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Semiótica do cuidado e da violência em #MarielleMultiplica: memetização e necropolítica durante as eleições presidenciais de 2018 no Brasil

Semiotics of Care and Violence in #MarielleMultiplica: memetization and necropolitics during the presidential elections in 2018 in Brazil

Isabel Löfgren

Keywords: Memetization; Necropolitics; Marielle Franco

Resumo

No presente trabalho busca-se aprofundar o conhecimento sobre o fenômeno da memetização dentro do ativismo e da cultura visual digital durante o processo eleitoral que levou Jair Bolsonaro à presidência em 2018. O objeto de estudo são as condições de produção e circulação relacionadas à placa de rua em memória à vereadora carioca Marielle Franco pelas redes. O artigo segue o percurso da placa em ações como #MarielleMultiplica, um exemplo de resistência cultural criativa por agentes autônomos no Rio de Janeiro, e, em contrapartida, em memes bolsonaristas contra as mobilizações em torno de Marielle usados para reforçar a retórica de necropolítica bolsonarista. O artigo faz o percurso da placa em diversas plataformas onde é utilizada em diversos gêneros meméticos de cultura visual digital como memes, gráficos, ilustrações e registros fotográficos, todos compreendidos como partes do arcabouço de mídias táticas online e offline em que se desencadeia uma batalha interdiscursiva entre os campos progressista e conservador. Dentro deste percurso surgem um conjunto de questões sobre justiça social, luto e luta, visibilidade e apagamento no embate entre a necropolítica promovida em discursos das campanhas política bolsonarista e os movimentos sociais que promovem

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uma política de vida e cuidado por meio de estratégias visuais pertinentes ao processo de memetização.

Dentro de uma semiótica de cuidado, por um lado, e da violência por outro, percebem-se diferenças em termo de táticas discursivas, autoria, qualidade de imagem, uso de protocolos técnicos, transparência e opacidade dos meios de produção, e modos de circulação da imagem da placa em diversos contextos. Conclui-se que o embate de narrativas mostra-se acirrado, situando o processo de memetização como eficiente arma política e de normalização da necropolítica em processos midiáticos, no qual as contra-narrativas dos movimentos de resistência, mesmo efêmeros, foram essenciais para manter pautas de justiça social e democracia acesas durante o período eleitoral que, através da ação #MarielleMultiplica, projetaram Marielle Franco como símbolo internacional de democracia interseccional e luta anti-fascista.

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In Brazil, memes and forms of *memetic communication* have become a second language opening for new forms of expression, action and organization stemming from increasingly polarized positions in society opening for a process of endemic *memetization* of political discourse. For conservative groups, memes have also become a medium of political education and beyond that images, memes and memetic gestures on social media have become the site of political tensions. Memetization has been identified as part of a process of mediatization by Borelli & Regiani (2017) while studying the circulation of memes from Evangelic groups in Brazil where they investigated “discursive aspects involved in the production and reproduction of memes which are re-signified through operations that involve de-framing and reframing and that trigger interdiscursivity”. When plunged into ideological battlegrounds such as in the progressives (left) versus conservatives (far-right) in the 2018 elections that led Jair Bolsonaro to power, we see evidence of very different ways in how memetization – or the act of turning texts and

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events into memes amd memetic devices through imitation, iteration and replication – illustrate this interdiscursive battle as political tools for mobilizing voters in such a way that memes become pivotal characters in the ideologies and narratives each side is promoting.

In the polarized landscape of the 2018 elections, both conservatives and progressives created user-generated content, actions and protests within an overall process *memetization* of communication which showed not only a shift in political communication by the candidates themselves, but also how grassroots mobilizations and activists leveraged a wide repertoire of tactical media (RENZI, 2008) which were performed in an interplay of social media and multi-scalar protest actions and political rallies which reconfigured the relationship between the streets and the Internet. This interplay involves the notion of circulation by Antônio Fausto Neto (2018) who argues that circulation should be seen as a place for the constitution of multiple meanings and for the complexification and reconfiguration of interactional processes. More importantly, this process of circulation of images occurs, according to Gisele Beiguelman (2021), as "images that jump from one medium to another, from TV to social media interfaces (...) moving from screen to screen, converting to multiple derivations which imply a break with current systems of representation and their mechanisms of symbolic organization (p. 45).

On the progressive side are activist approaches by "autonomous zones of resistance" (BEY, 1991), such as artistic and design collectives, alternative media outlets and multi-partisan provisional citizen constellations such as the #elenão and #MarielleMultiplica movements and Instagram profiles @coleraalegria and @designativista. Their practices of creative cultural resistance (DUNCOMBE, 2013) are built on processes of transparency, collectivity, polyvocal communication and strong parity between online and offline tactical media advocating social justice against Bolsonaro's necropolitics. On the Bolsonaro side are semi-autonomous (human and non-

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human) digital meme cultures operating through *meta-mimesis* (Horbyk, Löfgren, et. al, 2021), that is, creating texts that imitate other texts in a sort of *spiral transgression* – "an oblique and iterative rather than frontal tactic aimed at destabilising existing positions and well-rehearsed moves (…), as that difference that disorients the very idea of the limit " (MBEMBE, 2019). In this process of meta-mimesis, Bolsonarist communicative strategies include, besides tactics of imitation, iteration and replication, tactics of *memetic disruption* where claims from the left are imitated, inverted, deframed and reframed to banalize, downplay and ultimately erase their opponents' claims for social justice. These two widely different approaches lead us to ask ourselves not only which politics memes are representing, but the political conditions of its production, as well as its reproduction and circulation which are part of the process of memetization.

One of the main characteristics of Bolsonaro and his political allies' electoral campaigns in 2018 was how they actively promoted a discourse of necropolitics (WERMUTH et. al, 2020) to win conservative supporters through overtly racist, misogynistic, homo/transphobic, anti-human rights statements with reactions ranging from cheerful approval from his supporters to complete outrage from his opponents. According to Achille Mbembe (2019), necropolitics is the repression of sovereignty that resides in the power to 'dictate who may live and who may die', and the 'material destruction of bodies and populations' in a politics of 'selective elimination' or negation of bodies that the state machinery considers resistant or redundant to its workings and policies (2019). By working with this concept from political philosophy in a communicative context, we see discourses that re-emphasize the promotion of erasure, dispossession and death and its integral mechanism in political realities.

In Brazil, it can be argued that necropolitics has been a continuous political reality especially from the perspective of racialized populations since colonial times. However, in the 2018 elections Bolsonaro's "necropolitical turn" not only mirrored Brazil's long

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history of Black and indigenous genocide, but also venerated practices of torture and institutional violence from the military dictatorship by re-articulating these practices against contemporary identity politics such as feminist, HBTQIA+, human rights and anti-racist social movements. In this article, we chose to trace the circulation of a specific artefact, a street sign created as part of mobilizations demanding justice for the political crime of city councillor Marielle Franco, which became a pivotal *memetic device* which shows how the phenomenon of memetization, a hallmark of digital culture in the 2010s, became an efficient tool of communication, persuasion and activism across necropolitical and anti-necropolitical discourses during the 2018 elections.

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One of the most significant events of 2018 which expresses Bolsonaro's necropolitical stance during the presidential race and which precipitated a *memetic* battle between conservatives and progressives concerns the unsolved political assassination of leftist Rio de Janeiro city councillor Marielle Franco and her driver Anderson Gomes, ambushed by armed militia[1] on March 14th, 2018. Marielle Franco's brutal murder was often touted by the conservatives as the symbol of everything that was unwanted by the rising conservative hegemony – an educated, democratically elected, Black, HBTQIA+ woman from the *favelas* who was not afraid to denounce the effects of mass killings and ongoing human rights violations in poor areas controlled by para-military groups in Rio de Janeiro known as militias, with strong links to the Bolsonaro family. But to the surprise of her conservative political opponents, in her afterlife Franco became a martyr for all

[1] The militia in Rio de Janeiro are a well-established para-military group that controls territories in favelas and poor areas in the city and strongly represented in local politics, the police force, and the judicial system. Jair Bolsonaro, his sons and far-right political allies are strongly connected to these groups, owing their political careers to the rise of the militias after the military dictatorship (1964-1985).

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minorities who are victims of long-standing necropolitical practices of the Brazilian state and became an international symbol for anti-fascist resistance following several actions and protests along the year 2018, especially during the electoral period (MEIRELES, 2020).



Figure 1 - September 14th, 2014, Cinelândia, Rio de Janeiro. Monica Benício, Marielle Franco's widow, raises the Marielle Franco street sign during a memorial act.

On September 14, 2018, when the first round of the general elections was in full swing, a public act in downtown Rio de Janeiro was held to honor Franco's memory six months after her killing. During the memorial, a commemorative plaque in the form of a street sign "Rua Marielle Franco"[2] was placed by her widow Monica Benício on top of

[2] The original "Rua Marielle Franco" street sign follow the exact design of street signs in Rio, where many streets are named after martyrs or important historical figures. It was created by The sign was created and installed by photographer, lesbian activist, and anarchist working under the pseudonym Ana Archis, and became a symbol of resistance and disobedience, a cry of "You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us". It was meant to be used at the exact place of her killing in a location near downtown Rio, where the first memorial acts were held in her memory in late March 2018. It wasn't until this event on September

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an existing street sign in front of the City Council Chamber in Cinelândia square, downtown Rio de Janeiro. This symbolic gesture of *détournement* was witnessed by thousands of her supporters wearing T-shirts saying "Who killed Marielle Franco?" and holding up protest material decrying Bolsonaro's necropolitics which received a lot of media attention in the press and in social media. From this point on, the street sign circulated widely as a symbol of resistance and solidarity and would become a pivotal character in the "interdiscursive battle" which I follow across several social media platforms (mainly Instagram and Twitter), meme generating sites and meme repositories. Its appearance in both pro and anti-necropolitical discourses in the hashtags #MarielleMultiplica #MarielleVive and #MariellePeneira helps to unpack the process of *memetization* as an intrinsic feature of this interdiscursive battle.

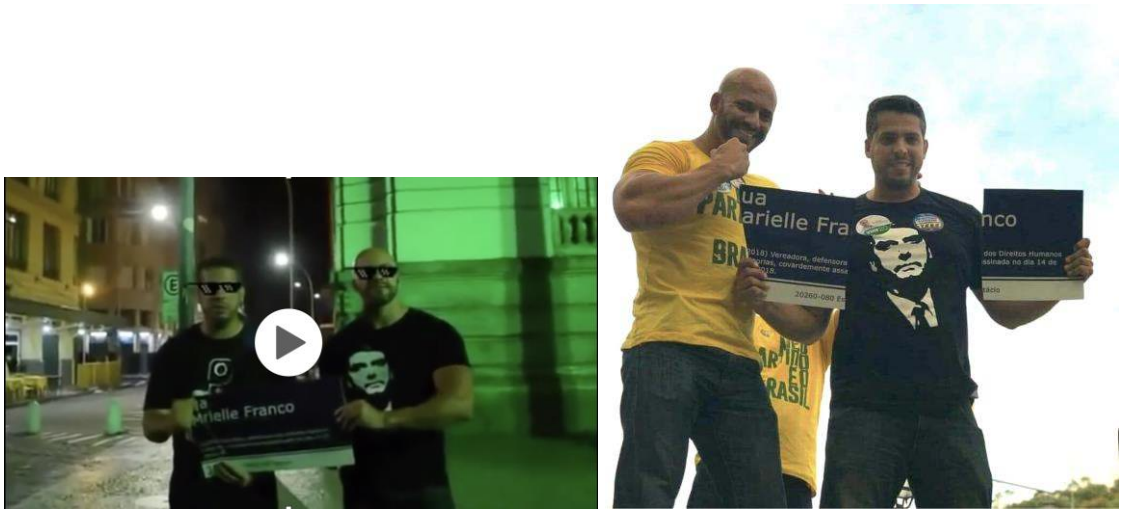

Figure 2a – (Left) The meme-video - October 2nd, 2018, Amorim (left) and Silveira (right) film themselves taking down the Marielle Franco street sign. Note the "thug life" dark glasses filter and Amorim's clenched fist as a Bolsonarist gesture.

14th, 2018 where the street sign became ubiquitous in all actions regarding Marielle Franco and the struggles she represented. *Arquivo Compa*, https://www.arquivocompa.org/colecoes/placa-rua-marielle-franco/

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Figure 3b – (Right) The image-trophy - October 3rd, 2018, Silveira (left) and Amorim (right) tear up the sign in a political rally in Rio de Janeiro. Note the yellow and green colors of the Brazilian flag used to signify patriotism.

Two weeks later, the street sign was removed by Marielle's political opponents Daniel Silveira and Rodrigo Amorim, Bolsonaro's political allies, who were at that point running for state and federal office. This action was filmed in a 30-second video with Silveira's and Amorim's electoral campaign graphics and published on meme sites where dozens of *Bolsonarist* memes can be found. The video ends with both candidates holding the removed sign with the "dark glasses" filter (which meme fans recognize as "thug life" or "deal with it") accusing thousands of Marielle's supporters of vandalism while promoting themselves in doing "public good for the benefit of God and Brazil".

The next day, Silveira and Amorim tore up the street sign in a political rally exhibiting it as a war trophy in front of cheering crowds. Viral photographs of the two muscled white men wearing Bolsonaro T-shirts holding the torn sign circulated widely in the press. This "trophy-image" (GRŽINIĆ, 2021) of tearing up the name of a Black woman in public reminds of horrific scenes of public whipping of Black enslaved people in public squares during colonial times, images of which are deeply entrenched in the subconscious of former slave societies like Brazil. Seeing it for the first time felt as if they were killing Marielle Franco once again. The image crystallizes the narrative and semiotic battle between the progressive side that stands for a politics of care, justice and solidarity, and the conservative side that champions a politics of death and elimination of "undesirables", using symbolic actions and their resulting images in a strategy of dispossession and de-humanization. Grzinic (2021) provides a good definition of what images become in what I call a process of de-humanizing memetization:

> What is then the emblematic image of the digital necrocapitalist mode of production? It is not a cinematic image, nor a virtual image, nor a militant image, not even a commodity image, less an NFT. I argue that the emblematic image of the time we live in is the trophy image. It implies that the historical formats of global capitalism ground their regime of affect, vision, and perception not in the space-time paradigm

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> but in the violent and direct modes of governmentality and dispossession.

When looking at the elements of this interdiscursive battle for and against necropolitics in the contested scenario of the memory of a Black lesbian feminist leftist politician, a few patterns and aspects emerge such as quality, transparency, authorship, and aspects of frontstage and backstage (GOFFMANN, 1959) which corroborate both the progressive and the conservative narratives. While the graphics in #MarielleMultiplica and @designativista present a high artistic standard in high-resolution graphics, Bolsonarist memes often have a crude "deep-fried" style which mostly used ready-made meme templates from sites such as makeyourmeme.com, imgflip.com, gerarmemes.com.br and others. In terms of production, while the progressives create original graphics and artworks such as the street sign itself and the @designativista graphic design pieces, the extreme-right uses automated technical protocols, readymade templates of rapid production within well-established and easily recognizable meme genres which are well-suited for high-speed retaliations. These are well-suited for messages that promote more shock value and violence "for laughs" disguised as humor memes and contribute to online radicalisation into far-right extremism, as already detected in several national contexts (ASKANIUS & KELLER, 2021).

In all the direct actions from the progressives, one sees both backstage and frontstage images posted on social media, with a clear identification of those who create the actions and those who participate in it, as in posts with celebrity endorsements which replicate the memetic gesture of holding the Marielle street sign. I consider the transparency of the process expressed in this backstage as an act *strong vulnerability*, showing that care and non-violence is a strength of grassroots mobilizations, which is inversely perceived as an Achilles heel by the extreme-right. The extreme-right reacts by substituting messages of care with messages of violence or diminishing the importance of this political crime, questioning Marielle's political reputation, and worse, publishing

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memes that metaphorically re-enact the crime scene as a metaphor for state-sanctioned violence, as in memes found through the hashtag #MariellePeneira.



Figure 3 - Several anti-Marielle memes. Note the use of typical meme templates.

Bolsonarist authors are concealed by proxy names which obscure any evidence of a human backstage in the production of the memes. By using meme generating prefabricated protocols, a digital equivalent of fast food, all we are allowed to see is the *frontstage,* which shows that the modus operandi of Bolsonaro supporters values opacity and group behaviour, and not originality, quality and transparency as in the leftist side, as seen in the original production of artifacts selected for this article. In fact, one of the derogatory denominations for Bolsonaristas by the left is the metaphor of "gado" or "cattle" which is an entire category of memes that differentiate the "critical left" from the "ignorant far-right". There are equally an over-production of memes accusing the left of "mimimi" or a criticism of the left being oversensitive and pouting, especially regarding identity politics and the rhetorics of solidarity and care.

Even if electoral periods can be considered highly spectactular episodic events that rely on specific media genres, actions such as #MarielleMultiplica though initiated in the heat of the electoral campaign through grassroots mobilizations have survived the

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electoral period. They have either been subsumed into more permanent movements and cultural expressions or evolved into bigger mobilizations that are already conceived with the phenomenon of *memetization* in mind. Memetic communicative elements from the left keep returning even within a more permanent state of necropolitics during the Bolsonaro administration between 2019 and 2022, as a way of fighting against the normalization of violence in media discourses and against the government's robust social media *memetic* machinery.

The interdiscursive battles on the Internet as seen in the process of memetization of necropolitics through the Marielle Franco street sign allows us to understand the extent in which memetic communication are an intrinsic part of necropolitical discourse and how social media reconfigure the limits of representation, capable our conception of the "human" in digital visual cultures that take advantage of meme sub-cultures. On the other hand, it is important to understand the power of mobilization generated by the #MarielleMultiplica action and assess the fragility and efficacy of such actions of creative cultural resistance and if they can resist efforts of depoliticizing the core issue over time. When considering the Marielle Franco street sign as a *memetic* device, it creates possibilities for the extension of biological deaths into a productive "after-life" (MEIRELES, 2020) that offers opportunities for mourning, affect, solidarity, identification and mobilization in the light of longstanding histories of oppression, thus helping to form a digital *necroresistance*. However, they also need to be assessed in terms of not only a symbolic gesture of catharsis but also as an enabler of agency and change, even when the Marielle Franco street sign has been commercialized on e-commerce sites such as Etsy and Amazon, and reproduced in countless objects as souvenirs. In these commercialized settings, pairs of flip-flops printed with both pro and anti-Bolsonaro messages can be found on the same sites, which further indicates the memetization of protest messages and political ideologies circulating in everyday life as a commodity and fashion trend. The fact that one producer prints merchandise that satisfies customers on

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all sides of the political spectrum may be good for business but also points to a reification of political messages and political propaganda as image-trophies within a digital necroeconomy (GRZINIC, 2021). In the case of the Marielle Franco street sign nonetheless, it can be argued that these commercial items still contribute to the continued visibility of the demands for justice and as an extension of Marielle's martyrdom. Does hypermemetization still serve the cause?

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