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The Force of Grace, the Grace of Force: Joking Critique of Figures of 'Urban Violence' on the Covers of a Tabloid Newspaper as the 'Violentization' of Public Discourse¹

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O objetivo de **A força da graça, a graça da força: A crítica jocosa aos personagens da 'violência urbana' nas capas de um jornal popular como 'violentização' da fala pública** é analisar como um conjunto de representações sobre a violência urbana no Rio de Janeiro se desdobra em críticas jocosas públicas. Isso é feito por meio de um estudo de cerca de 2400 capas do jornal popular *Meia Hora*, notório por sua apresentação jocosa das notícias, no período entre 2011 e 2017, correspondente a uma rotinização estabelecida por conta das Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora (UPPs). A análise mostrou como a *ridicularização* operada na crítica jocosa expressa representações sobre três figuras centrais no cenário da violência urbana fluminense: o *bandido*, o *policial* e o próprio *Rio de Janeiro como ordem social*.

Palavras-chave: graça, crítica jocosa, violência urbana, *Meia Hora*, jornal popular

This article sets out to analyse how a set of social representations of urban violence in Rio de Janeiro is revealed in public humorous critique. The research is based on a study of around 2,400 covers of the tabloid *Meia Hora*, famous for its comic presentation of the news, which were published between 2011 and 2017, a period corresponding to a *routinization* established by Rio's Pacifying Police Units (UPPs). The analysis reveals how the *ridicule* deployed in humorous critique expresses the social representations of three main figures in the context of Rio de Janeiro's urban violence: the *criminal*, the *police officer* and *Rio de Janeiro itself as a social order*.

Keywords: comic, humorous critique, urban violence, 'Meia Hora' newspaper, tabloids

The aim of this article is to analyse the way in which a set of representations of urban violence in Rio de Janeiro is revealed in the form of joking mechanisms deployed in public discourses—and to demonstrate some of the consequences of this movement in terms of what colleagues and I have called *violentization* (WERNECK, TEIXEIRA and TALONE, 2020), that is, the *definition of situations* (THOMAS, 1966[1923]) involving the mobilization of *notable differences of force* as situations of *violence*. This analysis is based on a study of the covers of the tabloid newspaper *Meia Hora*—notorious for the comic presentation of news on its front pages—between 2011 and 2017. During this period, the current configurations of what has been called the *social accumulation of violence* (MISSE, 1999) and the *language of urban violence* (MACHADO DA SILVA *et al.*, 2011) underwent a *routinization* due to the activities of Rio's Pacifying Police Units (UPPs),² thereby clearing the way for this specific form of the phenomenon,³ a scenario that, as various works have shown, fell into terminal decline in the final year of this series.⁴ The idea here is to analyse how the *ridicularization* (BILLIG, 2005; ROMANIENKO, 2008; WERNECK, 2019) deployed in humorous critique contributes to the

definition of three figures central to the representation of ‘urban violence’ (MACHADO DA SILVA, 1993; PORTO, 1999; MISSE, 1999): the *bandido* (bandit/criminal), the *policial* (police officer) and *Rio de Janeiro* itself as a *social order*. In the research, which involved a semiotic analysis (HODGE, 2017) of around 2,400 front pages of the newspaper, treated here as a *sounding board* of the representations of urban violence circulating in this environment, it was possible to observe how a critical discourse is constructed through the *intervention* (WERNECK, 2022a) of joking devices, a voice capable of expressing a series of characteristics of the moral configuration of this debate by *reducing to the ridiculous* (and thus the absurd) the *worth*⁵ (BOLTANSKI and THÉVENOT, 2020[1991]) of these characters, treated here as *actants* (GREIMAS, 1966; LATOUR, 1984; BOLTANSKI, 1990; WERNECK, 2015b)⁶ of violentization—that is, as entities with a determinant role in *defining the situation*, in this case, as *violent*.

In various works I have shown the role played by joking discourse in the construction and recognition of critiques (WERNECK, 2016a), both privately or in face-to-face interactions (WERNECK, 2015a) and publicly (WERNECK and LORETTI, 2018). In Werneck (2019), I demonstrated how the deployment of a humorous register as a platform for critique helps construct a *singular observer* capable of *effectuating* (WERNECK, 2012a, 2022b) the critique through a reduction to the ridiculous without the need to comply with the rationalist protocol of *providing proof* (BOLTANSKI and THÉVENOT, 2020[1991]), thereby ratifying the idea of a *transitory truth* (NIELSEN, 01/04/2019) to be accepted without objectivist evaluations. This demonstrates the role performed by the deployment of grace—that is, a competence founded on *inspiration* (BOLTANSKI and THÉVENOT, 2020[1991]), creativity and singularity, the main element of effectuation of a joking action (fundamentally, a demonstration of witness). Here, this operation is seen at the level of the maintenance of a representation of routine life in Rio de Janeiro (i.e., under a large-scale urban social order) represented as *violentized*. In an earlier work (WERNECK, 2015b), I demonstrated how this current state of the social accumulation of violence and the current grammar of the language of urban violence can be described as an *actantial system* (LATOUR, 1997[1987]; BOLTANSKI, 1990), a configuration of elements capable of effectuating a social phenomenon through the intervention of certain *actants*.⁷ In an actantial system, a configuration of typical key actants mobilize the phenomenon through the actions of each of them in their most effective state of worth (BOLTANSKI, 1990; WERNECK, 2012a).

In this earlier text, I also suggested a discrete set of actants to define the actantial system of urban violence in Rio de Janeiro, as represented by residents in their everyday conversations about the city. In another work, my colleagues and I (WERNECK, TEIXEIRA, TALONE and CAMINHAS, 2021) expanded this picture into a much broader gallery: the *tyrant* (*tirano*), epitomized by the favela drug trafficker; the *extorter* (*achacador*), symbolized

by the corrupt police officer; the *soldier* (*soldado*), represented by the combative version of the police officer (an idea that, from the viewpoint of the actors, covers a huge spectrum of formalized figures from military police and municipal guards to prison officers, even including private security staff—in other words, anyone who, in legal possession of firearms, is recognised to have the power to give orders/coerce);⁸ the *grabber* (*apoderador*) or simply *thief* (*ladrão*);⁹ the *threatener* (*ameaçador*), the paradigmatic example of whom is the killer; the *platypus* (*ornitorrinco*), a composite of tyrant, extortioner and threatener consubstantiated by the *militia member* (*miliciano*); the *urchin* (*pivete*), a representation of ‘idle’ children, ‘let loose in the street,’ associated with violent actions; the *crackhead* (*crackudo*), an image of the homeless person, whether or not a user of drugs, but represented as violent; and the *city*, the environment where conflictual social relations unfold and capable of transforming into a *dystopia* (TALONE, 2015, 2018) in the eyes of the actors.

The research on the front pages of *Meia Hora*, however, revealed the assemblage of a more simplified version of this array of representative figures, such as they are typically polarized in Rio’s social order: *police v. criminal* (a category that includes various of the criminalizable actants cited above)¹⁰ in a *city* that is *Rio de Janeiro as a social order*. Hence, the analysis consisted of studying how these three figures are presented comically—in other words, how they are *ridiculed* on the tabloid’s covers, demonstrating a dynamic according to which, as I shall demonstrate here, the particular cases of each are reduced to the ridiculous *each time that they fail to occupy the greatest state of worth as actants*, that is, when they do not prove to be ideal representatives of the categories to which they pertain. In this way, the newspaper covers present images of each of them at various moments, as in these examples:¹¹



11/02/2015



06/09/2012



11/06/2015

On the first cover—‘Right Arm of the Drug Trade Boss Only Has a Left Arm’—we see a criminal. But although his position of potency is shown (carrying a rifle and a walkie-talkie) along with his involvement in criminality (his connections to the drug trade are made explicit, naming him as the boss ‘right arm,’ the basis of the joke), he is displayed as bizarre (mocked for his disability) and ineffectual or *ridiculous* (not only as an amputee warrior, but also on account of his clothing, flipflops and the chaotic environment in which he moves about), thereby subverting the image of the *cold* and *serious* ‘big criminal.’

On the second cover we see the police being *mocked* (WERNECK, 2015b) by the newspaper, labelled incompetent and *mirim*, amateur, incapable of distinguishing criminals from ‘innocents’ (a fundamental distinction in this system of representations). The tabloid goes as far as to provide an illustration with the caption: ‘Hello Police! Meia Will Help You Improve your Training and Avoid Killing Innocents! Cut Out and Stick on your Target Stand. Oh, An Important Detail: The Criminal is the One Standing Behind’ (as in the saying ‘do you want me to draw you a picture?’ when someone fails to grasp a simple idea).

Finally, on the third cover—‘Colourless Rio’—the newspaper adopts as a comic element the editorial fashion of the time, colouring books for adults, normally presented as relaxing pastimes, simulating their aesthetic: it shows a Rio without colors, left lifeless, dazed by reports of more crime victims, telling its readers in the subheading that ‘[the] city is sad over another three cases of people injured in assaults. A woman was knifed in Campinho and another two injured by gunshots in Irajá and Botafogo. But we can help colour in everything again. Hands to work!’ An apparent message of optimism, but more likely ironic in tone since it basically insinuates that the only remedy available to Rio’s citizens is to colour in a page, given that changing the real world is impossible.

The examples synthesize a movement observed throughout the sample: the newspaper expresses through *humour* the debasement or ‘moral fall’ (WERNECK, 2015b) of each of these actants, reducing them to the ridiculous and thereby simultaneously expressing *through inversion* their representational characteristics commonly established in the Rio de Janeiro imaginary.¹² In these cases, then, we find a questioning of the characteristics of these actants typically represented in the Rio social order in an environment of urban violence. Moreover, these characteristics can be apprehended *precisely because of their negation through humour*: it was the recurrence of the subversion evoked by ridicularization that enables to characterize the images of these figures more usually anticipated, their characteristic worths, in which they are expected to prove effective. From the *criminal* (*bandido*), for example, it was possible to infer the image of a figure defined by perpetrating *crime* and acting with *violence*, who moves around using *force* and behaves as a *coward*, who displays *malandragem* (shrewdness) in his

(or her) *audacious* and defiant strategies and actions, who as a man shows himself *virile* and as a woman *low key*, and who acts against the *worker* (*trabalhador*), against *good people* (*gente de bem*).¹³ The *police officer* (*policia*l), in turn, is idealized by the common representation as someone whose reason for being is *combat*, recognized for his military *might*; someone motivated by *duty* (*dever*) who mobilizes force in a strictly *coercive*, *technical* form, although he demonstrates *courage* in his actions; someone *virile* and *serious*, but *human* with the good people, whose *only victims are criminals*. As for Rio de Janeiro, in a setting of violence, the anticipated representation is that the city always *resists* as the *Cidade Maravilhosa*, the Marvellous City, despite the many demanding situations it faces.¹⁴ The negative of this image is the assertion of an unprecedented and unbearable chaos—reflecting not only a social accumulation of violence but also a *social accumulation of disorder* (LORETTI, 2016, p. 58).

Based on the perception of this movement that implicates the three main actants in the sample, I was able to define a *matrix of formal elements* (WERNECK and LORETTI, 2018) characterizing these actants of urban violence. Setting out from central competences, observed in negative (WATSON, 2015) throughout the universe of tabloid covers and definitive of *how each one would ideally be*, it was possible to perceive the distinctions made between each and highlight other determinant characteristics.

The analysed sample comprised 2,403 covers, all the newspaper editions during the period.¹⁵ In addition, an interview was conducted with the executive editor of the newspaper at the time.¹⁶ In *Meia Hora*, the front pages are usually divided into four lead stories, hierarchically arranged (a distinction expressed in headline sizes, occupation of space, use of images and other resources). The research counted, classified and analysed the occurrences of different categories of topics to appear on the covers in each of these lead stories (taking into account this difference in weightings), observing when the topic was linked to violence in general and to the representation of ‘urban violence’ in particular (a distinction explained later), with an emphasis on the allusion to the three key actants, including when these allusions were made through humorous means. Analysed next was the *formal matrix* (WERNECK and LORETTI, 2018) involved in the construction of these comic allusions in terms of *humorous devices* in the various elements of the lead stories (headlines, subheadings, photos, illustrations, captions and so on). Finally, the analysis observed the forms of critique specifically directed at each of the actants in these comic discourses. The results, presented below, ultimately show how criminals, public security agents and the city itself¹⁷ are idealized—and deconstructed through ridicularization. Here I present a synthesis of the matrix with the main formal elements observed, notably the competence being ridicularized (and thus simultaneously negated in the particular case, newsworthy by its exceptionality, and made explicit through the routine):

Table 1

	ACTANT		
WORTHS	CRIMINAL	POLICE	RIO DE JANEIRO
CENTRAL COMPETENCE	CRIME AND VIOLENCE	COMBAT	ENCHANTMENT (MARVELLOUS CITY)
MOTOR AGENCY	FORCE	MIGHT	ORDER
RECOGNIZED FORM OF ACTUATION	AUDACITY	COURAGE	RESISTANCE
MORAL AGENCY	WICKEDNESS	DUTY	HOPE
FORM OF MOBILIZING FORCE	COWARDLINESS (EXCESSIVE)	COERCION (MAGNIFIED AND TARGETED)	INTEGRATED WITH THE SOCIAL ORDER
FORM OF AGENCY	CLEVER (SHREWD)	TECHNIQUE	INTEGRATIVE
IDENTITY MANAGEMENT	COHERENCE WITH THE BEHAVIOUR EXPECTED FROM THEIR GENDER	COHERENCE WITH THE BEHAVIOUR EXPECTED FROM THEIR GENDER	COHERENCE WITH THE CONDITION OF UTOPIA
EMOTIONAL MANAGEMENT	SERIOUS AND COLD	SERIOUS AND HUMAN	HAPPINESS AND ROUTINE
THOSE AFFECTED	'GOOD' PEOPLE	CRIMINALS	EVERYONE

Source: Author's elaboration.

As stated earlier, the research observed the front pages of *Meia Hora* between 1 January 2011 and 29 July 2017, an edition I adopted as the end point to the research due to its symbolic character, as explained earlier in a footnote. This is the cover from the day in question:



The captionless image taking up practically the entire page suggests that words are unnecessary to announce the news: the armed forces have arrived in Rio de Janeiro ('The Army Arrived!' the subheading below the photo exclaims, somewhat redundantly). At that moment, the dispatch of the national army was presented as a desperate measure against, as the same

subheading puts it, ‘the biggest security crisis the state has ever experienced,’ something perceived, as seen in the analyses, as an outcome of the crisis in the UPPs (BARRETTO, 28/07/2017; BIANCHI, 29/07/2017).¹⁸ The *humour* (which I shall discuss in more detail in the next item) of this cover derives from the use of emojis, icons typically used in internet communication to represent gestures and emotional states, as if the front page were a social media post: applause; a clenched fist, two hands meeting (an image itself a kind of visual pun since many people point out its ambiguity as either a prayer or a high-five greeting); two arms displaying muscles, thus showing force; and finally two raised hands indicating movement and/or commemoration: ‘Hallelujah!’ ‘Thank God!’—signs both of celebration and of ‘it was about time!’ In the process, the tabloid simultaneously expresses the idea that Rio de Janeiro is immersed in chaos and that its analysis based on a ‘war’ (LEITE, 2000, 2012; GRILLO, 2019) of police versus criminals is set to change: a bigger force has turned up. Up until then, the routine of the state had been otherwise. The research showed that this period, which today tends to be called ‘the UPP era,’ corresponded to a routine, precisely what I am interested in analysing here.

The idea of routine and its tense relationship to urban violence is fundamental in this context. Machado da Silva (2004, p. 54) makes explicit its importance when he stresses the need for studies of urban violence to take seriously its “impact on the structuring of everyday routines.”¹⁹ At the same time, Misse (1999), discussing the social accumulation of violence, points to a contradiction in the behaviour of what the author calls a ‘phantasm’ (the representation of an omnipresent violence): the fact that it constructs a perennial state of exception, a quotidian feeling of relational chaos. More recently, Talone (2015, 2018) analysed this routinization as a ‘realized dystopia’—building from Boltanski’s (1990) idea of a ‘realized utopia.’ Continuing Machado da Silva’s line of interpretation but guided by Dewey’s ideas of indeterminacy and inquiry (DEWEY, 1938), Menezes (2014) analysed how the entrance of the UPPs into the life of the favelas inaugurated an *investigative process* among the residents, seeking to define what was happening. In particular, the author explored how the attempt to assuage indeterminacy through *rumours* (MENEZES, 2014, 2015) represented a strong key to everyday life in these localities at that moment. My argument is that although this indeterminacy began in 2008 with the genesis of the UPP program, from 2011 the public discourse of the city, here epitomized by the representations published in *Meia Hora*, underwent a *routinization*, the fixation of a series of signs and their meanings as quotidian, which enabled consolidation of the elements of a *grammar of urban violence*²⁰ in the aforementioned actantial system and its simplification as a set of actants, enabling a critical dialogue on urban violence to be made through ridicularization (WERNECK, 2019).

This analysis simultaneously converges with two of my principal areas of inquiry: a *comprehensive and pragmatic sociology of critique* (BOLTANSKI, 2009; WERNECK, 2012a, 2015a, 2016a, 2016b; WERNECK and LORETTI, 2018) and an analysis of the *question of violence* in Rio de Janeiro as a *sociology of morality* (WERNECK, 2012b; 2015b, 2018; WERNECK and TALONE, 2019; WERNECK, TEIXEIRA and TALONE, 2020; WERNECK, TEIXEIRA, TALONE and CAMINHAS, 2021). The meeting of these perspectives enabled an advance in the comprehension of critique as a moral phenomenon and of violence as an *interpretant* (PEIRCE, 1977[1897]; WERNECK and TALONE, 2019; WERNECK, TEIXEIRA and TALONE, 2020; WERNECK, TEIXEIRA, TALONE and CAMINHAS, 2021).

The comedy of crime, the police and Rio de Janeiro

As I have shown in other works cited before, humour can be an important device for presenting critiques. Here I include myself among scholars who have focused attention on the use of jokes as a critical tool, especially in politics (CHOCK, 2001; COLEBROOK, 2004; BOS and T'HART, 2008; BECKMAN, 2014; YACINTAS, 2015; BERGER, 2017[1997]; TRNKA and REHAK, 2018; MINA, 2019), but also in other spheres (HERZFELD, 2001; GILBERT, 2004; SMITH, 2018). In my more recent analyses in this area (WERNECK, 2019, 2021), I have highlighted the need to take *humour* seriously as form of grace competence (the competence of inspiration), a means of effectuation, as Boltanski and Thévenot (2020[1991]) formulate the idea in their model of *economies of worth*: more than aim to *provoke laughter*, comic devices seek to *be witty, make fun* or, in Portuguese, *fazer graça*, literally 'make grace' (which means to prove inspiration); in other words, they seek to account for a given situation through a competence inherent to inspiration as a worth. This inspired humour (WERNECK, 2019, p. 619) or wit is

perceived by social actors to indicate that something singular has been introduced into the world and derives from a creative breath, originating from a higher – and to some extent transcendent – source. This inspiration (whether divine or some other origin) marks the production of mystic speech in religious contexts but equally also underpins the singularity of the great creator/creation in the arts and the sciences.

Continuing this line of argument, I suggested (WERNECK, 2019, pp. 620-621) that being witty or making fun (or grace/*graça*)

makes explicit the singularity of a mechanism and demonstrates one's inspiration or *spiritedness*. It is no accident that someone who makes fun/grace/*graça* is described [*in Portuguese*] as *engraçado*, full of grace/*graça* (that is, filled with the gift of this superior entity called inspiration). The configuration of the humorous game, therefore, in this scenario – and in the actual scene of its own art – suggests a dislocation of

the effectiveness of the comic through a rationalist inversion: the perception of humour as an emotional event (in which the primordial aim is to make someone laugh, to produce an involuntary response) shifts to the recognition of *grace* as an intellectual phenomenon, a witticism: it is not so much a question of judging what is 'funny' (*engraçado*) as something that provokes laughter (Bergson, (2001[1900]) but of judging that something 'has wit/grace/*graça*' in the sense of that which makes explicit a great idea, something that provokes (...) the validation indicative of an 'insight.' Thus [*the observed occurrences of jokes*] work with a huge spectrum of joking strategies, meaning that a 'humoristic' analytic perspective proves insufficient to explain (...) creative constructions: (...) a huge plethora [*of these occurrences of jokes*] seemed to be immersed in an inspired grammar, grounded in 'grace', basically demanding, in their analysis of competence, a demonstration of 'cleverness' or 'wit' in the message, an affirmation of creativity along highly technical lines, configuring a compromise between an inspired logic and an industrial logic [*Boltanski and Thévenot, 2020[1991]*] – seeking a less informative and more symbolic message (Peirce, 1977[1897]), or in other words, one open to interpretation. Consequently, it was necessary to broaden the scope [*of the sample*] to a level that included all [*the discourses*] whose message was not explicit and objective (Werneck and Loretto, 2018) and seek some creative presentation (that is, a symbolic presentation, open in semiotic terms) of their critique, given that all of them could represent grace.

As I also demonstrated in the same text, the advantage of this analytic operation was that it allowed inference of a mechanics of avoiding the central protocol of critique based on the regime of justice, the imperative to *test* (*épreuve*) (BOLTANSKI and THÉVENOT, 2020[1991]), whereby any critique needs to pass through a reflexive pondering of their justifications vis-à-vis worths (valorative principles) and proofs (concrete evidence capable of demonstrating the adjustment of the situation to these principles). This makes

the logical protocol pivots the situation: from a critical moment [*BOLTANSKI and THÉVENOT (1999)*] that would induce the process of providing proof (of rational evaluation based on proofs of consistent tangibility) to a moment of critique in which, through humour, nothing is evaluated rationally; on the contrary, the invitation to ridicule leads one to endorse the public denunciation (WERNECK, 2019, p. 623).

In this way, the analysis of *Meia Hora's* covers showed how headlines, photos and graphic elements contributed to the construction of critiques of the actants concerned: whether the criminal who *fails* as a criminal—a situation designated by the expression *perdeu*, 'lost'—or the police officer who fails as a police officer, that is, by acting in an incompetent or disastrous form, when he *manezou*, as the expression goes (that is, he acted as a *mané*, a 'dickhead,' simultaneously an assertion of his technical incompetence and his incapacity to show a certain *malandragem*, the smartness required of any Carioca, or resident of Rio, without possessing the malicious shrewdness of the criminal); and of Rio de Janeiro by failing as a paradise and permitting *nihilism* to reign. All are objects of a ridicularized presentation, which allows them to be attacked along similar lines to those observed in political critiques (WERNECK, 2019, 2021): reduced to the ridiculous, their potency is diminished, making them opponents easy to accuse.

The newspaper as a sounding board and *Meia Hora* as graces' agentic device

Ever since its launch in 2005, *Meia Hora* has become famous as a tabloid newspaper par excellence in Rio de Janeiro.²¹ Although no specific survey on the subject exists, save for the company's own market research, it is very likely that the place occupied in the Rio imaginary by this publication, which became the state's third highest selling newspaper with an average circulation of 115,000 copies per day, derives from its humorous form of presenting the news. Tabloid in format and sold at a low price—at the time of publishing this article, a copy cost R\$ 1—it is described by the company itself as a *jornal popular*, a tabloid newspaper, possessing a target public in the C and D classes, and using simple language and short texts (characteristics typical of this sector).²² But the joking identity, especially in the front page lead stories, made it a singular publication, demonstrating a strong personality and making explicit the strong creative agency and identity of its editors: there is clearly a *Meia Hora* front page 'style.'

Despite this fact, one of the premises adopted in this analysis involved bracketing the condition of actor (political, economic, etc.) of the newspaper itself and focusing solely on its dimension as a *sounding board*. Thus, while *Meia Hora* can be recognised as an *author* of the jokes (obviously as a metonym for its editors), it can primarily be conceived as an *assemblage* of a set of representations circulating in the city and its metropolitan region and registered by the publication. One of the reasons why this approach is possible is the fact that, even though it takes humour as its trademark, the newspaper does so in order to act out the basic operation of journalistic logic, precisely *critique* (LEMIEUX, 2000; WERNECK, 2004). The structure of the journalistic text follows a formal protocol: a story is justified on the basis of the idea of *publicization*, that is, the fact that it enunciates a fact of *public interest* (HABERMAS, 2014[1962]; LEMIEUX, 2000; NEVEU, 2001). This interest generally presumes either a *civic grammar* (BOLTANSKI and THÉVENOT, 2020[1991]), where this interest stems from the enunciated fact constituting a *public problem* (GUSFIELD, 1981; CEFAÏ, 2002) or representing a *solution* to such a problem; or an *inspired grammar* and/or a *grammar of fame* (BOLTANSKI and THÉVENOT, 2020[1991]), where the public character stems from a series of curiosities about personalities or things. But whether derived from a logic of the problem or from a curiosity, the journalistic text and, consequently, its preparation will be based on the same form: a) the presentation of the fact; b) the presentation of proofs of the fact (evidential data and/or witnesses) and, in so doing, the justification for its publicization; c) the observation that the fact has someone or something *responsible* and the identification of the latter; d) the *interpellation* of those responsible for the fact, implying a *critique* when a public problem is involved or a *potentially critical questioning* of its legitimacy as a solution or a curiosity; and e) the

presentation of *specialized discourses* analysing the fact (that is, corroborating the public interest, responsibility and/or questioning). This matrix will be followed in most journalistic texts in their most basic genres, news stories and reporting (ERBOLATO, 1991), with more or less space and depth for each element, depending on the dynamic of the case. In other words, whatever its interests as an economic and/or political agent, a newspaper needs to balance them textually and formally with its technical product, *critical interpellation*, and this is the point that I wish to extrapolate here: the humorous stance of the journal as a political project or a voluntarist morality—on which various analyses exist, as cited earlier—matters less than how its function in legitimizing the public character of its presentations.

But while this journalistic imperative is centred on the formal dimension, it demands an adjustment to the content that it effectuates. Among contemporary societies, the frameworks of values used as a reference for the construction of the interpellations and critiques are not left solely to the whim of journalists, editors or even media executives—although all of them can pursue their own agendas and indeed commonly do so with greater or lesser effectiveness, depending on the case (IGGERS, 1999; HERMAN and CHOMSKY, 2002). As a *profoundly modern* device (HABERMAS, 2014[1962]; LEMIEUX, 2000; NEVEU, 2001), journalism follows, save in its explicitly and expressly militant versions, a more or less homogeneous moral agenda, one centred on both a contemporary set of technical consensuses about the key disciplines for certain specialized publishers—such as those of economics,²³ health or arts/culture—and also on a more or less definitive set of principles for a minimal liberal hegemonic moral agenda (PRESSMAN, 2018, HERMAN and CHOMSKY, 2002) that is also more or less consensual: democracy, justice in an ample sense, individual freedoms, freedom of the press/expression, respect for human rights and the self-determination of peoples, respect for law and order, and so on. In this sense, it can be said that the normal journalistic construction needs to balance the formal critical imperative, the technical/moral consensuses of the time and the interests in play.

When it comes to so-called ‘popular’ or ‘tabloid’ newspapers, their specificity needs to be conceived, then, in terms of a pragmatics concerning their specific way of operationalizing this balancing, a way capable of characterizing it in the same terms by the actors themselves. In the social sciences, works on journalism in a broad sense and on tabloid journalism in particular are generally dedicated to a sociology critical of these media outlets as apparatuses of knowledge/power (for a synthesis, see NEVEU, 2001). The areas of communication and studies of language tend to invest more in discussions on their characterization and the mechanics of their fundamental operations—see, for example, Atallah and Nogueira (2012); Mota e Mota and Souza (2012); Freire and Valente (2014); Moura (2015), Valentim (2016), Costa and Menezes (2016), all on the specific case of *Meia Hora*, as well as the previously cited Amaral (2006) and

Costa (2016). To undertake a *sociology of critique* in/of journalism (LEMIEUX, 2000) it is necessary to take seriously not only the critical operations made in the ‘media’ (an idea itself an idealization of a constructed unit) as insights into the news media’s interpellation/verification/effectuation, but also—and primordially—the critical operations made as a public discourse in/by the media outlets as constructions to be analysed themselves. Without ignoring the need for a critical examination of the discourses of the newspapers, it is also necessary to set aside this task for now in order—without redounding in an analytic naivety—to take seriously the specific mechanics of the critique produced on the interface between journalism and social life (of which journalism obviously forms part). Thus, the idea itself of a tabloid newspaper should be explored not only in terms of its project (commercial, epistemological, political) but also in terms of its praxeology: how it functions, how it produces meanings, what results from them in terms of social phenomenon. It is necessary to think, therefore, about what a ‘tabloid newspaper’ is a posteriori to the observation, specifically how it is understood by the social actors involved, and not just think about it a priori as a device designed to manipulate them. Along these lines, the exhaustive observation of the covers of this specific newspaper revealed the operationalization of a specific strategy of *publicist* legitimation (TARDE, 2005[1901]), grounded in a game of proximity that simultaneously seeks to equalize and horizontalize the dialogue between newspaper and reader, and also effectuate its public character through an intensive thematic agenda (less diverse than that of traditional newspapers, based on a strategy of technical authority and an agenda of ‘big politics’ and authorized knowledge) and a set of devices for approximation with the readership (such as, for example, colloquial language and obviously, in this case, humour). In this sense, *Meia Hora* found its niche in comic speech by converting the critical mechanics of the newspaper into a daily operation of *gracejo*, the insertion of wit or *grace/grça* into the voice enunciating the news, creating the *singular observer* (WERNECK, 2019, 2021) who ultimately is legitimized by and legitimizes a *complicity* with the reader.

Joking, then, is adapted to the mechanics of this search for public legitimacy specifically established by this publication. In an interview with me, the chief editor of *Meia Hora* at the time of the investigation, Humberto Tziolas, states that he only ever sought humour in response to an important news story: “I never made a headline just for the joke’s sake. Behind the joke is the information. I think that [*if*] we managed a [*witty*] take, it’s because the information is important.” Although this may be questionable in a few cases, the study did not reveal a significant number of headlines of flagrantly minor interest being turned into lead stories just because of the possibility of a humorous angle.

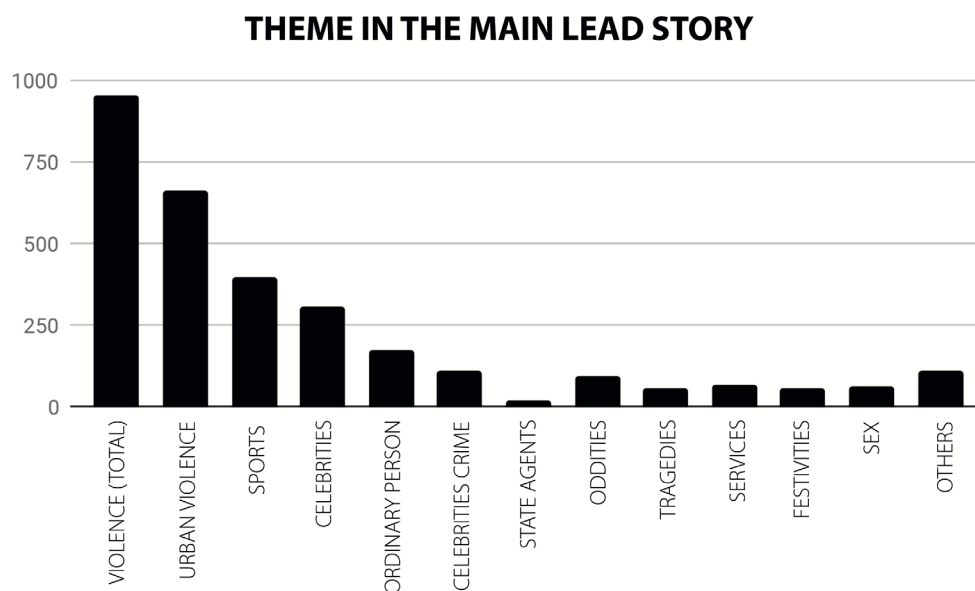
In the case of my sample, the fact that the publication, as a tabloid newspaper, prioritized news stories about urban violence, as we shall see in figures below, makes sense from the

viewpoint of legitimization among its readership, many of them residents of peripheral areas and favelas, making them social issues whose publicization is easily justified. Moreover, the fact that this theme, which some might find ‘heavy,’ is turned into the butt of a joke does not seem to conflict with any evaluation of its legitimacy: it precisely makes explicit a routinization capable of integrating the topic into the daily life of the actors and the city, the use of humour figuring as an attraction strategy for any of the newspaper’s themes in a formal decision to use humour that itself makes sense in the collusion between a ‘tabloid’ newspaper and readers.

Humour makes the news: lead stories on ‘violence’ and humorous devices

As a typical tabloid newspaper, therefore, *Meia Hora*, as could be seen in the research, privileges lead stories on (in decreasing order of occurrences): ‘violence,’²⁴ sports and celebrities. In addition, its front page also includes headlines on what could be called oddities (for example, the history of a woman married to a tree), tragedies, service provisions, festivities/gossip, and sex. Graph 1 below maps the presence of these themes in the main lead stories:

Graph 1



Source: Source: Author’s elaboration.

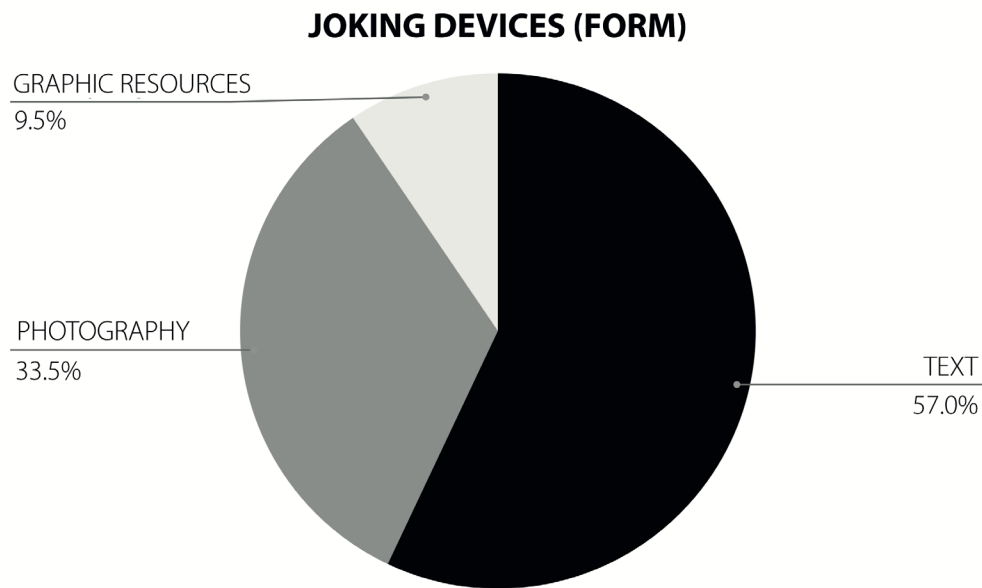
As can be seen, the stories on violence in general and on urban violence in particular dominate the news reports²⁵ (representing 44.8% of the main lead stories and 39.7% of the total leads).²⁶ I worked with a general category of news about ‘violence’ and divided the latter into four

subcategories: *urban violence*, specifically with news stories involving criminals (*bandidos*), the police and Rio de Janeiro in a public security crisis; *ordinary person crimes*, relating to occurrences outside the idealization of a criminal career, such as rapes, crimes of passion, deaths from road rage incidents, larceny, and so on; *celebrity crimes*, in which famous people²⁷ are involved (curiously common), treated separately from the prodigious output of celebrity news stories in this type of publication; and *crimes by State agents*, including cases of corruption and other deviant behaviours by public agents. In this coverage of urban violence, the recourse to humorous presentation is considerable: 38.2% of the total lead stories on the theme use humour and in the universe of main lead stories on violence, the proportion is overwhelming: 85.4%.

Nonetheless, there is an important inflexion in how humour is deployed: there are crimes about which *jokes are not made*: ‘cowardly’ occurrences, the murder of ‘innocents’ (such as children or elderly people), rapes, paedophilia and any other characterized as ‘very serious’ are not subject to mocking (*deboche*, the word preferred by the editors). At the same time, the idea of *innocence* that seems to inform this distinction makes explicit the resonance of a widely consecrated moral division: deaths of *bandidos*, whether at the hands of other criminals or the police, in general are not considered cowardly, even if the security forces have used disproportionate force or their actions have bordered on the unlawful—incidents unquestioned by the newspaper except when ‘innocents’ end up dead (as in the cover presented earlier). “Death is always lamentable. Very often [when the newspaper is criticized for a more or less ‘exaggerated’ lead story] there is some confusion when we mock the criminals. Very often there is a confused idea that perhaps we are celebrating a death,” says Tziolas in the interview, seeking to make a distinction between the ‘mocking’ of the death of a suspect and a supposed pro-execution stance. In response to the question “Does the newspaper lament some deaths more than others?” made by the interviewer in the aforementioned documentary on *Meia Hora*, the editorial director of the publication in the period 2007–2012, Alexandre Freeland, makes explicit the anti-crime stance typically adopted by any media outlet: “Certainly, certainly. It [the newspaper] does not celebrate the death of criminals [*bandido*], it doesn’t set off fireworks and balloons, but it does give more prominence and intense coverage when a criminal is killed.”²⁸ This preference is also impressed in the figures: more than half (56.9%) of the humorous news items on violence relate to criminals while just 11% concern the police. Put otherwise, the recourse to *perdeu* or ‘lost’ (81.1%) is far higher than the recourse to *manezou* or ‘failed’ (9.2%).²⁹

In the process, the tabloid deploys various formal devices, especially in terms of text, photography and graphic resources. Graph 2 below presents the distribution of each:

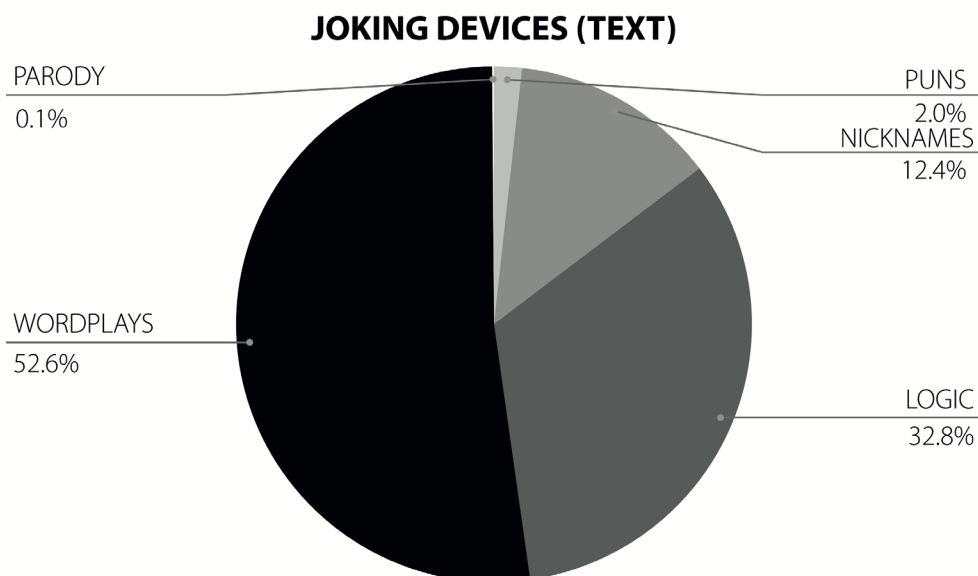
Graph 2



Source: Author's elaboration.

Firstly, attention can be drawn to the hegemony of the written text over the other forms—though this is unsurprising, not only because journalism is primarily a written activity but especially because the domain of what elsewhere (WERNECK, 2015a) I have called the joke-form is especially consecrated as textual. The protocol formed by a setup situation—the “presentation of the set of elements (...), the part that establishes the expectation and the set of devices around which the joke is logically constructed” (WERNECK, 2015a, p. 491)—and the punchline—“the part that establishes the turn in the situation that will produce the humorous effect” (WERNECK, 2015a)—is facilitated by the textual grammatical structure. Furthermore, observing the subdivision of this type into its specific humorous devices, as shown in Graph 3, we can see the set of resources available to the editors to make jokes:

Graph 3



Source: Author's elaboration.

Wordplays are the tool most often used by the newspaper, followed by jokes based on problematic logic—a contradiction, a *non sequitur*, an absurdity. Little use is made of puns—also a kind of wordplay but one I treated separately given their specific logic in which part of a sign is swapped, maintaining an allusion to the original but creating a new sign with another meaning, producing a shift in how they co-exist (POLLACK, 2012). On the other hand, the use of nicknames is understandable in the universe of police reporting due to the tradition using aliases for criminals and because the labels create characters and allow a simplifying malleability. This produces front pages like the following:



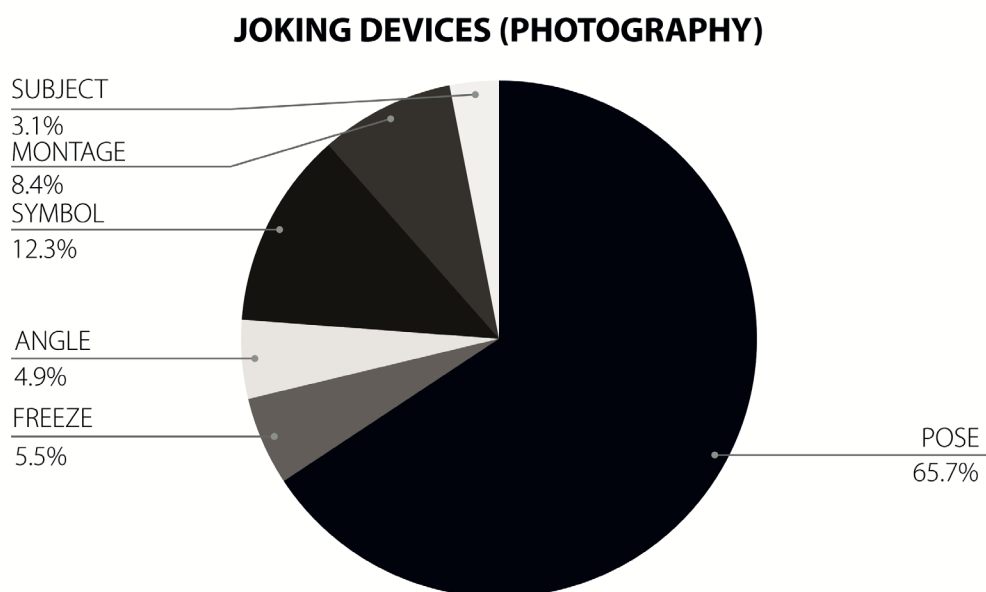
In the first example, we re-encounter the character cited on another cover, who acquires an alias, 'Cotó da ADA' ('ADA's Stump Man,' ADA: *Amigos dos Amigos*, Friends of Friends, a drug faction). At the same time, the play on words about his amputated arm is developed into a parody: *dar uma de João sem braço*, literally 'act like an armless man,' means to play the fool, feign innocence of a situation. Moreover, the subhead continues to include his limbs in the joke and states that he *meteu o pé* ('stuck out his foot,' went away): he left the favela in which a police operation had been launched. On the second cover, another nickname, this time producing a pun: *poposuda*, big booty, becomes *póposuda*, combining 'pó' (powder: cocaine) and the rest of the word, which may also refer to 'pose.' The subhead also reports that 'She and her Friend Went Around' ['rodaram,' also meaning 'failed,' that is, *they were caught by the police, they lost*] 'With a Full Baggage in the Airport.' 'Baggage' (*mala*) is also slang for buttocks—and this point is noteworthy: the tabloid newspaper has no qualms about using colloquial and sometimes vulgar language. In the third case, 'Rola Occupied on Valentine's Day,' the name of a favela, Rola, a kind of bird, serves as a source for a pun in which the double meaning derives from the reported event: the military police conducted an operation in the favela precisely on Valentine's Day, allowing a double message to be created: *rola*, also slang for penis, was found in intense sexual activity ('occupied/busy') just as the community was the target of a police occupation. On the other hand, the nicknames, less frequently mobilized as the main textual element (as shown by the survey data), appear as an accessory device in numerous news reports since, as already mentioned, aliases are commonplace in this universe. They also express the legalist moral dichotomy of the publication: it takes the side, like any typical publication, of law and order—and, in a moral simplification, of the security forces (except when they are acting blatantly outside the law or the accepted moral code for their behaviours, as in flagrant massacres). Consequently, again as the editorial director Alexandre Freeland stated in the documentary on the newspaper, thieves receive more or less standardized labels: "*vagabundo, mequetrefe, pilantra, safado, marginal...* *Bandido*, living or dead, all *bandidos* are the same: *vagabundos*." A rapist is "soulless, motherless, heartless, a monster..." "...And the police when they invade?" the film's interviewer asks, receiving the reply: "They tear up, burst, rip apart, mop up, clean up..." and when they shoot, "they finger the trigger, they send a bullet." The designations thus tend to exalt police power and ridicularize the criminals.

In these three cases, consistently with most of the sample, the actants are ridiculed by their placing in a 'normal' situation to which a twist is added, all of them textual: the unexpected effect of encountering the second (and third) meanings of the words produces the humour of the headline and wittily mocks the police (incapable of capturing a disabled criminal who proved to be smarter); a criminal woman (also called a *patricinha*, that is, a young woman from outside the favela who can be attributed the label of 'middle-class' drug trafficker³⁰ and, at the same time, someone not

‘naturally’ belonging to this world, who could earn money doing something else, and so on);³¹ and an entire favela (whose name is turned into a motive for ridicule).

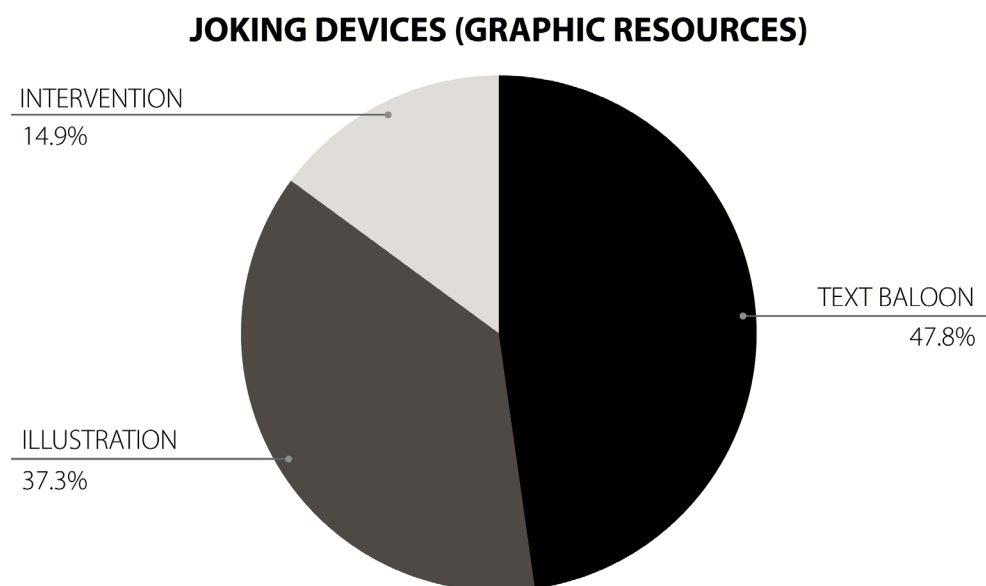
Photographs and graphic resources are less frequent but involve potent signs. The mobilization of both and their specific devices are shown in Graphs 4 and 5:

Graph 4



Source: Author's elaboration.

Graph 5



Source: Author's elaboration.

I wish to illustrate this case with three more covers:

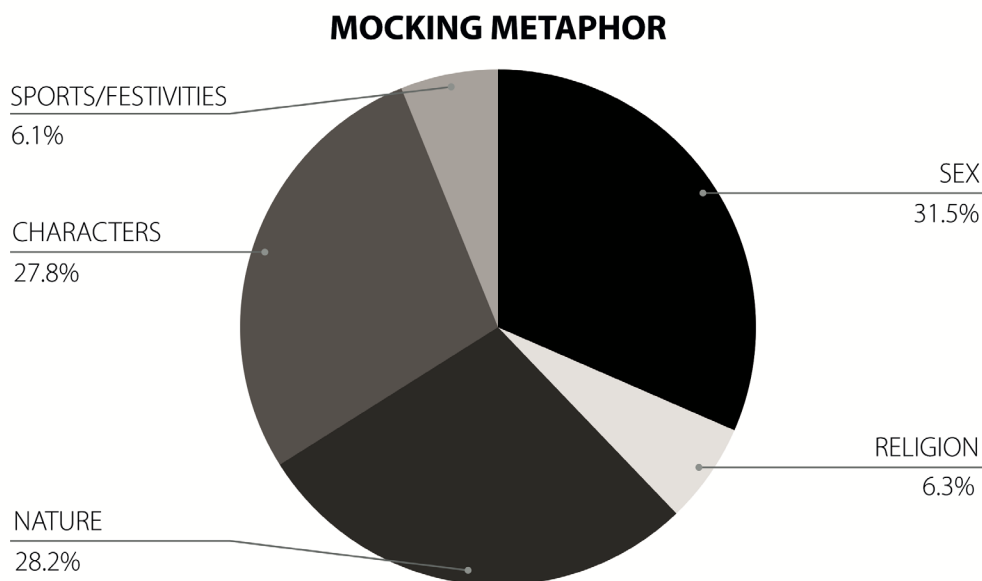


In the first example, ‘Bope Celebrates Birthday and Blows Out Four’, we see a photo with four prayer candles. The contrast between the headline informing the anniversary of the military police’s Special Operations Battalion (*Batalhão de Operações Especiais*: Bope, a paradigmatic figure from this period)—a moment when commemorative candles are blown out—and this image of the type more often used in prayers and funeral rites (surrounded here by graphic symbols of balloons decorated with the battalion’s logo) appears to simultaneously celebrate the killings and emphasize the seriousness of the police unit: the subhead states that the ‘Skulls [*as these police officers are nicknamed, positively*] Could not Celebrate as They Had to Work Hard’. Controversial, the cover was one of the reasons that the editor Humberto Tziolas commented about the paper seeming to celebrate by mocking the deaths of *bandidos*. In the second case, ‘Help [*Police*] to Find Fat Family’, a classic use of a graphic resource: the illustrator has drawn a maze, in an aesthetic style typical of the puzzles section of a newspaper, with the prize to be reached the Fat Family drug trafficker (also drawn), so-called because of his obesity.³² He had been rescued from the hospital by his accomplices a few days earlier after being shot by the police. The newspaper dedicated a series of front pages mocking the physical size of the criminal and the supposed ease with which he could therefore be found. But ‘even so’ the military police had proved incapable of finding him, which inspired the joke: given that the security forces have failed, find him yourself—in fact, the news story announces a reward for information passed to *Disque Denúncia* (the Denunciation Hotline) on the criminal’s whereabouts. The cover shows, then, three officers faced with a very simple maze of paths, ‘mocking’ the police. Finally, in the third cover, the photo of the subject of the news story is simply shown, accompanied by the headline ‘Crime has Decrease’ and the subhead ‘Dwarf

Arrested for Trafficking’. The subhead in fact seems redundant given that the information that the actor arrested for drug trafficking has dwarfism would be dispensable for any careful reader.

As well as mobilizing these three material forms, the operationalization of *perdeu* (lost), *manezou* (failed) or *niilismo* (nihilism) involves constructing metaphors (based on any of them) to mock the three actants. These are produced primarily via five semiotic domains (Graph 6):

Graph 6



Source: Author's elaboration.

The recourse to metaphor seems to follow two regimes of ridicularization, both linked to potency, one focused on demeaning the subject of the critique, negativized for a perceived weakness; the other emphasizing the subject's strength but highlighting the negative aspect of its (cowardly) use. Studying the data, the only metaphoric forms to overlap just one of these two regimes are those of a sexual nature, which occupy the largest portion of the graph (31.5%). These are always used to *reduce potency*: either by attacking virility, in the case of men, or purity, in the case of women (the discourse relating to crime is highly misogynist); or by mocking the stereotypical profile of members of the LGBTQIA+ universe—although the mere allusion to sex tends in itself to be an identifier of humour, being a topic especially privileged for this purpose (KUIPERS, 2006; DAVIES, 2011). Meanwhile, the other two categories most often used, based on transformations in the nature of the subject being mocked (28.2%) and those based on constructions of characters (27.8%), as well as religious metaphors,³³ are variable in this regard, although they tend more often to highlight the negativity of the subject's potency and their

competences, skills or capacities—given that we see more metaphors calling a subject a ‘monster,’ ‘animal’ or ‘demon’ than a ‘rat’ or ‘vermin.’ Finally, the sporting metaphors and/or those linked to events or festivities are usually fairly elastic and little related to potency: they are more a chance to exploit a festive universe as part of the punchline than used to mock the condition of the actants. Below are some examples:



20/05/2016



04/04/2012



12/03/2015



08/01/2013



21/08/2013



07/01/2014

The first three front pages contain sexual metaphors. The first—‘Shook his Todger in the Bus’ [busão, *also meaning ass*] and Ended Up on The Police Station’—belittles the accused subject less by exposing his condition as a *tarado* (pervert, ultimately perceived as a demonstration of potency) and more by calling his penis a *miserinha* (miserable little thing).³⁴ The second—‘Pervy Horse Mistakes MP [*military police officer*] for Mare (*eguinha pocotó*, a character from a popular funk hit alluding to a girl as such)—mocks the police officer by placing him in the passive position of sexual intercourse with a ‘partner’ with the huge potency of a stallion. Finally, the third one resorts to a complex network of devices to ridicularize a female

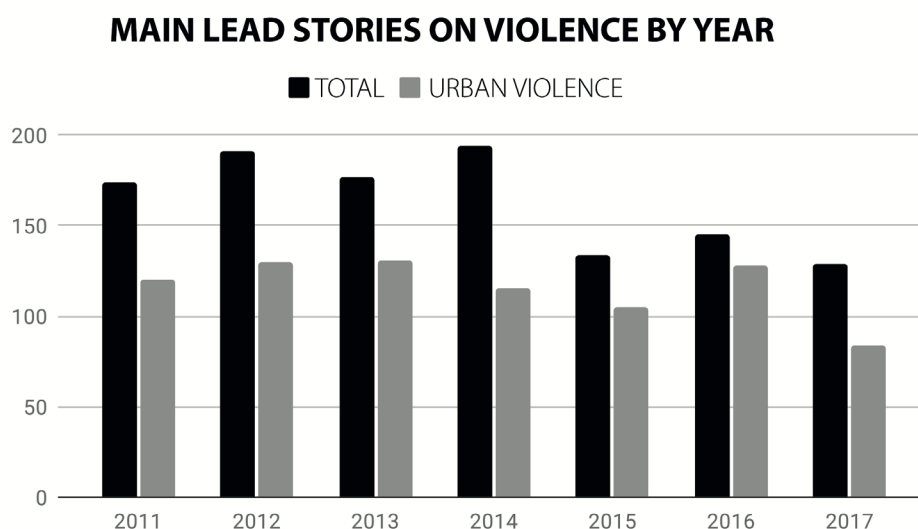
criminal: the nickname 'Póriguete' is a pun on *periguete*, a slang term used to refer to a considerable range of 'deviant' female behaviours—from a woman who dresses provocatively (according to the customs of the favela) or who shows herself to be *barraqueira*, someone who 'takes no crap,' to a woman who flirts with another woman's partner, including 'easy' or 'available' women or those who let themselves be played by certain men and even those linked to crime—especially when described from the viewpoint of the *asfalto*—that is, the formally urbanized (non-favela) part of the city. However, the woman on the cover is not just any *periguete*: she is linked to drug trafficking, making *pó* (cocaine) part of her epithet, as in the earlier example of 'Pó-posuda.' However, this name does not appear motive enough because the main reason for calling this woman acting as a drug carrier between one favela and another a *periguete* is the fact that she posted photos of herself in a bikini on a social network. The newspaper, therefore, displays on its front page a black-and-white image taken from the internet with the woman in a provocative pose, as though suggesting both vanity (the photo could be from a men's magazine) and the young woman's 'audacity'—demeaned not only for her 'inappropriate' behaviour but also for appearing 'ruined' (*estragada*) in the inset photo, indicating that she had 'lost' even in terms of aesthetic decline, falling from *gostosa* ('hot chick,' WERNECK and GOLDENBERG, 2010) to *baranga* ('ugly chick').³⁵

The other lead stories focus on the nature of the specific figure concerned, the second replacing the subject with a religious image and the third turning to the world of sport. In the first case, the newspaper converts the well-known nickname of a drug trafficker, Juninho Cagão (something like Johnny Pooper), into excrement, reporting that he had been sent 'Down the Sewer' (*esgoto abaixo*, killed) by *Comando Vermelho* ('CV', one of the biggest Brazilian traffickers faction), while he was taking a shower. The metaphor is completed visually with the words printed over the image of a toilet water tank. On the second cover, the evangelical church thief is called a demon—but the joke is extended with a metaphor about his nature: he was a 'loose wire' (*fio desencapado*), that is, hot-headed, easily capable of killing and so on. On the third cover, the witticism concerns the situation of Rio de Janeiro, faced by the prospect that in 2014, the year when the FIFA World Cup would be hosted by the city, the drug gangs would spill a gigantic quantity of drugs to meet the global demand: "The World Coke is Ours'. Based on a pun parodying the song 'A taça do mundo é nossa,' 'The World Cup is ours,' remembered even today as an icon of Brazil's first World Cup win in 1958, the report goes on to state that the cocaine sold will permit the drug gangs to double their profits during the competition.

Final considerations: the humorous translation of ‘urban violence’ as a form of making ‘violentization’ routine

Graph 7 below expresses the quantity of main lead stories on violence in general and urban violence in particular over the analysed period, year by year. The presence of humour throughout the universe analysed remained around the same level of 38%, so that we can see at the same time a balance of humorous coverage of that theme by this newspaper:

Graph 7



Source: Author's elaboration.

The data show a certain stability in the level of the number of lead stories over the period. Obviously, the data from the final year of the series skew the sample since they were analysed until the middle of the year only. However, we can note that in July the number of main lead stories on violence had already reached the level of previous years. Indeed, if we count the lead stories of the other three levels too, 2017 displays a consistent fixation with the theme of violence on the newspaper's front page, which is also manifested symbolically: it is the moment with the largest set of nihilistic ‘assessment covers,’ showing Rio de Janeiro immersed in chaos. The figures and cases constantly shown on the first pages confirm the impression that the relative calm—or at least the semiotic routinization—recorded previously was collapsing (along with the UPP program itself). Examples of ‘assessment covers’ include the following:



There were 23 covers following this model (18% of the total for 2017), asking ‘Why?’ or exclaiming ‘Enough!’ or asking ‘How much longer?’ or simply listing the accumulated cases. Among them, an aesthetic movement begins to form: few are like the first and third of these examples, few making use of humour—like the puns ‘Tiro de Janeiro’ (where *tiro* means gunshot) and UPP (pacifying police unit) versus UPA (emergency unit): ‘UPP? Best forget it! The Thing is to Rush to the UPA.’ Urban violence began to enter the gallery of themes too serious to inspire jokes.

But while at this moment the nihilism concerning security in the state dominated news reports, humorous or otherwise, in the earlier period the routine involves normalizing a news story about crime with around half of the main lead stories in the year reporting on violent incidents, the majority of them emphasizing urban violence—that is, the confrontation between criminals (*bandidos*) and police in a Rio de Janeiro in which life continues despite everything, and the largest category of them resorting to humorous devices to present their cases, as we have seen.

At the time of publication of this text, the data on 2011–2017 already no longer reflected many aspects of the public security scenario of Rio de Janeiro—as we have seen, the UPPs are ‘counted beans’ as the saying goes, already over, a situation demonstrated by assorted studies already cited here. Furthermore, a change of policy has taken place, implemented by the government of Wilson Witzel, elected in 2018 on a platform based around public security with an emphasis on authorization to kill suspects in favelas (BETIM, 22/08/2018), which continued under the administration of his replacement, Cláudio Castro, his vice-mayor, who took over the post after Witzel’s impeachment in 2021, and indeed intensified, especially due to the issue of the Federal Supreme Court (STF) banning police operations in favelas during the Covid-19 pandemic—a measure that did not prevent them from happening.³⁶ Indeed, the episode known as the Jacarezinho Massacre took place in May 2021, when the Civil Police entered the favela in

Rio's North Zone, resulting in 28 deaths, the largest ever number of deaths in a police operation in Rio de Janeiro state (SOUZA and SOARES, 06/05/2021). An analysis of the current situation lies beyond the objectives of the present text. However, besides its value as a historical record, the data presented here for the period under analysis expresses a mechanics that continues into the present, a set of sociological information on the social accumulation of violence in Rio de Janeiro (MISSE, 1999) that the earlier period of routinization helped make explicit: the social construction of a transition to the condition of a socially shared metaphysics of the simplified actantial system described earlier (*police v. criminals in utopian/dystopian Rio*) and the elements for its comprehension and operationalization by contemporary discourses. As stated previously, through the negatives expressed in the kinds of mocking coverage promoted by the newspaper, not only did these figures themselves become consolidated as the central actants in this scenario, but also the elements of their worth. As I demonstrated in Werneck (2019), the construction of a *singular observer* (represented here by the *humorous journalistic self*) enables the creation of a voice capable not only of circulating the critique contained in the inspired discourse but also of *ensuring it is taken seriously*. Humour/grace/*graça*, in become effectuated as form—through the intervention of recognizable devices of *inspiration*—makes providing proof of the contexts that it expresses somewhat superfluous, at least until the questioning is resumed.

In Werneck, Teixeira and Talone (2020), I proposed with my colleagues a model for a *pragmatic sociology of violence*, founded on the recognition that the semiotic multiplicity of the sign *violence* results in a plural framework of worldviews, full-blown native theories concerning the social, 'sociologies,' as we call them, which imply forms of defining the situation (THOMAS, 1966[1923]) in terms of violence and, in the final instance, of behaving in relation to others and the social order itself in which the phenomenon occurs of mobilizing *notable differences of force*, thereby *violentizing* these situations. For each of these *regimes of violentization* there corresponds a form of defining violence and, with this definition, of defining what is happening on its basis. These different sociologies, then, represent different investments by the social actors themselves in relation to what the mobilization of *force* in a situation signifies and determine the way in which people situate violence—or in our terms, how they *violentize* the situation. Hence, it comprises a model capturing how people represent different dimensions of the situations in which they are inserted as 'violent,' establishing diverse definitions of what, in the situation, is considered violence. Table 2 below, taken from the cited joint work, synthesizes the different forms of violentization inferred by us:

Table 2

REGIME OF VIOLENTIZATION	GRAMMATICAL CATEGORY	MEANING OF 'VIOLENCE'	WORTH IN PLAY (COMPETENCE OF EFFECTUATION)	ANALYTICAL MOVEMENT	DISTOPIA/UTOPIA/NEUTRALITY
(SUBSTANTIVIST) SOCIOLOGY 'OF VIOLENCE'	SUBSTANTIVE	UNWANTED AND / OR DESTRUCTIVE INTERVENTION IN THE AGENCY	INTERDICTION ON THE USE OF DISPROPORTIONAL FORCE (PHYSICAL OR SYMBOLIC)	DESCRIPTION OF THE FORMS OF OPERATION OF A POSITIVIT CALLED VIOLENCE	D
POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY OF VIOLENCE		DISCIPLINARY CONSTRAINT (COERCION) FOCUSED ON THE ORDER	ORDER	DESCRIPTION OF THE ROLE PLAYED BY A POSITIVITY CALLED VIOLENCE IN THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL ORDER	U
CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY OF VIOLENCE		RESTRAINING INTERVENTION IN AGENCIES (GOVERNMENT)	POWER	UNVEILING THE MECHANICS OF POWER	D
CONSTRUCTIVIST SOCIOLOGY OF VIOLENCE ON ATTRIBUTES	ADJECTIVE	ATTRIBUTE GRANTED TO CERTAIN FORCE ACTIONS/CERTAIN ACTORS WHO DEPLOY FORCE	ATTRIBUTION	EXHIBITION OF ATTRIBUTES' SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION PROCESSES	D
CONSTRUCTIVIST SOCIOLOGY OF VIOLENCE ON METAPHYSICS	GRAMMAR	GENERALIZED PRINCIPLE TO ALL SOCIAL ORDER ACCORDING TO WHICH A THREAT ENVIRONMENT IS ESTABLISHED	GENERALIZATION	EXPOSURE OF GENERALIZATION'S SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION PROCESSES	D
PRAXEOLOGIC SOCIOLOGY OF VIOLENCE	ADVERB	VIALE RESOURCE FOR CERTAIN SITUATIONS	PRACTICALITY	DESCRIPTION OF PRACTICES	N

Source: Author's elaboration, taken from Werneck, Teixeira and Talone (2020).

This model presents innumerable dimensions relating to the idea of violentization, detailed in the cited article. In summarized form, the first column refers to the type of native theory of the social that founds the definition of violence; the second, to the form in which the idea of violence is treated grammatically by people, whether as a substance in itself (noun), an attributed associated with substances (adjective), a modality of executing actions (adverb) or a metaphysics taken as a generalized logic for comprehending the social (grammar). However, the column of most interest here is the third, relating to the meanings of violence. I shall not explore the various meanings in depth here since they were examined to exhaustion in the other text. I shall merely emphasize the operation implied here: the generalization of the idea of violence, raised to the category of a grammar, inscribed here under the representational sign of 'urban violence.' In this sense, *the social accumulation of violence* described by Misse (1999) can be comprehended as a historical process through the reiteration of cases (accumulation) of impregnation of the interpretant (PEIRCE, 1977[1897]) *violence* in the interpretative toolkit disseminated in an urban social order. But not in just any sense: *violence* here is the sign of a threat become routine, the centre of a *dystopia* (TALONE, 2015). The covers of *Meia Hora* show how it takes the form of recipients, iconic actants that also become generalized as abstract forms and actualized in innumerable cases. *Criminals*, *police officers* and the *urban order submerged in chaos* are concentrated forms of this violence, themselves violentized by being represented as *force-bearing* bodies (WERNECK, TEIXEIRA and TALONE, 2020; WERNECK, TEIXEIRA, TALONE and

CAMINHAS, 2021), a force capable of imposing itself since these actants are activated in their full worth—a worth questioned by the humorous discourse, as we have seen. Moreover, in the routinized environment of certain historical moments, such as the ‘UPP era,’ the inner workings of the naturalization of this condition of force are made explicit, displaying its fragility as a construct. In fact, the same situation is revealed in the recurrent presentation of *Rio* as the platform of a ‘war’ (LEITE, 2000, 2012; GRILLO, 2019) between *police* and *criminals*, as a dystopia (TALONE, 2015) even outside a regime of ridicularization: the types are the same.

The proposal of a pragmatic sociology of violence, here put into practice, is founded on the idea of mapping the pairings between the grounding metaphysics (regimes) of violentizations as they overlap and correlate with the ‘sociologies’ of violence presented and the devices mobilized in situations in order to account for them as *situations of violence*. In the observed sample, the humorous devices are employed precisely as devices in this violentization: the critical actors (represented here by the newspaper in the form of the *humorous journalistic self*) resort to humour to naturalize the actancy of a critique that is also itself perennial because routinized: the critique of the *social problem* turned into the *public problem* (GUSFIELD, 1981) of public security—in general labelled ‘violence,’ the ‘phantasm’ of Misse (1999)—albeit constructed as a *major problem* in a diffuse form and therefore as something ultimately unresolvable (GUALANDE JUNIOR, 2019). In Werneck (2019, pp. 646-647), I proposed that

[the] path of a critique aspiring to public generalization and, therefore, to the adherence of collective force to its actancy (...) is subdivided into two (at least): on one hand, a *civic path* (BOLTANSKI; THÉVENOT, 2019[1991]) according to which, as the dynamic of public denunciation shows (BOLTANSKI, 1990), critics claim to act as representatives of the rest of society, suggesting that what they make public is in the latter’s interest, that their voice is society’s voice; on the other hand, an *inspired path* (BOLTANSKI; THÉVENOT, *ibid*), that presents the form of the critique as filled with grace, but strong from the viewpoint of the singularization of its expression. (...) In the second case (...), it is a question of opting for a regime of ridicularization in order to, using some humorous device, construct an actant to be inserted in the actantial system of denunciation, the *singular observer*, who, filled with grace, becomes a fixed viewpoint from which the world can always be interpreted as absurd and its moral negativity as obvious (so much so that it can become an object of humour, a joke). This observer adopts a position vis-à-vis the possibility of *épreuve* and, being singular, moves to a circumstance specific to the situation, constructing what Nielsen (2019) calls a ‘transitory truth,’ intrinsic to the construction of comic utterances, a type that ‘precede all reflection by hitting you in the gut with the immediate and corporeal realization that the insights [...presented...] have some weird and distorted truth-value to them.’ The author’s idea is that this truth is one ‘proven’ by the emotional discharge of laughter. However, the argument can be extended: it is founded on the circumstantiality of the humour, expressed here by the emotional/involuntary effectuation of the laugh, but in a general sense in the contingent effectuation of the veracity of the critique contained in the humorous discourse.

The argument of this text has been that adoption of this form of ridicularization by the *Meia Hora* newspaper appears in the form in which it is stabilized as the representation of a *constructivist* perspective (a sociology) of *violence* relating to metaphysics, thereby exposing the

generalized character of the social representation of urban violence as a language/grammar (MACHADO DA SILVA, 1993; WERNECK and TALONE, 2019) fully accumulated in the imaginary of Rio de Janeiro (MISSE, 1999). *Making jokes (graça)* about crime, the police and the current state of the social order, as *Meia Hora* did during the period under study, is to make explicit, joke by joke, the texture of this process of generalization, which, to be effectuated, needs to be continually constructed, thereby justifying for many a series of counterforce movements—such as the one expressed in the front pages themselves at the end of 2017, the need for a magnified difference in forces (on the part of the State) to account for the difference of forces (supposedly of the crime world) whose mobilization is expressed as a quotidian fact—which ends up being substantialized in an appeal for force to be used on the part of the population, as my colleagues and I have shown (WERNECK, TEIXEIRA, TALONE and CAMINHAS, 2021). What the research demonstrated, therefore, is that the singular observer represented by the newspaper's humorous journalistic discourse—and thus dealing with the transition between the emotional and mobilization (THÉVENOT, 1989, 1995)—makes explicit a diffuse set of critiques of the behaviours of the figures considered central to routinized urban violence—at that moment, due to the UPPs. Thus, the discourse of humour (grace/*graça*) is violentized, filled with elements that qualify it as a discourse about violence, as a discourse that qualifies this phenomenon, enabling the stabilization of a definition of a situation as one of *urban violence*.

Notes

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² The Pacifying Police Units (*Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora*: UPPs) comprise a public security program implemented in Rio de Janeiro in experimental format in 2008 and as a full-blown program in 2009 and maintained regularly until at least 2017—although it has officially remained running, albeit with scant resources, up to the moment of publication of this text. The program involved the installation of military police units in favelas—traditional strongholds of the city's armed drug trafficking factions—in order to establish a kind of community policing, with the public security agents interacting with the population in everyday life. The implantation of a unit was preceded by an armed intervention phase, announced previously to allow the drug traffickers to leave the community first and thus avoid armed conflict. The so-called 'era of the UPPs' was marked by a reduction in the indices of various crimes, especially homicides, as well as in the confrontations between the military police and traffickers, and by a certain change in the relations between the *asfalto*—the formally urbanized part of the city—and the favela, which began to be more accessible to people from outside. After the sports megaevents that marked the city, especially the 2016 Olympic Games, however, and the economic crisis faced by the state of Rio de Janeiro, the program began to collapse, and various units were dismantled. For a history of the first years of the

UPPs, see Misse (2014); for an in-depth study of the so-called 'pacification process,' see Menezes (2014); and for a diverse set of analyses on the program, see the texts from the dossier organized by Machado da Silva and Leite (2014). Finally, for a synthesis of the program made by an international correspondent, see Nolen (12/11/2017).

³ The choice of the first year of the series is also noteworthy: initially I planned to cover the entire period of the UPPs, beginning with the first police operation in the Morro Dona Marta favela in 2008, which serves as their origin myth. However, the exploratory observations showed that from that moment until 2010, beyond the period of management of the program itself—which was being created as it was being implanted, without any prior plan that constituted it as a project (MISSE, 2014)—it also represented a moment of adaptation for the city and its representations. It was only from 2011 that what I call routinization here, the effective incorporation of the UPP into the city's routine, became perceptible. This first period (2008-2010) will be explored in another text.

⁴ Various works have presented this diagnosis of decline, whether as a representation on the part of the residents and the press (*Meia Hora* included) or as an objective interpretation of a return of drug trafficking to its earlier configuration, the growth in militias, an increase in crime indices, as well as the objective change of public security policy under the current government—see, for example, Duarte (22/06/2017); Seta (03/07/2017); and Lemos and Bianchi (30/08/2017), for journalistic and conjunctural analyses. Among the academic analyses, I highlight, covering the entire period, Cano, Borges and Ribeiro (2012); Machado da Silva and Leite (2014), Menezes (2014, 2018), Correa and Menezes (2018) and Ribeiro and Vilarouca (2018). It is not the aim of this article to enter this debate, meaning that I take the period as a context in which the general discourse on urban violence was marked by a circumscribed set of specific representations of crime and the police, which, while manifested at a specific moment of Brazilian history, still have repercussions in the present.

⁵ In the model of Economies of Worth (*économies de la grandeur*, EG) (BOLTANSKI and THÉVENOT, 2006[1991]), the social situations are effectuated by a distribution of agency according to which the determining beings in the definition of the situation are those that represent most clearly the worth, the value at stake in the situation. This effectuation produces a stable situation in which this distribution of agency could be considered fair by those involved in the situation - that is, the distribution of worth is proven to distribute the common good. This determining state is called 'great,' the one with the greatest worth in the situation (this without presupposing a perennial size, but a state valid for that situation), being the determined state of lesser worth, the 'little.' Thus, in an actantial approach, the actant will be decisive as its worth is the greatest in the situation.

⁶ Although in their narratological definition, characters and actants are fundamentally distinct (and even opposed) concepts, here I shall use the former (in a broad sense) as a synonym of the latter (in a narrow sense).

⁷ As a colleague and I have shown (WERNECK and TALONE, 2019, p. 52), "The ideas of actantiality and actantial system were introduced into the social sciences by Bruno Latour through the concept of the actant, proposed by the linguist (...) Algirdas Greimas (1976[1966]), the proponent of a semiotic model dedicated to analysing narratives called narratology. According to the author, the actant is who or what practices an act. It comprises an entity endowed with the capacity to determine what occurs in a narrative [*shifting the pragmatic analysis involved in defining a situation from the question of decision making to the question of the decisive*]. This entity can be of any kind, a person, an animal, an object, an idea. Latour, along with Michel Callon, utilizes Greimas in the actor-network model to logically construct the idea of symmetrisation, that is, the inclusion of all the entities contained in a situation on the same analytic plane, not differentiating them in terms of agency (which enabled the analysis of the human beings and non-human beings in a laboratory within the same framework). An actantial system is a disposition of actants that logically situates an actantiality, a logic determining action."

⁸ On this continuum of figures acting in 'security,' see Teixeira (2013).

⁹ On the figure of the *ladrão*, see Caminhas and Beato (2020), Grillo and Martins (2020) and Prado (2020).

¹⁰ A figure worth noting in this respect is the militia member, the *miliciano*, who in another work I called a *platypus* (WERNECK, 2015b), since it is socially constructed with elements from other figures such as the drug trafficker, the corrupt police officer and the killer: for all practical purposes, the militia member and drug trafficker, though, distinguished, are treated in similar form on the newspaper covers, as a tyrannical criminal who dominates a particular region. This appears to reproduce a certain indistinction experienced by the residents of favelas and peripheries, who are used to experiencing the routine under these siege states as near identical. For more on this subject, see Cano, Borges and Ribeiro (2012).

¹¹ The examples presented, save where their exceptionality in sample terms is indicated, are illustrative and were chosen as they provide a clear representation of the categories to which they belong.

¹² Obviously, I am not affirming any of these representations as a positivity. They are constantly belied, not only by the cases exposed in the jokes but also by innumerable studies, especially in the case of the police—for example, in Misse et al. (2013). What matters here is that these representations *exist* and *have actancy*.

¹³ This description matches that of Michel Misse (1999) on the representation of the *bandido* in Rio de Janeiro: "[T]hree dimensions [*are*] incorporated in the social representation [*of this figure*] and its social types. The first (...) is the dimension that selects an agent based on their criminalizable trajectory, differentiating the agent from other social agents through

the expectation that, at some moment, there will be a demand for their incrimination; the second (...) is the dimension that expects this agent to have a specific 'social experience,' obtained in the relations with other *bandidos* and/or with the penitentiary experience; the third (...) dimension concerns the agent's subjectivity and a double expectation with regard to self-identity: the belief that the agent will not be able to reasonably justify their course of action or, on the contrary, the belief in a justification that this agent is expected to give (or that may be legitimately given to them) to explain why they repeatedly follow this course of criminalizable action" (pp. 66-67). He adds: "But who are the *bandidos* [according to the widespread social representation in Rio]? They are those who 'live off crime,' the 'thieves and killers,' those 'who respect no one,' currently the 'traffickers'" (p. 77). Use of the expression 'good people' (*peessoas de bem*) is widely used and described by various authors to refer to what is the 'non-criminal' portion of the population: these authors include Misse himself, as well as Zaluar (2004) and Freire (2014).

¹⁴ This is a city covered by much of the rest of the newspaper's output: vibrant football and huge crowds of fans, notable celebrities, emblematic festivities. Obviously, there are other deep problems, including healthcare and public transport (Gualande Júnior, 2019), but these agendas reiterate a routine of the good life 'despite everything' interrupted by news of 'violence.'

¹⁵ The analysis followed a grounded theory dynamic (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in which the sample is constructed inductively, inferring a *substantive (heuristic) theory* that is adjusted from point to point until arriving at a condition of *analytic saturation* in which a *grounded theory* can be enunciated. However, despite the point of saturation having been encountered long before (with two artificial years assembled over the period), I opted to cover the entire universe in order to have a temporally complete depiction at my disposal.

¹⁶ The conversation took place in the middle of surveying the covers when a fairly consistent substantive theory already existed. The interview was requested to collect both information and representations concerning the data already available. I also made use of interviews with the journal's executives and data on the latter contained in the documentary *Meia Hora e as manchetes que viram manchete* by Angelo Defanti (2014).

¹⁷ As a metropolis, Rio de Janeiro becomes a simplified image of the entire Rio state in this representation. On this simplification of Rio as an image of the state as a whole, see Freire (2016).

¹⁸ On this intervention and the subsequent in 2018 and their effects, see Morellato and Santos (2020).

¹⁹ On the mobilization of everyday life in the work of Machado da Silva, see Araujo (2019).

²⁰ Concerning the use of the term grammar (rather than language) to refer to urban violence, see Werneck and Talone (2019, pp. 36-45).

²¹ Its main commercial rivals, *Extra* and *Expresso*—both belonging to the Globo media group—compete with *Meia Hora* in terms of sales/print run/financial success and the former records objectively much higher sales. But it was certainly the tabloid that most clearly occupied a place in the city's imaginary. One indication of this is that the newspaper became the subject of the aforementioned documentary *Meia Hora e as manchetes que viram manchete* (*Meia Hora* and the headlines that became a headline).

²² Amaral (2006) suggests that the model of publicization typical of tabloid journalism involves a five-point protocol: a capacity to entertain, geographic and/or cultural proximity, simplification potential, dramatization potential, and utility. Costa (2016), for his part, emphasizes the proximity to the reader. My emphasis here will be on how this modality of journalism deploys a critique that assures it a specific form of publicization, mobilizing a diffuse morality—in this specific case, a morality resulting from violentization, centred on the social accumulation of violence (MISSE, 1999)—more than the aforementioned consensuses relating to so-called 'serious journalism' (*journalismo de referência*, Costa, 2016).

²³ An example of this condition is demonstrated by Puliti (2009), who explores the idea of mainstream economic analysis as a form of columnism grounded precisely in supposed (though debatable) consensuses in economic journalism. Another one is on the work of Undurraga (2017).

²⁴ Here I have made somewhat free use of this term, especially through reference to the idea of violence as a social representation found in Misse, Machado da Silva and Porto. But I wish to dedicate some lines to two considerations. The first concerns the meaning of this term to designate an area covered by the newspaper: here I consider 'coverage of violence' to include any news story about a criminal or state dynamic in which disproportionate physical force is used with more or less destructive consequences for the objects of this force (in the view of the actors and ultimately the journal, which is consistent with its imperative of adherence to law/order). The second point concerns the analytic mobilization of the term, which Teixeira, Talone and I (2020) initially treated as a multisemic sign and, continuing our analysis, as a semiotic interpretant, serving as a link between concrete and logical situations that we call *violentization*—that is, forms of describing the world through which notable differences in force are mobilized. I discuss this point in more detail later.

²⁵ The massive—although not dominant—presence of urban violence in the news is not exclusive to the tabloids. Traditional newspapers also highlight this theme, especially when treating it as a public problem. An excellent example

of this is the concern with the nationalization of the First Command of the Capital (PCC), São Paulo's hegemonic gang. On this, see Duarte and Araújo (2020).

²⁶ In a more refined version of this analysis, I removed Sundays and Mondays from the general sample. On these days, the topics for the front page are practically fixed (entertainment on Sundays, sports on Mondays). In this case, humorous stories relating to violence correspond to 54.7% of the main lead stories.

²⁷ For the purposes of this category, 'famous' was taken to mean any figure outside the police and crime able to be recognized by readers by their name alone without the need for any explanation. Coverage of celebrities was taken to include all news items on the private lives of these famous people—as well as, in the case of this newspaper, cultural coverage in general. In this regard, *Meia Hora* is peculiar: again, as a tabloid newspaper, it is read as a universe of celebrities, which, as well as a Brazilian 'star system' consecrated by television, popular music, sports and, more recently, digital influencers, also includes figures less frequently mentioned by the various media outlets specialized in this kind of coverage, such as funk carioca dancers, stage assistants, figures from memes and other 'viral' happenings on the internet. The newspaper's own editorial team features in 'Meia celebrities,' a gallery of the famous more representative of the newspaper's style—among whom the 'big booty' funk women of *Mulher Melão* occupy a prominent place (often humorously asked to express an opinion on current affairs, including violence, which can be understood as a joke). A deeper exploration of this topic, however, would go beyond the limits of this work.

²⁸ An especially sensitive case of this split is found in the 08/08/2015 issue, in which the death of the trafficker known as Playboy, from the Morro da Pedreira favela, is reported. According to the newspaper, he was then "Rio's most sought trafficker." The newspaper printed a photo of the man's dead body, adding a balloon with the phrase: 'Gone Down to the Devil's Playgorund.' Asked whether displaying the photo of the body was not somewhat scatological and whether mocking him in this way was 'inhumane,' the editor claimed that although the photo perturbed him as an individual, it was news, it had circulated on the internet all day and it would be an omission on the part of the newspaper not to publish it. Moreover, the humorous treatment was consistent with the gossip circulating about the *bandido* at that moment, including in the favelas. The editor considered that the newspaper was closer to 'going too far' in the case of the cover with the BOPE candles, discussed later in the article, than here because in the latter report, he said, 'it seemed' that the newspaper was celebrating the deaths—something that, he said, never actually happens. This same polemic was provoked by another front page, the 16/04/2011 issue, with the title 'Police Officer who Arrests Three Delinquents May Askes for a Song to Be Played on Mia Hora', an allusion to a section of TV Fantástico, a program broadcast by TV Globo, in which the football player who scores three goals in the weekend matches can ask for any song to be played in the on-line magazine. In this case, the curiosity is that the headline became notorious when a rumour circulated that the newspaper would 'reward' police officers who killed criminals, when in fact it merely referred to arresting them.

²⁹ Obviously, there is also a practical reason for this: as the news reporting on violence focuses on crimes occurring in the *asfalto* areas of the city and police operations in favelas—due to use of the latter as enclaves by drug gangs, the privileged figures of the *bandido* category in Rio de Janeiro, as already mentioned—there is clearly more space for criminals to *lose* than for police to *fail*.

³⁰ On this topic, see Grillo (2008).

³¹ In Rio de Janeiro street mythology (WERNECK, 2015a), the *patricinha* is also associated with a female version of the *mané*: she is stigmatized not only as a *riquinha*, but also as not very smart, unshrewd, unintelligent.

³² The name comes from a 1990's popular soul music singers group formed by seven siblings, all of them obese.

³³ Also reflecting an incorporation of diffuse popular language, these empowering religious inhumanizations make use of a fauna that it is both Christian—demon, angel, Beelzebub and so on—and also taken from Afro-Brazilian religions, although the latter generally employ a syncretism that, taking the former as a reference point, associates some of their entities with 'evil'—whereby *exus*, *pombajiras* etc. are also understood as 'demons' or at least as negative figures. For more on the form in which figures from the crime world are treated as non-human, see Freire and Teixeira (2016).

³⁴ This headline contains a second semiotic layer, referring to the pair '*busão*/'*ponto final*' (bus/last stop), inserted in the dynamic of public transport but also derived from the fact that *busão* can also refer to the buttocks. Hence *sacudir a miserinha no busão*, "shake the miserable little thing in the *busão* (bus/ass)," also has a double meaning indicative of sexual abuse.

³⁵ This cover and various others displaying women from the crime world are fertile ground for a discussion of the gender dynamic in this humour, hugely borrowed from the colloquial humour of Rio de Janeiro, itself decidedly male and chauvinist (WERNECK, 2015a). This analysis, however, would exceed the scope of this text.

³⁶ On this subject, see the various reports produced by the New Illegalities Study Group (GENI) at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF)—Hirata, Grillo and Dirk (25/06/2020, 18/08/2020) and Hirata, Grillo, Dirk and Lyra (15/04/2021).

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