

The Signifying Materiality of the Body (in Protests) in the Imbrication of Ideology, History and Discourse

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyze the signifying materiality of the body in protests scenes in the discursive imbrication of the political in the borders with the social. The theoretical and analytical perspective taken is based on the historical-materialism from the Discourse Analysis of the French line to help in the comprehension of the materiality of body in protests in its relation with history, ideology, memory and discourse. In this sense, the intention is to focus on a specific work by the Zimbabwean artist Dan Halter, considering the meaning effects that slide metaphorically and metonymically to other senses of the body that unfold in different images of the subject (LAGAZZI, 2014a) and help to understand the resistance-revolt-revolution process of the ideological and political class struggle (PÊCHEUX, 1982 [1975]), especially in those processes of tensivity of the social from the spaces occupied by the bodies and crossed by the symbolic, by the ideology and by the history.

Keywords: Discourse; Body, Memory; Ideology.

Introduction

Scenes of protests against Apartheid in the streets of Zimbabwe in south-African in its postcolonial era provide a rich material to analyse the signifying materiality of the body in protests in the imbrication of ideology, history and discourse.



Image 1 – Crowd of young people in European raves



Image 2 – Bodies gathered in Zimbabwe protests

In the convergence between art, the social and the political, the images in the documentary work of Dan Halter, entitled *Untitled – Zimbabwean Queen of Rave* (2005), present some prototypical scenes of social protests in the (inter)(en)lacement of different images of black protests on South African streets contrasting with flashes of rave parties throughout Europe in the early 1990s.

Theoretical-Methodological Resources

Based on materialist perspective of the Discourse Analysis of the French line, I try to observe the projections of the body in / through art, thinking about the question of the meanings mobilized by the body sliding through / on the frontiers with the social. In order to do so, I take as analysis basis some scenes of street protests in South Africa, in different historical moments caught from frames extracted from the videos *Untitled – Zimbabwean Queen of Rave* (2005; 3:33s), work by the Zimbabwean artist Dan Halter, who, by mobilizing in his work the question of the body occupying different social spaces, builds his critique of the political situation of Zimbabwe in its postcolonial era. And from these two materials, I examine how the artist looks around the demonstrations for the end of Apartheid and also around the xenophobia directed at refugees who left Zimbabwe to South Africa.

In this sense, considering the discursive materiality and modes of representation of the social and political body present in this material, I first turn my attention to some important reflections regarding the question of body. Thus, according to the understanding of Pêcheux and discourse analysts, what makes the body an ideological sign is its signifying materiality, as well as its historical materiality and its ideological value. In this sense, by approaching the body materiality as a support for the discourse of struggle, militancy, resistance and protest at the frontiers with the social, I consider the reflections of Althusser and Pêcheux towards the questions of the resistance and the class struggle. As a disciple of Louis Althusser, Porto & Sampaio (2013, p. 99-100) says that:

[...] Pêcheux expanded Althusser's reflection to think about the role of language in society: for him, language “inevitably reflected the class struggle, bringing, closely linked to its production, the marks of formation / reproduction / transformation of conditions in which it was produced” (INDURSKY, 1997, p. 20), as language was one of the forms of manifestation of ideology, and the ideological apparatus of the State were places for the transformation of production relations, and not simply the reproduction of the ideology of the dominant class, as Althusser argued. (author's translation)

Starting from the thought of manifestations of the body in historical conditions of social transformation, I take the idea of a collective body which is established through an experience of transgressive union (not being a mere unitary entity) to analyse the question of the body as discourse and on the body textualized in different signifying materialities (such as the artistic image, film and documentary scenes, video frames), seeking to show, in this sense, “that corporality itself is also a signifying materiality, discursiveness inscribed in boundary production conditions” (AZEVEDO, 2014, p. 322), author's translation. In the material taken here I intend to analyze thus how the body appears marked by the political and by the symbolic, occupying different spaces of protest and meaning in different ways, given the different conditions of meaning production, in the relation between body, space, time and subject, considering “the constitution movement of meanings about / of the body” (p. 322), as well as “the modes of meaning and signifying materiality are plural: the body is a place of opacity that

gains meaning through the look” (p. 323). In this perspective, is very important to highlight, according to Azevedo (2014, p. 323), that:

[...] through the theoretical affiliation to the historical materialism, the material form is always historical. In other words, taking the body as a material form implies removing any conception that treats it as an empirically understandable and biologically functional reality, common in areas such as health, where the body is natural, segmentable, controllable and transparent. (author's translation)

To make a reading of the body under this discursive and materialist bias, considering Michel Pêcheux legacy in discourse studies, represents an investment in gestures of interpreting different materialities, such as images in its visual formulations (LAGAZZI, 2013, 2014a, 2014b) of the body. This requires from the analyst a look that seeks to go beyond the meanings in evidence, in the methodological beat between the gestures of description and interpretation, making the opacity of the body and the representations of the body. In this perspective, “[...] human body was, and remains for us, covered with signs, even if their nature, the look that deciphers them, the position of the interpreter and the intention of the person who expresses them have historically changed (COURTINE, 2013, p. 78).

More than that, it is very important to comprehend the body in its relation with the class struggle pointed by Michel Pêcheux, as the author says (PÊCHEUX, 1982 [1975], p. 219) that:

[...] there is perhaps a thread that it would be interesting to follow in the historical study of repressive and ideological practices in order to begin at last to understand the resistance-revolt-revolution process of the ideological and political class struggle, without making the dominated ideology the eternal repetition of the dominant ideology or the self-education of an experience progressively discovering the truth behind the curtain of illusions held up by the ruling class, or the theoreticist irruption of an external knowledge alone able to break the enchanted circle of the ruling ideology¹.

In the case of art, it is possible to observe different representations of the body. Some of them, which are here the object of our analysis, arise in certain prototypical scenes of protests (bodies in marches, raised fists, crowds in the streets, hands hovering banners and posters). Therefore, such representations of the body are not only constituted in its performance aspect, in the dialogical confluence and in the imbrication between bodies and images, but they also interpellate different meanings (around)(of) the body in the (inter)(en)lacement between verbal and nonverbal (ORLANDI, 1995) crossed by the political, the ideological, occupying different spaces, different temporalities that are determinant in the processes of signification.

Taking into account, for example, the relation time-space, the Bakhtinian notion of chronotope leads me towards the reflection on how body and subject are placed on the meaning borders, from the experience of the streets and public spaces and from the discursiveness of the protests, which is forged in the temporality of manifestations and social-political struggles. The spaces of protests are the meeting point between heterogeneous bodies discursively crossed by ideology and history.

This, from the historical-materialism perspective of Michel Pêcheux in France to what he calls “a materialist theory of discourse” (PÊCHEUX, 1982 [1975], p. 60), this theoretical approach

¹ English version in the book translated BY in 1982 by H. Nagpal as *Language, Semantics and Ideology*, and published by Macmillan.

can help to broaden the horizons of this theoretical-analytical view on the body present in different textualities, from its representations in Art to its comprehension in the political, social and discursive borders.

Discursive and Analytical Notes

In some of Dan Halter's works¹ the body's images emerge in the constitution and construction of a critique of the artist regarding the political system of Zimbabwe in the postcolonial era. A descendant of Swiss refugees after World War I, Dan Halter was born in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, a small African country that in 1980 was no longer a British colony. In 2005, he witnessed the forced exile of his parents. Commenting on the political situation of his country, Dan Halter mentions the important step that must be taken by the revolutionaries who have fought against repression and, today in power, are also corrupted. The recognition of Dan Halter's work has resulted in the participation in several art exhibitions, such as in the 10th Havana Biennial (Cuba), the 3rd Triennial in Guangzhou (China), the 9th Biennial of Contemporary African Art (Dakar, Senegal), and the Smithsonian National Museum (Washington, USA).

Using an artistic technique of overlaying images in scratch videos, Dan Halter configured *Untitled – Zimbabwean Queen of Rave* (2005) in a videoclip format (3m32s) having as soundtrack the song hit *Everybody's Free (To Feel Good)* by the Zambian singer Rozalla, who made her first appearances on stage performances in the 1980s in Zimbabwe, reaching international fame with this dance-style song released in 1991. In the interlacing between the verses of the song and the video images, the visual and verbal materialities are articulated together in dialogical links which constitute Dan Halter's work. The chorus *Everybody's free (to feel good)* – repeatedly (re)sounds producing meaningful effects of a "spokesperson song" that moves in the discourse threads standing on the borders between the scenes of the European raves in contrast to the different movements of resistance and protest in the streets of Africa against the Apartheid regime that appear in parts of the videoclip.

The Apartheid policy led by successive National Party governments in South Africa over the years of 1948 and 1994 was a regime of racial segregation in which the rights of the majority of the inhabitants were imposed by the government formed by a white minority. After the March 21, 1960, massacre in Sharpeville, in the context of the period of decolonization, international critics against that segregationist political regime began to grow. As a result, many of the popular movements of the anti-apartheid ideology have gained ground in different African countries. In this sense, the first scenes of the video (0:08s) of *Untitled*, in which many bodies of militants appear in protest ² trying to bring down the iron railings of the gates in a

¹ My first contact with Dan Halter's work happened at the art exhibition titled *Memórias Inapagáveis*, at SESC Pompeia, in Sao Paulo (SP), 2014. At the time, it was possible to watch the documentary video *Untitled – Zimbabwean Queen of Rave* (2005).

² It is taken here the question of the discursiveness of the protest in the constant work of the politician in its relation with the symbolic. This emptying (deleting) effect, put in evidence, passes inevitably through the process from which other senses are silenced (ORLANDI, 1992) producing a certain textuality. It can be seen the superposing of images of young people (and their bodies) in the crowd, in Europe, and the bodies of militants occupying the streets of Zimbabwe in South African. The scenes (from images 1 and 2) mark, thus, the confluence between different temporalities and different spaces, which passes through the filming spectrum. The art edition works producing certain meaning effects. Reflecting with Nilton Milanez, images register "the movement of bodies in a succession of scenes [...]"

public space (image 3) are thus crossed by an ideology of social struggle, of struggle for freedom against a segregationist political system (in contrast to images of crowds of young people gathered at rave festivals on the streets of Europe, indicating in this case not a political struggle only, but also form of “expression” and “celebration” of freedom.



Image 3 – Protesters fighting against Apartheid. Source: Untitled (2005)

It is possible to observe, therefore, the criticism that Dan Halter’s work establishes by denouncing that some are freer than others. These initial scenes converge with the statements echoing from the verses of Rozalla’s song, producing a sense effect of a spokesperson in a kind of “defense” of the black movement on the streets of South Africa. Thus, the sense of mobilization through / for the union of people is enunciated from verses like “[...] brother and sister / together we’ll make it through” “[...] we are a family that should stand together as one / helping each other instead of just wasting time”.

From these reflections of the author on the indissociability between life, discourse and art, it is also possible to observe, on the other hand, that “it is the material interlacing between the verbal and the visual that enables the formulated criticism” (LAGAZZI-RODRIGUES, 2011, p. 11). In this case, it can be said that this is a criticism that goes through the constant irruption of the sense between the political ideology of oppression/segregation as an element that can be overcome by bodies gathered in protest and in struggle, occupying a given space at a historical moment. It is also possible to identify other meaning effects that this work of Dan Halter produces, as the art curator of the Cultural Video Brazil Association (which hosted this documentary in Brazil in 2014) points out, highlighting that:

[...] the dynamic edition, reminiscent of the English scratch videos of the 1980s, creates a parallel between two situations that, subject to the media re-contextualization, lose their potential for confrontation. The raves, marked by the refusal of the yuppie lifestyle, gain an image of empty fashion; the contestation movements in Africa seem to be devoid of causes. The freedom of dance as protest and protest as a dance is framed by the television rectangle, and rendered as a metaphor of a process of appropriation and emptying (VIDEO BRASIL, 05/08/2014).

making other images resurrect in us, which form a chain of displacements in the movement of the meanings” (MILANEZ, 2011, p. 36-37). From this analysis perspective, it is important here to emphasize, that both the “intersection of different materialities” and “the significant material imbrication”, according to Lagazzi (2011, p. 402).

[...] emphasize that it is not a matter of analyzing an image and the speech and musicality, for example, as additions to each other, but rather of analyzing the different signifying materialities one intermingled with the other. (author's translation)

Hence, the visual language which is also the place of failure, of aperture/holes, of equivocation, of erasure is constituted by producing such meaning effects that escape from the total apprehension of the symbolic, being that something which always returns through different ways of signification.

In this analysis, considering the important parallel between body materiality and the visual formulations of the body in contrast (on one hand, of bodies in spaces of protest; and on the other hand, of bodies occupying the spaces of rave parties), I question myself about how the relations of alterity (of the body in relation to the other) are structured in the images in terms of regularity.

These parallels leave marks on the discourse threads, which I seek to examine from the images here in question. The massive concentration of people, for example, brought together by a common interest, the permanent movement, the climate of exaltation, the escapism, the search for freedom and the streets taken by bodies in protest suggest that the visual formulations of the body “unfold in different images of the subject and show us the importance of the remission of the intra-discourse to the inter-discourse” (LAGAZZI, 2014a, p. 111).

“Rave” as a term in English designating outdoor electronic music festivals can be understood as “moving or advancing violently”. The contrast of meanings (constituted by a discursive heterogeneity) highlights, in this case, some white young people who have the privilege of meeting to celebrate, while some black people of different ages (not just young ones) need to come together to claim the most basic human rights. Hence the movement of bodies in struggle to break paradigms and make important (social as well as political...) revolutions.

Taking into account then the idea of a collective body as a discourse support (the discourse of resistance, the discourse of social and political protest), it is possible to understand the issue of otherness as a dialogical bridge, in Bakhtin's terms, and formulated in terms of distinction, contrast, in spaces of signification in which the bodies are interpellated by memory, by the social and by the different positions occupied by the subjects in the discourse. From this perspective, I consider how the meanings pass through these bodies and how the meanings of occupation put these bodies in motion. Thus, there are meanings occupying these bodies, as well as these bodies emerge occupying different spaces discursively and ideologically.

An example of this is the case of the typical African dance from Zimbabwe, present in the protests that appear in Untitled (images 4 and 5). The movements and gestures of the bodies forming marches (in the dance called *Toyi-Toyi* ⁴, very common in the forces of ZIPRA, Revolutionary Army of the Zimbabwean People) represent signs integrated in different meanings. According to Gilbert (2008), *Toyi-Toyi* is a “militant dance”, organized in protest marches and accompanied by songs and slogans. In the following frames, extracted from Dan Halter's documentary, it is possible to observe some images of the body being placed in the borders of signification between the political, the ideological and the social, from the *Toyi-Toyi* marches.



Image 4 – Bodies occupying the street of Zimbabwe



Image 5 – South-African militants in the Toyi-Toyi marches

Used not only to intimidate the African police forces during the anti-apartheid protests, the Toyi-Toyi “is still present in some specific contexts, such as political protests, rallies and trade union movements” (BRAZ DIAS, 2012, p. 100). In the words of the anthropologist Juliana Braz Dias, “toyi-toyi is part of a sequence of practices that refer to the armed struggle in a symbolic way only because of the impossibility of carrying out the actual armed struggle” (p. 103). In the author’s reflections, she points out that in this form of protest “we would have a case of ‘symbolic compensation’ for the absence of power” (p. 103). So by observing the images of these bodies in struggle, Braz Dias (2012, p. 110-111) describes that:

[...] the approach of the protesters is announced by a sharp cry: “Amandla!” – which, in zulu and xhosa, means “poder”. The answer comes from the crowd, in chorus: “Awethu!” (“For us!”). The images start to [...] focus on the movement of resistance to apartheid. They are young people who at gunpoint sing songs of protest, evoking their leaders: Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela. Carry posters in which is read: [...] “Freedom, justice and peace, now!”; “How long will we be humiliated, kicked, strangled, beaten, raped, and killed?”. (author’s translation)

This reflection by Braz-Dias interlaces to Eni Orlandi’s words on a discursive theory of the subjects’ resistance forms, when the discourse analyst states that “there are forms of omnipotence also in the social domain: ‘together we can do anything’, a position that is supported by the quantity and by the intended collective conscience” (ORLANDI, 2012, p. 213) (ORLANDI, 2012, p. 2013) 35. Such consideration made by Eni Orlandi echoes in the description of the bodies assembled in the Toyi-Toyi marches as a form of struggle and popular resistance, as the Braz Dias (2012, p. 111) sates that:

[...] many of them carry in their right hands a piece of wood, like a spear. Others only have their hands closed. Several wear school uniforms; some with the tie – a traditional part of the uniform – tied to the forehead, remembering the adornments worn by the Zulus warriors. Many wear a serious expression on their faces. Others reveal a slight smile as they sing the songs and let their bodies follow the movement together: with their knees high, alternately, and fists in the air. (author’s translation)

Taking into account the discourse of the body mobilized in the relation with the other, there is the sliding and (re)displacement of meanings in the memory paths in which the said, the already said and the pre-constructed meanings are reformulated.

At another point, the relation of otherness of bodies and subjects in different spaces is interlaced to certain prototypical scenes of protests and images of bodies occupying the urban spaces, in Dan Halter's work, so that different relations between the "I" and the other are easily identified. Examining, further, the documentary *Untitled*, it is possible to see, for example, some scenes highlighting the different positions occupied by both the African militants and young people having fun at rave parties in Europe, in contrast (by the visual) with the positions occupied by the police authorities which are placed in the streets in constant vigilance of the crowd (images 6 and 7).



Image 6 – Policers watching young people in raves



Image 7 – Armed guards and African protesters

These scenes let slip in the discourse thread different meanings attributed to the body. There are, on one hand, bodies expressing certain meanings of freedom during the parties, others expressing people's union to fight and to protest for the conquest of freedom (and at the same time as a form of escapism or a escape from reality, often oppressive), and there are, on the other hand, bodies that stand on the social frontiers exercising power in positions of control and vigilance, as reflects Nascimento (2017) – remembering what, for Althusser (1971), works as a Repressive State Apparatus, which guarantees to certain agents of the dominant classes the power to rule and assure their domination over other classes.

It is fundamental to take into account, from the words of Suzy Lagazzi, that "we do not have materialities that are completed by each other, but that are related by the contradiction, each working the incompleteness in the other" (LAGAZZI, 2009, p. 68). There is in the film process the displacement of meanings in a continuous (dis)cadence of scenes that, as Sabino (2008, p. 49) says:

[...] get together, overlap each other, merging each other into the images that, together with words and music, play with the rhythmic senses of modernity. Rhythm of music, of images that get together (and separate), find disparate images, of images that are in between (within) other images [...]: conjunction and heterogeneity from the observer's view and listening. They are different textualities that conjugate in this filmic fabric allusive meanings alluding to a

modernity in the daily life of 20th century, and that opening in intertextual and interdiscursive windows, play with meanings that (dis)organize, that unravel, which highlight and erase the relations between events and meanings, exposing the daily life in a relationship of confluence with memory. (author's translation)

Metaphorically, it is observed how image projects in the object in focus the repressed meanings in condensation (LAGAZZI, 2014b). Thus, it is possible to notice, from these scenes a relation of alterity by a drifting process. Metonymically, the image marks the lack in the meanings slipping by the reiteration of the close-up view of the object in focus: the guns (in hands or at waists) of the policemen watching the crowd. Metaphorizing itself into prototypical images of protests, these sense-of-vigilance effects work on the boundaries between saying and not saying, silence and gesture in an ever-moving structure.

Final considerations

Considering the analysis made at the end of this article, the work of Dan Halter marks the confluence between the verbal and non-verbal materiality of the space crossed by silence, by the sonority, by the image and also by the body slipping in the interlacement and enlacement either by the senses mobilized by the music of the Zambian singer Rozalla or by the presence of the dominant other in a position of vigilance. The marches and the bodies in the streets and the public spaces, the meanings of the dance (the raves, the Toyi-Toyi, the moonwalk) slide in the discourse threads, for example, in the crossing of the refugee, which has in the bridge the symbolic place (space) of reference marked by an instant (temporally) marked by the very duration of the crossing, which allows this body to mean differently from its movement. Meaning movements. Meanings in movement. Bodies that put the discourse in the borders with the social (also in movement).

In view of these considerations, therefore, what is perceived, in the meshes of the social, the political and the discursive, is that both the testimonial of the immigrant and the South African movements against Apartheid are rebuilt by the look of Art as a sort of (re)constitution of indissoluble movements in history interpellated by (re)formulated some senses that are updated in memory. Thus, one can observe the experience, for example, of a refugee working in confluence with memory as kind of a discursive window where meanings overflow, so many of them exposed, so many of them silenced.

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