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Flávio Fontana Dutra<sup>1</sup>

## Images in prison and “thumbs up” poses – We’re fine

*Imagens no presídio e as poses de “joinha” – Estamos todos bem<sup>2</sup>*

### Abstract

This study analyzes images produced during photography workshops that took place in two prisons, located in Porto Alegre/Brazil; the attendees were comprised of groups of inmates. For Catherine Tambrun, it is impossible for an external agent to photograph these places. Her concepts were used to highlight what specifics were present in the images approximating them to discussions brought forth by Judith Butler with respect to precarious lives, in opposition to general notions of prison images and the imprisonment of images.

### Keywords

Photography. Image. Prison. Self-representation. Imprisonment.

### Resumo

*O trabalho apresenta uma análise das imagens produzidas a partir de oficinas de fotografia realizadas em dois presídios localizados em Porto Alegre. A partir de noções trazidas por Catherine Tambrun sobre a impossibilidade do agente externo fotografar nesses ambientes, pretende discutir que especificidades apresentam as imagens feitas pelos próprios presos, contrapondo noções de imagens da prisão e aprisionamentos da imagem e, ao mesmo tempo, as aproximando de discussões sobre as vidas precárias trazidas por Judith Butler.*

### Palavras-chave

*Fotografia. Imagem. Prisão. Autorrepresentação. Aprisionamento.*

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"They are animals", he shouted, just after an imperative handshake. "This country is all wrong. There are more poets than men. I, the government, ordered to lock half, at least there, with corporal punishment once a month!"

Not without first alerting that "He barely knew that the Detention is full", this is how João do Rio (life chronicler from Rio de Janeiro on early 20th century) ends his text *Inmate Verses*. After leaving the Detention House, he reported an encounter he had had with a friend, a "poet like the new ones that has attacked old schools for 25 years", and what his friend had told him after seeing papers "full of prison, mulling over sentences of sad psychology" that João had collected. It is easy to find someone who makes claims like these nowadays, whether they are politicians, common people, intellectuals, or people responsible for leading important public policies for people's everyday life. In opposition to what his friend said, João do Rio, based on his experiences in prisons from Rio de Janeiro, argues that, different from the general idea, relatively usual and still fully present, the criminal is a man like any other.



Figure 1: Penitenciária Estadual de Porto Alegre Fotografia analógica digitalizada a partir de filme fotográfico 35mm e de câmera pinhole. Foto: Wladimir, 2019.

The chronicler describes that in this situation what is seen is the crime, the infamous action. There, you can't see the men "without the abnormal that put him on the fringes of life" (RIO, 2008, p. 214). However, he says that when we get used to seeing and talking to him every day, the terror disappears: "There are always two men inside of each detainee - the one that committed the crime and the current, the detainee. The current are perfectly humane". (idem)

This text discusses elements of a research developed along two institutions from the penitentiary system of Rio Grande do Sul, a southern Brazilian state: the Penitenciária Estadual de Porto Alegre (Porto Alegre State Prison, in English) and the Cadeia Pública de Porto Alegre. This study derives from photography workshops with inmates. Such workshops intended that inmates themselves produced images of their daily routine. Aside from encounters that took place between May and July 2019, for eight weeks, the participants received analogue cameras and films and were allowed to use them in the spaces restricted to them. Printed pictures in paper were given to the inmates once films were developed. In a second moment, artisanal photography cameras were produced using match boxes, films, and pinhole techniques within the same realm of intentions. Ten working inmates from the Penitenciária Estadual de Porto Alegre and eighteen inmates from Cadeia Pública participated in this study. The inmates from the Cadeia Pública came from gallery E1, which is where men in ongoing chemical detox are placed..

Among the photographs that comprise the archive resulting from this study, one kind stands out: the self-representation. Aside from self portraits, self representation is shown in at least three formats: inmates photographing themselves, inmates photographing one another, and inmates being photographed by peers. This set of images seem to come from a considerable logic dynamic, not only by reflecting omnipresent selfie models coming from varied media and platforms, but also as a consequence of being confined in restricted spaces. As of now, inmates have a lot of free time, little horizons available and rare attractive elements to look at, along with limited visual references. Their repertoire of images is the result of lack access to images, aside from what is in their memory, what they see in DVDs, and TV, mainly.



Figure 2: Penitenciária Estadual de Porto Alegre. Fotografia analógica digitalizada a partir de filme 35 mm, câmera pinhole. Foto: Rafael E., 2019

A very resounding characteristic in these auto representations in the pose: they pose with their family when they are visited, with fellows from the same gallery, working site, cell, and with the technicians who support them. The ways in which they represent themselves or in which they are represented by colleagues (sometimes reminding images of a school group), invariably repeat three gestures: thumbs up in one or both hands as a positive sign; another with the index and middle fingers rigid and slightly separated while the thumb is up creating a shape that occupies three fingers; and, finally, with the index and thumb fingers pointing in perpendicular directions forming an "L" shape. The first pose is a traditional sign of O.K., of positivity, the second is a representation of a "V" and an "L" which are a sign of "vida loca" (crazy live in English) and lastly a sign that indicates a solitary "L", which is a register of "liberdade" ("liberty" in English). They repeat these gestures while laying down, sitting, standing or in groups, with one of both hands. Sometimes all people from the same group did the same gestures. Throughout the study, impressed by the repetition of these models, mainly by the omnipresent signs of positivity ("thumbs up" poses) and privately anxious by the will to see "other images", the participants of the study were asked why they repeated those poses in the pictures. The answer to that was that they wanted to "show that we're fine! Those who will see these images have to remain calm, they have to know that we are well." Primo Levi, referring to the horrors in concentration camps during World War II, corroborates this worry saying that "The sentiment of our existence depends in large part from the look that others give us; that is because it is not human the experience of those who lived days in which men was an object to the eyes of other men". (LEVI apud DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2013, p. 62). The comparison between concentration camps and prisons is certainly unmeasured in political terms and historical scales and, even with respect to the horrors committed and suffered, however, it is our understanding that Levi contributes in the sense that it is meaningful to think here in what way the fact that inmates construct the images of their own living constitutes the possibility of us seeing them in a different registry of humanity. From the inmates point of view, are there any transformations by the reach of these photographs whenever the images to be seen by other eyes are the images that I (the "imprisoned-me") want to show, not those in which I am seen by others as someone available to be shown?

The images that here seem to constitute such remarkable occurrence, the poses, can be also thought in proximity to what Annateresa Fabris (1998) and Amador and Fonseca (2014) discuss while talking about the artist's Rosangela Rennó work in Cicatrizes (1996). In this study, Rennó utilized a set of images of inmates from the Tatoo files that belong to the São Paulo Penitentiary Museum . By appropriating photographs that were obtained by the psychiatrist José de Moraes Mello and his crew, the artist reflects upon the disciplinary use of technical images in prisons for concentrating, expanding and, therefore, making explicit data from a logic in which disciplinary practices are based in a classificatory knowledge that is produced from a careful examination of inmates bodies.

The artist look falls over tattoo photographs from inmates. Such photographs composed a register for institutions serving as identity models during the incarceration practice where they were obtained helping as a parameter in the treatment provided to the inmates. In a text for the *Seditious Discourses* magazine, Rennó justifies the study stating that

To remove photography from its natural context - the identification system or scientific study - is not to empty it of its initial symbolic content, but to free its referent from the condition of penitentiary statistics. Returning visibility to these photographs means exposing the pain of deprivation of the right to be free and the loss of identity and the desire to resist amnesia and anonymity. In prison, discipline is maintained by a coercive policy on the individual's body that ends up being reduced to an unnamed criminal figure. (RENNÓ, 1998, p. 19)

Fabris (1998) alerts that, at least until the moment she published her text, she didn't considered to be enough references to develop links between criminal studies and the images of tattooed bodies obtained by the doctor Moraes Mello to the practices of Lombroso and Lacassagne, pointing out some differences such as, formal traces registered in the images. In the case of São Paulo photograph files, the images had a proximity between the camera and body fragments which presented tattoo marks, characterizing these photographs with a very fragmented and "atomic" resolution of the registered bodies. On the contrary, shots taken by European researchers privileged a broader focus over the inmate's body, or yet, in producing portraits in American shot plan, front and back. Anyway, it seems very pertinent that relations are established between these images and the positivist dynamic of the search for body inscriptions that would substantiate or point out indictment trends of criminal behavior. Such "evidences", obtained from typologies, aimed at facilitating the State's work in the control of practices supported by rigid disciplinary logics, similar fundamentals to those developed by Lombroso and also Lacassagne.

Based on Foucauldian analysis that prisons are distributed through most ordinary spaces by disciplinary actions, Amador and Fonseca (2014) affirm that prisons also used images to push politics which not only keep and sustain these practices, but also operate through ways of looking. Based on what they called image imprisonment, Amador and Fonseca affirm that this look allows us to think about the subject of prisons not only as an empirical field, but as an experience established "in the most intimate spaces of daily lives". Thus, operating in collective life experience practices through specific ways of looking that cooperate in

the way that certain institutional and existential courses move ahead, as well as possible politics of look "that imply the whole body as they move on and manage thoughts, gestures, and actions." (AMADOR e FONSECA, 2014, p. 75). These politics are not necessarily related to the practices of imposition, neither to known actions, but indeed to "something that can impregnate them by fine textures that obscure them, for being a reception channel of forces from the world." (Idem)



Figure 3: Presídio Central de Porto Alegre. Fotografia analógica digitalizada a partir de filme 35 mm, câmera pin-hole. Foto: Cleberson, 2019

The images that I refer here can, I think, be related to the concepts brought by Amador and Fonseca (2014) to analyze the work of Rennó. Such concepts address what the authors refer as to speech-image and vibrato-image. The first, linked to the look that objectifies the world as a zone of discursive language, which bets in "lines of egotistic and personalized individuality"; the latter, "in lines of a singular life", which see this same world related to a look that vibrates, disturbing these same discursive logics.

Based on Michel Foucault thoughts, Rosangela Rennó arrives to many questions that can help us to think about the state that tattooed bodies images can assume: could marks so deep to the point of being carved in bodies designate traces of adhesion to power in the form of tattoos? Or, on the contrary, being traces registered in bodies as liberty practices or even as aesthetics attempts to evade the confinement? Images that imprison or that allow to escape? These questions can also help to think about some images obtained by the inmates in this study. In what way posed portraits, in many ways schematic, recurrences of a scene that point at truly rigorous framing of themselves can be thought? Traces that point out at some resigned state of mind? Or, on the other hand, scenes that aim at showing that nevertheless, "we are effectively all well"? After all it is necessary to say that those who need to make sure that "all is well" could be because of the possibility of the opposite being true

and, even though living conditions in prison by the groups which participated in this research are far from being the worst situations of imprisonment, risky situations are always imminent, especially in the context of the Public Prison. Lastly, in a more suspicious way, one can think that because of being in prison, where the behavior is constantly evaluated, being “well”, being “positive” could result in evaluations and disciplinary judgments that would somehow grant advantages to their penal life, therefore “cheating” conditions enforced by the disciplinary logic itself? How to interpret “crazy life”, “liberty”, and “positive” under these circumstances?

Reflecting about the photographs produced in this study which could relate to the notion of vibrato-image as those which can disturb discursive logics, I also recognize a dimension that does not allow to move them away from certain generalities, from a certain amount of impersonality or, even better, social standards which indicate that other questions are possible. Catherine Tambrun (2010), curator of the Impossible Photographie – prisons parisiennes 1851-2010 exhibition, proposes that among the impossible conditions for a photographer from outside a prison to register it are the absence of feeling and experiencing the imprisonment itself, very different from a simple “visual experience”. Such absence would be missing to formulate an appropriate aesthetical perspective. If following Tambrun’s rational, the question here is whether it is impossible for an outside photographer, someone who does not have the incarceration experience and all the feelings resulting from it to produce images that reach such experience. How to think of images produced by the inmates themselves that, in some way, also put in check their own singular condition by the standardization to models with whom they connect? Still, could it be the case that the images produced by this study are also attached and connected to actions that link them to imprisoned logics? Even if distinguishable from the horrors in which prison environments are commonly portrait?

Amador and Fonseca state that Rennó’s work instigate us to think about a “double face” that, I think, can help us in the issues addressed here: image prisons and prison images, images subject to particular configuration of luminosity and legibility linked to determined truth regiments and those that refuse them. In this sense, the images invite us to

transit between local and non-locatable prisons; between what is seen of prisons and what is made invisible of them, making them visible - since the visibilities consist of forms of luminosity and not exactly visual forms, being a game in which visualizing can produce things not seen and vice versa. (AMADOR e FONSECA, 2014, p. 76).

How could the very blunt statement from Didi-Huberman (2013) addressing "erratic corpus" of images despite everything help us to perceive images obtained by inmates in prisons? Images produced by those who live all the diversity in which prisons are presented? Could those images sensitize us in a way that would make possible understand and perceive perspectives that are also incomplete, lacunary, and non-total like the images registered by members of the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz-Birkenau presented by the French author? And, once understood the differences in terms of political and historical differences, of humanity and even responsibilities with respect to their own acts in what extent these images contribute to not saying that photographs of prisons are unutterable or unthinkable, if compared to the context in which Didi-Huberman discuss them?

On the other hand, it is important to highlight an important difference between Rosângela Rennó images (appropriated from an archive with medical and classificatory purposes) and the images that this study produced: here, there was not the imposition of an obligatory visibility to sanction and normalize traces produced by inmates in their own bodies. It is not about scratched marks, but posed marks, poses as deliberated actions, freely assumed or in a way, self imposed. thinking about the self-portrait perspective, ABREU (2005) states that it is an image that is articulated around a reflection of itself, a discursive field that proposes the exteriorization of the subject, a way for someone to declare his or her "presence in the world", to reveal into what the person has imagined to be, but also to propose what is desired and what is intended to be. In these terms, it seems necessary to note that the self-portraits shown here cannot be thought in isolation, but must be contextualized in a particular environment, highly normalized and conditioned by social norms, politics and very peculiar ethics of being in the world, even though components of a self invention are certainly present.

Up until here I thought and brought issues relative to images that constitute a certain imagery with respect to how we see prisons. By thinking about a condition named as "precarious lives", Judith Butler presents a different perspective, thinking about how the discourse hits and imposes itself over the subjects that are constituted by it. In some extent, the author get closer to issues also discussed by Eduardo Coutinho, mainly in the documentary *Boca de Lixo*. In the film, carried out on a landfill in the periphery of Rio de Janeiro city, the cinematographer proposed himself to avoid a look that reaffirmed convictions, making an effort to understand the conditions, the choices and the impositions involved in the lives that circulated and obtained their financial support there. Coutinho thought as to how the media imposed discourses upon people, without noticing possible resistance acts involved in those forms and ways of being. For Butler, the structure of a discourse is important for the understanding as to how moral authority is introduced and maintained from the notion that its existence is not related to the fact that we report to each other. In fact, how, under what conditions, ways or timing such discourse reaches us, mainly when conditions in which we can't avoid "or even by-pass it" are involved. For the author, the



implication of someone's discourse constitute us, in this case, "against our own will or, better said, even before having formed our own will." (BUTLER, 2011, p. 15). In this context, there would be demands that would come from unidentified places, creating "demands" that impose themselves upon people:

In fact, this conception of what is morally binding is not given by myself; it does not come from my autonomy or my own reflexivity. It comes to me from an unknown place, unexpectedly, involuntarily and unplanned. In fact, it tends to ruin my plans, and if my plans are undone, it may well be the sign that a moral authority weighs on me.

To contextualize the idea that "others make moral claims about us, direct moral demands to us, which we have not asked for, but we aren't free to refuse." (BUTLER, 2011, p. 16) the author get closer to the notion of a "face" that Emmanuel Levinas works with, linking it to the necessary "understanding of Other's precariousness", and, mainly, to the clues that the author provides to think about the relation between representation and humanization. Here, such notion contributes to the understanding that aside from being physically incarcerated, inmates can also be thought as captives of a set of judgments that constitute them from a discourse in which they are also conveyed by some violence, similarly to what happens to the characters of Coutinho at the landfill. For Butler, "Being submitted to the discourse is, from the get go, being stripped of will while feeling such dispossession as the base of their own position in the discourse." (BUTLER, 2011, p. 23) The relation between representation and humanization would not be "as direct as we would like to think", stating that a common way to establish connections between humanization and dehumanization is the supposition that those who obtain representation detain better chances to being humanized, especially when it comes down to self-representation. Thus, on the other hand, those who does not have such opportunity would have higher possibilities of being seen as "less humans", or even "not even being seen". At the end, the author gets to the idea that even though for Levinas a face is not necessarily always understood as a human face, there is an important data to consider: it is the way that faces are approached in inner media that effectively lead to dehumanization Butler states that in this case personification not always humanizes - we are back to the documentary Boca de Lixo -, it can even operate in the sense of dehumanization itself. To answer the question about "how could we get to know de difference between an inhumane face, although humanized, for Levinas, and the dehumanization that can also occur through faces (BUTLER, 2011, p. 24), the author proposes that we think about the different ways by which violence can happen, as in: it is precisely by means of a "face", or in a broader way, through its own representation, as we have seen up until now.

However, in this case the "I" who sees a face does not identify with it": the face represents something impossible to identify with, "an accomplishment of the dehumanization and a condition for violence, imposing, on the contrary, an hegemonic visuality. An example would be images of some Afghan women shown in pictures smiling with exposed faces, free from the use of burcas, after the Taliban collapse imposed by American occupation. In those pictures, what can be as a sign of liberation from oppression can also be gratification of the imposition of values external to that group "once we have not seen or heard any vocalization of lament or agony through those faces, not even a single sound of the precariousness of life." (BUTLER, 2011, p. 25). This rise a question: while these faces humanize such events (by giving a human face to Afghan women), would it be the case that the emerging faces are effectively humanizing or, in some instances they are also dehumanizing? Lastly, what cultural values are being imposed as "victory" in this uncovered face? the lingering question is for what narrative function would these mobilized images be for or, what pain and lament scenes these images in fact cover, deny or simply disqualify?

Another important question to discuss between the imprisonment of the image and images of prison has to do with the place of these images. In this study the pictures are important for addressing prisons by the eyes of inmates, thus trying to produce inflections in attachments that do not reveal themselves in erasures that do not reveal themselves also by virtue of limitations of images, that, thus, end by circumscribing the set of representations of what we can see and of what we can get to know with respect to the imprisoned subject. However, it would be a mistake thinking that "we only need to find the correct and true images and that, in this way, certain reality will be expressed. The reality is not expressed by what is represented in the interior of the image, but instead through the challenge towards the representation that reality delivers." (BUTLER, 2011, p. 28). Still, it is important to point out what Didi-Huberman reminds us by claiming that photography has a particular aptitude to put breaks to the "most voracious will of disappearance". And that beyond its technical simplicity this happens "for so many different reasons, good or bad, public or private, confessed or not, actively prolonging violence or protesting against it, etc". (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2013, p. 38). Act images, not only representation images.

Some photographs obtained during the Vietnam war became known by the drama of what they represented, but also by their contribution to change the position of the American public opinion with respect to supporting that war. The children photographed by Nick Ut, running on a road while taking their clothes off trying to avoid skin burns due to Napalm bombardments are, in this regard and in that context, what Judith Butler points out as an interruption in the, until then, hegemonic field of representation. But, in addition to that, "pointed at another place, beyond themselves, at a life and precariousness that they couldn't display." (BUTLER, 2011, p. 31). I think it is possible to make a connection between what Didi-Huberman writes to what different Holocaust testimonies imply as

the possibility of bringing statements that enunciate and make us feel not only by what they say, but operate “in the void of words themselves”, connecting us through “arduous work, because what comes to light is a description of death at work, with inarticulate screams and the silences that it supposes”. The images of inmates can be thought from the perspective of such emptiness, from what they show, but also to what they point at beyond the represented figure. The image exceeds the value of representation and demand to be interpreted beyond themselves, as indicated by Judith Butler.

Could the images of inmates being positive, showing their lives from perspectives that avoid or deny the sometimes tragic condition of their situation, also relate to this approximation? It may not be possible to answer such question just yet, but it fundamentally points at a different attitude towards the representation of what is typically depicted as images of prisons. The remaining question depends on what is brought by Butler: how to ensure that such lives don't remain unnamed and not lamented if they do not show as to what the author qualifies as “all its precariousness and destruction”. Maybe we should think about these images as another kind of speeches, another registry that allows us to imagine such precariousness at play in the lives of these people. Here, the issue of a face as a representation paradox comes back again: faces are not exclusively human faces, but, still, are a condition for a humanization. The counterpoint presented relates to its media use when it comes to implement the dehumanization, what leads us to think that the personification not always humanizes (Coutinho, in *Boca de Lixo*, point at the same issue). Under these conditions, how to distinguish between an inhumane face, but still humanizing and the dehumanization, that can also occur through faces? Or, in the case of this study, is it possible to perceive, even in what does not show tragedy, even in what is positive within these images, a representation of what they carry on as tragic? Is there a paradigmatic image of this situation? When the inmates show themselves in the way that they do, aren't they in a way breaking with this paradigmatic image? It seems to me that they are, forcefully or not, breaking with an imposition of representation getting closer to appropriating the ways that are convenient to self-represent themselves indicating other possibilities that point at interruptions in a hegemonic field of representation.

Didi-Huberman bases himself in Giorgio Agamben texts about the testimony to think about Auschwitz-Birkenau images as index that carry its power in the “impotence of saying” and that, in a process of de-subjectification, manifest a split where the “essential part” is nothing else than a void what remains from those images must be thought as a limit: neither what succumbs, nor what saves, but what remains in between. Seizing the opportunity, I think that looking at the images obtained in the prisons in its lacunar existence is to put in a demand that one would look at them in what they lack, not on what they show. What is in these images that show thumbs up poses that have power as their limits, maybe restrictions? What is missing, at the same time that, in its positive expression, presents itself as resistance, as a desire to, maybe, proceed?

The images cover themselves by what Didi-Huberman refers to as a “difficult ethics of images”: they are impossible, there is not an “invisible by excelency”, neither are icons of horror or simply documents that register objective realities: “a simple image: inadequate but necessary, inaccurate but true. Truth of a paradox truth, evidently.” Paradox in the sense that the eye is always as in the eye of a cyclon, where is an apparent tranquility, even though the cloudy situation muddy our interpretation. (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2013, p. 60).

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**VERSÃO**

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