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# The social in scene in significant materiality

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper analyses the movies: *Tropa de Elite*, *Tereza* and *Boca de Lixo*, with the aim of providing visibility, in the imbrication of different significant materialities, for the discursive work of textualizing social differences. In the theoretical and methodological perspective of the materialistic Discourse Analysis, this text allows us to observe the functioning of the contradiction during the oppositional naturalization that structures most of the relations which organize our society, presenting the resistance as a process of possible displacement.

**Key words:** discourse analysis, significant materiality, social contradiction, discursive analysis of films, discursive analysis of documentaries, society resistance.

**RESUMO. O social em cena na materialidade significante.** Este artigo reúne análises de *Tropa de Elite*, *Tereza* e *Boca de Lixo* com o objetivo de dar visibilidade, na imbricação de distintas materialidades significantes, ao trabalho discursivo de textualização da diferença no social. Na perspectiva teórico-metodológica da Análise do Discurso materialista, este texto permite-nos observar o funcionamento da contradição em meio à naturalização opositiva que estrutura grande parte das relações que organizam nossa sociedade atual, apresentando a resistência como um processo de deslocamento possível.

**Palavras chave:** análise do discurso, materialidade significante, contradição social, análise discursiva de filmes, análise discursiva de documentários, resistência na sociedade.

## Introduction

In my analytical work on documentaries and movies, the analyses of *Boca De Lixo*, by Eduardo Coutinho, *Tereza*, by Kiko Goifman and Caco de Souza, and *Tropa De Elite*, by José Padilha, are meaningful to understand the ways by which the difference is textualized in social relationships. Through the reading device of materialistic discourse analysis, I seek to make visible the functioning of opposition and contradiction in society.

Discourse Analysis considers the interpretation as a symbolic work and allows understanding what it means, according to Pêcheux (1990b), the gesture of interpretation being denied at the very moment it takes place, that is, it allows us to understand that the work of the ideology turns evident the result of the relationship between the significant materiality and History.

I highlight the formulation ‘significant materiality’, on which I have insisted in my analysis of documentaries and movies. I have tried, with this formulation, to reiterate at the same time the materialistic perspective and the symbolic work on the significant. Taking the definition of *discourse as the relationship between language and History*, a

definition that we can find in passages throughout the work of Orlandi, I emphasized the possibility of expanding its analytical scope. By defining *the discourse as the relationship between the significant materiality and History*, I could cover the work with different materialities and reiterate the importance of understanding sense as effect of a symbolic work about the significant chain, in History. Materialities which require being signified. Materiality that I understand as *the significant way by which the sense is formulated*.

From the beginning of my work of documentaries and movies, I have also insisted on the analytical discursive work in the “intersection of different materialities” (LAGAZZI-RODRIGUES, 2004), in the “significant material imbrication” (LAGAZZI, 2009<sup>1</sup>), formulations that follows Orlandi’s (1999) notion of *entremeio* (in-between). They stress that we should not analyze image *and* speech *and* music, for example, as one adds on the other, but we should analyze the material in its whole. When she presents the constitution of the Discourse Analysis in the space between Linguistics, Historical Materialism and Psychoanalysis, Orlandi

<sup>1</sup>Text originally presented at the III SEAD – Seminar of Studies on Discourse Analysis (Seminário de Estudos em Análise do Discurso), UFRGS, Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul State, Brazil, 2007.

(ditto) specifies that it is not a matter of adding questions from a theory to another, but of making work the difference in the theoretical scope of each one of these fields of knowledge: to bring up to Linguistics and Psychoanalysis social and political questions, to bring up to Historical Materialism symbolic questions. In analyses with different materialities, “the analyst mobilizes the material differences in the relationship between theory and practice, without disregarding the specificities of each significant materiality, each one making the incompleteness in another a work by contradiction” (LAGAZZI, 2009).

In the perspective of discourse, a reader participates in the sense play, is caught in the evidence of interpretations, and therefore reading is a question of interpretation which has as it limits the text, in its significant materiality, and History, in its production conditions. Thus the same text when read in different production conditions allow us to different interpretations. Likewise, a paraphrase of a text, even someone trying to keep the same interpretation, will always point to other possibilities of relationships among senses. As Orlandi writes in several of her passages on Discourse Analysis, there is not ‘only one’ interpretation and there is not ‘any’ interpretation, for the interpretation is always cut by omissions and silences.

In a society like ours, extremely mobilized by information, the evidence of content is very strong. We are still questioned by the main ideas of the text and by the intentions of the author. But other questions must refer the text to different reading paths, beyond its imaginary cohesion and coherence, helping us to distrust of all that is asserted as obvious.

We always read from a certain position, different from other possible ones. It is impossible to signify from just any position. Our words have meaning in a particular historical way, among other ones. In the discursive materialist perspective, we always refer the content of a text to its production conditions and to the production conditions of its reading. The text does not break its reading history. There is a speech memory that supports the words of the whole text. That is the reason why the sense relationships produced in textualization are possible formulations related to the production conditions and are not independently defined from the discursive memory. The text is a cut from the incompleteness of the discourse.

This incompleteness allows the movement among signifiers and meanings. Since no one may ever say everything, it is always possible to say it in

another way, to say something else. And since it is not possible to say everything, incompleteness moves our relationship with language. In order to say something, we have to not say a lot of things, we must forget to say, forget that it is not possible to say everything. The movement on saying is fundamental in Discourse Analysis. The notion of displacement points out, in the discursive materialist perspective, that the relationships between signifier and meaning are produced in the discursive functioning, always determined by the production conditions and always pointing to other possible relationships. By thinking of the displacement of meanings in the *entremeio* (in-between) of language and History, we restate that meaning is produced in the tension of the borders between language and history.

The search for the displacement of interpretation between language and History is the statement of movement in the incompleteness and contradiction. I take the contradiction as the impossibility of synthesis, reinforcing the distance between contradiction and opposition. Pêcheux (1990a) discusses the predictability of opposition and the impossibility of opposition producing displacement since it brings up only the inversion of roles. It is important to understand that the difference does not lie in the opposition and therefore being different is not the same as being opposite. Hence, my interest in contradiction.

The visibility awarded to the social questions in current times is marked by dichotomies that reduce the contradiction that constitutes those questions, in a constant reaffirmation of the logical disjunction and attempt of capturing what is left out. The significant materiality demands senses in the contradiction of historical determinations. That means approaching the social relationships without searching for pacifying solutions, considering them in their constitutive differences. My analytical investment is on the constant questioning for the contradiction on the work of social relationships in the significant material imbrication. In the analysis of the ways in which the social relationships are textualized, I try to observe the play between contradiction and opposition. In the set of different materials in composition, the specificities of each significant materiality should be considered in the beating between description and interpretation.

*Tropa de Elite*, *Tereza* and *Boca de Lixo* show, in their different ways of formulating, important

relationships that help us understand the functioning of the difference in social relationships.

### Tropa de Elite

*Tropa de Elite*, a 2007 movie, is ruled by a markedly oppositional and assertive functioning. The story of the movie is anchored in *Capitão Nascimento's* image (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Capitain Nascimento. *Tropa de Elite* (2007).

This is a strong image that meets the assertiveness that structures the movie and that is materialized in *Capitain Nascimento's* voice-over, an omniscient voice that speaks for BOPE<sup>2</sup> - *My name is Capitain Nascimento. I headed the alpha team of BOPE.*<sup>3</sup> -, it speaks for the conventional police, talks about corruption, traffic and war on the hill among the drug dealers. He introduces *Matias* and *Neto* and tells us how was his search for his replacement as head of BOPE. Opposed to the voice-over plan, which serves as the voice of truth, we observe the daily facts plan which, on one hand, shows us the corruption and the traffic in action and, on the other hand, the human obliquity and its diverse feelings.

The voice-over in *Tropa de Elite* begins with the following cut.

"Rio de Janeiro has over 700 slums, most of them ruled by heavily armed drug dealers. All you can see around is dudes with AR15, USA Pistol, HK, and the like. In the rest of the world, these guns are used to wage war. In Rio they are used for crime. A 762 bullet pierces through a car as if it were a sheet of paper. It's insane to think that in a city like that cops will walk up the hill just to enforce the law. A cop has family, friends. A cop is afraid of dying. That is why in this city, every cop has to choose from corruption, neglect or war"<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> BOPE – Batalhão de Operações Especiais (Elite Group for Special Operation of Militar Academy).

<sup>3</sup> Translated from: Meu nome é Capitão Nascimento. Eu chefiava a equipe alfa da BOPE.

<sup>4</sup> Translated from: "O Rio de Janeiro tem mais de 700 favelas, quase todas dominadas por traficantes armados até os dentes. É só nego de AR15, Pisto

The voice-over points out to a polemic and complex subject: the traffic in the slums - *Rio de Janeiro has more than 700 slums, almost all dominated by heavily armed drug dealers* - and the relationship between drug dealers and police - *It's insane to think that in a city like that policemen will walk up the hill just to enforce the law/ in this city a cop has to choose from corruption, neglect or war*. In this excerpt we observe that there is an effect of truth markedly built in assertive constructions, without any modalization, marked by the present tense - *Rio de Janeiro has/the slums are/ all you can see is dudes with/ a bullet pierces through/ it is insane to think that/ a cop has/ that is why -*, by verbal complements very well defined complements such as: *has over 700 slums ruled by heavily armed drug dealers/ used to wage war/ pierces through a car as if it were a sheet of paper -*, by consecutive and defining relationships, besides choices in logical disjunction - *that is way/ it is insane to think that/ choose from...or*.

This assertiveness is a regularity of *Capitain Nascimento's* voice-over and comes in and out in different ways, but always producing the same effect of complete certainty and total omniscience.

"If Rio depended only on the conventional Police, the drug dealers would have already taken the city. That's why there is BOPE: the elite group of Military Academy. In theory, BOPE is part of the Military Academy but in practice it is a totally different police force. BOPE symbol makes that clear when we get into the slums. And our uniform is not blue, but black. BOPE was developed to interfere when the conventional Police force could not handle it. And that often happens in Rio de Janeiro"<sup>5</sup>.

The society depicted in *Tropa de Elite* is dichotomized between good and evil, fine and bad, and traffic and corruption is fitted in a place radically rejected by the order of legitimated moral values. According to the excerpt BOP is there to prevent the drug dealers from taking the city. Its existence and action guarantees the fight against corruption and traffic: "*BOPE was developed to interfere when the conventional Police force*

USA, HK e por aí vai. No resto do mundo essas armas são usadas pra fazer guerra. No Rio são as armas do crime. Um tiro de 762 atravessa um carro como se fosse papel. É burrice pensar que numa cidade assim policiais vão subir favela só pra fazer valer a lei. Policial tem família, amigos, policial também tem medo de morrer. É por isso que nesta cidade todo policial tem que escolher: ou se corrompe, ou se omite, ou vai pra guerra."

<sup>5</sup> Translated from: "Se o Rio dependesse só da polícia convencional os traficantes já tinham tomado a cidade faz tempo. É por isso que existe o BOPE: tropa de elite da polícia militar. Na teoria o BOPE faz parte da polícia militar. Na prática é uma polícia completamente diferente. O símbolo do BOPE deixa claro o que acontece quando a gente entra na favela. E a nossa farda não é azul, é preta. O BOPE foi criado pra intervir quando a polícia convencional não consegue dar jeito. E no Rio de Janeiro isso acontece o tempo inteiro."

could not handle it” tells us *Capitain Nascimento*. Even with its radical practice, BOPE finds meaning in the society showed by the movie, as the safeguard of society, in a relationship of opposition to what is strongly rejected and criticized. Even if we question BOPE’s procedures, it is not possible to defend the traffic and corruption and, therefore, an alliance is established between BOPE and the portrayed society, between BOPE and the viewer.

Thus, in *Tropa de Elite* the ‘corrupt police’ and the ‘armed drug dealers’ are the two major social problems which serve as the theme, in opposition to society and in a relationship of truth and omniscience. Although these two big social problems are current issues, having these truths depicted in scenes print an even sharper effect of reality, which allows us to confirm what everyone already knew, but many did not see.

This effect of reality in *Tropa de Elite* is also highlighted by the music, or the lack thereof. The only two songs in the movie are the funk about Dendê’s Hill (Morro do Dendê) and the movie’s theme BOPE. This lack of music is very significant for the effect of reality, because it allows the voice-over of Capitain Nascimento, the voice of truth, to be in the spotlight, fulfilling a structural role: the role that of what is being told is the truth.

The problems of corruption and traffic, taken in their imaginary reality, are placed on the conventional police with its corrupt policemen and in the armed drug dealers, which means silencing society organization. This way we disregard the production conditions of social relationships. ‘War against the corrupt and the perverse’, ‘ban the weak’, is a way of stating mechanisms of individualization of the State and erasing the social side. Considering that the solution is on the shoulders of the BOPE men, and considering that a war is justified for choosing the new BOPE captain, we can say that *Tropa de Elite* does not discuss social issues, which are presented in dichotomized and oppositional relationships.

Concerning the pictures, when we look at the camera shots throughout the movie we can see the closing of the frames on the characters (Figure 2), which shows that the action is a strong structuring axis of *Tropa de Elite*. Open shots are rare and the great majority of camera movement are medium and closed shots.



**Figure 2.** The closing of the frames on the characters. *Tropa de Elite* (2007).



**Figure 2 (continuation).** The closing of the frames on the characters. *Tropa de Elite* (2007).

All the action of the movie takes place, on one hand, showing that the conventional police is corrupt, that the drug dealers are out there and that only BOPE can control crime. When we notice these facts and place them in daily life, we find the humanistic perspective of *Tropa de Elite*, in which love, passion, fear, desire and affliction are depicted, working as major incisors that are anchored by the voice of the BOPE's captain.



The police, traffic, BOPE, slum, hill<sup>6</sup>. We can see a naming whose constitutive equivocality is silenced in the generalization and subsequent homogenization of each one of these social cuts. The determined article and singular name produce an imaginary unit. However, there are many meanings to police, traffic, BOPE, slum and hill. There is much to understand about each of these social cuts. The effect of unit that the focus in singular produces over each one of these established spaces allows us not to look at the differences and builds up what we consider the political abstraction in society.



Taking up the set of the movie textuality, we find the syntax and semantics assertion, the lack of music, the closing of the camera on characters as different ways of such textuality indicating both the theme opposition that establishes the dichotomy between BOPE and society, on one hand, and corruption and traffic, on the other hand, as assertive

**Figure 2 (continuation).** The closing of the frames on the characters. *Tropa de Elite* (2007).

<sup>6</sup>Most of Rio de Janeiro slums are located in the hills surrounding the city, and therefore "hill" has come to mean the place where slums and the traffic are.

working that produces the effect of truth to the BOPE's voice.

But along with the operation of opposition and observation, I turn to funk music. A mark in the materiality of *Tropa de Elite* which brings us the hill and asks for an interpretation that is not limited in traffic or violence. If on one hand we observe the centering of social solution in the humanism personified by BOPE, with the city over-determined by the sense of corruption and the hill over-determined by the sense of traffic, on the other hand we have the funk that came down the hill and was made known and sung by a large portion of the city population and *Tropa de Elite's* viewers.

“O Morro do Dendê é ruim de invadir  
Nós do Alemão vamos se divertir  
Porque o Dendê eu vou dizer como é que é  
Aqui não tem mole nem pra DRE  
Pra subir aqui no morro até a BOPE treme  
Não tem mole pro exército civil nem pra PM  
Eu dou o maior conceito para os amigos meus  
Mas Morro do Dendê também é terra de Deus  
Fé em Deus, DJ.”

The funk makes the viewer listen to a hill that is not depicted and that echoes in other relationships, in a striking pace and with an contrasting conjunction which goes beyond traffic and violence: *But Dendê's Hill is also God's place (Mas Morro do Dendê também é terra de Deus)*! In *Tropa de Elite* the funk highlights a contradiction, a difference that calls for a hill to be discovered.

In the analysis of *Tropa de Elite* I followed the social relationships presented in the movie to understand the textualization of the difference in the social relationships, in the play between opposition and contradiction. Having understood the funk as the formulation of the contradiction in *Tropa de Elite*, a movie of strong assertive and oppositional effect, brings me the dimension of the difficulty to our social organization structured by capitalism of managing the difference in a productive way. Therefore my interest in the comprehension of contradiction, which will be focused more specifically in the analysis of *Tereza* and *Boca de Lixo*.

### Tereza

In *Tereza*, a 1992 production, we have a little of the prisoners' life and the everyday of a prison, hard questions of a world that is not the viewer's one, which comes through stories, as facts in a fictional form. However, in *Tereza* we read that “*this is not a fictional story*”...

The stories told in *Tereza* appear to be amalgamated episodes, in a continuous way that does not define beginnings or endings.

“The dude can get in, can fall like a chicken thief. He can be anything, only by not falling like a kinky he may be a good thief. He stole someone, right? Now, the guys come here like sick-minded people, they get spanked, no pity, no pity at all”<sup>7</sup>.

“Bought four grammes, sometimes, when one thought one could get a bit more, one bought five grammes. So, so the thing was like a little sequence, I mean, one for you and one for me”<sup>8</sup>.

“Twelve is the guy who deals with the pot, he sells pot, sells cocaine, sells different things like drugs. So, he is the article twelve. Sixteen is the article for only drug addicted. He smokes pot, he gets high, well, every drug, if he is... If he is not caught selling, see, so he is a sixteen”<sup>9</sup>.

“Tereza may be different things, tereza, in a scape, for example, may be blankets, see, which you can use as a ladder to run away, this is tereza. If you have a tereza inside the slum, for example, and you smoke pot, tereza may be used to prevent people from outside to smell pot, preventing the smoke to get out of the slum”<sup>10</sup>.

Facts anchored in real faces, which are depicted as characters of the documentary. Prisoners who are characters (Figure 3), protagonists of a space of fundamental otherness.



Figure 3. Prisoners or characters? *Tereza* (1992).

<sup>7</sup> Translated from: “o cara pode entrar, pode cair como um ladrão de galinha. Pode cair como qualquer coisa, só não caindo como um sem-vergonha, ele é um bom ladrão. Ele roubou também, certo? Agora, os cara cai aqui como safado eles apanham mesmo, num dá boa, num tem boa mesmo”.

<sup>8</sup> Translated from: “comprava quatro grammas, às vezes, quando a gente achava que a gente ia conseguir tomar um pouco mais, a gente comprava cinco grammas. Ai, ai era aquela sessão de barrinha. A barrinha que a gente fala é um pro cê, um pra mim”.

<sup>9</sup> Translated from: “o doze é o cara que mexe com maconha, ele vende maconha, vende cocaína, vende diversas coisas que seria droga. Então ele é o artigo doze. O dezesseis é um artigo que só é o viciado. Ele fuma maconha, ele toma pica, enfim, tudo o que for droga, se ele for é... Se não pegarem ele vendendo, entendeu, então ele é um dezesseis”.

<sup>10</sup> Translated from: “tereza existe de várias maneira, tereza, por exemplo numa fuga, elas são cobertores, entendeu, trançado em nó, entendeu, que você coloca numa altura, ela serve de escada pra você conseguir a fuga, isso é a tereza. Se existir tereza dentro dum barraco, por exemplo, vamos supor, você vai fumar uma maconha, então são três pedaços de pano trançado em trança e assim aquilo ali vai segurar a fumaça pra evitar o cheiro da maconha, pra não ir pra fora”.



Figure 3 (continuation). Prisoners or characters? *Tereza* (1992).

One specific scene of the documentary, captured in frame (Figure 4), is very significant for the discussion of the contradiction in *Tereza*.

The cropped face allows us to say that the identification of the individual does not matter. We have a focus that peers in vagueness, telling us that there is an individual, that there are individuals, as well as there are 'stories...'. Unfinished face and sentence. In this scene we see the reference to outside of the limits marked by the framing of the face's segmented picture and by the ellipsis that points to a non-formulated sequence. In audio we hear: "he wanted to kill me for trivial things, me, I killed him. Now I am sworn to death by his gang (ele quis matar eu por coisas banais, eu me, eu matei ele. Agora eu to jurado de morte pela quadrilha dele)".



Figure 4. Unfinished face and sentence. *Tereza* (1992).

In the analysis of this speech that talks about a crime - "I killed him (*eu matei ele*)" I call attention to the totally unexpected prosody of this sequence: there is no signal of commotion and the death that is told about is in the same level as many other trivial subjects. A form of justice that is not legitimized by the discursive memory that guides the order of law.

This individual is seen by the viewer from a position that is destabilized in his judgment. An outside position, which finds the prosody strange and misunderstands the apparent normality of the reported action. A routine in which the verbs 'kill' and 'die' share the same scene by an equivocal relationship. A viewer who hears the voice of an individual whose position of murder is ambiguous in the imbrication of killing or dying.

Our look reaches the face of a prisoner in character's position, and the conjunction plays an important role here: criminal *and* character, fact *and* story, truth *and* fiction. The possibility of sliding is presented by anchoring our listening in the non-conclusion, in the composition of an undefined face in an episodic story.

The possibility of seeing death, drug, rape told in facts that are episodic stories, by faces that are scrutinized and marked at the same time as prisoners and characters, demands a reorganization of senses

that is marked in the look, prosody, strangeness of the teller and the listener.

Facts and/or stories, true faces and/or characters. An essential paraphrastic game. One and another at the same time, a little of each one, in the equivocal contradiction of a society that dichotomizes reality and fiction. What is important the equivocal impasse between the face of a prisoner and the face of a character, the equivocal impasse between a fact and a story. *Tereza* builds an equivocal listening for the viewer in this intersection between faces and stories, a nodal point in the composition of visual and verbal materiality.

### Boca de Lixo

*Boca de Lixo*, a 1992 documentary by Eduardo Coutinho, discusses the life of the dump scavengers of *Vazadouro de Itaoca*, Rio de Janeiro, placing us as viewers of the dump scavengers' work. In *Boca de Lixo* I understand the contradictory relationship between trash and body.

I show that the body bent towards the garbage (Figure 5) has no resonance in the discursive memory that constitutes and legitimizes our social organization. Even though bending the body towards the floor brings the memory of work, there are many already legitimated conceptions imposed by our society that prevent the conjunction between the bent body and the trash, such as, for example, the needs for a healthy lifestyle, good hygiene, clean environment and good working conditions.



Figure 5. Body and garbage. *Boca de Lixo* (1992).

Despite the strangeness, we can not deny that bending the body towards the garbage is the gesture that identifies the dump scavenger, it is an anchor point of the visual materiality in *Boca de Lixo*, a visual support point of the documentary (Figure 6).



Figure 6. The bent body towards the garbage. *Boca de Lixo* (1992).

I state that in the dump-scavenger-subject-position, the bent body only makes sense if related to the garbage, and this visual formulation concentrates tension and contradiction. I

understand that being a scavenger is to upgrade the memory of working in a body position, in a subject-position without a place in our social organization. The bent body towards the garbage is the formulation of the contradiction that is not solved.

My proposal of working in contradictory composition between different materialities is based on the assertion that unit is always imaginary, that the synthesis is impossible when talking about the social relationships. This is important because the discourses are interlinked and the formulations are open to other possibilities of significant rearrangements.

### Conclusion

The analyses here presented of *Tropa de Elite*, *Tereza* and *Boca de Lixo* bring visibility to the discursive work in the imbrication of different significant materialities and to the textualization of the difference in social context, allowing us to observe the work of contradiction in between the oppositional naturalization that structures most of the relationships which organizes us in the capitalist world. Working with contradiction makes visible the failure in the ritual and shows the resistance as a process of possible displacement. Away from the logical disjunction, the hill, the prison and the dump are necessary demands for non-obvious senses.

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