

Towards a “semantics of power”: A case of resistance and recognition in contemporary Brazilian film[◇]

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Abstract

Drawing on *Lula's Angels* (*As Panteras do Lula*), a fake trailer which premiered on the Zel Junior YouTube channel and went viral in March/April 2022, this essay discusses the construction of a “semantics of power” within the context of a Brazilian “impotent grammar”. Thus, the present work explores how artist and content creator Zel Junior elaborates, through pop influence and a critical and humorous expression, a language which inverts far-right signs in a desire for self-representation and recognition.

Keywords: semantics of power, contemporary Brazilian audio-visual production, sociology of culture and communication.

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***Por uma “semântica da potência”:
um caso de resistência e reconhecimento no cinema brasileiro
contemporâneo***

Resumo

Com base no *fake trailer* “As Panteras do Lula”, estreado e viralizado em março/abril de 2022 no canal do YouTube Zel Junior, o ensaio discute a construção de uma “semântica da potência” no contexto brasileiro de uma “gramática impotente”. Assim, busca-se verificar como, através de influência pop e expressão crítica e humorada, o artista e criador de conteúdo Zel Junior elabora uma linguagem que inverte diametralmente signos bolsonaristas, num desejo de autorrepresentação e reconhecimento.

Palavras-chave: semântica da potência, produção audiovisual brasileira contemporânea, sociologia da cultura e da comunicação.

Introduction: the interlocutor and his artistic creation

A stylish trio dash into the middle of a dark city street when they come across a muscular guy with an electronic eye wearing Brazil’s football shirt. With a strong punch, he breaks the ground below his feet and presents himself with a cyborg’s voice: “I am Bolsonaro’s robot”. The film’s beginning pulls the viewer toward the adventure he/she will experience in the next two minutes. The director, actor, screenwriter, producer, editor, and costume designer Zel Junior unveils with his creation the current Brazilian political scenario through an anti-bolsonarist film semantics as a key element for the understanding of the country’s contemporary context.

Figure 1. Film poster available on Zel Junior YouTube channel



Source: Junior (2022a).

As *Panteras de Lula* (translated here as *Lula’s Angels*) premiered on YouTube on March 29th, 2022 (nearly six decades after the civil-military coup of 1964) and took ten months to be completed. That was the time Zel needed to raise the film budget, coming from his five different freelance jobs, in order to be able to independently afford the seven shooting days.

During his interview for this research, Zel notes that, in contrast with the film industry, in which countless people work together on a production, he takes care of everything by himself without sponsorships or any other sources of funding: “I really do things like in the guerrillas, you know? I take my mobile phone, and my cameras, and I start recording with my friends. I have never made a script for my videos.” The “low-income and northeastern” youth, as he likes to define himself, migrated from an inland region of Bahia to São Paulo still as a child. He votes for the Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores – PT) since he was 16 and nowadays, at the age of 25, he is based in the East Zone of São Paulo with three brothers and his mother.

When inquired about what drives him, the artist confidently states:

Anger. I am driven by indignation and anger. That can be seen in all of my videos. It is through them that I show what hurts me and what I want to express. As I can’t face it on the spot, I create it to relieve my feelings. When I feel hate, I know good things are coming.

Zel was afraid of *Lula’s Angels* “not doing well”, being “ignored” or having “little recognition”, as he supposes his previous videos have done. His fear also rested on the fact that *Lula’s Angels* was a “fake trailer” – a teaser for a film that will not premiere, which “‘out there’ is common, but not in Brazil”. In addition to using social media channels, he printed film posters and went to the streets to distribute them with the intention of disseminating the work (Junior, 2022b): “Somehow, I believed [in the film]”, he admits.

The video’s millions of views bothered Brazilian right-wing and far-right viewers. Zel received death threats through his social media channels, as well as protests from political parties and movements, such as Movimento Brasil Livre [MBL] (Junior, 2022c): “I massively received photographs of

Marielle [Franco] in the comments of my videos, you know?¹ On Facebook, it was mostly comments saying that I would only stop when shot in the head. Nowadays, all I can do is be very careful. Living this country... I'm scared but I learned by force to ignore everything, otherwise, I would have stopped already”, he says.

The other side of the story, however, is that representatives from progressive political parties and the film sector have praised the video. For instance, the first female Brazilian president (2012 to 2016), Dilma Rousseff, liked the video, and the director of *The Edge of Democracy* (2019), Petra Costa, publicised Zel's work as “the new promise for national action cinema” (Junior, 2022d; Costa, 2022).

This visibility resulted in Zel receiving offers of exclusivity contracts from different entertainment companies: “The goal was to silence everything I do”, that is, he would have to suspend his YouTube channel and halt his own productions. He did not accept: “What is the point? How am I supposed to stop doing what I do? I still don't see many transgender people making action films as protagonists. So, if I'm doing this, I think it's only fair to continue”. In August 2022, Zel released *Lula's Angels 2*, a film as elaborate, political, and reflective as the first.

Conceptual readings: For a “semantics of power”

The notion of a “semantics of power” was conceived based on Zel Junior's work on the construction of signs and meanings antagonistic to the “aesthetics of impotence”² of the Bolsonarist grammar. It is worth

¹ “Black woman, from the favelas, Human Rights advocate and sociologist” (https://www.instagram.com/marielle_franco/), Marielle Franco was murdered on 14 March 2018, in the middle of her term as a city councilwoman in Rio de Janeiro, seven months before the retired military officer Jair Bolsonaro was elected President of Brazil.

² The concept of “impotence” discussed in this section draws inspiration from Baruch Espinosa. Likewise, here we are inspired by Walter Benjamin's notion of the “aestheticisation of politics”. In 1935/1936, the author writes that fascism leads to the aestheticisation of political life: “All efforts to aestheticise politics culminate in one point. That one point is war [...] Such is the aestheticising of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicising art” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 195-196; my translation).

noting that by the latter we understand a set of rules or linguistic structure which seeks to establish ultra right standards – or a “reactionary populism” (Lynch; Cassimiro, 2022) – in a kind of “moral community”, as suggested by Angela Alonso (2019). On the other hand, the notion of semantics presented here relates to the grammar, but rather in its objection of it. An antonymic aesthetic. The second name – power or potency – composes the notion inspired by the “living-seeing”³ thinker, Baruch Spinoza. Let us go through it briefly.

In Definition 8 of Book IV of *Ethics*, the seventeenth-century philosopher outlines his “virtue and power”, which means the same thing, as it follows: “By virtue and power I understand the same thing, that is virtue, insofar as it is related to man, is the very essence, or nature, of man” (Spinoza 2018, p. 159). Spinoza returns to the idea of virtue/power in proposition 20: “The more each one strives, and is able, to preserve his being, the more he is endowed with virtue; conversely, insofar as one neglects his own advantage, that is, neglects to preserve his being” (2018, p. 170).

Regarding our artist and content creator, Zel Junior, it is worth mentioning Proposition 46, still in the fourth part of *Ethics*: “He, who lives under the guidance of reason, endeavours, as far as possible, to render back love, or kindness, for other men’s hatred, anger, contempt, towards him”. In other words, a person who fights with joy and security in the hopes of defeating hatred with love is able to triumph over hatred (since “Hatred can never be good” – Spinoza, 2018, p. 186-187).

While the representative figure of Government, through an authoritarian grammar, not only marginalises women, LGBT people, and other “minorities”, as well as the progressive groups, Zel accounts for the forms of oppression, hostility and disrespect he has himself struggled with in his daily life, coming from various sections of society. For instance:

There was one day when I was aggressively stopped by a Christian couple because I was wearing high heels, and this happens very often, it’s not an

³ As named by Gilles Deleuze (2002).

isolated case. While we were shooting *Lula's Angels*, some people violently stopped me in front of my team, you know? And several of my LGBTQIA+ friends share with me these stories of evangelicals who have tried to exorcise them and other types of approaches. This is very common, you see?

Given this scenario, it is worth noting the following: the artist does not incorporate an exclusive politics of suffering,⁴ nor does he seek to fight back the hatred received. When he declares that he could respond with the same feeling, “but is unable to”, that means he channels this feeling into creative power. Thus, we uncover something about his semantics: in contrast to the “aesthetics of impotence,” Zel exercises a critical and propositional role contesting those who “do not know how to fortify the spirits of men, but rather depress them – these are unbearable for themselves” (Deleuze, 2002, p. 31, my translation).

In the case of *Lula's Angels* and some of his other videos,⁵ it becomes clear that his “revenge” is translated into a political, pop, and ironic action language. In his films, one can observe his knowledge of the signs and codes of the far right – such as the fundamentalist aesthetic, the images of “cleansing” and “sanitisation”, and the gun ideology, to name a few – represented in reverse, in a double that is antagonised, in a kind of metamorphosis of the sad passions into joyful feelings. As an example, in *Lula's Angels* there are no images of Jair Messias but there are satirised bolsonarist symbols – such as a bomb with the number 17, alluding to Bolsonaro’s election number, which explodes in a trap, and “bolsominion robots” ironized in an allegory of utopia as the female superheroes are ready to end their project for the destruction of Brazil.

The semantics that rips that grammar apart can then be interpreted through the idea of a “minor literature”, developed by G. Deleuze and F. Guattari:

⁴ This notion is discussed in expanded research (to be published) based on ideas of political scientist Wendy Brown.

⁵ Such as the videos “Gay x Crente” (“Gay X Evangelical”), “Gay x Crente 2”, “Fiquei com um bolsominion” (“I dated a bolsominion”), among others. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/c/zeljunior>. Last accessed on 10 Aug. 2023.

[It] does not belong to a minor language, but rather to the language that a minority builds in a larger language [...]. The three categories of the minor literature are the deterritorialisation of language, the connection of the individual with the political immediate, and the collective agency of enunciation (2003, p. 38-42; my translation).

How may one verify such categories in Zel Junior's productions and, more specifically, in *Lula's Angels*?

Considering that deterritorialisation⁶ represents a movement of displacement or departure from the territory (as well as the disconnection of a sign from its context of signification) towards a reterritorialisation, this desire is evident in Zel's own semantics. That is to say, his language seeks ways out of the fascist aesthetics leading to new paths, notably, of production and recognition of assembled subjectivities. Such unsubjected subjectivities lead us to see the two categories mentioned in the above excerpt, after all, in *Lula's Angels*, the individual, collective, and political are mixed with each other and represented in multiple discontinued expressions.

As for the idea of "minor", the authors suggest that it is a condition of certain literatures, here in the form of a "minor cinema", which promotes other versions towards transforming assemblages, other actions and actings, bodies and spatialities, aesthetics and poetics, in fearless acts of disruption with the establishment. Thus, this name – *minor* – "We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature" (Deleuze; Guattari 1986, p. 18).

Evading a "greater" narrative can be added to Zel's accounts of injustices, death threats and violence suffered by him and his friends, who play themselves in the film, representing, in turn, a community (LGBTQIA+). In his transgressive cinema, while disrupting the institutional or established, we see that anger is poured into other lines, powers and aesthetics, where collective agency plays the leading role. In one of his lines in *Lula's Angels*, for instance, the director says to his friends that "the best part of all this

⁶ To learn more about Deleuze and Guattari's concept, see *Mil Platós* (1995).

is not hitting bolsominions, it’s you” (in the video entitled “Fiquei com um bolsominion” [“I dated a bolsominion”] (Junior, 2019), likewise, it is friendship, love, and group identity that prevail).

Open remarks or “Which art form should my anger take?”

The desire to continue producing, deterritorialising, and creating “lines of flight”⁷ has as its driving force recognition, which, in turn, flows into Judith Butler’s notion about the productive character of power relations.⁸ Such a character would generate a type of subject to pave the way for battles for the destabilisation of established norms and “frameworks” (2015).

In the current case, that could be exemplified by the interview Zel and Jade Mascarenhas (his friend and actress) gave to a YouTube channel (DCM TV, 2022), in which the artist recalled the proposals he received from progressive entrepreneurs to support him as long as he no longer discussed religion and some other topics in his videos:

But I am a gay guy who’s been tortured by the church his entire childhood... So it’s just impossible not to criticise that in my videos, you know. It’s not that I’m romanticising it, I’d rather work hard to produce my short film and own it, doing it my way, than sell myself out to do something I don’t believe in. Our creations are precisely meant to criticise what’s oppressing us.

During a special episode with Judith Butler of *TransMissão*,⁹ the television show hosted by Linn da Quebrada and Jup do Bairro, Linn posed the philosopher a question about “the force of non-violence” (2021): “How can we consider the non-violence [position] in a place like Brazil, where violence towards bodies like ours is everywhere, and it is even institutionalised and

⁷ A concept developed by Félix Guattari (2011) and equally discussed in the full version of the research.

⁸ See Rosenfield and Saavedra (2013) for an example of the wide reception of the concept developed by Axel Honneth in Brazilian Social Sciences.

⁹ Produced and broadcasted by the TV channel *Canal Brasil*, directed by Claudia Priscilla and Kiko Goifman. Available at <https://youtu.be/DMge3Uc9sUs>. Last accessed on 15 August 2022.

endorsed? A violence that is sophisticated, cruel, and part of our everyday lives? [...] Is it possible not to have violence as an answer?”.

To which Butler replied:

Let me say first that you must react. There has to be a reaction, there has to be a widespread reaction, local, regional, and global. And the anti-violence movement has to be very large, and very strong, and very loud. So, for me, non-violence is not the same as passivity, [it] has nothing to do with passivity. The only question then is, you must react. How do you react? [...] Now how can I be forceful without being violent? That is the question: how do I be powerful without being violent? [...] What art form should my anger take? How can we make a collective art form of our anger?

Zel Junior's way of reacting, his motivation, and audio-visual format – all these elements combined build up his “semantics of power” by creating meaning through his loud, angry, collaborative, and loving film language. May his wishes not be undermined by mainstream grammar and may the artist and his friends continue to explore new territories, through escape routes that guide them (and us) to follow confidently.

In addition to Zel, other artists, art groups and collectives, and cultural movements have been working on powerful semantics despite the power of the established visual systems out there. We will have a long road of investigations to walk through in the near future.

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