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Culture, television and urban imaginary

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Abstract

This paper aims to demonstrate the relationship between culture, television and urban imaginary in Brazil, that is, it intendeds to demonstrate how this country operates television as the main mediator of social relations and construction of collective identities.

Keywords: television, culture, urban identity, memory

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The Brazilian television is now 60 years old: maybe a path not so long if we think it in terms of world history, but certainly a path of great impact on the constitution of what we understand as the Brazilian nation.

“The TV and the news programs have been consolidated in Brazil as a symbolic territory, where different social groups share feelings of citizenship and belonging to complex societies” (BECKER, 2009, p.85).

The television, within the disordered and fast scenario of Late Modernity, is assigned to explain the world to the ordinary citizen, do its duties, make his/her access to the public power and the commodities, insure him/her information and entertainment. Explicitly, the television has become the most powerful medium of national scenario, capable of not only drawing almost 60% of advertising investments of the country (ibid., 2009), but also of guiding the issues of every-day talks, influencing the decision on purchasing a certain product or a voting and building the desire that seduces men and women from North to South of the country (Coutinho; Musse, 2009). Wolton (2006) described this feeling as a “social bond”, Vizeu, Porcello e Mota (2006) coined the definition of “new public square”, to this that would be one of the most important roles performed by the Brazilian television nowadays. Temer and Pimentel claim that “the television functions as a depot between private life and public space mediating these two social worlds that build up our society” (2009, p. 177). Despite this finding, the authors questioned themselves if the TV could be considered as a replacement of the citizen’s expression. And the authors argue:

“On the contrary, what can be observed is that the relation between the traditional means of communication and the society as a whole rarely or almost have never met the demands of dialogic communication or to the ideals of social citizenship” (ibid., p.177).

In Brazil, communication is marked by the pioneering and the predominance of private model, opposite to other countries, especially in terms of electronic media. The Brazilian law has a nationalist approach, but it does not protect the cultural diversity of the country, and it has enabled the formation of big private oligopolies, some of them with familiar characteristics, showing the sharing of production power of information among political and economical oligarchies (Musse, 2008). “The attitude of the Brazil in the sector of communication displays the practice of patrimonialism entwined in Brazilian politics”, claims Luiz Felipe Stevanim (2007, p.122). In this sense, it is observed an appropriation of the public by the private, made

possible not just by the loopholes in the law and by the excess of bureaucracy, which almost paralyzes the public sector, as a generalized disbelief in the ability of the state of being the sponsor of innovation and social welfare. The neoliberal speech supported by the media, above all from the 90's on, tended to depreciate of everything that is public, since then associated to inefficiency. In Brazil, even during President Lula's mandate, from the Labor Party, whose mandate expires this year, managed to change the media scenario, in which the public concessions of channels of radio diffusion continue to grant political allies and in which there is no control over the format and content of programming, what permits the capital logic to rule instead of the public interest. In this article, we are going to attempt to understand how these symbolic disputes are fought, in the complex scenario of the XXI century, having as empiric referential the evolution of Brazilian television, especially in the construction of the news narratives, which create new charts of cities and the country.

THE PRESS, THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PLACE AND THE COMMUNICATION FLOWS

In the construction of the imaginary about the nation, the city and the community, Benedict Anderson (1989) claims that the romance and the news had its highlights, in the bloom of the liberal thought, then accompanied by other communication vehicles, such as radio, the television and the Internet. The popularization of printed information in vulgar language, that is to say, the relation between what is produced and the consumer public, was carried out through the press market, that established, according to Anderson, the main relations between the bourgeoisie of distant regions. Before that, the pre-bourgeois classes had created its own net of independent relations of the language, at least, of the printed language. To them, the solidarities were products of the kinship and personal loyalties.

The new partnerships, which arise through the press, will give birth to the concept of "public", which inaugurates a new net of relations, according to Gabriel Tarde (1992). If the crowd cannot live without the neighborhood, the face to face, and from the crowd draws its power of construction and destruction, the public, in turn, is a feeling that unite people from faraway places through common interest, which is established through the press. Among other aspects, the crowd is physically and geographically limited, in other words, by the territory, where the public is "indefinitely extensible" (*ibid.*, p. 37). Likewise, the steam engine will dictate the new rhythm of the factories and decrease the traveling time between cities, the press

will enable the circulation and fast diffusion of information, creating a partnership that does not depend completely on physical presence, is the new net exchange that is established. “The great conversions of masses, today, are the journalists that make them real” (*ibid.*, p.50). The finding of Tarde, at the end of XIX century, anticipates a tendency that is confirmed in the 1900s. The press, as far as we are concerned, will be a great consigner of the republican country and of the way of capitalist production, closely related to the conformation of urban imaginaries.

In the XIX and XX centuries, the successive nationalist movements showed the creation of bonds among populations, based on factors such as vulgar language and the press. But, if, during a long period, this feeling of belonging to a “imagined community”, called by Anderson (1989, p. 11) “*nation-ness*”, still had an intrinsic relation with the geographical space, at the end of XX century, it was observed a disruption: the destruction of State-nation, in the ways of liberal bourgeoisie of the XVII century, and the implosion of feeling of Sate-nation with the rise of hundreds of new nations, resulting out of new fidelities. According to Anderson (*ibid.*, p.11),

“[...] the ‘the end of times of nationalism’, long ago prophesized, is not in sight, not a bit. In fact, the *nation-ness* constitutes the value of the most universally legitimate in political life in our time”.

But can we think beyond *nation-ness*? We believe so and at this point it is the Indian Arjun Appadurai (1997) that presents us with a possibility, when he claims that it is “imagination” that will have to take us beyond nation. Actually, what is inaugurated in contemporaneity, are new ways of belonging, in which the territory, as physical space of living together, is less important and in which the technology and the means of communication reorganize the social, changing it into the main mortar to the post-national cartographies (Musse, 2008).

By analyzing the social cultural background, resulted out of the process of a globalized economy and culture, Canclini points out to the redefinition of the sense of belonging and identity, “organized even more by the local or national loyalties and more by the participation in transnational communities or deterritorialized from consumers” (1999, p.52). The social bonds that, before, were kept among the populations by the contact of neighborhood in the districts, by the proximity within schools, or by living together for leisure and the consumerism, in the city center, today, is sparse.

The territorial expansion and the massification of the city, which reduce the interactions between the neighborhoods, take place along with the reinvention of social and cultural bonds that go through the radio and

television. Nowadays, these are the means that, with the vertical and anonymous logic, diagramed the new invisible links of the city (*ibid.*, p.102).

In countries such as Brazil, specially the television, among all other vehicles of communication, will exert this function of creating a “national imaginary”.

THE TELEJOURNALISM AND URBAN CARTOGRAPHIES

The speech of “Brazility” is the founding myth of the “place”, which opposes itself to the feeling of the so-called modern of “dis-placement” (HALL, 2003). The construction of this “cultural identity” will work as an “umbilical cord”, which enables us to be “in contact with the immutable and timeless nucleus, linking the future to the past and the present in a uninterrupted line” (*ibid.*, p.29). In this sense, Coutinho e Musse claim that:

The idea of Brazility is, then, a creation of the political and economic elite in order to create links with the explicit objective of ordination of public space. In this symbolic process of construction, the Brazilian TV news have a central position, resulted out of strategies coming from political and business order (2009, p.17).

The daily TV news selects the information and create a cartography of the cities and the country, taking into account criteria highly subjective. There are neighborhoods, cities and associated regions to well-being, normally named in the issues of politics, economy, culture and sports. Other urban spaces, such as those from slums, suburbs and the outskirts frequently appear in the police issues or in those so-called factual, which privilege catastrophes and accidents. TV news divide the city and the country and then classify them according to value judgments, although everything is wrapped up under the disguise of impartiality.

From the point of view of some scholars (BARBERO; VIZEU; WOLTON), the programs shown by big open broadcasters, specially in Latin America, are responsible for the construction of new bonds of belonging, that is to say, in the collapse of the model of the State of Social Welfare, in the distance that, in peripheral countries, the population find themselves in relation to the services by public institutions, the communication vehicles start to supply the most important necessities of information and clarification, becoming the true organizers of the ruling chaos. Besides, by privileging the service to the viewer, bringing him/her into the newsroom, as a partner in the building of issues, through their suggestions, or as a collaborator that is interviewed “live” in the streets or studios in order to expose or meet their demands, the television gives a face to that old anonymous receptor. That is, in Vizeu’s words (2006), change the television in the new “public square”.

The applicability of these issues can be observed by the shift in the format and the content of various TV news, including those that make part of the “grid” of programming of the leader of audience in this question: Globo broadcaster. In the *Thematic Seminar Intercom: the Journalism of Globo Broadcaster*, carried out in July, 2009, in Rio de Janeiro, the regional director of Journalism of the carioca broadcaster, Renato Ribeiro, remembered the necessity of new posture: “We want to get closer, together. Even in the way we write our texts. [...] We are neighbours of these people. If not, we get isolated.” (RIBEIRO, 2009). Such posture involves a shift in the behavior of reporters and anchormen, who, more frequently, tend to be nearer to the viewer. The stand, before recognized as a sacred space, the “space of speech” of the TV news, is now seem like a space of “isolation”. “There is a tendency for looser and ‘looser interviews’, a tendency to almost leave the *script* behind” (RIBEIRO, 2009). This way, the “city journalism” has to provoke the satisfaction of the viewer and therefore it has to take hold of a territory, either real or symbolic. To do this, we can exemplify the decision of the broadcaster of the Jardim Botânico to install a place to wait on the public in Santa Marta hill, in Botafogo. “The police settled down in Santa Marta, had driven off the drug dealers, and then we set up our own stand there. We stayed there for a month. After that, we moved to Cidade de Deus” (RIBEIRO, 2009). The objective was to reach other hills in Rio de Janeiro, such as Chapéu Mangueira e Babilônia, in an attempt to take the authorities there, showing the problems and then returning to check results. In this sense, the reporters interact more in the street with the community and the anchors (presenters that also comment the news and interview) even address the viewers as “friends of RJ TV [news broadcast by Globo in Rio de Janeiro]”. By trying a differential if compared to the competition, Globo has invested in a more colloquial, informal journalism, “nearer to the public”, made almost in partnership, with great emphasis on the services for the communities.

Today, with the increasingly purchasing power of the lower classes of the Brazilian population, including the issue of information consume, it is observed a bitter competition among the broadcasters, specially, those with more popular programming. We do not want to compare the audience measuring, but we observe as a more and more intense dispute by the viewers’ attention has set up a new way of programming, specially of the journalist gender.

THE ELECTRONIC MEANS AND NEW GEOPOLITICS

By investigating the image of cities, Kevin Lynch (1997, p.3) suggests that it is resulted of the mental image that its inhabitants have of it. He believes that the legibility of the city is not an attribute only linked to the city as one thing in itself, that is, an object, but, the “city the way as they see their inhabitants”. In this aspect, considering the means of communication as mediators related to the subject with its surroundings, we observe that the press has a capital role in the construction of the imaginary of the city.

Janice Caiafa (2001) believes that the communication can be an extremely relevant tool to the studies about the city. In several papers, Caiafa shows how, in the United States, for example, the television contributed to the “empowerment of the familiar suburbs”, of that *modus vivendi* that became typical of American cities (except for New York), where there is a true “unsettlement” of the center in favor of suburbs. Caiafa claims that this process takes to the “privatization” or “deurbanization” of cities. The experience of alterity of the streets would not be replaced by the TV mediation.

Another important observation refers to the occupation of the private space. If, in the 60s and 70s, in Brazil, the domestic space were the space of change, of the family lunches, of political meetings, of musical soiree, of parties, little by little, this private space would work less as an interpersonal place of living together and more as a space of individual isolation. Initially, there is a verticalization of the city, with the consequent loss of space of backyards, trees and animals. Then, there is a decrease in the area of dwelling. And within this exiguous space, each one dedicates himself to a personal task, as to watch broadcasts “alive” of the news channels.

Virilio (1993) draws our attention to the subversion of the limit between the public and the private, set in this new “electronic topology”, which ends up with the separation between the “near” and “far”, at the same time that it subverts the notion of length of time, by dictating a “permanent present”, the present of “live” broadcasts of television or of online connection. We would then have a scenario that Virilio calls “post-urban” and transnational, in which it would be observed the degradation of cities, in a way of “‘post-industrial’ deurbanization”, to reach the developed countries. The same way, the “hyper concentration” of certain megalopolises, as Mexico City, Xangai or Sao Paulo does not tend to mean the urban development, but it means, according to Virilio (*ibid.*, p.95), “the next disintegration of the historic city, of traditional urbanization and, equally, of state-form”.

The typical citizen of Late Modernity, at least those that live in big urban centers, tends to be almost always in transit and connected to some type of electronic device, which allows him/her to get in touch with long distances, but, certainly, dissociates it from the environment of its surroundings. Such aspects, taken from a quick observation, establish the bases of new net of sociability, based less on the face to face and in the relations mediated by a series of gadgets. In the printing of *Folha de São Paulo*, March 7th, 2010, an issue sentenced: “Smartphone leaves the friend missing and silences the bar chat”. The report spoke of Tomás Toledo’s nuisance, 23, was subjected to when he went out with his friends.

He does not have a Smartphone and says that the addiction to 3G cell phones creates a vacuum at the table during dinners in restaurants and meetings at bars, with the attention divided among who is present and the virtual. When friends are together - and most of the times without realizing it - everybody starts to check their cells and each stays with it, as if there were nobody around. (GALVÃO, 2010, p. C3).

Certainly, the drama of the man is not an exception, but almost a rule today. Such finding has sometimes bad consequences, it is not for nothing that the University of São Paulo keeps a Group of Internet Addiction in the Psychiatric Institute.

In this context, how will the relations between human beings and cities where they live in be established? The urbanization phenomenon, which increased in the whole world from the 60s on, took more and more people to concentrate in the cities. At the same time, the urban agglomerates started to register higher figures of violence and loneliness. The constant flow of people in the streets and avenues, squares and shopping centers have not taken to a more intense exchange of experience among them. Despite the diversity observable in public spaces, the interchange, the dialogue and interpersonal communication appear to be threatened. The same way, the affectionate relations with the heritage, with the urban landscape seem to suffer a natural wear, what, in Brazil, is still more affected by the saying that prophesizes that everything that is public is nobody’s. The result is the carelessness with what is public, the depredation, the lack of responsibility and care. All this interfering with the identity of cities, which start to be equal in problems and no longer to differentiate in the singularity, hospitality and history.

If the mobility and constant flow, possible through the new technologies, are translated into a more open and interconnected society, they also set up new relations of belongings or of diaspora with the territory. There is a significant difference between what Martín-Barbero (1998) calls literate cultures, linked to language and to the territory, and the electronic cultures, that respond to new ways of seeing and narrating the identity. “Identities of less extensive

temporalities, more precarious, but also more flexible, capable of bonding and make ingredients of cultural universes more diverse live together” (1998, p. 59).

According to the author, it is the paradigm of communication that today rules the urban chaos. A paradigm focused on the flow, what can be translated by “uninterrupted traffic, transparent interconnection and constant circulation of vehicles, people and information” (*ibid.*, p. 59). Thus, every urban planning of cities that privileges the circulation through highways, flyovers, bridges and tunnels. “The true worry of urbanists will not be, therefore, what citizens meet themselves but that they circulate, because citizens are not wanted to be united but connected” (*ibid.*, p.59). Martín-Barbero concludes that this paradigm of communication or flow takes to the “des-specialization, to the de-centering and de-urbanization” (*ibid.*, p.59), in other words, to the emptying of the “real” city occupied by the citizens, on behalf of fabulation, which “the constant mediation and interweaving of information and images produce” (*ibid.*, p. 60).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The displacements, the infinite stimulation of the needs and the instantaneity of pleasures, characteristics of Late Modernity, took to a new configuration of sociabilities, today, inevitably determined by mediation of narratives of corporations of communication, a “techno-interaction”, featured by Muniz Sodré, as a “sort of technologic and marketing prosthesis of sensible reality” (2002, p.21). Virilio (1999) already pointed out the effect of these new form of social relation in cities, in which there is a subversion between the public and the private, the near and the far, it will tend even more to deurbanization, that is, the decadence of the human face to face over the man/machine interface, which would reach its climax in the constitution of virtual environments, such as those typical of electronic games as “Second Life”.

But, the same scenario marked by the fastness and inconstancy, Hall (2001) pointed out a less apocalyptic exit, observing between the more nomad and uprooted populations a tendency to the construction of new identities, the “hybrid identities”, that feature less influenced behaviors by “tradition”, but, by “translation” (BHABHA, 1998), that is, displaying the search for references, by bonds of belonging, which were built, now, from the point of view of minorities until then deprived of a place of speech. Through the cheaper and the easiness of access to new objects of communication, such as cell phones, digital cameras e computers, these

minorities tend to self-organize and fight over space for the production of symbolic goods, establishing alternative networks of communication, especially in the Web.

From the point of view of several scholars (BARBERO; VIZEU; WOLTON), the programs shown by big open broadcasters, especially in Latin America, would also be responsible for the construction of new bonds of belongings, that is, in the fall of the model of the State of Social Welfare, in the distance that, in peripheral countries, the populations find themselves in relation to the services by the public authorities, the vehicles of communication would start to supply the more urgent needs of information and clarification, becoming true rulers of a more and more complex world. Besides, by privileging the service to viewer, by bringing him/her “inside” of the newsroom, as a partner in the building of issues, through their suggestions, or as a collaborator that is interviewed “live” in the streets or in the studio in order to expose or see to their needs, the television gives a face to that ancient anonymous receiver, grants him/her an identity, a place of speech, even if temporary and with relative capacity of transformation.

In Brazil, the television, especially through the soap operas and journalism, builds what we call a “national identity”. Certainly, an identity produced in axis of the two most representative cities, in economic terms, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, both located in the Southeastern region, and unable, therefore, to contemplate the cultural diversity of the country. In Brazil, the production of programs is centralized in the two cities and reproduced by dozens of affiliated broadcasters to the bigger corporations of communication throughout the national territory. The local or regional production is very restricted, generally directed to TV journalism. This “identity”, idealized in the years of the military dictatorship (1964/1985), created to guarantee national integration and prevail the doctrine of security and the model of development established by the dictatorship, got an undisputed hegemony in the 70s and 80s of the last century. Today, the imaginary coined by the Brazilian television, especially the Globo Broadcaster, the audience leader, is still predominant, but the high executives of the sector know that the new media, specially the Internet, can “kidnap” the public and “steal” advertising turnover. Thus, all conglomerate of communication try to stop this by investing the media convergence, and the seduction of viewer, more often invited to take part in the programming. It is still early to prophesize the future, but, certainly, it points out towards the new television, in which the segmentation and plurality of content will replace the model of a “grid” of programming plastered and homogenized, which, in a recent past, was the formula of success of the Brazilian television.

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