can change how I represent myself on a daily basis. All of that creates a narrative modulation that is very interesting but that causes the catastrophe of mass media. Media is in itself catastrophic, but not digital communication. What saves digital communication from catastrophe is its inherent capacity to innovate and to disrupt itself, following the wave that came from California and that has created many of these processes. Our challenge now is to continue with the process of decentralisation. Digital app culture is an example of this decentralisation. The centralisation of digital culture in California is now undergoing a gradual process of decentralisation. We have now a myriad of potentialities that might steer us away from global catastrophe.

Renata: The theory of media ecology has been addressing the intimate ways in which natural environments and mediated environments are becoming more and more interconnected. How do you see this process of literal convergence between nature and culture?

Massimo: This is an excellent question. I think that western thought has created in its dialectics a constitutive difference between nature and culture, and the process of civilisation, or of humanisation, has been based upon this conflict between nature and culture. What we are experiencing now is a

distension that creates a temporal and spatial inversion in which these different cultures, natural and artificial, merge with one another. The ecological dimension of the mind, and also of media itself, according to Gregory Bateson, is distinctive from environmental ecologies. Bateson talks about another kind of ecology. It is an ecology that brings with it a renewed potential for connection. All living systems, and what I mean by living systems is not restricted to biology, I'm also referring to objects as well, a piece of wood, a mountain, a product. Bateson's ecology of the mind creates a transitive structure that allows for continuous connection - not continuous unity, but continuous connection between elements that while still different from one another are nevertheless in a state of constant exchange. So as a human, this means that I cannot go on destroying nature with the underlying belief that it has infinite resources to be exploited. Air and water have also a vital dimension. We must understand that nature is not an eternal landscape that has as its sole purpose to serve as a workshop for humans. If we were able to fully comprehend the flux of communication, of connectivity, according to our diverse forms of cosmological experience, I believe we would be able to confront our major ecological problems in an entirely new way. This would be the basis for a philosophy of non-anthropocentric anthropology.

Renata: I believe your concept of polyphony could be instrumental to this process. How do you see polyphony in relation to Donna Haraway's concept of naturecultures (2003) and also to the practice of multispecies ethnography?

Massimo: This is an important, but very difficult, question. I have used the concept of polyphony in relation to São Paulo and its multitude of voices that together create a narrative that defines what is a metropolis in the contemporary. Polyphony to me is not simply about a multitude of voices. It is not solely about an empirical context. Polyphony is also a method of representation. If a metropolis is polyphonic, and encompasses a multitude of voices, so the manner in which we must represent these voices has to be polyphonic as well. Polyphony is not about a harmony of sounds. Polyphony is also about conflict, because the metropolis is conflict. There is no harmonious, calm, metropolis where everything works perfectly and all is wonderful. Polyphony incorporates dissonance as a narrative - a dissonance that is social and mediated, that comes from subjectivity itself. The work of Donna Haraway is crucial to this discussion. The *Cyborg Manifesto* has made clear the many ways in which technology is not outside the body, and how it is, instead, a constitutive part of how we expand the body. Technology is smart, just as the city is smart. To make explicit the technological interconnection between nature and culture is to make explicit a new path for humanity that we are now calling post-human. The idea of the post-human was first explored in an art exhibition, which in itself is something significant, because the relation between art and technology and the notion of virtual bodies has shifted our perception about art itself. Of course technology has always been a part of art, but for a long time a work of art was seen as being separate from it. The difference is that the post-human makes our bodies become technologies in themselves. The notion of humanity is thus expanded into technology itself. The transformation of body technologies into narratives brings with it enormous potentiality. In the 90s I was researching these questions in a group called *Avatar*, which was a term that few people knew at the time. *Avatar* was a research group that was pushing the boundaries of anthropology to include these instances of body expansion and transformation that were affecting our sensibilities and our aesthetics. At the time many people were terrified by the idea of the post-human, but now, more than 20 years later, these issues have become commonplace. Computational implants are revolutionising medicine and health in wonderful ways. Disabled children are literally being able to walk again due to these cyborg technologies, and this is post-human. Artists such as Marcel-lí Antúnez Roca and Stelarc, for example, have anticipated these changes in many ways. I have worked closely with Marcel-lí Antúnez Roca during the 80s, and he created an interactive method of performance in which the audience was always participating in the work. His work was alive because it was never

the same. Polyphony can be found not only in post-human art, but also in post-human philosophy. It is a perspective through which we can address the challenge of complexity in our times. To face such complexity we must produce a new kind of anthropological imagination. I like the idea of an *exact imagination.* It is still imagined, because we must be able to envision that which does not exist, but it has the exactitude of hard sciences. The opposition between the sciences and the humanities is something from the past. This convergence between imagination and science was already happening in the Renascence, this is what Leonardo da Vinci's work was all about. The *bottegas* were venues of exact imagination. This is the idea behind my latest project at the Institute of European Design, IED, in São Paulo. We are setting up a *Digital Bottega -* a space that brings together the traditional renascence practice of a bottega and a creative multidisciplinary laboratory in the context of digital culture. All of that, acting via the mix of science and art, is an epistemological force that pushes forward the elements needed for the establishment of a non-anthropocentric anthropology.

Renata: You have also addressed these levels of complexity in relation to the individual in your concept of the multividual. Is the multividual multiple due to the mediated and networked environment in which s/he lives?

Massimo: The idea of individual has a fascinating history. This idea seems natural to us, but it isn't natural. This word comes from a Latin translation of the Greek word *atomon*, meaning indivisible. This means that human identity was originally conceived as a fixed identity, compact and unitary. Human identity has been associated with that which remains constant as it moves through different contexts. This conception only works to a certain extent and therefore it is gradually collapsing. This idea embodies an ancient drive for differentiation that is challenged by contemporary technologies in which the plural of "I" is not "We", but a multitude of different "I"s. Our challenge is to create the possibility of co-existence of an archipelago of "I"s. A great part of this model is based on ubiquity as a property of being, that is, I'm here talking to you, but my phone is beside me, I'm here but I'm also connected to everywhere and everyone at the same time. My perceptive experience is not restricted to place but instead becomes more and more ubiquitous. I have written a chapter about ubiquity in my book on *syncretism* (2004). What was considered ubiquitous in the past by our Western traditions was the gaze of God. The divine gaze reaches you everywhere. God is always watching you. Then there is also the question of simultaneity. Simultaneity was a major element of Italian futurism, which was based entirely on an appreciation of Milan as a metropolis, and was spatial in essence. Digital ubiquity brings with it a new dimension of simultaneity, one in which the dimensions of time and space are not a dichotomy anymore. Digital ubiquity has the power of overlapping spatial and temporal dimensions, transforming the ways in which we experience our subjectivity. Ubiquity manifests the continuity of communication and it turns the individual into a *multividual* who is fluid and who might play an important role in creating a non-anthropocentric world. The experience of ubiquity is in itself anthropological.

Renata: Is the multividual always post-human? How can we situate the multividual in the context of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's perspective on multinatures (2014)?

Massimo: I believe that the thinking of Viveiros de Castro is somewhat upside down. It does bring about a radical transformation of structuralist thought and a rupture with the classical understanding of naturalism, but to conceive of multinaturalism separately from multicultures seems to me to reproduce a problem without confronting it. Both the idea of multinature and of multiculture are limited. Multiculturalism hasn't worked, although here in Melbourne it seems to have worked well, from what I've seen so far. Multiculturalism is a model that frames the peaceful co-existence of different

cultures within the hegemony of a global WASP culture. Because of this hegemony, multiculturalism hasn't truly worked. Transculture or interculture are better terms in my view. In order to deal with multiple cultural subjectivities we should focus on the idea of syncretism. We here have the temporary co-existence of various cultural influences within a single individual as a cultural assemblage. In my work I've been expanding the notion of assemblage from the aesthetic fields of cinema and architecture into the area of human subjectivity. Multinaturalism, as the indigenous worldview in which nature has an immanent vitality, or sacred, is an established idea. However when it does not engage with multicultures it becomes isolated and nostalgic. I prefer to work from the standpoint of the multividual as a sacred dimension of existence - understanding what is sacred not as religious, but instead as the fluid dimension in which all aspects of nature are immanent to a person. Your question makes me think of something else: the plurality of cultures and the subjectivity of the individual within digital cultures is also based on multinatures, because we cannot think of nature as something that is singular and universal anymore. Nature is not singular nor universal, just as the individual isn't. Syncretism articulates these kinds of cultural archipelagos around which fragments of identities and also of nature itself are assembled. Nature is not unified, it is an interweaving. Nature is polymorphic. Technology is also polymorphic.

Renata: What about the idea of a diasporic self? Is it restricted to metropolitan life or could it also refer to indigenous identities as well?

Massimo: I have a problem with the modern idea of nomadism. The original nomad was an enemy of the metropolis. Deleuze and Guattari have never faced the metropolis completely. Deleuze was always very attached to his own locality, his own territory. He barely went out of his studio. I find it quite bizarre that one can write an eulogy to nomadism while remaining grounded in the same space. Diasporic movements always came from suffering, from the violence of politics that forced people to be uprooted and to begin life elsewhere. The problem is that the diasporic self that is constrained to abandon its home and has to rebuild a home elsewhere faces an enormous challenge. The African diaspora to the United States and to Brazil has create a diaspora that is polygenetic because it is anthropogenic. We are also talking about music: jazz for example is a consequence of diaspora. Modernity has happened as a consequence of diaspora in many ways. Diasporic movements change the meaning of roots as places of origin into roots as avenues of exploration. This is very interesting because each diasporic subject has to deconstruct this notion of roots as *racines,* this notion becomes quite absurd actually, because roots for the diasporic subject become routes. The diasporic self is an itinerant self, and her/his itinerary goes in the direction of the metropolis. In fact, the transformation of the city into a metropolis was determined by the diasporic self. The diasporic self has brought about transformation and disturbance, new lifestyles, new fashion, new foods, new spiritualities, and it has been all of that what has ignited the transformation of the city into a metropolis. If all of these processes belong to the last century, the diasporic self in the contemporary is gradually releasing itself from the old political constraints of forced diaspora into a new diaspora that comes from free choice. Contemporary subjectivity is, in many ways, determined by this present version of the diasporic self. We are ourselves examples of that: you are Brazilian but came to Australia by choice, I am Italian but now live in São Paulo by choice.

Renata: How are these processes affecting indigenous communities? Davi Kopenawa (2013) compares the white man's media to the bark (or skin) of a tree: "tupë siki" - which causes "dizziness". What is the Bororo (2013a) view on our media devices? Are there any touching points between the Bororo and the Yanomami understanding of contemporary media?

Massimo: There are profound differences even within different Bororo villages and different Yanomami villages, so it would be impossible to generalise. Among the Bororo of Meruri and Garças, many use social media daily, many are video-makers, they love to record songs and rituals, etc. The metaphor used by Davi Kopenawa is very interesting because it portrays a poetic and cosmological aspect of Yanomami culture. Within post-human culture, we already understand the skin as an extension of the screen and vice versa. In that sense, the "dizziness" described by Davi Kopenawa is an intrinsic part of our present experience of digital communication, in particular in the context of 3D animations, virtual reality and holograms.

Renata: What would be the most important contribution indigenous knowledge could bring us in relation to the Anthropocene?

Massimo: Beautiful final question! I think that different indigenous cosmologies are unified precisely around the idea of an Anthropocene. I believe that indigenous peoples and cultures are the true expressions of Bateson's Ecology of Mind. The cognitive expansion proposed by Bateson connects humans, animals, plants, minerals… much in the same way indigenous cosmologies already do. I sometimes like to imagine a sort of *Anthropocenic* ritual where different indigenous songs and dances would take us to the stupor of cultural syncretisms, leading us toward a non-anthropocentric anthropology.

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