

AMORIM, Marília. *Petit traité de labêtise contemporaine: suivi de comment (re)devenir intelligente* [A Small Treatise on the Contemporary Stupidity: Guidelines for Becoming Intelligent (Again)]. Toulouse. Éditions Érès. 2012. 141 p.

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Marília Amorim's book takes us all by *surprise* in every single meaning of the word: the theme is extraordinary, the perspicacious point of view is uncommon, the original approach is inspiring, the final remarks are striking.

Petit Traité is divided into three main sections (Parole et Identité [Parole and Identity], Parole et Mémoire [Parole and Memory], Une intelligence bête [A Stupid Intelligence]), which are followed by the Final Remarks and by comprehensive References. The 140-page book is concise, written in dialogic style and its reasoning is developed by a multitude of examples that are mostly extracted from European (especially French) and Latin-American societies' (especially Brazilian) daily life.

The language employed by Marília Amorim deserves a special remark. At every second, the reader is called to take an active interlocution position. The author talks to the readers, directs her words to them and calls their attention. This writing style is absolutely consonant with the work's theme and with the theoretical perspective adopted by her. We shall begin by addressing the book's theme.

It is hard to write, in a few words, what the book's theme is due to its complexity. Even though the title's first part may seem a rhetorical device (it could be literally translated as *Small treatise on the contemporary nonsense*, but it could also be freely translated as ... *on the contemporary stupidity, silliness, foolishness*, or it could be even more freely translated as ... *on the contemporary goofiness*), it is completely coherent. The author chooses *stupidity* as the object of analysis and, more specifically, the speech that turns men stupid (*bête*). Her hypothesis is that *there are some ways of speaking that situate human beings in a position* where it is impossible for them *to be fully intelligent*, unless they show resistance, which implies a critical analysis of their surroundings.

This way of speaking that turns human beings stupid – and it is one of Amorim's great theoretical achievements – disregards the content of what is being said (it might be a drug description leaflet, a safety recommendation issued by the Public Transportation Safety Board, recycling information on a product label, etc.). Actually, it is the enunciative position in which one is placed – and not specifically the content – that defines a *bête* talking position.

In order to develop this first part of her thought, Marília Amorim relies on Emile Benveniste's *enunciation studies*, especially those regarding the figurative aspect of the *formal apparatus of enunciation*, which is understood, according to

Benveniste, as *the basis for the relations from which it is possible to speak. I speak to a You about a He.*

She develops a category of analysis – the *fusional utterance* – which allows detecting a contemporary crisis from an enunciation perspective, which is a *profound imprint on post-modern culture*. A *fusional utterance* – there are terminology variations in the book, such as: *fusional enunciative form* (p.13), *enunciation's fusional form* (p.19), and *fusional utterance* (p.20) – fuses – my apologies for the redundancy – the one who speaks and the one spoken to. It has several consequences. Let's see an example given by the author.

In drug description leaflets, it is possible to find, besides technical data, information addressed to patients *in which what is said is not taken as words from the pharmaceutical specialist anymore* and starts to be taken as utterances pronounced by the patient. Those utterances can be exemplified by: *How should I take this medicine?* Or: *When should I not take this medicine?* These are examples of the *fusional enunciative form*, which works a combination which allows the suppression of the specialist's authoritative voice.

Amorim's work is full of examples of that kind: *recycle my package* (written in a cake package); *I identify myself* (written in a scientific journal website). Who is asking to be recycled? Is it the package? Who is saying 'I identify myself'? Is it the user?

There is certain *addressee infantilization*. This binds the following questions: *In which aspects would a fusional utterance be more understandable than an ordinary utterance?* Why is there an attempt to formally situate the speaker in such a silly talk position?

One of Amorim's findings (p.29) is very intriguing: *the fusion/confusion of enunciative positions suppresses the distance/reference and the tension between the speaker and his/her addressee*. In a certain way, *the asymmetry between the deletion of different enunciative positions answers to a strategy that aims to silence authority voices and all injunctive instances*.

According to this author, this kind of discourse establishes another way of otherness, which she calls *metamorphosis*: "You metamorphose in I, He metamorphoses in I as well, since the new enunciative injunction does not admit more than the first persons of discourse" (p.35).

What we have exposed so far already proves the book to be innovative. But the reader will find more.

The author still faces the theme of language from the perspective of its relation to memory and, thus, with culture. Therefore, Amorim formulates an axiom (p.40): *the saying that becomes intelligent is the one that transmits culture.*

Without any doubt, we are here in one of the high points of the author's reasoning. It is language itself that is under examination. To her, each time we speak, "we confirm and update this common patrimony, which is language. As a place of social bonding, language only exists if it is spoken. Each speech act makes us live and, by the same gesture, makes common humanity live" (p.41).

Once more it is necessary to go beyond the content: It regards the *transmission of language itself*. What is under analysis is the *combining apparatus* that constitutes language, *which allows new words to be created and others to be eliminated all the time*, "which allows each social sphere of activity to renew the stock and variation of speech genres" (p.41). Language *diversity and complexity* is huge. It is part of language to simultaneously conserve and transform itself. The language forms, as well as the cultural forms in general, that are not used are forgotten. And the "general or exclusive use of certain forms produces the possibilities of 'linguistic apparatus' impoverishment" (p.44). Thus, "if our language is reduced to informal and family language, we lose the capacity of inhabiting other symbolic spaces" (p.48).

Thus said, the author can explore her thought more deeply: "... the saying that makes one intelligent primarily conveys language in all its possibilities and the position relations that constitute dialogue conditions" (p.53). From this debate on, the reader is faced with another fundamental questioning regarding the cultural object as a speaking object. Inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin's theory, the author considers that a cultural object – understood as every object that refers to culture itself (p.55) – built as any object, carries a collective memory. Both – object and memory – have a discursive dimension that "completes the enunciative dimension," as aforementioned: The cultural object carries a polyphonic approach through which it is understood as a speaking object. In other words, *each time an object is situated in the position of being able to talk about the culture that made its existence possible, it has become a cultural object.*

In the third and last part of her book – *Une intelligence bête* [A stupid intelligence] – Marília Amorim focuses, among other things, on the analyses of television sayings. The author’s question is: *How does television speak?*

Once more the reader will be provided with an original reflection, to say the least. The author starts by approaching the relation between intonation and meaning and proposes the term fake/distorted intonation (*intonation faussé*) to the identical and invariable intonation employed by television reporters to talk about any content, regardless of its nature. To Amorim, “intonation ceases to be a cue for the meaning production of the transmitted information to become the component of a broadcasting format” (p.79). And she adds: It is “a format that seeks to tell us that ‘even though I have just informed you of a catastrophe, do not worry too much about it and, especially, stay tuned with us’” (p.79). Three chapters follow this discussion: The Two Intelligences (*Les deux intelligences*), The System Without a Subject (*Le système sans sujet*) and Memory and Education (*Mémoire et éducation*). The reader will experiment a mixture of laugh and indignation while reading *Le système sans sujet*. The author, in this delightful text that goes from ironic to sarcastic, discusses the automatization services and, especially, the character named *system*. Yes, with *system* we mean the bank *system*, the *system* of telephone companies, the system of flight companies, etc.: *A system without a subject, which goes by alone with simple information exchange*.

As it can be noticed, many are the objects upon which Marília Amorim reflects in her great *Petit traité de la bêtise contemporaine* [*A Small Treatise on the Contemporary Stupidity*]. Before concluding this review, let us briefly talk about the theoretical perspective adopted by the author. Besides Benveniste – whose *formal apparatus of enunciation* is presented as a *political model*, since it establishes a *mode of relationship with the otherness* that fits in the *modern ideal of social bond* –, the reader will find in *Petit traité* [A small treatise] a constellation of linguists, philosophers, anthropologists, political scientists, psychoanalysts, etc. We see references to Levinas, Lyotard, Bakhtin, Freud, Lacan, Dufour, Martinet, Bourdieu, among many others. They are all presented in a simple, elegant language and, more importantly, in a way that guarantees the complexity of what is being approached.

Everything in the book invites us to read it: its originality, its language, its simple erudition, its elegance in reasoning. The text on the back cover well advises:

“The reader has embarked in an adventure: to see what he did not see, to understand what he did not understand, to comprehend what he did not comprehend.” Reader, open *Petit traité de la bêtise contemporaine* [*A Small Treatise on the Contemporary Stupidity*] and see why words are not enough to say everything here.

As it can be seen, the reader will find a lot more.

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