

Discourses and images of violence¹

Discursos e imagens da violência

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Abstract

This article was based of the Ph.D research "Discourses and Images of Violence" in which we discuss violent deaths (homicides) in the São Paulo metropolis, favoring the study of cultural and psychic elaborations that happen around this phenomenon. The main objective of this research was to address two types of violent deaths discourses. The discourse of a population submitted to the event of violent death and the discourse of the televised media about the violence phenomenon. There are two approaches in the methodology of this research. The first one is an ethnographic approach to as seen as a violent territory in the city of São Paulo. The second one refers to two analysis of violent deaths discourses: televised media and narratives of the territory residents. The ethnographic results of the violent territory found in the sociability strand, distress, fear, survival strategies and other excuses to live in a violent neighborhood. In the resident narratives we find a series of fragmented verbal discourses, chaotic, not organized were the terror to excessive closeness to death was present. On the other hand, analyzing the discourse of the televised media, we find an excess of images, verbalizations, theories and interpretations about violence.

Keywords: Violence; Homicide; Discourse; Cultural Anthropology.

Resumo

Este artigo baseou-se na pesquisa de doutorado “Discursos e imagens da violência”, na qual abordamos as mortes violentas (homicídios) na metrópole de São Paulo, privilegiando o estudo das elaborações subjetivas e culturais que ocorrem em torno desse fenômeno. O objetivo desta pesquisa foi abordar dois tipos de discursos sobre as mortes violentas: o discurso de uma população submetida ao evento das mortes violentas e o discurso da mídia televisiva sobre o fenômeno da violência. Há duas vertentes metodológicas neste estudo. A primeira é uma abordagem etnográfica de um bairro situado ou visto como “território violento” na cidade de São Paulo. A segunda são duas análises de discursos sobre as mortes violentas: o discurso da mídia televisiva e o discurso dos moradores do território. Nos resultados da etnografia do território violento encontramos, na trama da sociabilidade, angústia, medo, estratégias de sobrevivência e outros subterfúgios para viver num bairro violento. Nas narrativas dos moradores encontramos uma série de discursos verbais fragmentados, caóticos, desorganizados onde estava presente o terror da proximidade excessiva com a morte. Em contraponto, na análise do discurso da mídia televisiva, encontramos o excesso de imagens, verbalizações, teorizações e interpretações sobre a violência.

Palavras-chave: Violência; Homicídio; Discursos; Antropologia Cultural.

Discourses and images of violence

The empirical basis of this article is the results of research that led to the Public Health doctoral thesis “Discourses and images of violence”. We conducted an investigation into violent deaths, specifically homicides, in the city of São Paulo. This was chosen as the object of the research due to its relevance, be that the statistical scale of the events or the psycho-social impacts on the population living in close proximity with contact with the bodies of homicide victims. This research sought to develop new views of the phenomenon of violence, taking on the complex perspective needed to approach the issue of violence expressed through so-called deaths from external causes, specifically homicides occurring in various regions of large cities. Using an analytical focus, emphasis was placed on the psycho-social dimension and on the subjective ties the subjects-inhabitants of the territory have with violence.

In this research we place ourselves within a specific frame in order to study the topic of violence through homicide deaths recorded in the PROAIM (Program to improve and refine mortality data in São Paulo) and occurring in a neighborhood on the outskirts of the city of São Paulo and we discuss its manifestations in the form of the discourses and images surrounding these events (Ceinfo, 2002). To maintain the anonymity of the population, we have called this neighborhood merely “the Vila”.

The study included the following stages; an ethnography of the field of study; a portrait of the Vila and its thoroughfares; an analysis of discourses and images of violence through photographs taken by inhabitants of the Vila; an analysis of discourses on violence in the televisual media in the groundbreaking program on this topic; “Linha Direta” from the Globo TV channel.

The aim of this approach was to create a multifaceted panorama of the phenomenon of violence in the territory of the city of São Paulo and to show the mediation between the fundamental elements in producing meanings concerning violence. In other words, violence as a material fact witnessed through the deaths in counterpoint to the construction of violence through discourses and images, such as the myths constructed in the narratives of residents in

the territory, the discourses produced by the media concerning violence and possible elements of the bio-medical discourse present in both extremes.

For the subject who inhabits the territory of violence, it is possible to construct meaning from the experiences of violence through narratives permeated with subjectivity, also influenced by other languages, such as media and biomedical discourse. In the last decades of the 20th century, the topic of violence and insecurity came to be identified with cities and certain territories. If, from a historical, Marxist perspective, the city and its territories were classified according to the different social classes occupying them, the contemporary image would be translated through “non-relations”, segregation, denial, excluded groups, rival territories making a bad name for themselves, thus becoming stigmatized, and this stigmatization extending to those residing there. (Adorno, 1999).

In the origin of the topic of violence is a plan in common with public health - before this field was appropriated by biomedical discourse -, as outlined by Foucault (2007), the development of health actions and their relationship with the State was legitimized in the discourse of defending territories and, therefore, safety.

A noteworthy issue in the discussion of “violence” in Brazilian society concerns so-called “structural violence”, in other words, that which is encouraged by the State, specifically in the period of the military dictatorship. As Caldeira (2000) states, many participants in State violence during the dictatorship hold places in the media through “discussing crime” thus aiming to contribute to creating an atmosphere of insecurity which serves to justify the adoption of authoritarian methods and measures by State institutions.

Another important aspect is that the different spatialization of violence in reality leads to different, complex relationships between local government and so-called “criminal gangs” and between legal and illegal. Forming the background to facts such as the significant decrease in homicide rates in the city of São Paulo is the perception that the structural relationships of violence remain present

in sociability networks in the outskirts (Feltran, 2011). Despite decreasing homicide rates, we can see that the relationships of the inhabitants of violent areas with the criminal underworld remain present in the outskirts in different forms, governed by different laws.

The data of this field research were collected in 2002 and indicate an intense conflict in the fabric of local sociability in the Vila: the situation of fear, suffering, survival strategies and various subterfuges engaged in by the local population in order to survive in a violent neighborhood, with the presence of the PCC², which, at this time, was planning to “pacify crime”.

The so-called “pacification” of internal relations with “crime” began in 2000 and was consolidated in 2003 when, according to reports obtained from the field, the PCC took on the function of organizing the “world of crime” in the area. With the various points of sale of drugs obeying one single “boss”, armed disputes between gangs became much less frequent. (Feltran, 2011, p. 221). However, in the Vila, the effects of “pacifying criminal relationships” were slow to arrive; in 2002 there were constant disputes between rival criminal gangs and homicides. Another, diverse aspect in the Vila, at that time, concerns the futile motivation of homicides by those belonging to the so-called criminal underworld. According to recent research, this practice was curbed:

When inhabitants of the favela or young people participating in the “criminal underworld” say that the “can no longer kill”, they are referring to a principal instituted in territories where the PCC is present: someone can only be sentenced to death collectively, legitimized by tribunals composed of respected individuals from the “Comando” [...] Punishments are meted out without the need for homicide (Feltran, 2011, p. 231).

However, in the Vila in 2002, homicides occurred for personal, futile motives, with no reported intermediaries, as in the situation in which a local crime boss killed a youth who “looked at his woman”. The situation portrayed here refers to this “pre crime pacification” period.

2 Organization calling itself Primeiro Comando da Capital.

A tour of the Vila

During the research process, we noticed something of fundamental importance concerning “violent deaths” (including homicides): they are the only ones which do not fit the pattern of Western death described by Ariès (1989) and occupy a place transgressing the death taboo in Western society. “Violent deaths” fall outside of culturally established rites and controls to deal with death and expose the issue of human finiteness without the subterfuges involved in natural deaths (Marquetti, 2011). The representation of death in contemporary society has been shown to be a significant research topic. In Western society, the way in which death is treated has differed over the centuries, and in the modern period we see the treatment of death as something surrounded by a series of restrictions, prohibitions and codes which increasingly distance it from the living. Socio-cultural modifications to the topic of death take centuries to occur, distancing the memories of other ways of existing with death. In Western culture, death has been progressively silenced, feared and hospitalized, in other words, it rarely escapes the restrictions concerning place, form and time. It is surrounded by countless rituals, giving us the pattern of death in the West (Ariès, 1989).

To be closer to violent deaths and view the event from close up and, above all, to avoid constructing new, artificial images and discourses to shield violent deaths, we undertook an ethnography of the selected neighborhood. Thus, we approach violent death between the subjects who are related to this violence in a more immediate and closer way, sharing in it, practicing it, living with it and suffering from it.

We spent six months visiting the neighborhood, we walked the streets seeking to make informal contact, observing local interactions and health care units and we formed links with an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) to obtain local access. We describe the tour of the violent area. The Vila is located on edge of the municipality of São Paulo. One side borders the Serra da Cantareira mountain range and on the other is an intensely urbanized area of middle and upper class neighborhoods in the north of the city of São Paulo. We observed that the Vila is a fairly heterogeneous space of urban interstice, in which there are upper, middle and lower class

dwelling and even the presence of a favela. Specific to the Vila, compared with other peripheral areas, is its abrupt delineation due to the geographical obstacles posed by the Serra da Cantareira and the avenues of the surrounding urban areas. This layout gives the impression that the city cannot expand its outskirts there. The Vila is compressed between the middle class neighborhoods and the favela which climbs the slopes of the bordering mountains, illegally occupying the territory. The area enclosed by the favelas is also very heterogeneous, as can be seen in the geographical and social segmentation determined by local criminal powers and by the subtle sociability relationships between the local population and organized crime, among others. This internal process of organization and differentiation in the favelas has been widely discussed by other authors (Zaluar and Alvito, 2004). In our ethnography, we found field situations revealing details of this demarcation of territories and social relationships, which can be observed in different formats, showing that “the favela is not a place of deprivation and emptiness” as Zaluar and Alvito (2004, p. 7) have it, but rather a place of socio-cultural arrangements, negotiation and the refined skills necessary for social interaction.

When the mother of a police family revealed that one of her sons was killed by a character from the local criminal underworld, this revelation echoed around the whole Vila for hours, constraining the research process. A former Vila resident responsible for the neighborhood association explained the function of monitoring by the criminal underworld: it seeks those responsible for thefts within the Vila and applies a caution. Another resident reported ignoring bodies found in alleys on her way home, in order to avoid problems. In another situation, the wake of a criminal, we heard how the wake was invaded by a rival gang, culminating in further homicides. Such situations show a Vila diversified by the inhabitants of the territory, as well as by the social relationships established for co-existence with social conflict. There is a real network of relationships, subtle gestures and codes for coexisting which support the stabilization of the Vila and, when altered, local life becomes unbalanced. It would be interesting to return to this area at this moment in

time to see how the hegemony of the PCC has calmed conflicts, without necessarily nullifying diversity.

The Vila is characterized as “poor and criminal” by the local population and is closed within its own boundaries. As we began to climb its slopes we noticed that its streets are crooked and winding, characteristic of a place without urban planning, leading us to always return to the same spot from which to gain access to higher areas. The poorly signposted streets, the lack of space for cars to pass, the unsafe footpaths and insufficient street lighting, raw sewage in the streets and other problems typical of a poor area made us feel we had left the “city” and entered the “*quebrada*”. The native concept of violent territories may help us understand the places we visited, as we are not dealing with merely geographical, but also relational layout:

Based on this approach, crime is placed in juxtaposition with the recurrent native notion in the territories I have studied *quebrada* - broken, run-down. This notion is the way my interlocutors used to refer to their neighborhoods and the specific relationships between its residents, it also refers to the disposition to present the neighborhood in which they live to those outside, characterizing it as a risky, hostile and dangerous place for those who do not belong and do not know its rules. The notion of *quebrada* is used in allusion to the idea of a peripheral neighborhood, a territorial notion; it is characterized by the high rates of violence and by following codes of behavior (Malvasi, 2012, p. 13).

In this article, we use codenames instead of the names of the seven occupations Favela do córrego; Favela do crime; Favela da ponte; Favela barraco; Favelado do cemitério; Favela nova; and Favela velha. Within some of these favelas, we found real labyrinths, that is, when you enter officially existing streets linking places in the municipality, you find countless alleys, lanes and paths between the houses, merging with their yards, making it impossible for someone not living there to inhabit the area. This type of space can be identified by the urban classification of “*pedaço*” - piece:

In reality, the term (*pedaço*) designates an intermediary space between the private (the house) and public, in which basic sociability takes place,

wider, than that based on family ties, and denser, more significant and more stable than formal, individualized relationships imposed by society (Magnani, 1998, p. 116).

Obviously, improvised “public” spaces do not appear in official guides, and it is only possible to enter them accompanied by a resident of the area, because of location and permission. As the Vila is characterized as closed, even when we walked the streets outside the favelas, we were quickly recognized as “outsiders”, all of the passersby and residents noticed the presence of strangers. There was, however, no hostility but rather curiosity about the strangers, in other words, someone from outside of the “*pedaço*” according to the definition:

However, it is not enough to pass through, or even to regularly spend time there, to belong to the *pedaço*; you need to be part of, and to be recognized as such, a particular network combining ties of kinship, neighbor and origin, links defined by participating in community and sporting activities etc. thus, the second element - the network of relationships - establishing a code capable of separating, organizing and classifying: it was ultimately by referring to this code that one could say who did, or did not, belong to the “*pedaço*” and to what degree (“colleague”, “arrival”, “namesake” etc.) (Magnani, 2002, p. 21).

During our ethnography of the Vila, we followed a long path to achieve our objectives and along the way, unexpected elements appeared, producing new issues. In addition to the “*pedaço*” as an urban notion, as we stated above, we also explore the space of the “*quebrada*”, – a designation going beyond geographic and urban space, expressing the situation of life of those inhabiting these spaces. At the beginning of the research, we viewed the ethnographic stage as a means of obtaining narratives and images of violence produced by the inhabitants. However, we found that the path of the search itself revealed images of violence. The full text of the thesis (Marquetti, 2004) contains descriptions of the literal steps taken to obtain the “narratives and images of violence”, as the sequence of events reveals the meanders in which violence hides itself. In other words, the research was guided by diverse events occurring in the Vila

within that period: “curfew”, homicides of criminal underworld family members” by rival gangs, non-official police activity, “settling of scores” between local criminals, triple homicides during a criminal’s wake, immoderate reactions of fear and suffering, etc. When we began the field work, we viewed it as a turbulent period, but we eventually came to see that it was the strange routine of the Vila. In this essay, we cannot present the full set of data, and we therefore use one single episode which portrays and synthesizes this field work process.

The myth of the Devil and the veiled image

Over the months, we became closer to the residents of the Vila and were, in a certain way, made welcome, although whenever we requested statements or images about violence the reaction was one of perplexity and fear. We obtained various narratives, although they were limited and curtailed by fear, but the images of violence do not appear in the ethnography. In the latter stages of the field work, interaction with a local resident explained the situation concerning images of violence. We saw it as relevant that the discourse of the interviewee’s narrative was ragged, fragmented, non-linear, characteristic of the life of the “*quebradas*” and of the language of the “*vida loka* - crazee life”, as expressed by young people and shown by Malvasi (2012). Writing up this narrative required much construction of the text (preserving the content), as some of the statements were unintelligible: an overview of information and chaotic episodes, isolated phrases without connection, moments of weeping, in other words, completely unstructured. I would like to emphasize that this is characteristic of the narrative of the interviewee and is not related to level of education or verbal capacity, but rather to the disorganization that the topic of violence and the discontinuousness and fragility of living in the urban space provokes in their lives. We also observed that the interviewee’s attitude towards local violence and agreeing to be interviewed was an exception within the ethnographic field. The majority of reports we received were partial, fragments of stories, repetitions of media discourses or evasive.

The narrative

Clarice reported that violence in the Vila varies, in other words, there are periods in which a lot of dead bodies appear and others, “calm” in which nothing happens. Violence in the Vila is cyclical and is related to disputes between rival groups, to police vigilantism and to other activities by criminals themselves, thus, the occurrence of one homicide triggers others. After reporting various criminal and homicidal episodes in the Vila, Clarice went on, on her own initiative, to talk about a criminal named Z. she stated that Z used to kill individuals in the Vila in broad daylight, with little or no motive and that all of the residents were very frightened of him. She reported how he said he had made a pact with the devil and thus would not die. She told us how he killed a boy in broad daylight while playing pool in a bar in the Vila, because the boy “looked” at his girl. She said there was no emotional or sexual relationship whatsoever between this boy and Z’s girl, and he was killed simply because he looked at the woman. She went on to say that the other women (a group of women from an NGO, with whom we had some contact during the field work) did not want to talk to us about violence in the Vila because they were afraid of Z. At that point she hesitated and, frightened, asked: You’re not police, are you? I stated I was not and explained once again about the research and its confidentiality and she continued to talk about Z and told how he had been imprisoned, but there were still others from his circle who controlled the whole Vila. When I asked about Z’s profile, she described a figure who had become “legendary” within the Vila. He seemed to be fictitious, a man surrounded by myths and unreal stories. A is a criminal leader in the Vila and, despite having been imprisoned for more than two years, still exercised much influence on the place and the life of its population. He is involved in drug dealing, assaults and homicides of those who disrespect the rules put in place by his criminal gang, and also plays a role in “justice”, as, if someone robs Vila residents or their houses, he kills them. I asked if everyone in the Vila knows him, she said yes and stated that many Vila residents helped him kill people. She began to have misgivings that someone was listening to our conversation, peered through

the blinds and examined the ceiling of the room for cameras, saying: Do you think they are filming us? The interviewee showed extreme anguish, persecution, almost crying and speaking in whispers, saying how scared she was for speaking about Z. I once again affirmed the confidentiality of the interview and explained that the information given would be treated so as not to expose anyone to risk. She then told us how Z was taken prisoner, allowing us to understand the misgivings provoked by our proposal for photographs of the Vila. Z boasted that the police could not manage to catch or kill him, as they did not know what he looked like, he once again spoke of his pact with the devil and appeared to believe in it. Even when he killed the boy at the pool table for “looking” at his girl, nothing happened to him. According to her, the boy’s family was outraged and sought his “human rights”, handing a photograph of Z, taken secretly during a birthday party, to the police and thus enabling them to recognize and capture him. She said she thought it was difficult to take photographs in the Vila, as one might unintentionally take a photo of “them” (criminals). When the interviewee revealed the incident which led to Z being taken prisoner, we understood that our aim to take photos of images of violence in the Vila trespassed on a local cultural narrative involving Z’s myth. We made some reflections on the situation which are representative of the ethnography: a crime boss “with no face” and who has made a “pact with the devil”, whose criminal career was partially interrupted through a photograph. Throughout the ethnographic path looking for images of violence we had groped blindly through the territory, initially unaware of the history of this place and thus not understanding the rules of sociability (and of survival) dictated by the crime, in other words, photographs are prohibited in the Vila. As we did not belong to the “*pedaço*” we were not aware of local rules.

On the topic of Z’s “pact with the devil”, we found an important reference which may shed light on the narrative about him:

In the West and in South America there is a vast accumulation of myths about a man on the margins of community selling his soul to the devil in exchange for riches which turn out to be not only useless, but come to represent desperation, destruction and

death. What does this contract with the devil symbolize: the era of a struggle between good and evil? The innocence of the poor and the evils of riches? More than this: the legendary pact with the devil is an accusation against the economic system that forces men to exchange their souls for the destructive power of merchandise (Taussig, 2010, p. 18).

The author argues that populations in the West and in South America that underwent proletarianization invoked the devil in order to explain the processes of socio-economic advantages of some subjects of the community. According to him, the function of this form of collective symbolic construction is to deal with the terror imposed on such communities by the rules of economic expropriation. In our case, selling the soul to the devil occurred in order to obtain economic advantages through criminal enterprise (avoiding capture and death) and the community invoked this legend in order to live with the terror imposed by the criminal underworld. Other elements of this concept can also be found in the narrative about Z “[...] why not consider such beliefs by themselves, in all their vividness and detail, as a response of the people to what they see as an evil and destructive way of ordering economic life” (Taussig, 2010, p. 42). There is a perception of Z’s malignancy within the power relationships in the Vila and another finding compatible with this concept refers to the danger and transgression surrounding this character:

Here it would be interesting to ponder the nature of evil (the devil) in these pacts - the feeling of danger generated by these tales of strangeness, of limits transgressed, of unexplored, and perhaps unexplorable, depths. Even talking about such things, seems to pose a risk - regardless of to what extent - of pollution by the powers in question; I would like, therefore, to call attention to the coalescence between danger and immortality - for a specific focus on the religious practice: the little understood common-place that is taboo, and thus the transgression (Taussig, 2010, p. 338).

Z becomes confused with the figure of the devil and becomes a myth in the Vila, we can see in the narrative that the silence surrounding him has become a real taboo and speaking about him or his

legends (breaking this aura of protection) signifies transgression and exposing oneself to peril. The criminal boss becomes a taboo and those who defy it have to pay the price for transgression. However, in this history (story) of the Vila, a real “hero” appears who takes on Z’s legendary force, as, when the family of one of his victims hands his photograph to the police, the myth falls apart. It is interesting to note that the faceless myth is undone by his own image. The transgression did not lead to direct punishment and ended (at least partially) a period of terror in the Vila. In almost all field work situations with the local population we obtained chaotic fragments of verbal discussions or a lack of imagetic discourse on the violence. Over the course of the field work, we found only a lack of images and our aim of analyzing images of violence was subverted. We deem this to be an episode that symbolizes the whole universe of local violence, as there were countless other narratives from Vila residents indicating the local sociability camouflaging, denying and tenuously covering up the gaping violence in the Vila. The verbal narratives of Vila inhabitants do not reveal an opinion of the violence, they repeat a media discourse referring to the mental illness of those involved in crime and their discourses are fragmented and incoherent. The majority denied constantly living with homicides and minimized these facts, stating that the whole city is violent, disbelieving statistical data, or simply not speaking about the topic. There is a mechanism of collective denial which distances them from perception of the local situation. An imaginary collective construction of the “happy Vila” which creates a narrative denying violence that is, in some episodes, rudely interrupted by the reality of a dead body found in an alley. There are many aspects involved in death by homicide in the Vila. Thus, we can approach this issue from a parallel direction. Faced with the inhabitants’ consistent refusal to produce images of violence, we reinterpreted the object of our research based on the final result: the lack of images. This research objective was subverted by the ethnographic field and we therefore inverted our inquiry. What does this lack of image consist of? An unrevealed image, a hidden image. This can be linked to some forms of meaning: the absence of light and the lack of visibility. Likewise, our research

object appeared concealed throughout the fieldwork process: in this territory violent deaths are not spoken of, living with daily homicides is denied, there is a denial of explicit deaths in the area.

The need for Vila inhabitants to represent contiguous and daily death may be the origin of the concealed image. We observed a precarious psychological and cultural balance in the violent territory, where the inhabitants are in constant “denial” of their own perceptions, thoughts, memories and feelings in order to tolerate the day-to-day violence. Death insists on placing itself in the scene and requires representation. The concealed image may reveal something about the representation of death in Western culture: death is silenced and feared when it escapes the confines of place and way (as in homicides) and becomes taboo - an insurmountable object and impossible element of meaning.

Thus, the subjective and cultural mechanisms of the Vila that are brought into action to coexist with the constant homicides in the territory are explained. If the function of all meanings through verbal or imagetic discourse is to integrate an object into psychological and cultural life, we requested the population to address an object that does not allow meaning and, therefore, cannot be integrated into their life. If, conducted in this way, the precarious psychological and cultural balance of the territory is exposed to breaking, they wisely refuse.

The view of the subject that determines it is necessary between the object and its existence. By looking at the object, the subject makes its presence concrete, in other words, they give it existence. Thus, what we find is the strange situation of an object that is not looked at, an object that attracts no glances at all. The lack of light and visibility of violent deaths created a concealed image.

Unique places in the Vila

In the contact with the Vila in search of images and narratives that reveal images of violence, we came across a series of places, special geographies, particular situations and urban spaces which seemed very unique to us. During the search for images of violence created by local residents, other, surprising images appeared, although these images came

from the view of the researcher and, thus, from another bias. Even being aware of the traps that the images may pose, the uniqueness of the places led us to reflect on the issue of geographic space and its occupation by the subjects. The place inhabited is another mirror of relational and cultural issues, and this was also the case in the Vila. The urban anthropological references showed that the culture of cities can be studied through their space and the way in which the residents inhabit it. We can, therefore, say that in a city or neighborhood it is the “natives” who construct the places, creating geographical references and transforming it into a symbolic place (Magnani, 1996). In the geographical space of the Vila and its surroundings, we observed places which maintained some kind of relationship with the issue of violence and its symbolic story. We chose one of these places to discuss in this article: The *Pedra* - stone. We recognize that we are once again falling into the trap of discourses on violence always being external. This discourse was created “from outside and far away” using the researcher’s framework. However, even being aware of this fact, we are going to portray a place in the Vila that appears, to us, to be intrinsically linked with local violence.

The *Pedra*, the navel of the Vila

In the ethnography of the Vila, we observed that, whenever a resident of the Vila was asked for a reference point, the *Pedra* was mentioned. Thus, when we became lost in the unplanned streets, the locals indicated the *Pedra* as a reference point. This happened even when the *Pedra* had no connection and was not even near the place we sought. Other situations in the field work revealed the importance of the *Pedra*, as almost all of the residents mentioned it when referring to a favela, a dangerous region, a public place, etc. or, they simply said *That’s it... there is the Pedra!* This was a recurring situation and that fact directed our ethnographic attention to it. Thus, we began describing the *Pedra*: it is situated in a small urban space, in an area formed by the intersection of two streets ending suddenly in a slope and leading to a higher and a lower area of the Vila. The spatial location of the *Pedra* is not central, in other words, it is not the geographic center of the

Vila, nor is it on a main street. Looking at a map of public and officially recognized places, we can say it is to the right of the geographic center of the Vila. It has, however, without a doubt, been chosen by residents of the region as the symbolic center of the place. But, symbolic of what? The *Pedra* is native to the area (the region is mountainous and there are many rocks of this type) and there is a kind of square constructed around it, in a terrain without pavements or other urban facilities. In other words, there are no benches, tables, playgrounds, nothing except the *Pedra*. For us, there does not appear to be anything significant about the *Pedra* itself, apart from some graffiti. The *Pedra* is a meeting point for Vila residents and we observed that those who spend time around the *Pedra* are also those pointed out by the local population as being involved in crime. We observed, on a map of the area, that the *Pedra* is located in a triangle, a confluence of the favelas described as areas subject to violence due to local crime. The *Pedra* is on the way for those going to: Favela nova; Favela do crime; Favela da ponte; and Favela barraco. This suggests that the *Pedra* is not the geographical center of the Vila, it is the meeting point for the area’s criminals. It also appears to be the place that, for the local population, represents violence, due to their need to limit and define the violence in their area to one specific place. The *Pedra* seems to be the geographic symbol that condenses the meanings of criminality and, perhaps because of this, is so often mentioned by the local population. This *Pedra* seems to be the center from which violence emanates and is controlled, the place where paths meet and local criminal gangs encounter each other. In Greek mythology we found references to a stone named “*Onfalô*”, from which forces emanated into the world:

The *onfalô* is the universal symbol of the center of the world. A great number of traditions assume that the world originated in a navel, from which the manifestation spread in all four directions. But the navel does not only indicate the center of the physical manifestation; it is also the spiritual center of the world [...] In symbolic art, the *onfalô* is generally an upright egg shaped stone white stone; many models have one or more serpents wound around them [...] The *onfalô* symbolizes the vital

power that dominates the blind and monstrous forces of chaos; today it would be considered the rational organization of life. But organization obtained through internal domination; by victory over oneself, without outside help (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1989, p. 659-660).

Our *Pedra* and the “*Onfalô*” have many things in common. The *Pedra* is on the way to the four large favelas in the area, the four directions in the world of the Vila. It is not the physical, but rather the spiritual center of the Vila, from which emanate forces of violence but, above all, it is the Vila’s organizing point, a reference, a place or order, created by local culture itself and embedded between the forces of crime. We do not know what is communicated in secret between men at the Vila’s *Pedra*, but anyone moving through the area can see that it is a meeting point for the criminal underworld.

When exploring the territory we were referred to this mythical location in the Vila, the reference for controlling the forces of chaos and evil. And, once again, through the geographical narratives we return to the topic of the devil. We reached the navel of the Vila: the center of transformed energies and communication, the center ensuring communication between men and primordial chaos, in this case, violence.

Verbal discourses and media images

One of the central characteristics of modernity is its reflexive element (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1997), or the fact of its being a product of intervention exercised over oneself. This reflexivity also comes to be exercised based on expert systems that, supported by technology and science, the driving forces of modernity itself, come to explain phenomena and, through the media, translate explanations for what is happening from cells and genetics to daily life. The authors themselves do not rule out - when discussing violence - that understanding it when faced with modernity calls for understanding connections of meaning created through tradition and through modernity itself.

In the ethnography, the narratives of violence spoke of myths, thus evoking “tradition” as indi-

cated by Taussig (2010), in relation to the barbarity and violence of Latin America that came to be talked about through myths, as experiencing it daily overcame human limits - such as the stories of seeing summary cold blooded executions. Another tool of modernity is reflexivity, which can be interpreted based on the current action and explanation in the media.

In the final part of the research, we identified and analyzed discourses on violence in televisual media. We present a synopsis of the discourses in the televisual media in contrast with the results of the ethnography conducted in the Vila. In the media discourse, we achieve the generic and imaginary discourse on violence, as we know that televisual media condenses the different discourses of modern society (Freitas, 1992). Our objective with this methodology is to discover how the subject inhabiting violent territory constructs the meaning of their experiences of violence permeated by specific socio-cultural determinants of the media and biomedical discourse. In this stage, we discovered the different media discourses that repeatedly manifested themselves around “violent death” and we asked: Who (or what) do they serve? What is the meaning? How do these discourses return with different appearances? How can we soothe the suffering provoked by “violent death”? Which discursive elements are usually used in discourse to articulate “violent death”? In modern society, the media hold a privileged place in producing meaning. In the media we find a mixture of the most recurring discourses on violence: police, governmental, religious, legal, political, medical-psychiatric, scientific, health and mystical discourses, with the discourse itself a combination of all of them. We therefore approached it in its nuances, variations, overlaps of meaning, we sought to identify the presence of different discourses on violence.

To conduct this part of the study, we selected a television program: “*Linha Direta*” made by the Globo TV channel. At this time, the program was broadcast weekly, at primetime, and covered issues of violence. In Brazilian television, it was a groundbreaking program about violence and it was broadcast for over ten years, the forerunner of various other programs in this genre. There was another

determinant in this choice, the program showed “simulations of the reality” of violence through discourses and images the *Linha Direta* program is produced by TV Globo and is presented to the audience as a journalist-based program, aiming to portray the reality of real-life cases. However, when we conducted the broadcaster, aiming to obtain some recordings of the programs, we were given different information. The broadcaster informed us that it could only provide recordings of journalistic programs and that the above mentioned program was a core part of the tele-drama. In a casual way, we obtained information that was significant for this research. The broadcaster presented the program to the audience as a journalist-based program, but it was conceived as drama. The *Linha Direta* program is not a representation of reality via investigative journalism but rather an imaginary construct.

We watched the program over a period of several months and found that the stories related had a basic structure that was repeated throughout the programs. Thus, the programs to be analyzed were selected randomly, recorded and watched repeatedly. We observed discursive associations that appeared frequently: between crime and deviant behavior, crime and sexual perversion and crime and “human animality”, in other words, “psychiatric deviations” in place of nonhumans. Although a detailed analysis the selected programs is conducted in the complete study, here we will merely show some selections we judge necessary to understand the whole.

There are around four programs per month, each showing two cases of violence, all of which contain the above mentioned elements associated with criminals. Often, there were details peripheral to the case and which, apparently, were not part of the criminal plot, for example: episodes of emotion associated with insanity; emphasis on the difference in ages of a couple involved in crime (as if it were a sexual transgression, a case of incest); explicit characterization of criminal acts as something without reason, instinctive and animal; insinuations that socially prohibited romances would end in tragedy; etc. The well-known cases of associating criminality and mental abnormality. Since the beginning of mental health care through to the modern psychiatry 20th century, these associations have been made

(Foucault, 1997) and we see them once again in the current era, with the insistent association between crime and classical forms of mental abnormality. We know that the link made between crime and insanity in the period known as “The great institutionalization” justified institutionalizing the insane (Foucault, 1972). The dangerousness of madmen, that is, their supposed potential to commit violent acts threatened the normal, and thus gave scientific and rational motives for creating the model of mental asylums. It is known that the birth of psychiatric medicine played a central role in regulating norms by which to live (Foucault, 1972). And now, in modern society, in which the media play a fundamental role in constituting lifestyle, it provides a vehicle for medical discourse on crime, violence and insanity. In the *Linha Direta* program we once again found medicine, with the power to judge, playing a role collaborating with the law and its function of health and social control. There was one issue that seemed incongruent to us: now that the association between insanity-violence-crime has been culturally established, why are we experiencing the construction of the inverse relationship? Why the insistence on finding characteristics of insanity and mental abnormality in criminals? Apparently, the associations found in the media culture have no objective, as the previous motivation was historically accomplished, that is, institutionalizing the insane. But, something began to reveal itself little by little. We observed that the construction of psychiatric knowledge, that the real objective of psychiatry was not mental treatment but rather part of the system of social control. Psychiatry and Justice shared power over the “dangerous individual”. The criminal-abnormal subject justified and authorized medical knowledge about him. If imposing the concept of danger onto insanity served to authorize institutionalization and isolation of the insane by psychiatry, the link between crime and insanity served for psychiatry to extend its power and activity (Foucault, 2002). When a criminal act is attributed to illness, the individual does not escape social power and control. Depending on the power that handles the case, there are two different institutional destinies that can be followed: one by the criminal and one by the mentally ill. Another fundamental consequence is that psychiatric

authorities became able to intervene preventatively in the relationship between crime-insanity. This process occurs in psychiatry through their knowhow in recognizing signs and symptoms and prevention through established diagnoses of the subjects who are capable of committing insanity-crimes. Here is one of the essential motives for characterizing crime as insanity, in other words, if the criminal is insane he can be previously diagnosed and the act prevented. The psychiatric authorities is not only a form of repression but also a legal authority, although, the fundamental difference of this authority is in anticipating criminal-insane acts and preventing them. And in crime which originates in insanity, isolation is most quickly and efficiently achieved through institutionalization (Foucault, 1972). Thus, we see the relationships between crime and insanity, or between legal and mental health care, are far from exhausted. We must not forget that simultaneously with the broadcast of *Linha Direta*, the legislative authorities were drawing up the “Paulo Delgado” Law project on Psychiatric Reform (current law nº 10, 216), proposing withdrawing the civil rights of the mentally ill. This law argues the concept of “non-danger” of subjects with mental disorders (Brasil, 2001). This project was perhaps the reason for new efforts driving the crime-insanity relationship.

Final discussion

The overlap of cultural determinants in producing the meaning of subjects in violent territories becomes evident in this research, in a plot that brings together “expert knowledge” and tradition contemporaneously. The media, bio-medical discourse and local myths were incorporated in the forms of meaning given to local violence and the possibilities and strategies for coexisting with this violent territory. The plot of local sociability used these symbolic artifacts to survive in the Vila, living with the suffering and fear from the terror of violent deaths. The processes and the fabric of violence in contemporary society require ways of understanding that include the population’s subjectivity, their territory in their singular myths and histories, the irradiation of official and media discourses among the variety of factors composing this context. Presenting violence

and deaths in epidemiological data with risk factors obscures the network of relationships in the territory, the inter-subjectivity between local-global and the historical determinants of the context. Ethnography and its possibilities for discovering a place, formerly merely identified as a “violent neighborhood” “from inside and up close” allows that place’s local secrets, fantastic stories, myths and legendary figures to be uncovered. In contrast, distancing oneself from the local reality and discovering generic discourses and media constructions of violence aids in profiling the backbone around which subjectivity of the local population is built. The extreme separation of the two forms of constructing meaning for violence by the population of the local territory and the media launched us on an impossible quest. And in search of images of violence we found a myriad of media images clouding our understanding and a concealed image.

We produced some considerations and set out the principal topics that appeared with most weight in the process. We began with the hypothesis that the violent deaths brought with them an aspect of psycho-cultural disorganization and this disorder caused by the violent deaths attracted countless resources aiming to minimize their effect. Among these resources to soothe the disorganizing effects are verbal and imagetic discourses, which come to form part of subjectivity based on the day-to-day experiences of social suffering. In the analysis of media discourse permeating violent deaths, we were able to show clearly how suffering provoked by these types of death unveiled countless soothing discourses. When analyzing the “*Linha Direta*” program, we found a powerful imaginary discourse encompassing verbal and visual resources and producing a broad construct of meaning. The media currently occupy a central place that brings together, condenses, transforms, permeates and irradiates the produced meanings into the world. This construct of meaning influences our cultural imagination and predominates as the “truth”. In the discourses produced by the media and permeated by bio-medical discourse, we find the classic formulae for solving human conflicts. In other words, we recognize conflicts that repeatedly affect humanity and the consequences associated with crime and

types of mental abnormality established by modern psychiatry (Foucault, 1997). Over two years of observing cases in the “Linha Direta” program, we found structures which were repeated ad infinitum. On the other hand, this excess of media words, ideas, images, assumptions and theories about violence is in contrast with the absolute emptiness or with the limit of the visible and the suffering found in subjects living with violence. In the Vila we had direct contact with violent places and the deaths there and we observed that the local population revealed an almost total lack of verbal or visual discourse. This population, subject to violence, does not produce discourses, but rather reports information, offers statements, although interpretations are rarely verbalized. These reports, apparently “stuck” to reality were not versions or discourses but rather fragments of the reality, described without articulation. Another point that stood out was the only discourse on violence found among the residents of the Vila and the media discourse itself. Although we know the power of media constructions of meaning associated with Biomedicine, some statements were surprising. In various situations, residents of the Vila refused to look at the local violence “from inside and up close”. They could only look at the violent area in which they found themselves “from outside and far away” (Magnani, 2002, p. 17). In the media discourses repeated by Vila residents, we found the same categories mentioned above in which the criminal is “other”, a stranger, from “outside”, someone with no character, to whom violence is something intrinsic. The contradiction was explicit: the Vila residents reported objectively on local crime, repeating the media’s impassioned discourses on generic violence. Contradiction inherent to human psyche in conflict. The Vila highlights silence, the concealed image, emptiness and suffering. The lack of images in the research was disconcerting, but in the end it revealed something crucial: the proximity of violent death does not allow discourse to soothe it, as they soothing resources only work from a distance. It was surprising to find some situations permeated with strategies, myths, legend and stories elaborated to coexist with death and violence. The myth of the devil (Taussig, 2010), a stone reminiscent of the “*Onfalô*” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1989) and the “*quebradas*” of the “craze life” language (Malvasi,

2012) revealed the diversity of psychological and cultural resources needed by the Vila’s population in order to survive.

In the discourse of Public Health, we found many gaps concerning violence and homicides. The first point refers to local institutions themselves, who do not interact or are not in the habit of understanding epidemiological data for a specific region, thus, a lack of knowledge of the subject was observed on the part of local health care workers and managers. Not even the epidemiological data on homicide deaths produced by the Program to Improve and Refine Mortality Data in São Paulo were assimilated by the health sector. However, getting close to the phenomenon of violence and evaluating the significance of the homicides goes beyond the panorama of epidemiological data that may merely reveal data and association of factors. Thinking about violence in the field of health requires an effort that may intensify the State’s own sphere of influence regarding institutions. If today there is no concern with planning actions in local areas according to epidemiological data, it would be too utopian to expect “up close and inside” understanding of local dynamics and relationships with the social suffering of those living there. We are, then, in the dreaded situation of producing just another discourse. Moreover, it would be interesting to return to the outskirts of São Paulo, where conflicts are shaping up, at the moment in order to identify whether those previously accused of belonging to violent factions had been pacified, as the forces of law and order have now been indicated as those commanding the violence.

Authors’ collaboration

Marquetti conducted the field research, the doctoral thesis based on this article and the article. Adorno guided the field research and the bibliography of the thesis, oriented the writing of the thesis and participated in editing the text for article format.

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