AFFECT, SOCIAL DIFFERENCES
AND BRAZILIAN IDENTITY DISCOURSE

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Abstract: “Nós sofremos mas nós gozamos”, or, “we suffers but we enjoys ourselves,” is how Brazilian identity discourse often bridges socio-economic differences and the racial divide. This paper will examine ways in which affect is valued as that bridge. It will examine media narrativization of urban violence, as well as how the the valuing of pleasure as a counterpoint to suffering echoes views of Brazil current in the northern hemisphere.

Brazil has two reputations, two identities, seen from abroad: it is a country of transitive underdevelopment, a place where the environment and humanity are destroyed purposefully, it is a place of apocalypse. And it is a place of dance and drumming, of a good humor best expressed in the pliability of the human body and in joyful laughter, if not happy smiles; it is a place of jogo de cintura in the face of adversity, of simple pleasures, of music. On the one hand, there is a reality so hard as to be unquestionable in its concreteness: a view of Brazil as underdeveloped country, as a place of great poverty and violence; on the other, a dionysiac view of Brazilian possibility as the delights of the senses. Between the two, dominant identity discourse runs like Orpheus, who visits the Land of the Dead to bring back his Eurydice, joining the two domains, of joy and of suffering, by the affirmation of affect, art and music. This paper will examine this discourse, in an attempt to understand what it speaks of and to whom it is addressed.

According to Stuart Hall, and certainly the Brazilian case is evidence for this view, tensions are constitutive of identity, which bring together our sensuous subjectivity with our subject positions, our social location. To form identity, such tensions require a suture between what the media and other public discourses call on subjects to be and what they identify with. On this point Hall writes:

I use ‘identity’ to refer to the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to “interpellate”, speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken’. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us. (1996b: 5)

What I am calling “affect” is fundamental to these “social subjects of particular discourses” and “the processes which produce subjectivities,” though I am looking at it from the perspective less of the subject than of the discourses that “hail us into place”, asking what place that is, how its land lies. In sum, I am interested the ways in which the discourse of Brazilian identity bridges the gap between dionysian values and the Hades which is part of the same everyday life’s physical and psychic geography.

As dominant Brazilian identity discourse reconciles polar opposites, it responds both to the demands of national self-esteem and to subjects’ recognition of their places in the schemes of external and internal domination. But the tensions are evident and the result is not always convincing. For decades, therefore, hegemonic discourse on Brazil has been criticised as forced, false, misplaced. The nature of the difference between the ideal and the perceived, how to
understand it, has been the subject of long debate, most markedly, perhaps, in the polemic between Roberto Schwarz and Silviano Santiago in the early 1970s. But such difference was also present in the official discourse on economic development under the *desenvolvimentismo* of the 1950s and the continuity of its discourse under generals, with the call for a collective effort towards progress. The “Sou da Paz” public demonstrations of April 2000, supported by the Rede Globo, that called for pacification of social conflict, had a similar tone of the hope that collective action can generate social cohesion with good will, bridging the gap between ideal and real.

The fact that such identity discourses are not completely convincing is typical of them, Hall continues; they are

the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always ‘knowing’ (the language of consciousness here betrays us) that they are representations, that representation is always constructed across a ‘lack’, across a division, from the place of the Other, and thus can never be adequate – identical – to the subject processes which are invested in them. (1996b: 6)

In sum, one can understand the reconciliation of these conflicting interpretations of Brazil as ways of reading the impact on affect of divergent stimuli. As such, we are in the face of a balancing act typical of hegemonic identity discourse.

But the Brazilian case is perhaps somewhat different from others too. It does not direct affective investment and identification into the Nation or the capacity to resist Nazism (see Gilroy, 2000 on the importance of discourse on World War II to British identity) or the US American notion of Freedom, but relies on Brazilian self-identification as people who experience the tension between *alegria* and *sofrimento*. The investment of affect in Brazilianness is not only what hegemonic discourse calls for, but it is its very subject matter. Hall’s insight that in an identity, understood as intersection, suture, articulation, there is a meeting of a production and an investment, a call and an answer, is particular apt for this examination of Brazilian identity discourse, for this insight allows us to look at who is being spoken of (the imagined community of that discourse) and what it is responding to.

“Nós sofre mas nós goza”

No example of hegemonic discourse is as propitious as a humorous one, for humor presupposes general recognition of the basic reference on which it puts its spin. So, of the many manifestations of hegemonic national identity discourse in Brazil, few have the immediate recognition of *Folha de S. Paulo* columnist José Simão’s “nós sofre mas nós goza.”¹ Indeed, Simão’s column is an assemblage of what is generally known and recognized, which he satirizes through puns and other plays on phrases and images encountered in everyday life and current news. A very recent example is his column of 26 August 2001, entitled “Rubinho pega segundo em bicicleta ergométrica”. On the subject of Rubens Barichello, the Formula 1 driver, Simão says:

¹ For the non-Portuguese speaker, a commentary on what is most simply translated as “We suffers but we enjoys ourselves”: “nós” is a phonetic spelling of a popular mispronunciation of “nós”, while “goza” is from the verb *gozar*, best translated by the French *jouir*, for it has the same sexual connotations as in French. *Gozar* has the additional meaning of to mock, to make fun of.
Diz que o Rubinho chega em segundo lugar até em corrida de bicicleta ergométrica. Mas justiça seja feita! Ele é o único brasileiro de origem italiana, com cara de bebê chorão, uniforme de teletubbie e com o nome começando pela letra R que mais chegou em segundo lugar pela Ferrari em toda história da Fórmula 1.  

The column goes on to make fun of Pedro Malan’s precandidacy for the presidency by saying it will eliminate middlemen between Brazil and the IMF, and nicknames President Fernando Henrique Cardoso “FHnistão”, an association, by the similarity of sound, of FHC and Afganistão, and of the current state of affairs in Brazil with those of Afghanistan, symbolic of backwardness. Associations are Simão’s forte and the visual simile - Barichello as Teletubbie - is as typical of Simão as the tone of good-humored defeatism.

His humor relies on recognition and self-recognition, it is a discourse that interpellates and hails into place its reader. Once in place, the reader quickly notes that the circumstances, while fully recognizable, are rather ridiculous: after Ayrton Senna, a Teletubbie; after a firm government-IMF alliance, the logical next step is an IMF representative in the presidency. The refrain “nós sofre mas nós goza” sums up this general situation. Like other choruses Simão uses less constantly – “Hoje, só amanhã”, for example, recognizably the words of someone closing up shop and tactfully telling a waiting client that no more can be done that day - its ironic displacement eliminates the possibility of discussion of its meaning. It is presented, from the start, as non sequitur. The feckless gozo seems small compensation, while pathos becomes bathos.

The phrase indicates the end of Simão’s column, and constitutes a kind of coda used in different contexts and in which Brazilians recognize a homely truth of the phrase, an expression of commonplace values. But while the target of irony is the author and reader, the phrase also ironizes the matter it refers to by juxtaposition. On 21 May 2000, for example, the government was the target.


Acorda, Brasil! que eu vou dormir! UFA!

Here is the classic suture of the Brazilian divide: the affirmation of enjoyment against the tension caused by poverty. Here is the foreign view of Brazil since Pero Vaz de Caminha: if the scribe writing to King Manoel was astounded that indigenous women did not cover their “shames”, their genitalia, today foreign visitors often marvel at how Brazilians live with or in poverty but do not lose their joie de vivre.

On 4 June 2000, the target was Brazilians’ self-image as especially sensual and libidinous.

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2 “They say Rubinho comes in second even in exercise bicycle races. But let’s be fair! He is the only Brazilian of Italian origin with a crybaby face, Teletubbie uniform and a name beginning with R who has ever come in second for Ferrari in the entire history of the Formula 1!”

3 “And do you know what Don Doca FHC next three big projects are? To help the financial system, help the financial system, help the financial system! And us, with nervous systems! Ha, ha, ha. We suffers but we enjoys ourselves. Today I’ll be back tomorrow. Wake up, Brazil! Because I’m going to sleep. Oofta!”
E a socióloga Agenita Ameno descobriu que monogamia é farsa! Descobriu a pôlvora! Se monogamia fosse natural não ia ter tanto motel no Brasil. [...] E uma outra [amiga] disse que é monogâmica preguiçosa. Tem preguiça de arrumar o segundo! Rarará! Nóis sofre mas nós goza! É gostoso!

Here, the emphasis is on *gozo* as a natural state of affairs: nothing extraordinary here, just average Brazilian behavior. Hall is instructive again, here, when he provides the categories for understanding how the public and private life are dimensions of a public discourse. He writes, “Dominant ethnicities are always underpinned by a particular sexual economy, a particular figured masculinity, a particular class identity.” (1996a: 473-4) Thus, subjectivity at its most closely defined, as related to sexual behavior, is just as much part of the set of connotations of Brazilian suffering-and-joy as the difficulties of economic insecurity.

But the phrase seems almost infinitely applicable to Brazilian sensibility and Simão uses it to mock Brazilian artistic ambitions. On 14 May 2000, he wrote: “... E a melhor frase fica com a mãe de Glauber Rocha: ‘Meu filho morreu de Brasil!’ Sensacional! Nóis sofre mas nós goza! Hoje só amanhã. Vai indo que eu não vou!” Glauber Rocha’s cinema, winner of international prizes and a motive for the affirmation of Brazilian cultural grandeur, is the target here, and with it the romantic valuation of suffering as a wellspring of great art. Glauber Rocha died of Brazil; he would have survived had he not been Brazilian. Here, the reader finds him or herself in the conundrum of affirming Brazilian singularity, as Glauber Rocha did in his work, and the inviability of Brazil as a source of art, as the artist’s *causa mortis*.

These are just a few examples, easily supplemented by a visit to José Simão’s website at [www.uol.com.br/josesimao](http://www.uol.com.br/josesimao), of how, taken out of context, the tension between the two poles of Brazilian identification come to the fore and are frozen into place. But who is the putative author of this phrase, who is this Brazilian people? Though Simão includes his middle class readership in his “nóis”, it is in a tone of mockery: even the middle class accepts the absurdities and injustices of daily life and political authoritarianism, just like “the people” do. Furthermore, with the incorrect grammar and spelling and lack of subtlety, the phrase evokes a people that is aware of its condition, is uneducated and unconcerned. This is the people that takes to the streets at carnival, that is both disillusioned and happy in its sensuality. It is the homogeneous, malleable mass that is the object of populism, of the picturesque, and of the humor that, at least since the Roman empire, makes the poor an object of ridicule. It is the people that starred in a report on the sensationalist news report *Aqui Agora*, on the Record network, shortly after the terrifying takeover of a bus on line 174 in Rio de Janeiro, when an armed, destitute man killed a hostage and was killed in turn. The television report showed “*populares* concerned with a mare who had fallen into a ditch.” The timing of the report explains it, for it made the poor innocuous once

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4 “Sociologist Agenita Ameno discovered that monogamy is a farse! She’s invented the wheel! If monogamy were natural there wouldn’t be so many motels in Brazil. […] And another friend says she’s lazily monogamous. She’s too lazy to find a second one! Ha, ha, ha! We suffers but we enjoys ourselves! It’s great!”

5 “… And the best phrase is by Glauber Rocha’s mother: ‘My son died of Brazil!’ Terrific! We suffers but we enjoys ourselves. Today I’ll be back tomorrow. Go ahead because I’m not going!”

6 Here, one could make a cross-cultural comparison to *MAD* magazine’s Alfred E. Newman and the phrase “what, me worry?” Contrasts may be instructive of how such lack of concern is understood in the United States, in contrast to Brazil.
again. In spite of the poverty, associated with eastern São Paulo and with having a horse in an urban area, the people live in solidarity. In other words, nós sofre mas nós goza.

But if the Brazilian people evoke in the phrase condense suffering and pleasure it is also true that common sense says suffering and pleasure are not an easy pair. In the conjunction “mas” this contradiction is made explicit. We have here something like Homi Bhabha’s stereotype (1994), characterized not by some kind of easy shortcut, but by the need to anxiously reaffirm pleasure’s priority over suffering and its consoling value. Here, then, we have the class identity of which Hall speaks, that of a class that sees suffering mainly from the outside. And yet there is also a gender identity, if not a “particular figured masculinity”.

When Simão produces the image of a resigned people that takes refuge from oppression in sensuality (the sense of the phrase when juxtaposed to motels and monogamy), when he makes fun of the president by calling him Don Doc FHC, dondoca being a kind of female lightweight, less bimbo than wife, he relates suffering and pleasure, resignation and gozo to representations of the feminine. The masculine opposite is only referred to in the breach, in Simão’s column, for it is not resigned, it is not sensual, it is in control and not a victim of circumstance; indeed, it does not require much to conclude that the masculine is the classical and traditional image of a white male.

As for this Third World feminine, it is associated with race and ethnicity in the European thought that is so fundamental to hegemonic Brazilian identity discourse. But this association is usually omitted from contemporary discussions of scientific racism, liberalism, positivism in Brazil. As a contribution to filling this lacuna, Sarah Kofman’s work is certainly of interest. In her study of gender in Auguste Comte’s thought and writing, she notes that Comte, while doing away with the “metaphysical” valuation of intellect, and therefore presents a basis for an abolitionism on the basis of an anti-essentialist position, he reinstates it as a question of history and degree.

À une opposition de nature, Comte substitue partout une simple différence de degrés impliquant le postulat de l’unité et de l’homogénéité des intelligences et des esprits; […] Mais, d’un autre côté, Comte “récupère” une certaine vérité doctrinale et absolue: la supériorité de l’intellect n’est pas essentielle, elle advient au cours de l’histoire […].

Et pourtant, affirmer la “dignité” supérieure de l’intelligence permet au positivisme de redonner à l’homme tous ses vieux privilèges, de légitimer mieux que jamais les anciennes hiérarchies théologiques. En dépit d’une critique systématicque des vaines démarches métaphysiques, triomphe un ethnochaflogocentrisme que n’a rien à envier à celui que résulte des pires aberrations théologico-métaphysiques.7 (Kofman, 1978: 153) [My emphasis]

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7 “Comte replaced the opposition to nature with a simple difference of degree, implying the thesis of unity and homogeneity of intelligences and minds; […] But, on the other hand, Comte ‘reclaims’ a certain doctrinal and absolute truth: the superiority of the intellect is not essential, it arises in the course of history […].

“And yet, to affirm the superior ‘dignity’ of intelligence allows positivism to return to man all of his old privileges, and to legitimize better than ever the old theological hierarchies. In spite of a systematic critique of the vain metaphysical demarcations, an ethnochaflogocentrism triumphs that owes nothing to the one that results from the worst theological-metaphysical aberrations.” (Kofman, 1978: 153)
The linkage of gender to race was taken up at the time: ethnophallogocentrism was the object of
disagreement between John Stuart Mill and Comte, Kofman notes, in letters they exchanged in
1843. Mill associated the subordination of women to that of the slave and affirmed women’s
potential equality with men, while Comte – whose thought was used by abolitionists in Brazil –
affirmed that women’s subordination is a natural product of the natural capacities of women.

Approached from the other side, that of race and ethnicity, the association of ethnicity to values
and motifs associated with the feminine still holds. In Brasil – Mito fundador e sociedade
autoritária (2000: 22ff.), Marilena Chaui surveys the history of thought on the psychological
characteristics of Brazilians. Afonso Celso (1860-1938) identified the following characteristics
with blacks: affectionate feelings (sentimentos afetivos), resignation, courage, diligence, feelings
of independence. Manoel Bonfim (1868-1932) found “passive affect” and “warm, sweet and
instinctive dedication” in the black influence on Brazilian psychological characteristics. For
Gilberto Freyre (1900-1987), Indians had “overexcited sexuality” and there was “greater
goodness” among blacks, while the Portuguese had “many inconsistent and impractical skills”;
the result, for Brazilians, among others, was “sadism in the dominant group, masochism among
dominated groups.” In the phrase that parodies Brazilian identity discourse, José Simão activates
the memory of an association that runs as follows: Brazilian-woman-black-indian, and whose
dense synthesis is the mestiza woman, sexually available and lacking major ambitions or
productive capacity. One need not look far to find representations of this figure, whether verbal
ones like Bahia (blackness) as the land of happiness, or the frequent affirmation that Brazilians
are joyful and hospitable. Carmen Miranda, with her Bahian tutti frutti hat, is the ambassador of
Brazilian culture as caricature and she continues to provide pleasure and to make her presence
felt in current musical representations, such as Marisa Monte’s heavily accented version of
“South American Way” or Caetano Veloso’s gesticulations on stage. (See also Veloso, 2001)

But such identity discourse does not remain in the domain of caricature, it is constantly renewed.
Simão’s phrase also recalls the foreign tourist who visits Brazil and faces the need to define and
tame the most differences most blatant to those who come from Europe or the United States:
“They are poor, but they know how to have fun better than we do,” is one version of this
discourse. Another, from the most authorized discourse of all, philosophy, was uttered by
Clément Rossi, a Nietzschean who spoke on ethics and nihilism at a recent contemporary
philosophy conference in Rio de Janeiro. He is, the newspaper report said, “contrary to all forms
of denial of tragic aspects of life, against all the mirrors we create to duplicate and camouflage
existence, including psychoanalysis. His ‘critique of illusion’ is found in books like Le Réel et
son double, L’Antinature and La Joie: la force majeure. The target of his most recent essay, “Le
régime des passions”, is passion, a feeling that is built around an unreal object. Paradoxically,
newspaper reports tell us, the philosopher of joy is a victim of depression, in which he refuses to
see anything beyond clinical aspects. In Brazil, he is much at ease: “It is a country where there is
an extraordinary co-presence of joy and the tragic character of life.” [Trigo, 2001]

There are a thousand validations of the stereotype cited by Simão. Simão himself does the
humorist’s job. He dismantles the stereotype to show the illogic of its associations. He puts
pleasure and suffering into a new collision, linking the peaceful marriage to the submissiveness
that has been produced as intrinsic to women’s and African Brazilians’ condition. His irony
leaves the assemblage in fragments, where an ideological analysis can easily associate them
individually to the production of a racist national identity and to a sexist social order. But at the
same time, the currency of the image of mental health contained in the preservation of joy in the
face of adversity, contained in Rossi’s valuation of joy and of Brazilian culture in particular,
raises the problem of any ideological critique, as Barthes long ago noted about the mythologist’s
work. That is, once the discourse has been deconstructed or dismantled, there only remains to
observe the fragments and the fact that, like some kind of sugar plum fairies, they rise to perform
their innocence once again, for who can find fault in the capacity for pleasure in the face of
adversity?

Hostage-Taking on Bus Line 174

But what happens when the strains of the division are too great and the affectionate reminder of
the conviviality of pleasure and suffering is not enough to suture Brazilian identity together?
Nothing, one might say: the strains of the division are always great, violence is always present.
Indeed, there is a permanent background of discourse, in the media, that speaks of a social
polarization too great to bridge, but such is its constancy that the media represents it easily.
Periodically, the theme at the forefront of this discussion changes. At the time of the great shock
of the Candelária massacre of eight children by the police, the agenda was violence and the
extermination of minors. Now, it is organized crime syndicates with a variety of initials, PCC,
CV and so on, that constitute the government of favelas and prisons. But if such organized
violence and the areas it occupies are on the map that orients daily life in Brazil, and particularly
Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, there are times when violence erupts so strongly that the strain of
describing, narrativizing and thus disposing of it seems greater than the resources and repertories
available. It is not immediately possible to interpret these interruptions as the opposite of the
conventional salve of alegria, cordialidade, and pleasure, or as the distant rumor of war on
someone else’s turf. Such was the case of the massacre of 111 prisoners in Carandiru, São
Paulo’s main jail. Such, too, on a smaller scale but precisely within middle class urban territory,
was the “kidnapping” aboard an urban bus in an upper middle class neighborhood of Rio de
Janeiro, Jardim Botânico, not far from the Globo television network headquarters, on June 12,
the Brazilian equivalent of Valentine’s Day.

The violence of both Sandro, the hostage-taker who threatened 12 passengers with a gun for four
and a half hours, and Marcelo, the policeman who accidentally shot Sandro’s hostage, Geisa, as
Sandro took her out of the bus, threw the balance between suffering and enjoyment out of kilter.
The subsequent asfixiation of Sandro by the policemen in the police van completed a triangle of
fear and apparently groundless passion. Evidently, the suffering but sensuous Brazilian cannot
be affirmed, on such occasions. One of the reactions of the media was to show how separate
gozo and suffering really are. In the comic magazine Bundas, in the issue of 20 June, a cartoon
of Guga in grey tones, holding up a championship cup, is the background to a colored cartoon of
Sandro with one arm around Geisa’s neck and the other holding a gun to her head. Because the
events occurred on a Monday and the weekly news magazines are published on Sunday, the
reports of the three newsweeklies, Época, Istoé and Veja, more than ever had the role of finding
some way to suture together Brazilian identity.

Veja, the largest circulation news magazine, put the Bus 174 events in second place, putting Tom
Cruise on the cover for his starring role in Mission Impossible. The banner appearing on the top
left-hand corner read: “Rio de Janeiro. Terror in the bus: Did hostage Geisa die in vain?” Inside,
the story’s title was: “A gota d’água”, the last straw. The lead reminds the reader of the media repercussions (events were broadcast live by GloboSat, the Globo network’s cable channel and by CNN) and suggests better police training. The report mentions the alternative of army occupation of urban areas and the fact that, in light of the events in Jardim Botânico, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso was going to anticipate the release of plans for national security and fight against crime. Sidebars speak of police extortion and murder, filmed in 1997 at the Naval favela in Diadema, São Paulo; the accidental shooting of a bystander during a police chase of bandit Lenardo Pareja in 1996 and other police brutality and error. It also refers to the successful Peruvian invasion of the occupied Japanese embassy, Los Angeles police reforms in the wake of the Rodney King beating, the mass deaths in Waco, and successful action by Argentine police the same week as the events covered. The report goes on to discuss the amount of money spent on combatting drug traffic in Colombia.

Thus, there is a mixture of favorable and unfavorable comparisons of the Brazilian to foreign security forces and a clear call for government action. The report also briefly covers the actual events, that had been viewed and reviewed that week on television, the lives of the hostage that died (identified as a young and hopeful migrant from the Northeast), the policeman that killed her (who fired by mistake after having spent three hours squatting with his rifle pointed) and the attacker (a survivor of the Candelária police killings of 1993), as well as the mistakes of the police negotiators.

The Veja interpretation, then, puts Brazil in international perspective: where other mistakes have led to deaths at the hands of security forces, where such security forces have been “more competent”, as well as the drug trade and how it leads to militarization. While all three protagonists of the story are considered victims, continuity is provided by the question, will the situation change as a result of the brutal images of a hostage dying on camera? The emphasis on government action, even when put in sceptical tones, modulates the brutality of the situation.

Istoé puts the story on the cover, with a staged photograph of people of a range of ages, races and social classes in a bus. A young woman with hair like Geísa’s has written “MEDO”, or fear, on the window with lipstick. The subtitle is: “Hostage to violence, the country asks if there is a way out,” while the alternative headline story speaks of tennis and boxing champions: “Guga and Popó: our heroes with character.” Instead of the international reference of Tom Cruise, Istoé’s cover offers a choice between fear, on the one hand, and heroics more heroic than Macunaíma’s. Inside, a litany of recent homicides in the Rio de Janeiro, Brasilia and São Paulo, to show how such attacks have become common, unexceptional, leads into a discussion of security policy and the reactions of those in government. Istoé’s coverage focuses on profiling the three protagonists: Geisa who dreamed of a new life with her boyfriend in the big city and worked with children in the Rocinha favela; Sandro, known as “Spot” because of a birthmark, who was a survivor of the Candelária massacre and wanted to have a hot-dog stand; and Marcelo, member of the elite police battalion, who dreamed of passing a public exam and a better career. There follows a report on the roots of crime in poverty and the vicious circle into which ex-convicts are drawn. The theme is the social generation of violence and of the protagonists as victims.

Finally, Época dedicates its cover entirely to the story and presents the most detailed and complete coverage of events. “Passengers of Horror” is the title, followed by “Exclusive: The anguishes and hopes of the dead bandit and teacher in the kidnapping of the bus in Rio.” The
cover photograph is of actual events and superimposed on it are excerpts from Sandro’s school essay in which he affirms that street children “are not animals but defenseless children coming out of hell” and Geisa’s diary, where she declares that “I am traveling to Rio today with Zuleide. I am going to meet my happiness.” Época discusses Sandro’s lack of identity (he had several names and his mother’s identity was still in question when he was buried), his experience as survivor of the Candelária massacre and as a poor person surviving on the streets. He is said to have reacted aggressively out of fear and perhaps cocaine-generated paranoia, and not to have been, usually, a violent person. Geisa was a common person, a dreamer. The main actors of the story are seen as passive victims of circumstance and bad luck. Any one of us could have been a hostage, we are to understand. On the other hand, the magazine memorializes both main players in the singularity of their biographical details and their movements on the day. Never were suffering (Sandro) and gozo (Geisa) farther apart, and yet the narrative makes them meet by narrating their lives on June 12, 2000, as victims of circumstance.

Certain themes recur, whether in biographical particularity or in broadbrushed discussions, in all three weeklies: violence, media coverage, international comparisons of police training, public safety policy, poverty and, in the case of Época only - in a final comment on a police check of passengers on the same bus line a week later - racial prejudice. Indeed, though the photograph of the children who survived Candelária shows a row of African Brazilian faces, this fact seems to be understood as natural, one affinity with nós sofre mas nós goza, which presumes racial identity without making it explicit. The main figures are made into types: a hopeful migrant’s hopes are dashed, the barbarous Candelária killings may have prepared Sandro for his role of attacker. As types, the events too become typical and are bound to repeat themselves ("it could happen to anyone"). The overarching, rationalistic narrative is the most classical of all national identity discourses, that which seeks to reinforce the State in its enforcement of laws and administration of order.

I would like to suggest two frameworks for analysing these attempts to domesticate violence in national narratives. One is a comparison to the encounter between dominant forces and their Other as discussed by Stephen Greenblatt in Marvelous Possessions (1991: 14 ff.). Greenblatt understands that his interpretation is not only available for the 16th century; in his preface and introduction, Greenblatt speaks of his interest in such encounters because of ambivalent feelings about Zionism; and tells of his positive evaluation of Balinese appropriation of video technology. But the basis of his argument is the narrative of Discovery and the Conquest. Wonder was, according to Greenblatt, “the central figure in the initial European response to the New World, the decisive emotional and intellectual experience in the presence of radical difference.” It was “something like a ‘startle reflex’ one can observe in infants: eyes widened, arms outstretched, breathing stilled, the whole body momentarily convulsed.”(p.14) Such wonder was channeled by representatives of power, like Colombus, into domination, in the form of affirmations of the desirability of Christian conversion of the indigenous and affirmations of possession, Iberian royal dominion over the Americas. But in the writings of Huguenot Jean de Léry on a Tupinambá religious ritual, its music and dance, Greenblatt finds a more shaded and ambiguous wonder. On the one hand, Léry concluded that “‘I can only believe that the devil entered their body and that they fell into a fit of madness’” (p.14). According to Greenblatt, “The experience of wonder is linked to a violation of all that is holy”, but it can also be “not the sign of revulsion but of ravishment” (p.16), or of both, as Renaissance understanding was that the angel of darkness could come disguised as the angel of light. Finally, Greenblatt notes, “The fact that
Léry does not securely attach a meaning to his experience – and that we cannot do so for him – is the source of its mysterious power.” (p.17) But the fright, the “startle reflex”, can become too much. Descartes, Greenblatt notes, thought that “a moderate measure of wonder is useful in that it calls attention to that which is ‘new or very different from what we formerly knew, or from what we supposed that it ought to be’ and fixes it in memory.” Too much wonder, in Descartes’ view, could be harmful because it freezes individuals “in the face of objects whose moral character […] has not yet been determined.” (p.20)

The narratives of the bus attack are similarly more powerful than the ability to make them signify something. They remain open to interpretation and reinterpretation. Sandro is invariably painted as a victim of his own, socially-determined past, while the images speak of extremely violent behavior that can only be condemned. The magazine stories, like Léry and other 16th century narrators of America, speak of scenes of terror, of unpredictability, the unknown, all represented in individual stories. The weeklies appeal to and rely on agents of order – not the Church, allied to the State, as in the 16th century, but the State and sometimes the media - as symbolic and real sources of power. In both cases, the story is told from the perspective of the group that holds the means of symbolic production.

What can be made of the affinities between the weeklies’ portrayal of urban violence and this older European sensibility? They bring to the fore imagined relations between readers of newsweeklies and the criminal, the crazy, the poor. The weeklies put events into relationship with what is known: past experience of the individuals in question, police training, public policy. They are concerned to interpret the natives, to understand those who inhabit the battlefronts between the dominant order and its strangers. They seek to calm the startle reflex and make Others into brothers. The monsters are good people, people like us, when their context is understood. If Sandro had not had bad luck that day, if he had not suffered poverty and the murder of his childhood friends by the police, he could be a person like us. The same is true of Marcelo, who is actually portrayed as above average, a studious cop but lacking training and the right gun. The process of domesticating terror requires constructing the Other as the same. The strange and the familiar are combined to reaffirm the Nation and the possibility of its government.

Strange and familiar: Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” (1958/1919) helps explain how these narratives, which are actually repetitions, incantations, expressions of will, efforts to join poles, try and fail to pair self and other. Freud related the uncanny or unheimlich, translated in Latin languages as “the familiar stranger or familiar strangeness”, to a series of characteristics that we can identify in the figure of Sandro.

Freud associates the uncanny with repression of the castration complex, on the one hand, and with the stirring of primitive ways of thought, that have been “surmounted”. Such primitive ways of thought are based on an animistic conception of the universe, where desiring our mother’s breast is enough to call it to us, where there is a “narcissistic overestimation of subjective mental processes (such as the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts)” (p.147). When we attribute others’ action to our will, we are in a realm peopled by our doubles, our secret sharers, our immortal souls. These doubles were once our private partners, our best friends. If as infants and children we longed for their company, as adults we have surmounted or repressed their imaginary existence, and – sometimes unsuccessfully - doubt their humanity: hence the
assocation of the uncanny to the suspicion that something inanimate is actually alive or something apparently alive is an automaton and with the fear of death.

After animistic narcissism is overcome, these doubles can haunt us as self-consciousness and double awareness and we try to rationalize and control our double. Associated to instinctual activity, Freud notes, the uncanny is also related to repetition-compulsion, to madness and epilepsy, in sum, to the workings of “forces hitherto unsuspected [by the ordinary person] in his fellow-man but which at the same time he is dimly aware of in a remote corner of his being” (p.151). Its effect is “often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality” (p.152), hence its association with the evil eye, where reasonable envy is given the power of effecting damage. And it “can be traced back without exception to something familiar that has been repressed” (p.155). The uncanny is, moreover, constituted by what “ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light.” (p.130).

The Sandro of the weekly magazines’ narratives is driven by demonic forces loose in society: more than cocaine, whose use is seen as unexceptional in Sandro’s case, such forces are identified with the murder of children, a primitive fear if there ever was one. Once he feels threatened because his gun has been noted, the police are called and he has taken over the bus, the narratives attribute to his actions a certain inevitability. The photographs of Sandro, mouth open and waving a gun, are of a contemporary Grim Reaper, someone who causes death - and who is already beyond death. Involuntary repetition: all of the reports are filled with stories of how events in Jardim Botânico are common, that the difference on June 12, 2000 was that the television cameras showed what commonly happens in other, usually poorer parts of the city. Furthermore, the descriptions of policeman Marcelo and hostage Geisa portray them as everyman and everywoman. Under normal circumstances, we are told, their lives would proceed unexceptionally, Geisa fulfilling her plans for love, family and success in the big city and Marcelo passing some public exam into a better future than police work.

Freud notes: “If psycho-analytic theory is correct in maintaining that every emotional affect, whatever its quality, is transformed by repression into morbid anxiety, then among such cases of anxiety there must be a class in which the anxiety can be shown to come from something repressed which recurs.” (p.148) Moreover, the uncanny brings to light what should have remained hidden. The hidden, in this case, is the suffering of the Other and the threat his envy, and the evil eye that results, pose to “normal circumstances.” This means that the discussions of police training, public security and policy are ways of “whistling in the dark,” of wishing away the double, the unbearable situation that can, at the same time, “happen to anyone.” Against the involuntary and recurrent return of the repressed, the weeklies offer the amulet of rational public discussion even as they say they are not sure it will be effective. Such uncertainty is symptomatic, still: according to psychoanalytic theory, the emergence of what was secret causes anxiety.

Thus, the narrativization of violence by the weeklies, its transformation in meaning, nevertheless must tell a kind of horror story, using the structures of uncanny narratives that make such horror recognizable. The story of Bus 174 takes the shape of Lispector’s “A Hora da Estrela” gone wrong, where Geisa is concerned. Instead of a car putting an end to her naïve hopes, she is struck down by the everyday appearance of the demonic, in the shape of Sandro: a demon so strong that he is able to make the police, whose function is protection, kill her. By providing him
with an image, an explanation, the press gives a meaning to events, making them tragic and unavoidable, and puts a finger in the dike against the violent side of the nonsense phrase “nóis sofre mas nóis goza”.

Conclusion

Almost inadvertently, by delving into the prominence of affect in Brazilian identity discourse, some of that discourse’s secondary characteristics have been brought to light. Not only the economic polarization of society is at stake. Racial connotations of “nóis sofre mas nóis goza” point to the legacy of colonial and racist domination that has an important role in the history and present of hegemonic identity discourses produced in Brazil and about Brazil. Black and white, descendents of African slaves and of those whose predominant genetic inheritance is from slave owners or post-Abolition immigrants: these two poles are also taken into account in the phrase. And the poles have clear gender connotations, the fruit of the association of subalternity not only with African descendents but with women.

However, the centrality of affect in Brazilian identity discourse must not be seen only in a negative light, as a cover-up or façade for such domination. Clément Rossi is clearly right to emphasise the ability to value Orpheus’s partial victory over Hades, of the production of meaning and of culture production over depression and oppression. So, in existential terms, we can only be delighted that nóis sofre mas nóis goza has some degree of practical reality to it. Furthermore, the ambivalent impact of the Other on affect is, as Descartes notes, a way to knowledge, while the affective dimensions of the desire to know – both in academic work and in the consumption of culture – provides us with some kind of reality principle.

But while hegemonic Brazilian identity discourse affirms suffering and gozo as compatible, their easy relationship is strained by the sudden need to account for violence. When this happens, the media seek to affirm a kind of hypothetical level playing field, where social structure determines violent action. Brazilians are essentially the same, we are told, all have dreams and fears, but social conditions are different and cause such explosions as the hostage-taking on Bus 174. After making a great effort to find some common ground and language, some solace of community in Geisa’s life and the victimhood of the shooters, the weeklies conclude that such conditions must be changed by federal government action, though the reports are not very helpful. Clearly, media criticism and pressure on government has led to action before, perhaps it will again.

But the object in this essay is cultural, before it is political. What alternatives can be posed to the anxious reduction of the Other to the same? What can still be made of the discourse of enjoyment compensating for suffering? In other words, what space exists, within the terms of hegemonic identity discourse, for an affirmation of affect that does not carry with it the legacy of colonial, racist and sexism domination? One way of understanding this is to start from the critique of their easy linkage. The “natural” way in which they go together takes several forms. No one knows who is uttering Simão’s phrase. No one says it and at the same time everyone does, vox populi vox dei. As for the news magazines, they have the grave disembodied voices of journalistic objectivity, while the discussion of Greenblatt in this paper indicates how superficial is the view of the powerful observer. Whose gozo is it, after all, and whose suffering?
Production of counter-narratives requires the staking out of a position. The recent popularity of rap among the middle class and some other contributions to the cultural scene, including Caetano Veloso’s “Noites do Norte”, with the identifications and discussions they have caused, contribute to the negotiation of new terms by which hegemonic discourse represents the Other’s suffering. But how and to what extent is a question for another day, another discussion: “Hoje, só amanhã. Vai indo que eu não vou.”

REFERENCES


