Between Accidents and Explosions: Indeterminacy and Aesthesia in the Becoming of History / *Entre acidentes e explosões: indeterminação e estesia no devir da história*

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ABSTRACT

The article proposes a comparison between the concepts of *accident*, developed by Landowski in his sociosemiotic theory of interaction, and *explosion*, elaborated by Lotman in his last writings on the semiotics of culture. Far from being an end in itself, this confrontation aims to sketch a theoretical-epistemological synthesis that can contribute to the analysis of the communicational-discursive processes that trigger the historical flow of sociocultural systems, as well as to their conceptual categorisation. My hypothesis is that the basis of this articulation lies in the link between the indeterminacy highlighted by both authors, and the aesthesic value, that is, the core of sensible tensions that, as shown by Landowski, the accidental/explosive events could mobilise. In order to demonstrate its pertinence and relevance, I will focus on a specific case study: the 2013 protests in Brazil and their impact on the process that led to the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018.
KEYWORDS: Accident; Explosion; Landowski; Lotman; Populism

RESUMO

O artigo propõe uma releitura cruzada dos conceitos de acidente*, desenvolvido por Landowski no âmbito de sua teoria sociossemiótica da interação, e* explosão*, elaborado por Lotman em seus últimos escritos de semiótica da cultura. Longe de ser um fim em si mesmo, este confronto almeja esboçar uma síntese teórico-epistemológica que possa contribuir à análise dos processos comunicacionais-discursivos que regem o devir dos sistemas socioculturais, bem como ao seu enquadramento conceitual. A minha hipótese é que a cifra desta articulação resida no vínculo entre a indeterminação destacada por ambos os autores e a carga estésica, isto é, o núcleo de tensões sensíveis que, conforme vislumbra Landowski, os acontecimentos acidentais/explosivos são capazes de mobilizar. Para procurar demonstrar sua pertinência e relevância, partirei de um caso concreto: as jornadas de junho de 2013 e seu impacto no processo que levou, em 2016, ao impeachment de Dilma Rousseff e, em 2018, à eleição de Jair Bolsonaro.*
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Acidente; Explosão; Landowski; Lotman; Populismo

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Introduction

How does meaning change? How do we move away from a type of world and towards another? How do seemingly consolidated arrangements of cultural, social, and political values and cultural beliefs implode, decompose, undo themselves, making way for new conjunctures and configurations? What are the rhythms of these changes? What is the shape of time when things change? How do events that are more or less circumscribed manage to trigger and/or accelerate such processes? And in what way is it possible to understand these breaks as semiotic-discursive phenomena?

Thinking of providing answers to such questions is, at the very least, an ambitious endeavour. The issue of the syntax of historic processes – be they social, cultural, political, communicational, etc. – has intrigued scholars from different countries and disciplines. Just during the second half of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty first century, amongst the researchers who have dedicated their work to the topic, we can name historians as prominent as Braudel (1960),[1] Le Goff (1992),[2] Koselleck (1985; 2018),[3] and Hartog (2003); anthropologists such as Sahlins (1976); sociologists as Elias (1994);[4] philosophers as Virilio (1986),[5] Foucault (1972),[6] Ricouer (1990),[7] and Julien (2011).[8]

In the field of languages and discourse, the list of names is equally long and dense. Mikhail Bakhtin addresses the problem of historical-discursive temporality in his writings on the "chronotope" (BAKHTIN, 1981;[9] 1984)[10] and the "great time"

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[1] BRAUDEL, F. History and the Social Sciences: The Long Duration. *American Behavioral Scientist*, v. 3, n. 6, pp.3-13, 1960.

[2] LE GOFF, J. *History and Memory*. Trans. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.

[3] KOSELLECK, R. *Sediments of Time*: On Possible Histories. Trans. and ed. Sean Franzel and Stefen-Ludwig Hoffman. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018.

[4] ELIAS, N. *Time*: An Essay. Oxford; Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994.

[5] VIRILIO, P. *Speed and Politics*: An Essay on Dromology. Trans. Mark Polizzoni. New York: Semiotext(e), 1986.

[6] FOUCAULT, M. *Archeology of Knowledge*. Trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.

[7] RICOEUR, P. *Time and Narrative*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990. v. III.

[8] JULLIEN, F. *The Silent Transformations*. Trans. Krzysztof Fijałkowski and Michael Richardson. London; New York: Seagull Books, 2011.

[9] BAKHTIN, M. Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel. *In*: BAKHTIN, M. *The Dialogic Imagination*: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin. Edited by Michael Holquist; translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981, pp.84-258.

[10] BAKHTIN, M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis, MN: University of. Minnesota Press, 1984.

(BAKHTIN, 2003;[11] BUBNOVA, 2015)[12]. In one of the chapters in *The Social Sciences*: A Semiotic View, Algirdas Julien Greimas (1989)[13] approaches the relation between fundamental history and the history of events. In *On Meaning*, drawing on a text by Dumezil, he drafts a semiotic analysis of accidents in the humanities (GREIMAS, 1987).[14] Years later, in *De l'Imperfection* (2002), the semiotician revisits the problem of the overlap between *continuity* and *discontinuity*, focusing now on the meaning of aesthetic events in everyday life. The topic was then developed by some of his most notorious followers, amongst whom Jacques Fontanille (2004) and Claude Zilberberg (2011), theorists of the so-called "tensive semiotics," and Eric Landowski (2004; 2014), the creator of "sociosemiotics." Not to mention, finally, Jurij M. Lotman, cultural semiotician who worked, at different stages of his career, on the points raised at the beginning of this text (LOTMAN, 1985; 1994; 2009; 2014a; 2014b).[15]

It is not my intention, therefore, to solve problems of such breadth and complexity in these few pages. Instead, I put forth a crossed reading of the concepts of *accident*, developed by Landowski within his sociosemiotic theory of the regimes of interaction and meaning (LANDOWSKI, 2014), as well as *explosion*, elaborated by Lotman in his final writings on the semiotics of culture (see Lotman, 1994; 2009; 2014a; 2014b).

Both Landowski's accident and Lotman's explosion designate a break in the gradual evolution of the history of individual and/or collective subjects (cultural community, social groups and organisations, political institutions, nation-states) that leads to a phase of semantic indeterminacy whose resolution will later be the object of dispute between competing intentionalities. There are nuances between the two, however, that set them apart.

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[11] BAKHTIN, M. Response to a Question from Novi Mir Editorial Staff. *In*: BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986. pp.1-9.

[12] BUBNOVA, T. What Could the "Great Time" Mean? *Bakhtiniana*, São Paulo, v. 10, n. 2, 2015. Available at: https://revistas.pucsp.br/bakhtiniana/article/view/23260/17074. Accessed in: 15 Apr. 2019.

[13] GREIMAS, A. *The Social Sciences*: A Semiotic View. Trans. Frank Collins and Paul Perron, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

[14] GREIMAS, A. *On Meaning*. Trans. Frank Collins and Paul Perron, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987

[15] The list could go on. Many authors, especially within discourse semiotics, have reflected, in recent years, on the issues of time and the relations between continuity and discontinuity. See, on that note, essays by Sedda (2012) and the volumes edited by Bertrand and Fontanille (2006); Migliore (2010); and Mendes (2010).

For Landowski, indeterminacy is mostly *negative*: accident is an event marked by *absurdity*, by *meaninglessness* (LANDOWSKI, 2014, pp.71-80). Conversely, for Lotman, indeterminacy is *positive*: the explosion always generates a *semantic surplus*, that is, *meaning in excess* (LOTMAN, 1994; 2009). Besides, whereas Lotman's explosion does not comprise the role of aesthesia, Landowski's accident points, in its intersections with other regimes – especially "adjustment" (see Landowski, 2014, pp.47-60)[16] –, to the relevance of the sensible in the dynamic of social interactions.

The confrontation is not an end in itself. Far from it, it aims to contribute to the construction of a new theoretical-epistemological framework for the study and the conceptual framing of processes that dictate the becoming of sociocultural and/or political systems, which, in line with the semiotic approach adopted here, are understood as discursive systems and processes.

In this sense, as I will claim in the analysis and study of previously developed cases (DEMURU, 2019a; 2019b) – namely, the June 2013 protests and their impact in the process that, in 2016, led to the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff and, in 2018, to the elections of Jair Bolsonaro as the President of Brazil – the comparison between accident and explosion unfolds into a conceptual synthesis which, at the same time that it allows for the resolution of some of the embedded aporias in each notion, turns out to be heuristically valid for the analysis of certain contemporary social and political phenomena, such as the rise and spread of populist leaders and movements from both the left and the right in Brazil and in the West as a whole – amongst whom feature Matteo Salvini, Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, André Manuel Lopez Obrador and, as previously mentioned, Jair Bolsonaro.

My hypothesis is that the result of this synthesis lies in the articulation between, on the one hand, the semantic indeterminacy that marks both Landowski's accident and Lotman's explosion and, on the other, the *aesthesic value* that such events or unpredictable historical phases are capable of mobilising – in which the aesthesic value is the living core of the sensible tensions yet to be named (see Landowski, 2004) that circulate in a given social universe in search for discursive sublimation (see Demuru, 2019a).

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[16] In the Portuguese translation: "ajustamento."

As we will see, it is the overlap between vagueness and aesthesia that defines, today, the changes at place in the international political scenario as well as, of course, the discourses on which they rest.

Accident, According to Eric Landowski

Drawing on Greimas' "narrative grammar" (see Greimas; Courtés, 1982, pp.204-211),[17] Landowski elaborates, in *Les Interactions Risquées,* a model to cover the regimes of meaning and interaction that guide, roughly speaking, human existence (LANDOWSKI, 2014). There are four regimes identified by Landowski, namely programming, manipulation, adjustment, and accident, which the author parses out in a semiotic square ruled by elliptical relations (Figure 1).

In *programming*, subjects regularly follow the narrative paths ruled by principles of physical causality and/or social coercion. This is the realm of routine and habits in which, as Greimas had already pointed out in *De l'Imperfection* (2002), there lies a tendency to the insignificance and exploitation of meaning.
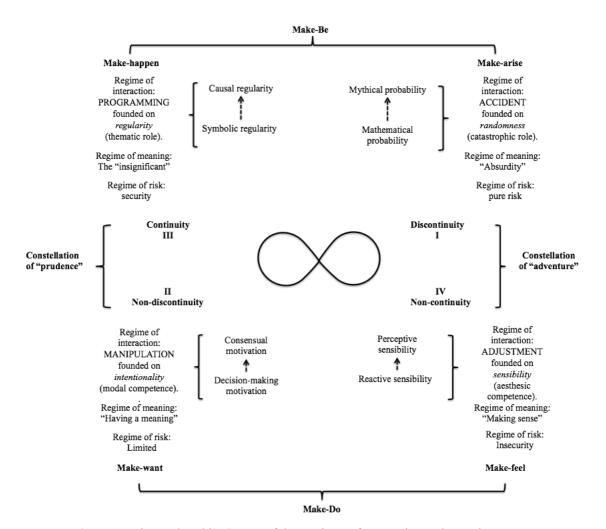
In *manipulation*, interactions take place in accordance with a strategic intentionality: an *addresser* directs an *addressee* to *having-to-do* or *wanting-to-do* something, that is, to engage in a certain narrative programme that includes the acquisition of certain modal competencies: being-able-to-do (*pouvoir-faire*), know-how (*savoir-faire*), etc.

In *adjustment*, there are no pre-programmed scripts or defined strategies: subjects build, from a common sensibility and focusing on aesthesic competencies, a relation that could result, as Landowski argues (2014, p.54), in some kind of mutual realisation.

In *accident*, interactions take place under the auspices of *alea*. This is the regime of absurdity, in which chance emerges in its purest form, breaking the continuous flow of programming and placing the subject before a semantic universe that is marked by insignificance and meaninglessness (see Landowski, 2014, p.71).

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[17] GREIMAS, A. J.; COURTÉS, J. *Semiotic and Language*: An Analytical Dictionary. Translation Larry Crist, Daniel Patteand, James Lee, Edward McMahon II, Gary Phillips and Michael Rengstorf. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.

Figure 1: Eric Landowski's Square of the Regimes of Interaction and Meaning - Adapted from Landowski (2014)

Examples of accidents provided by Landowski mostly refer to the realm of natural calamities (tsunamis, lightnings, earthquakes) and the singular existence of individual subjects (happy and unhappy unforeseen events, as when a roof tile falls on someone's head; surprises; and strokes of luck). Nevertheless, as I claimed in other occasions (DEMURU, 2019b), it seems plausible to translocate the concept to the sphere of macro-social processes. As for the rest of it, Landowski himself (2001) shows, in his studies on Diana's death, that the accident suffered by the former Princess of Wales characterises a random break not only of someone's or a particular family's life, but also of the historical-political flow of the whole of the United Kingdom, after which, unexpectedly, the worn-out image of both Queen Elizabeth and the Windsors took on a new life. On hindsight, historical periods such as May 68 in France or, as we shall see, the 2013 June protests in Brazil can be considered historical accidents.

Surely, things become infinitely more complex in face of phenomena of this order. What characterises a macro-social accident? What are its distinctive features? Where does it begin and where does it end? I will revisit these questions later, bearing in mind that an approach to them should benefit from being contrasted to Lotman. I should say now, however, that, following Landowski's suggestions, the identity of an accident always depends on the point of view and on the moment when it is observed. What is an accident for some might not be so for others. To someone who is a fatalist, chance is a "motivated" hap just as, for statisticians who are partial to the laws of big numbers, this hap can be "programmed" (see Landowski, 2014, p.77). Likewise, when we look at past accidents from the present, their interpretation may differ. An example that Landowski offers himself is that, in face of an unexpected and senseless result on an election, *a posteriori*, a hidden meaning points to an intentionality (manipulation) which, supposedly, led to such result (see Landowski, 2014, p.75).

Having said that, we now move on to the syntactical, semantical, and aspectual dimensions that characterise, according to Landowski, the regime of the accident.

As shown in Figure 1, programming, accident, manipulation, and adjustment each occupy a position along the path defined by the logical-semantical unfolding of the category of *continuity-discontinuity*: whereas programming is a continuous process, accident is a *discontinuous* one; whereas manipulation is a *non-discontinuous* interaction, adjustment is a *non-continuous* one.

There seems to be, therefore, an *aspectual configuration* that is unique to each regime. That is to say, in linguistics and in discourse semiotics, the aspect is the point of view over the action: whereas time is a category that places the action in relation to the moment of enunciation, that is, to the *when* (present, past, future), the aspect defines the *how* of the action, the rhythm through which it develops (see Greimas; Courtés, 1982, pp.18-19).[18] An action can therefore be described as either finished (by using perfect tenses) or unfinished (by using imperfect tenses), during which it is possible to highlight different *aspects* of its process: *punctuality*, which highlights its uniqueness; *durativeness*, which highlights its stretch in time; *iterativeness*, which focuses on its regular and constant repetition; *inchoateness*, which points to its initial dimension; *terminativeness*, which marks it end. In sum, aspectualisation is an overdetermination of

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[18] For reference, see footnote 18.

temporality, in which all discourse depends on − and derives from − a procedure of aspectualisation.

Going back to Landowski's model, it could thus be argued that programming is marked by traces of *durativity* and *iterativity* whereas accident is characterised as a *punctual* event (see Greimas; Courtés, 1982, pp.18-19).[19]

Nevertheless, the issue of the aspectual arrangement of the accident is complex and deserves to be addressed with caution. On this, there are three lines of reasoning whose development serves the current discussion.

Before anything else, it can be assumed that the accident is a punctual event that is *terminative* and *inchoative* all at once. This is justified by two reasons. First, by the fact that Landowski, just as Greimas in *De l'Imperfection* (2002), defines accident both as rupture of the order, that is, as something that precedes it logically, as well as a starting point (point I in Figure 1) of the syntax of the squares of regimes of meaning and interaction. In other words, it is the path of a subject who, finding themselves in a random and chaotic world, starts to look for some sender to give a new meaning to their existence: "we shall start, therefore, from the opposite point to that of Greimas [Landowski states, inverting the reasoning of the Lithuanian semiotician]: and if all were at the beginning, as in myths, accident, distress, instability, agitation and fury, disorder, chaos?" (LANDOWSKI, 2014, p.70; my translation).[20] Secondly, by the determination of the roles that the French semiotician attributes to accident. Unlike programming, whose role is assimilable to the "thematic role" of Greimas' narrative grammar (see Greimas; Courtés, 1982, p.344),[21] accident operates as a true "actant joker" which fills at least three semantic-discursive roles: (i) a "critical role" that is, "it is they who decide the orientation and, moreover, often the result of the processes in which they intervene" (LANDOWSKI, 2014, p.79; my translation);[22] (ii) a "catastrophic role," that is, of something that breaches the ongoing programming, the manipulations, and the adjustments; and, finally, (iii) a "catalytic role," which is to say of something that engenders a new cycle of interactions whose trajectories are, at the

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[19] For reference, see footnote 18.

[20] In the Portuguese translation: "Partamos, portanto, do ponto oposto àquele de Greimas: e se tudo na origem fosse, como nos mitos, acidente, intranquilidade, instabilidade, agitação e fúria, desordem, caos?".

[21] For reference, see footnote 18.

[22] In the Portuguese translation: "É ele que decide a orientação e, ainda, frequentemente, o resultado dos processos nos quais intervém."

moment when they manifest, still unpredictable (see Landowski, 2014, p.79). For philological rigour, it is necessary to acknowledge that Landowski reserves a privileged position to the catastrophic role, thus emphasising the terminative aspect of accident.[23] Nonetheless, albeit Landowski does not take it any further, the joint operation of a *catastrophic* and a *catalytic* movement is, as I see it, an essential point for understanding the semiotic nature of historical, political, and sociocultural accidents, both at the micro and macro levels.

Next, it seems useful to establish a correlation between this double aspectual valuation of accident (punctual/terminative and punctual/inchoative) and the issue of aesthesis. This is what Greimas did in *De l'Imperfection* (2002), in approaching the issue of the aesthesic accident in the everyday, understood as an eminently sensible fracture of the matrix.[24] It is true that, in *Les Interactions Risquées*, Landowski, unlike Greimas, treats the sensible and the random separately, making the former the regulatory principle of the regime of adjustment and the latter, the regulatory principle of the regime of accident (LANDOWSKI, 2014, pp.73-79). However, the terms used by the semiotician to introduce accident – "distress, instability, agitation and fury, disorder, and chaos" (see LANDOWSKI, 2014, p.70; my translation),[25] "bedazzlement," "exclamation" (LANDOWSKI, 2014, p.92; my translation)[26] – directly and indirectly evoke the theme of feelings, whose implication cannot be ignored.[27] Moreover, according to the elliptical and recursive syntax that rules the relations between the regimes (see Landowski, 2014, pp.85-89), adjustment, that is, the logic of sensibility, tends to or ends in the imponderable and the random. Conversely, an event that reaches dimensions that are initially unpredictable might give birth to processes of susceptible adjustment and collective contagion to feed back into it. This is what Landowski has

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[23] "Let us retain, thus, this last quality [catastrophic], to counterweight to the thematic role mentioned below," Landowski states at the margin of the chapter on accident in *Les Interactions Risquées* (LANDOWSKI, 2014, p.79; my translation). In the Portuguese translation: "Retenhamos, pois, este último qualificativo [catastrófico], para fazer contrapeso ao papel temático no modelo abaixo." What is more, as shown in Figure 1, the role that designates the accident is precisely the catastrophic role.

[24] In his reflections on the event, Zilberberg (2006) shows the relation between event and aesthesia, thus reflecting on the overlaps between aspectual intensity and the affective value in overcoming the unexpected. The comparison between the accident in Landowski and the event in Zilberberg was studied by Jacques Fontanille (2016). However, albeit desirable, his exploration exceeds the limits of this text.

[25] In the Portuguese translation: "Intranquilidade, instabilidade, agitação e fúria, desordem e caos."

[26] In the Portuguese translation: "Deslumbramento [...] exclamação."

[27] The overlap between Landowski's accident and aesthesia is shown by Ana Claudia de Oliveira in her study on *faits divers* (OLIVEIRA, 2012).

been recently calling the "spread" (LANDOWSKI, 2018),[28] a propagation, in the social fabric, of *aesthesic meaning* founded on contact between sentient bodies, which corresponds "neither to an empathy of the cognitive order nor to a viral contagion but, rather, to expansion by contiguity of elements that touch each other, as in a wildfire" (LANDOWSKI, 2018, p.15; my translation).[29] The case of Diana's death, which ignited an explosion, in the international and British media discourse, of a generalised social aesthesia as well as of an adjustment, both between the people and the body of the Princess as well as between the latter and Queen Elizabeth II, is a highly significant example of such dynamic (LANDOWSKI, 2001).

Finally, it is paramount to highlight the correlation between *accident* and *semantic indeterminacy*, equally crucial for Lotman's concept of explosion. We have seen that Landowski attributes a catastrophic role to accident, which determines the collapse of a system of beliefs and values that are sedimented on a specific narrative horizon. The regime of meaning which this shock originates is the "senseless," the "absurd," the "foolish" (LANDOWSKI, 2014, pp.71-80; my translation).[30] It is impossible to infer, therefore, that accident gives ways to a semantic indeterminacy of a *negative* character.

Nevertheless, this is valid only from a certain point of view, which highlights the *catastrophic* role and the *terminative* aspect of accident, understood as the end of a certain state of affairs. Inverting the perspective and highlighting the *catalytic* role, that is, the *inchoative* aspect of accident, things become more complex. What emerges, in this case, is not a lack of meaning, but *meaning in excess*, a plural and highly indeterminate universe of possible significations. In other words, albeit Landowski does not deepen his discussions on the theoretical guidelines, the semantic figure of accident does not seem (only) to be the *nonsense*, the *absurd* but, rather, the *excess of meaning*. It is a semantic surplus that, according to the very model proposed by the French semiotician, will end, sooner or later, in a regime of manipulation, that is, in a dispute between different intentionalities, each of which will seek to imprint a path on the indeterminacy offered by accident. This is, as we will see next, Lotman's alternative.

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[28] In order to explain his hypothesis, Landowski uses, in the French original text, the Portuguese word "alastramento."

[29] In the original: "Ni empathie d'ordre cognitif ni contagion virale mais expansion par contiguïté des éléments touchés, à la manière d'un incendie de forêt."

[30] In the Portuguese translation: "O sem sentido [...] o absurdo [...] a insensatez."

Explosion, According to Jurij Lotman

In his last writings, semiotician Jurij Lotman (1994; 2009) reflects on the articulations between gradual processes and punctual processes in the becoming of cultures. Cultures, Lotman says, evolve in accordance with two complementary movements: regularly, step by step; and punctually, by leaps. The first movement is marked by the linear development of history; the second, by sudden transitions and accelerations, which the scholar defines as "explosions" (LOTMAN, 1994; 2009).

Difficult to outline, the concept of *explosion* has, in Lotman's theory, at least two possible meanings. On the one hand, it indicates historical moments at which something "interrupts the chain of cause and effect and projects, on the surface, a space of equally likely events, of which it is impossible to say, at first, which will turn into reality" (LOTMAN, 1994, p.35; my translation).[31]

On the other hand, it designates a process of meaning explosion – of new meanings, metaphors, analogies – which emerges and is configured as the result of the translation of what was previously deemed untranslatable. That is, in the words of Lotman himself, the generation of a series of "unexpected semantic combinations, impossible or forbidden on a previous stage" (LOTMAN, 1994, p.93; my translation).[32]

The first case deals with the unpredictability of actions, facts, or events, bearing in mind that "the conception of the historical event depends on the type of culture […] the reason why the historian with a text in their hands is not obliged to distinguish what, in the text, is an event from their historian's point of view and what was a noteworthy event from the point of view of the author of the text and their contemporaries" (LOTMAN, 2014a, p.137; my translation).[33]

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[31] In the Italian translation: "Il momento dell'esplosione interrompe la catena delle cause e degli effetti e proietta in superficie uno spazio di eventi parimenti probabili di cui è impossibile per principio dire quale si realizzerà."

[32] In the Italian translation: "la possibilità di combinazioni strutturali semantiche inattese, impossibili o proibite in una fase precedente." It is worth pointing out that, according to Lotman (1985), gradual and explosive processes might not merely alternate, but can even coexist: as the semiotician suggests, specific portions of culture may evolve at different speeds than others (see Lotman, 1985).

[33] In the Italian translation: "La concezione di evento storico dipende dal tipo di cultura ed è un importante indicatore tipologico. Per questo prendendo in mano il testo lo storico è costretto a distinguere che cosa nel testo è un evento dal punto di vista suo, e che cosa era un evento degno di menzione dal punto di vista dell'autore e dei suoi contemnporanei."

When George d'Anthès pulls the trigger, Lotman states in *Cercare la strada*, not only is the life and death of Pushkin equally probable, but there is potentially another history of Russia as well (LOTMAN, 1994, p.36). Other examples mentioned by Lotman are the French Revolution and the Time of Troubles (the interregnum period that followed the end of the Rurik dynasty, between 1589 and 1613; see Lotman, 1994; 2009; 2014b). From this perspective, "the explosion of diverse possibilities adds chance to the cultural space: all possibilities are likely" (LOTMAN, 1994, pp.37-38; my translation).[34] As Lotman explains, it was by chance that Louis XVI of France, a lover of mechanics, contributed to the project of the machine that would perform his own beheading: the guillotine. Just as it was by chance that the machine became the symbol of the French Revolution (if we consider, for example, that the technical details of regicides in other revolutions were not clad in symbolic valences). In the author's own words:

> The criterion that allows us to determine the explosive nature of a process [...] consists in the unpredictability of the beginnings of an event. The event which takes place and that which does not are, at the moment of the explosion, interchangeable variables (LOTMAN, 1994, p.96; my translation).[35]

However, this is only valid when we observe explosion from the present towards the future, that is, at the moment when it happens, when all roads can still be travelled. Conversely, similarly to what Landowski glimpsed, when we observe the chain of events backwards, from the point of view of someone who looks at the past from the future, it is normal to attribute an "additional retroactive motivation" to the element of unpredictability (LOTMAN, 1994, p.37; my translation).[36] As Lotman explains in another fundamental step in *Cercare la strada*:

> Reality [...] is like a fairy-tale princess, whose hand many princes desire. Until the choice is made, all have the same probability of

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[34] In the Italian translation: "L'esplosione di possibilità diverse introduce nello spazio culturale la casualità: le possibilità sono tutte probabili."

[35] In the Italian translation: "Il criterio che permette di determinare la natura esplosiva di un processo [...] consiste nella imprevedibilità di principio di un evento. L'evento che si realizza e quello che non si realizza sono, nel momento dell'esplosione, varianti intercambiabili."

[36] In the Italian translation: "L'elemento imprevedibile viene dotato di significato, munito di motivazione aggiuntiva retroattiva."

success and all might sport the title of "fiancé." However, when we describe this situation retrospectively, from the moment when the choice has already been made, only the one who has been successfully crowned will seem to have been predestined to victory (LOTMAN, 1994, p.81; my translation).[37]

This is why Lotman points out in his essay Volontà di Dio o gioco d'azzardo (le leggi della storia e i processi casuali) that every historical event is always the result of the actualisation of one of the possible alternatives and that "the actualised paths will always be surrounded by groups of non-actualised possibilities" (LOTMAN, 2014a, p.140; my translation).[38]

In the second case, explosion is seen as an *explosion of meaning*, that is, as the emergence of a series of unpredicted semantic connections between values, themes, images, signs, distant or potentially contradictory symbols. In Lotman's words, "the state of explosion is characterised by the moment of equalisation of all oppositions. That which is different appears to be the same. This renders possible unexpected leaps into completely different, unpredictable organisational structures" (LOTMAN, 2009, p.158). This is clear in explosive processes that invest, as Lotman concludes, "entire epochs [...] in this case, between the effects of a particularly strong explosion, which overflows from a sphere to another, in which the problem of incorrect translation lies: precise meanings will be replaced with explosions of metaphors" (LOTMAN, 1994, p.38; my translation).[39]

It can therefore be inferred that "factual" unpredictability and "semantic" unpredictability are deeply connected. As in Landowski's sociosemiotics, in Lotman's semiotics of culture, every reality is the result of a discursive construction. There is no solution for continuity between world and languages, between world and discourse.

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[37] In the Italian translation: "La realtà [...] è come la principessa delle fiabe, alla cui mano aspirano più principi. finché la scelta non è compiuta tutti hanno la stessa probabilità di successo e tutti possono fregiarsi del titolo di 'fidanzato'. Se però descriviamo questa situazione retrospettivamente, a scelta compiuta, l'unico coronato di successo ci sembrerà predestinato alla vittoria, e gli altri indegni usurpatori. L'arte guarda alla vita con gli occhi della fidanzata ancora libera, la storia invece come con lo sguardo della moglie vincolata dalla sua scelta."

[38] In the Italian translation: "I percorsi attualizzati saranno circondati di gruppi di possibilità non attualizzate."

[39] In the Italian translation: "In questo caso, tra gli effetti di un'esplosione di particolare forza, che trapassa da una sfera in un'altra, ci sarà il problema della traduzione scorretta: sensi precisi saranno sostituiti da esplosioni di metafore."

What generates these explosions of meaning is what he defines as "the translation of the untranslatable" (LOTMAN, 1994, p.46; my translation).[40] That is, the establishment of links and bonds between portions of the semiosphere that are, in a certain historical phase and/or in a certain sociocultural context, seen as incompatible. According to Gherlone, this act of resignification of a given meaning does not characterise "the mere leak of new information but, rather, the suspension of all coordinates [...] within which the meaning and the emersion of something radically new takes shape, the result of a non-syntactic unit of asymmetries" (GHERLONE, 2014, p.81; my translation).[41] It is worth noting that, in postulating the explosion of meaning as the effect of translating the untranslatable, Lotman (1994; 2009; 2014a; 2014b) mainly draws inspiration from the creative process of the arts and literature and, especially, from the work of Pushkin and Blok. Notwithstanding, what is valid for art is equally so for the historical-cultural process as a whole. See, in this sense, how the author defines the indeterminacy generated by the exchange between diverse cultural systems:

> [I]n a system characterised by major internal indeterminacy, a text penetrates from the exterior [...] itself acquiring internal indeterminacy, presenting itself not as the concrete realisation of a language but, rather, as the susceptible polyglot construction of a series of interpretations [...] capable of revealing, in a new context, completely new meanings. This intrusion increases the indeterminacy of a whole system considerably, granting the following stages an unpredictability by leaps (LOTMAN, 1985, p.128; my translation).[42]

In sum, both in art and in other spheres of culture, translating the untranslatable "removes all boundaries of untranslatability and unites the incompatible" (LOTMAN, 2009, p.22). In this sense, as Franciscu Sedda synthesises it, explosion produces in the semiosphere a true "flattening, which transforms a hierarchical and articulated space

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[40] In the Italian translation: "la traduzione dell'intraducibile."

[41] In the original: "Questa particolare intersezione dà luogo a quella che Lotman definisce un'esplosione di senso, che non è la mera fuoriuscita di nuova informazione ma la sospensione di tutte le coordinate (culturali, temporali, spaziali) entro cui si forma il senso e l'emersione di qualcosa di radicalmente nuovo, frutto di un'unità non sintetica delle assimetrie."

[42] In the Italian translation: "In un sistema con una grande indeterminatezza interna entra dall'esterno un testo che [...] acquista esso stesso indeterminatezza interna, presentandosi non come la realizzazione concreta di un linguaggio, ma come una costruzione poliglotta plausibile di una serie di interpretazioni dal punto di vista dei linguaggi diversi, interna- mente conflittuale e capace di rivelare in un nuovo con- testo sensi interamente nuovi. Questa intrusione aumenta notevolmente l'indeterminatezza di tutto il sistema, dando un'imprevedibilità a sbalzi alle tappe successive."

('striated') into a flat one [...] a 'connective' space, where everything seems to be able to get back in touch with everything else" (SEDDA, 2006, p.44; my translation).[43]

Thus defined, "the moment of explosion lies in the intersection between past and future, in a dimension that is almost atemporal, timeless" (LOTMAN, 1994, p.35; my translation).[44] As if "this moment is experienced out of time, even if, in reality, it stretches across a very wide temporal space" (LOTMAN, 2009, p.158). A temporal dimension that is outlined as such precisely due to the fact that it is marked by a high degree of semantic indeterminacy.

Sooner or later, however, this indeterminacy will have to be resolved. As Lorusso points out (2010, p.85), this is the true turning point of explosion: when one of the possible meanings is realised and explosion begins, on some level, to dissipate the semantic vagueness that characterises it, placing events in a system of rules from which, Lotman concludes, it is unlikely to be rescued (see Lotman, 1994, p.37).[45]

Analogies and Differences

From what has been hitherto covered, there seem to be analogies and differences between Landowski's accident and Lotman's explosion.

Here, before anything else, it is worth noting that both accident and explosion always depend on the point of view and on the moment at which they are observed. As we have seen, what is an accidental/explosive accident for some might not be so for others. Likewise, what is considered an accidental/explosive event at a certain time might not be so at other times either.

It follows that, just as accident, explosion has a double aspectual characteristic. On the one hand, it defines a *terminative event*, which enacts a break from a sedimented system of relations. On the other hand, it configures an *inchoative event,* which makes room for new configurations. As Sedda points out, it is as if every *explosion* implied an

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[43] In the original: "Ecco dunque come nella semiosi sociale quotidiana si riproduce un movimento di *appiattimento*, che trasforma uno spazio gerarchizzato e articolato ("striato") in uno spazio piatto [...], uno spazio "connessionista" in cui tutto sembra poter tornare in contatto con tutto."
[44] In the Italian translation: "Il momento dell'esplosione si colloca nell'intersezione di passato e futuro, in una dimensione quasi atemporale."
[45] I say on some level because, as we will later see, there are cases in which indeterminacy is resolved only in certain discursive spheres, remaining, in turn, alive in other ones.

implosion that took place on the same space-time horizon of the former, simultaneously triggering "the collapse of the old and [the] insurgence of the new" (SEDDA, 2012, p.85; my translation).[46]

For both authors, these ruptures catapult socio-historical subjects − individuals and collective − into an existential universe that is semantically uncertain. However, whereas for Landowski indeterminacy is negative, for Lotman it is positive: the Russian scholar emphasises the surplus of meaning engendered by the explosive process, whose trajectories might spread into the most secret crevices of the cultural space, converging and diverging in different ways (see Lotman, 2009, p.172). The point towards which there is explicit convergence between the two is different: both for Landowski and Lotman, indeterminacy will, at some point, be dissipated. The meaning of the event becomes a matter of dispute. An environmental catastrophe, a terrorist act, or any other chaotic situation, Landowski suggests (2014, p.82), will always be followed by a feud between distinct semiotic intentionalities. It is when the event proceeds, according to the elliptical syntax between the regimes of interaction and meaning of Landowski's model, towards manipulation, in which an *addresser* seeks to make the subject adhere to its value system (see Landowski, 2014, p.82). Likewise, for Lotman, as soon as explosion takes place, its meaning becomes the matter of dispute (see Lotman, 1994, p.36). Those who manage to impose their own interpretation of the facts will thus steer the course of cultural self-awareness (see Lotman, 2014b; Lotman, 1994, p.100).[47]

Moreover, if Landowski does not make any explicit claims about the possible duration of accident, for Lotman there is no coincidence between the gradual processes and a long duration, on the one hand, and the explosive processes and a short duration on the other, warning that "the idea of atemporality is not linked to the real timeline of the process, which, in fact, might take a long time" (LOTMAN, 1994, p.35; my translation).[48] For example, the fall of the Roman Empire and the impact of WWI on

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[46] In the original: "collasso del vecchio e insorgenza del nuovo." This is particularly valid for those explosions that characterise what Lotman defines as "terminative." This is the case of the French Revolution, understood by the Russian semiotician as an explosive moment that included, at the time, both "destructive and constructive tendencies" (LOTMAN, 2014b, p.152).

[47] Keeping in mind that, following the ellipsis backwards, the accident can end in adjustment or be ruled by other regimes, according the logic of oblique recursivity postulated by Landowski (see Landowski, 2014, p.89).

[48] In the Italian translation: "L'idea di temporalità non è legata alla reale cronologia del processo, che nella realtà può durare anche molto a lungo."

Russian society, the semiotician proceeds, are typical of explosive processes despite having been protracted for many years (see Lotman, 1994, pp.35-38).[49]

Finally, unlike Landowski, who sees the need thereto, Lotman lacks the issue of aesthesia and the sensible and passional impacts of the explosion, whose complexification is, as I see it, fundamental for understanding the temporal dimensions of contemporary socio-political and media processes.

Drafting a Synthesis

As I hinted at earlier in the *Introduction*, contrasting Lotman's and Landowski's positions allows for a theoretical-epistemological synthesis to framing historical accidents and explosions from other perspectives. To do so, I will focus on a concrete case, analysed by me elsewhere (DEMURU 2019a; 2019b): the 2013 June protests in Brazil and their impact on the process that led, in 2016, to the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff and, in 2018, to the election of Jair Bolsonaro as President of Brazil.

My hypothesis is as follows: June 2013 constituted, in Brazil's recent political history, an accidental/explosive event of proportions and developments that were initially incommensurable. This was an event that brought the system of beliefs and values of the "Lula era" asunder (see Nobre, 2013; Schwarz, 2013; SINGER, 2018; Souza, 2016; Bucci, 2016), producing, at the same time, the emergence and the growth of a nebula of meanings for the country's future.[50] Albeit it is not possible to revisit the totality of the *corpus* and the consequences of the analysis, it is worth briefly noting here the path and the implications of the 2013 protests.

Organised via Twitter and Facebook over the first days of the month by *Movimento Passe Livre* (MPL) [Free Fare Movement], the protests initially had a precise goal: to revoke the hike in public transportation fares passed by state and city governments in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and other capitals. The first protests, held in the city of São Paulo (on the 3rd, 6th, and 11th of June, 2013), were led, both on the streets and on social networks, by clear, focused slogans and hashtags: *três reais é*

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[49] Within Greimas' Semiotics field of research, Luiz Tatit (2010) reflected more deeply on this kind of long-duration event.

[50] Singer (2018) lists in detail the indexes that show, in the arc of the protests, the sudden fall of Rousseff's approval ratings. These quantitative data reinforce and explain, as I suggested in Demuru (2019b), the semiotic approach to the protests as accidental/explosive events.

roubo [*three reals is theft*]*, por uma vida sem catraca* [*for a life without turnstiles*]*,* and *se a tarifa não baixar a cidade vai parar* [*the city will stop if the fare does not go down*]. However, on the 13th of June, after police repression of the fourth major protest against the fares, things changed: the precise slogans from previous days gave way to different ones, with open and confusing meanings: *não é pelos vintes centavos* [*it is not because of 20 pence*]; *vem pra rua* [*take to the streets*]*, o gigante acordou* [*the giant has risen*]; *muda Brasil* [*Brazil must change*]*, mais saúde e mais educação* [*for health and education*]*, contra a corrupção* [*against corruption*], among others. In André Singer's words, "the protests acquired such a dimension that *something* visceral seemed to be taking place in society, *something* that could get out of control. The issue was that this *thing* was never clear" (SINGER, 2018, p.102; emphasis in original).[51]

From the streets and social networks, vagueness moves towards traditional media. "Thousands take to the streets against everything"[52] is the cover of *Folha de S. Paulo* on the 18th of June 2013, the day after the largest protest (see Demuru, 2019a). Meanwhile, the page *Cadernos* simply reads "Against."[53] Similarly, on the morning of the 17th of June, live on *CBN*, commentator Arnaldo Jabor, who had at first classified protesters as "vandals" and "troublemakers,"[54] admits that he was wrong and changes his opinion. The young people who had occupied the streets were no longer a "bunch of irresponsible people, moved by useless anarchy [but] an original political movement, precisely because of the fact that, *a priori*, *it does not have a precise goal*" (JABOR, 2013; emphasis added).[55]

The interaction between new and old media and the streets triggered two discourses, which started to consolidate in the public opinion: the first is the discourse of crisis, that is, the thematic-figurative construction of a country adrift, where everything, so to speak, is wrong; the second one is the discourse of national unity. According to the latter, those protesting on those days were not simply a restricted and minor portion of the population (MPL, young people against the fare increase, etc.) but,

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[51] In the original: "os protestos adquiriram tal dimensão que parecia estar ocorrendo *algo* nas entranhas da sociedade, *algo* que poderia sair do controle. O problema é que não ficou claro *que algo* era esse."
[52] In the original: "Milhares vão à rua 'contra tudo.'"
[53] In the original: "Contra."
[54] In the original: "vândalos"; "baderneiros."
[55] In the original: "Bando de irresponsáveis movidos por um anarquismo inútil [mas] uma formação politica original, justamente pelo fato de não ter um rumo, um objetivo certo a priori."

rather, the totality of the Brazilian people interacting in unison in a *here* and *now* that is physical and mediatic all at once.

Traditional hegemonic media appropriate the vagueness from social networks, thus engendering two intertwining movements, in a single space-time *continuum*. The first, *implosive*, refers to the fall of the old, that is, to the fragmentation of the system of beliefs and values of Lulism: the idea, as Schwarz (2013) puts it, of an emergent and internationally respected country, of a seemingly stable political and economic system. The second one, *explosive*, pertains to the insurgence of the new, whose shape and semantic trajectories remain uncertain. As in Lotman's explosion, June 2013 offers an equalisation of the oppositions between the values at play, a flattening of the semantic space of Brazilian politics and a true explosion of metaphors. Everything relates to everything else: public transportation to health, corruption to the 20 pence, and so on, without, however, there being a specific arrangement and direction.

It should be likewise noted that the proliferation of meaning turns into a phenomenon of the order of aesthesia. More than that: it is the superficial contagion between sentient subjects that feeds the semantic indeterminacy of the 2013 protests. Besides the street protests themselves, the episode in which the national anthem is sung *a capella* in Fortaleza on the 18th of June at the opening ceremony of the Confederations Cup live on Rede Globo is particularly emblematic. What the social body experiences, in the here and now of such interactions, is a true aesthesic scuffle, the experience of the sensible co-presence of others (LANDOWSKI, 2014; FECHINE, 2008).

This is also valid for online interactions. As shown by Fábio Malini (2016), similarly to what Landowski postulates in reference to spreading, those days generated an online chain that "electrifies" (see Landowski, 2018, pp.14-15) the community of users. Proof of that is the explosion of the hashtag *#vemprarua* [#taketothestreets] (see Malini, 2016), which translates into a relevant number of participants at the street protests of the 17th of June (see Singer, 2018). That is, between streets and social networks, there is no solution for continuity: the aesthesic value that runs along both the former and the latter are not one and the same.[56]

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[56] In Demuru (2019b), I will further explore the temporal dimensions of this process, showing how the accidental/explosive process engendered by the 2013 June protests generates a hyper-representative temporal regime, characterised by *instantisation*, by the *compression* and the *acceleration* of historical-

After the 13th of June 2013, then-president Dilma Rousseff becomes the target of collective anger. The vagueness and the aesthesia that originated online and on the streets are projected on Mrs Rousseff through what can only be called a process of "manipulation by contagion" (see Landowski, 2008).[57] On the 15th of June, she is booed by the audience at Mané Garrincha stadium in Brasília during the opening ceremony of the Confederations Cup (ALENCAR, 2013). Nevertheless, it is after her re-election, in 2014, that Mrs Rousseff and her cabinet are identified as the main culprits of the country's so-called social and political crisis. With the 2015 protests organised by *Movimento Brasil Livre* (MBL) [Free Brazil Movement] – along with Globo and the main print media outlets of the country (*Revista Veja*, *Isto É*, *Época*, etc.; see Demuru, 2019a) – the chance that Mrs Rousseff would be impeached becomes more plausible, culminating with her deposition on the 31st of August, 2016.

With Mrs Rousseff leaving, things change. On the one hand, Lula and the Labour Party (PT) are made into the main "anti-subjects" (see Greimas; Courtés, 1982, p.487)[58] of the country. On the other hand, new actors start to fill this narrative leading role: LGBT activists, portrayed as threats to "good mores" – mainly by movements such as MBL and then-MP Jair Bolsonaro –; artists and museums, especially those promoting work and exhibitions connected to sexuality; universities, schools, teachers and researchers from both state and private schools are accused of left-wing indoctrination (see Solano, 2018).

Nevertheless, the values supported by protesters for a new Brazil remain ambiguous, just as they had in 2013. That is, the semantic indeterminacy is only resolved negatively, pointing to a series of enemies "against" whom to direct collective anger. At no point were goals defined. It was this discursive strategy that guaranteed Jair Bolsonaro's win on the 2018 presidential elections: building a campaign centred around vague, nebulous signs and symbols – "floating signifiers," as Ernesto Laclau (2005) would put it: God, Brazil, the flag and the national anthem, green and yellow, the national team jersey, etc. – and precise anti-subjects, who were to blame for the country's situation.

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social time.
[57] In the original: "manipuler par contagion."
[58] For reference, see note 18.

Bakhtiniana, São Paulo, 15 (1): 83-109, Jan./March 2020.

The case of the 2013 June protests can be compared to other events that marked the international political arena of the 21st century. Similar dynamics took place, for example, in Italy in 2012. In January that year, the *Movimento dei Forconi* [Pitchfork Protests] and the *Associazione Imprese Autotrasportatori Siciliani* [Association of Haulage Companies of Sicily] organised a series of protests that shook Sicily as well as other regions of the country. These protests gained visibility on social networks, where, boosted by collective demonstrations of anger, the hashtag *#fermosicilia* [#stopsicily] was one of Twitter's trending topics (see Bianchi, 2017, p.35).

As shown by Leonardo Bianchi (2017), the protests represented one of the most significant events of a chain of explosions of generalised resentment that, starting on "V-Day" (Vaffanculo Day), organised by Beppe Grillo on the 8th of August 2008 in Bologna, unfolded during the next ten years through the most isolated meanders of the peninsula. The array of claims that marked this period is broad and nebulous, going from the increase in fuel prices, the privileges enjoyed by the elite, migrants, and chemtrails – the long-lasting condensation trails which, as the conspiracy theory of the same name goes, were supposed to cause tumours and other diseases (BIANCHI, 2017, p.67). From the core of the relation between mass aesthesic pulsions and vagueness of claims and propositions emerge the conditions for the victory, on the March 2018 elections, of populist leaders and parties such as *Movimento Cinque Stelle* [Five Star Movement], founded by the very same Grillo, and Matteo Salvini's *Lega Nord*, with their ability to intercept the claims and moods of protesters and transform them into electoral consensus.

The same evolutionary pattern seems to repeat itself with the Yellow Vests, which have been taking place since October 2018 in France. Fomented by groups of "online rebels" and initially characterised by specific complaints (the repeal of the hike in fuel prices), the protests quickly gain an unforeseen aesthesic intensity and dimension, including a series of disconnected issues: anti-globalisation economic claims, minimum wage, pension schemes, popular vote on referenda, and so on (see Harding, 2019). Notwithstanding, unlike what happened in Brazil and Italy, it is not yet known, as I write this, in April 2019, what and to what degree these will impact on the future of French politics.

These examples support the ties between indeterminacy and aesthesia in the historical phases that configure a break and/or an acceleration of cultural, social, and political systems. Regardless of what we call it – "accidents," "explosions," "turbulences" (see Fabbri, 2010) – we must admit that these ruptures are marked not only by the irruption of *no meaning*, but, conversely, by the production of *meaning in excess*, of unexpected, nebulous, volatile, and imponderable semantic links and connections.

At the same time, these moments are characterised by the explosion and the circulation, in different discursive spheres, of a high degree of aesthesic value. Both on the streets and online, we see today, more than ever, processes of intersubjective aesthesic contagion that, as Landowski suggests, might spread to the point of creating a social body that is apparently uniform, which will then see itself (as well as be seen) as a cohesive and indistinct integral totality (see Landowski, 2018; Greimas, 1989).[59] This is precisely what I tried to demonstrate in Demuru (2019b): social networks are the main vector of today's aesthesic spread.

Moreover, the impact of the explosive process, as well as its duration, seems to be directly proportional to the aesthesic value that engenders it and that, in turn, becomes capable of activating. Slightly similar to what happens, within Physics, with quantum systems (ROVELLI, 2017),[60] the intensity and the period of time of the accident seems to depend on the energy generated by the contact and the interaction between moving bodies. Perhaps this means that accident is not merely a *producer* (the agent who generates) of semantic forces, but also the *product* (the result) of a coming together of sensibilities of a different order, which can be taken back to the regime of adjustment. But, for now, this is a matter that exceeds the limits of this text.

Final Remarks (and Detours)

In this article, I have tried to show how contrasting the concepts of *accident*, put forth by Eric Landowski, and of *explosion*, coined by Jurij Lotman, can be useful to reflect on the semiotic-discursive nature of unpredictable events that break the linear

[59] For reference, see note 14.
[60] ROVELLI, C. *The Order of Time*. Trans. Erica Segre and Simon Carnell. New York: Riverhead Books, 2018.

flow of history. My hypothesis, which must be further tested, is that the correlation between semantic indeterminacy and aesthesia plays a leading role in these processes. The cases of the 2013 June protests in Brazil as well as recent developments in French and Italian politics offer, in this sense, some clues. In them, the overlap between the explosion of meaning and the aesthesic value in circulation in these societies is visible and tight. Both move constantly side by side: the larger the first, the larger the second.

The rise of populist leaders and parties in the second decade of the twenty-first century can be explained on these theoretical bases. As suggested elsewhere, populism, at its moment of emersion, presents itself as both an *absence* and a *confusion* of meanings all at once, simultaneously triggering the fall of the old universe of beliefs and values as well as the insurgence of a new universe, whose limits, nexus, and directions remain indecipherable (see Sedda; Demuru, 2018). This raises the issue of the course to be taken by this populist moment, which is, as in the aforementioned cases, a matter of political dispute.

There are admittedly populist politicians who, even when in power, insist on strategies that reaffirm the unpredictable and uncertain character of certain events, of which they can then take advantage. This is the case of names such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, who, with their dissonant communication, which belies constants and moves back and forth (see Seto, 2018), turn into real "joker actants" – that is, so to speak, "accidental" presidents.

Furthermore, both the emergence and the efficacy of populist discourse depend on the affective-aesthesic involvement that its explosion is able to cause. And this is not only valid for today's right-wing populism. Even contemporary theorists of left-wing populism seem to be aware of the importance of this dimension. This is addressed in the most recent contributions by Chantal Mouffe, who argues that, in order for populism to be successful, "[i]t is essential for a left populist strategy to acknowledge the importance of fostering common affects because, as Spinoza was keen to stress, an affect can only be displaced by an opposed affect, stronger than the one to be repressed" (MOUFFE, 2018, p.78). Ultimately then, when it comes to political discourse, every explosion of *sense* and *meanings* is and will always be, sooner or later, a field of semiotic dispute.

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