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# THE MULTIPLE EXPOSURE OF GABRIELA BILO:

on facts, montage, and photojournalism



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**ABSTRACT** – We reflect on the impact of the cover photo of *Folha de S.Paulo* on January 19, 2023, in which President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has a shattered glass superimposed over his image, a record of the coup attempts in Brasília weeks earlier. From a semiotic perspective, we problematize the nature of photographic images, their implications in photojournalism, and their transformation into events. We discuss the notions of fact and truth in relation to events and mediation; with this, we question editorial processes, the use and interpretation of images, which reveal complex layers about the crisis of contemporary journalism.

**Key words:** Photojournalism. Event. Semeiosis. *Folha de S.Paulo*.

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## **A EXPOSIÇÃO MÚLTIPLA DE GABRIELA BILÓ: sobre fatos, montagem e fotojornalismo**

**RESUMO** – Refletimos sobre a repercussão da foto de capa da Folha de S.Paulo, dia 19 de janeiro de 2023, em que o presidente Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva tem sobreposta à sua imagem um vidro estilhaçado, registro de semanas antes, dos atos golpistas em Brasília. A partir da semiótica, problematizamos a natureza da imagem fotográfica, suas implicações no fotojornalismo e sua transformação em acontecimento. Discutimos as noções de fato e verdade em relação a acontecimento e mediação; com isso questionamos os processos editoriais, o uso e a interpretação da imagem, que revelam camadas complexas sobre a crise do jornalismo contemporâneo.

**Palavras-chave:** Fotojornalismo. Acontecimento. Semiose. Folha de S.Paulo.

## **LA EXPOSICIÓN MÚLTIPLE DE GABRIELA BILÓ: sobre hechos, montaje y fotoperiodismo**

**RESUMEN** – Reflexionamos sobre la repercusión de la foto de Folha de S.Paulo en 19 de enero de 2023, en que el presidente Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva tiene un vidrio roto superpuesto sobre su imagen, registro de los intentos de golpe en Brasilia semanas antes. Desde una perspectiva semiótica, problematizamos la naturaleza de imágenes fotográficas, sus implicaciones en el fotoperiodismo y su transformación en acontecimientos. Discutimos las nociones de hecho y verdad en relación a acontecimientos y mediación; con ello cuestionamos los procesos editoriales, el uso y interpretación de imágenes, que revelan capas complejas sobre la crisis del periodismo contemporáneo.

**Palabras clave:** Fotoperiodismo. Acontecimiento. Semiosis. Folha de S.Paulo.

### **1 Introduction**

On January 19, 2023, Folha de S.Paulo featured a headline on its cover (figure 1): “In Lula’s focus, military presence in the Planalto reaches a record”. However, what stirred controversy was an image somewhat independent of the accompanying headline: a photo of the President of the Republic adjusting his tie; and, through the multiple exposure technique (produced by photographer Gabriela Biló), a shattered glass from the coup-related events on the 8th of the same month is overlaid onto Lula’s figure. This montage suggests the effect of a shot at the level of his heart. Immediately, an intense discussion spread across various media platforms, much of it focused on two interconnected cores: the nature of photojournalism and its intrinsic connection to factuality, and the ethical dimension of journalism in the manipulative processes of its languages, which can generate suggestions or debatable meanings. From a semiotic perspective, this article will analyze the editorial configuration in question, with the perspective that the image itself, in the way it was edited, has

transformed into an event. It aims to problematize the notions of fact and truth in the relationship between events and journalistic mediation, understanding that within this tension also lies a conceptual conflict that traces back to the origins of photojournalism.

### Figure 1

Photograph with multiple exposure technique on the cover of Folha de S.Paulo on January 19, 2023



Source: reproduction, 2023<sup>1</sup>.

A brief contextualization helps in understanding how authorial and editorial decisions brought the role of the press and the deontology of journalism into public debate, contributing to the transformation of an element that would illustrate bureaucratic news into an event itself. The phenomenon of the news outlet becoming the news itself sheds light on the media and inserts itself into a recent yet broad history of questioning “the media”.

A remarkably similar controversy occurred in August 2011, during the first term of then-President Dilma Rousseff. At a ceremony for the delivery of swords to 441 first-year cadets at the Academia Militar das Agulhas Negras (Aman), the head of the Executive was captured by photographer Wilton Junior of Estado de S.Paulo in an image (figure 2) suggesting that she is being pierced by one of the event’s weapons. The photo, winner of the Esso Journalism Award that year, raised suspicions of being a montage by the newspaper, given

the tensions between that government and the military, particularly due to the potential advances of the National Truth Commission, which was investigating crimes committed by the Brazilian state during the dictatorship established after the 1964 coup. On his *Estadão* blog, Wilton published the sequence of images that led to the published photo, demonstrating that it was not a montage – similar to the explanations provided by Biló in *Folha* and on her social media pages. Nevertheless, the image, as edited by *Estadão*, also problematized the possibilities of meaning in photojournalism and its ontology based on a supposedly indisputable referentiality.

**Figure 2**



Source: reproduction, 2011.

The *Folha de S. Paulo* is now accused of inciting attacks against the newly inaugurated president. However, unlike the photo of Dilma, in this case, there was an overlay technique in which photojournalist Gabriela Biló placed the crack from one of the large windows of the Planalto Palace, vandalized by coup supporters a few days before this headline, over the president's chest. Due to the violence of the anti-democratic acts on January 8 and the threats directed at Lula<sup>2</sup> on social media, the newspaper was criticized by what can be referred to as the “left-wing field” – academics, politicians, supporters, public figures, and some of its own columnists (figure 3).

### Figure 3

Post from January 19 on Marcia Tiburi's Instagram page<sup>3</sup>



Source: reproduction, 2023<sup>4</sup>.

At the beginning of the new presidential term, after four years of the Bolsonaro administration, it was expected that the political world would return to its bureaucratic monotony, without the abundance of sensory stimuli caused by histrionic announcements and declarations that used to dominate the news.

During these atypical years for democratic rituals, much of the content circulating in political sections accustomed readers to oscillate between states of anger and sadness, perplexity and panic. In opinion spaces, editorials, and strictly news-related articles, critiques for mismanagement, neglect during the pandemic, attacks on human rights, misinformation, and institutional entrenchment were carried out by major media outlets, such as Folha.

The press was declared an official enemy and persecuted by Bolsonarism through defamation campaigns, economic sanctions, and verbal and physical attacks. For embracing progressive agendas and being accused of being “communist” by the far-right, the journalistic field seemed naturally aligned with left-wing movements. The controversial choice for the newspaper’s cover overshadowed this brief history of tropical anti-authoritarian positioning and revived the image of a “coup-supporting media” – a critique made by left-wing social movements in the past decade. This criticism ranged from the

fight for the representation of marginalized cultures, through the alleged contribution to Dilma Rousseff's impeachment, to the space given to Bolsonaro's statements.

"And the worst part is that we bought into this crap when they were being persecuted by fascism. It is unbelievable that the level of villainy has no limits". User reactions like this are in the post (figure 4) of Folha's January 19 cover on its official Instagram profile, a social network designed for the protagonism of images. There, unlike in newspapers that are born centered on texts, images do not illustrate texts; it is the text that, when it exists, serves as a caption – an accessory – or follows what is evoked by the images.

### Figure 4

*Comments on the post of Folha de S.Paulo's cover on January 19 on Instagram*



Source: Instagram, 2023<sup>5,6</sup>

The image sparked discussions on social media and became a topic in at least some sections of Folha in the days following that publication. However, on the same afternoon, Gabriela Biló explained in a video on Instagram, both on her personal profile and on the newspaper's profile, what the "multiple exposure" photograph is: the technique, even when performed on digital cameras, is subject to the same overlay of frames as an analog one. This explanation distinguishes this process from what could be "just another montage?" – a term that emphasizes a sense of falseness, especially in the era of deep fakes and AI simulations. In the evening, the photojournalist explained her intentions, methods, and concepts in a column

published on Folha's website.

Upon seeing the Palace wounded and life carrying on as usual, I reflected on what would be the best way to translate what I was feeling — photojournalism is not just documentation, it is also a translation of the environment; in this case, the political environment. Then, I thought of this ancient technique of double exposure. I pointed the camera at the cracks in the Palace and then at the president who was on the lower floor. I waited. I waited for an expression that symbolized what I was reading: the Palace resists. The president adjusted his tie, and I took the second shot. Two realities, separated by about 30 meters, but that already existed in the symbolism allowed by photojournalism, came together in my camera. (Biló, 2023, digital text)<sup>8</sup>.

In addition to reviving the tradition of this photographic technique, used both in art and journalism, she acknowledged that the result provoked varied interpretations: “[...] I will not say what people have to feel; I respect how the photo reached those who saw violence. But the truth is not singular. As the author of the photo, I accept the criticism”. The most important aspect of her opening up to various possible interpretations was the closure of the meaning sought by her original intention: to convey that the “Palace resists after the barbarism in Brasília”.

Despite Biló's agility in distancing herself from accusations of a coup mentality or endorsement of violence, was it enough to match the speed of an image? Were the subsequent explanations more convincing than the interpretative suggestion prompted by the surface of the image?

Did the divergence between possible readings of the image occur in its immediate perception – secondness – or the resulting abstraction – thirdness? Would this discussion about the cover photo of Folha take place if it were an unequivocal image – that is, in which the sense derived from its reading was closed? And even in photojournalism, would this possibility be guaranteed? These are questions for which we do not have precise answers. What we do in this article is problematize, through a semiotic perspective rooted in Peircean principles, the nature of this image, especially concerning its connection with the editorial process in which it is embedded. It is not an analysis deconstructing the image into specific categories, but an analytical movement guided by conceptual articulation between postulations that address the photographic process. The argumentative line we have constructed starts from this relationship between event and representation.

It is worth mentioning that the elements brought under the semiotic and eventful perspective have been displaced from other

debates or relevant theories that they usually are or could be associated with, such as the discussion about image in journalism, ethics in the press, or the deontology of the profession. The methodological perspective we employ perceives these concepts themselves as signs, as each of them has meanings associated with them, not only in the study of Communication but also in the public debate itself – this is the point we find most interesting, as the event formed precisely due to the senses, rooted and in dispute, about these elements in relation, at stake. At this point, we can already anticipate some of these signs triggered by the event: the photographic image; the idea of montage; the criticism; the relationship between photography and referentiality, indexicality, iconicity, symbolism, and truth; the circulation of image and news; the cyber event; linear reading and circular reading; authorship and intention; the work as essence and the open work; the limits of interpretation; informational noise and semiotic dispute; the brief political history as a context that provides meaning; the historical relationship between journalism and democracy; the coup mentality image of the press; journalism and the journalist as news; limits, ethics, and responsibility of journalism. The meanings that these terms carry drive the event and mobilize public discussion, which, by activating these signs, also questions, disputes, and resignifies them.

In the next three sections, we will place this case in (some of) its possible theoretical implications – starting from photography, its relationship with semiotics, and theories of the event – to culminate, from section 6 onwards, in its sharpened discussion in the face of this conceptual provision.

## **2 Photographic image: some considerations**

The photographic image, since its consolidation throughout the 19th century, has generated a set of aesthetic, ethical, and consequently, cultural questions that remain relevant today, reshaped by the processes of digitization that have transformed the media landscape of the world. The nature of the image, capable of capturing and fixing a fragment of reality through photochemical procedures, with the agency of a machine, and with the possibility of serial reproduction, has caused disruptions in the field of representing the visible world, previously monopolized by the mediation of visual



artists. Walter Benjamin (1985), in his famous *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, diagnoses that, as the means of production affect a particularly sensitive core of the nature of what is understood as a work of art – its authenticity –, a radical transformation arises in photography: it replaces the unique existence of the work with a serial existence. To the extent that this technique allows reproduction to meet the viewer in all situations, it updates the reproduced object. This represents a change in production conditions, associated with the technical environment created by the Industrial Revolution, which transforms, according to the author, culture as a whole.

Observing that devices have inaugurated what is understood as the post-industrial era, in which the human species, once surrounded by machines, begin to think, live, know, value, and act in relation to them, Flusser (2011) argues that the beginning of this process is marked precisely by the emergence of photography. It is a semiotic machine capable of producing language with relative autonomy. The movable type printing press, implemented in the late 15th century, already contained the DNA of this movement, enabling the reproduction of written language from a matrix – a template. It is from this previously unprecedented possibility that journalism begins to move towards its modern form. However, the reproduction of writing through the press intensified a linear configuration of perception (McLuhan, 1972) that, from Flusser's perspective (2013, p. 133), reaffirms the continuous plane, establishing causal relationships between events: “[an image] ‘explains’ the scene to the extent that it clearly and distinctly enumerates each isolated symbol”. The texts are even more removed from concrete experience than the images. This position of image and text concerning reality will be fundamental to understanding Gabriela Biló's photograph.

The image intensified by photographic production is a surface on which the gaze circulates and generates another level of mediation between humans and the world. There is, in this conceptualization, a singularity that will dialogue with the theories of the event that will be thematized later. For Flusser (2013, p. 133), images do not eternalize events but replace them with scenes: “Therefore, the line (the ‘text’) does not mean the circumstance directly but the scene of the image, which, in turn, means the ‘concrete circumstance’”. It is as if the images hide, on this surface, the world itself from their receivers, a phenomenon that the author understands as the magical

character of photography. This understanding has been taken into account not only in specific studies on images but also in analyses that understand that society is immersed in an imagistic, imaginative paradigm. According to Souza (2020), our era “thinks through images” because they are suitable only to confirm previously assumed meanings – which, in his view, hinders argumentation and encourages polarization. The image, especially if we consider environments like social media, which privilege its circulation, becomes a mediation of thought because, as Klein and Dias (2021) state, it is from it that the observer sees and shows a fact or an object.

These issues become more complex when photography begins to integrate the informative core of the press. Atilio Avancini (2017), recovering Gisèle Freund’s thought, recalls that the pioneering photojournalist recognized that the image is a type of “false vision” of the world. However, without neglecting what the author calls the “other side of photography” (Avancini, 2017, p. 243), that is, the “window that opens to the world – universal language and document of memory to reveal man to man”. Between these two dimensions – of falsification and the positivist window –, the commercial production conditions of journalism transform the photographic perception of the event as more important than the fact itself. In this movement, “the hegemonic media is commercially concerned with the interplay between news, social violence, ordinary vision transformed into extraordinary, and the disjunctions of society”. For Lambert (1986), the image of the press will draw the event according to the rules of representation, becoming, itself the fact to be disseminated. The implications involved in this issue are contained in the case of *Folha de S.Paulo* that we have examined.

Tracing a critical history of photojournalism, Jorge Pedro Souza (2000) recalls that, born in a positivist environment, photography came to be seen as the visual record of the truth, a perception that, when incorporated by the press, was reiterated. However, with the emergence of photojournalistic genres, especially the so-called realistic, there is a shift from the idea of something true to something credible. In the late 20th century, images were manipulated to make them credible. Even so, there is the rise of photodocumentarism, more concerned with the idea of recording, which takes precedence over aesthetics. In contrast, the idea of the photographer as an artist, author, and original creator is born. “From this point, the idea of the social construction of reality quickly became incorporated into

photojournalism, in line with the view of the time, a process that is partly fueled by the action of the media”, points out Souza. “But this was also the starting line for the photojournalistic interpretation of reality, partly because the perceptions of it are dissonant from reality itself and, in this sense, are always a kind of fiction” (Souza, 2000, p. 14). In this complex tangle that increases the tension between representation and creation, Souza (2000, p. 15) understands that the photographer creators legitimize themselves,

viewing themselves as participants in a game that has long ceased to be a mere game of mirrors, leading to a much more elaborate and complex game of worlds of signs and codes, language and culture, ideology and myths, history and traditions, contradictions, and conventions.

By understanding that images are sources of historical information, Kossoy (2000) also problematizes the specular attribute of photography, to the extent that they are the product of the photographer’s manipulation of the apparatus based on their intentions, to capture, in this process, the reality they observe and, precisely because of this, interfere. “Its informative character can only be achieved with the connection and deciphering of its symbolic elements in the historical context in which the photograph represents” (Meirinho De Souza, 2009). Thus, the inherent reality of photography is not the reality that surrounds the recorded object but a second reality, of a documentary and representational nature, with all the ambiguities inherent in processes of this order.

### **3 Photography in the web of sign possibilities**

From a semiotic perspective, thinking of the photographic image as carrying undeniable referentiality also encounters some complicating factors. In the tradition of C.S. Peirce (1977), the sign is something that occupies the place of another. By establishing representation through this condition, the sign produces another sign when it affects a mind, in connection with the represented object. This is a triadic relationship in which the sign is a first, associated with a second (object), and produces a third (interpretant). The interpretant, as a sign, produces other interpretants in a potentially infinite progression, always concerning the same object or set of objects, a movement that Peirce designates as semiosis: the action of the sign.

Peirce produced an extensive classification of signs, anchored in the phenomenological categories that underlie his entire philosophical architecture, known as firstness, secondness, and thirdness. These correspond to sufficiently general modes of how minds perceive and decode phenomena in the world. The first category refers to an immediate present, things in themselves, without a relationship with the past or future: something like pure quality, elusive, that cannot be grasped in its immediacy. This category configures signs that function as such due to their positive qualities, such as the color red, independent of the materiality that conveys it. The vagueness of the represented object, the red itself, produces as an interpretant what Peirce calls the quality of feeling. It is in this dimension that pure icons spread, later transmuting into signs in which aesthetics predominates, such as those composed of images or sounds.

In the second category, there is no longer the immediate totality of consciousness, but a world that is divided with what Peirce calls brute force. A binary distinction is outlined: action and reaction. In one of his elaborations on secondness, the author defines reality as something that insists and forces us to recognize “another different from the spirit” (Peirce, 1974, p. 96). The world of secondness is, therefore, the world of events as discriminatory forces (Henn, 2010). It is from this world that signs emerge, functioning as such by designating singular, concrete objects that have an indexical connection to the objects.

Signs, in their everyday functionality, are never exclusively first, second, or third. Some aspects of the categories become prominent, depending on the communicative function that becomes a priority (Jakobson, 1975). At the same time, Peirce projected degenerate forms of signs within the categories or between them. A figurative image, for example, approaches firstness by representing its object based on analogical qualities. But to the extent that the image evokes a recognizable object with a singular existence, the dimension of secondness overlaps. On the other hand, any material image may be governed by codifications, making it conventional in its mode of representation: the dimension of thirdness imposes itself.

Peirce understood that secondness will always have elements of firstness and that thirdness will equally contain secondness and thirdness. To the extent that our thought is already inscribed at the third level, either because a sign will always intervene between

the first and second dimensions or because every sign is already inscribed at some level of codification, we will repeatedly deal with degenerate forms of the categories (Fragoso et al., 2008).

The photographic image became notable for its exuberant indexical character: the visible world offering itself to the photochemical capture of a machine. But it is also an icon because it allows the representation of the photographed object based on formal analogies. On the other hand, it has symbolic elements of different orders. The main one resides in its originating codification, that is, the central perspective, matured during the Renaissance, around which the image is organized. Arlindo Machado (1984) identifies in this historical formulation of perspective the ideological deconstruction of transparency or specular neutrality associated with photography (and Journalism, especially in the physiognomy it assumes from the 19th century onwards). The author assumes that wherever there is a code, a constructive aspect of reality is instituted, even though its action, in the sense of Peircean secondness, is predominant. Not to mention the framing of choices regarding what is portrayed and, in the case of photojournalism, editorial criteria that favor certain images over others, aside from the activated diagrammatic hierarchies. And since signs only function as such in a semiotic process, the possibilities of meaning would not be exhausted in definitive referentiality.

Therefore, based on this semiotic conception, it is appropriate to discuss the question proposed in the introduction: do unequivocal images exist? However denotative they may seem to be, photographic images also open themselves to interpretations when captured by the senses. Flusser (1997, n.p., our translation) calls this process scanning.

[...] the eye has a certain autonomy and can follow its own path. It is for this reason that the message contained in an image is necessarily connotative. An image can be interpreted by each receiver in its own way. This, of course, has the advantage that the message becomes full of meaning, but the disadvantage is that the message is never clear and distinct. It is always, to some extent, confusing. [...] The eye can return to any element of the image at any time. Thus, the diachronization of the synchronicity of the image is circular.

Precisely, the text (and the photographic image can be understood as a text) carries multiple writings and cultures, but this multiplicity does not come together in the author, but rather in the listener, the reader, says Barthes (2004, p. 5); that is where all of them are inscribed: "the unity of a text is not in its origin but in its destination". The production of interpretants, in which meanings are

configured, despite having a connection with objects mediated by signs, will always contain a margin of indeterminacy.

For post-structuralist philosophy, no essence dictates what a thing is to the extent that it is possible to have a closure preventing interpretations about this thing. Deleuze radicalizes this assumption by indicating that there is no inherent meaning in something; every meaning is created, and imposed, by the interpreter. There is no event or phenomenon without multiple meanings: anything can be this or that, depending on the forces that take hold of this thing. “A thing has all the more meaning as there are forces capable of seizing it” (Deleuze, 2001, p. 10).

Initially, imagining that different eyes are capable of traversing different paths and, from this, interpreting the image in their own way suggests an idea of autonomy for the viewer, as if it were possible to choose how to take possession of a thing or an image. However, the multiplicity of apprehension of an object is not synonymous with total permission for free creation – which, in the extreme, could even be independent of the thing to be interpreted.

[...] saying that there are no facts but only interpretations means, certainly, saying that those that appear to us as facts are the effect of interpretation, but not that each possible interpretation produces something that, in the light of successive interpretations, we are obliged to consider as if it were a fact. (Eco, 1998, p. 47).

Furthermore, an image, by itself, can suggest reading paths so seductive that it is not possible to deviate from them without prior notice. For Barthes (1984), even though the denotative force of the photographic image prevails, what the author understood as *studium* and *punctum* comes into play in the process of decoding. The first involves cognitive work of recognizing the elements present in the image, such as characters, scenarios, and contexts. This work requires the viewer to have historical knowledge or a repertoire. Jaqueline Schiavoni (2017), analyzing other photos published by Estadão's competition, in the case of the military ceremony led by Dilma, understands that there was a predominance of *studium* in them, characterized by a “medium affection” of the public, circumscribed to a referential immanence.

Everything indicates that the reader, in general, glanced through the page and did not have more than a “vague”, “uniform”, and “irresponsible” interest in the other images - to cite some of the terms that Barthes uses to describe his feeling about images endowed only with *studium*. (Schiavoni, 2017, p. 174).

However, there are photographs that, by transcending protocol constraints, cause the reader to be effectively touched by the image, an effect that Barthes called *punctum*. “In contact with an image, the reader can be emotionally awakened by any element of the photograph and feel intensely moved – in joy or pain” (Schiavoni, 2017, p. 175). Barthes said that this second element is independent of the subject’s search. “It is the one that departs from the scene like an arrow and comes to pierce me” (Barthes, 1984, p. 46). This Barthesian idea is as if it were on the interface between the iconic dimension of the image, provided with what Peirce understood as “quality of feeling”, by an indexical force that is at the core of its indexical nature – and the affectation of the event, as Quéré (2005) postulates, but mobilized precisely by its iconic power.

According to Barthes, *punctum* is something absolutely personal, that is, it depends solely and exclusively on the subjectivity of the reader who observes the image. However, we believe that some conditions can ‘predispose’ or ‘trigger’, so to speak, this emotional sense in the subject. Otherwise, the other photos published about the event in Rio de Janeiro would also have been commented on, even if in smaller quantity or ardor, but still commented on with some affection – after all, it is the same event, the same characters, and the same scenario. But that did not happen. (Schiavoni, 2017, p. 177).

The sign production is permeated by the expectation of reception. Even if this intention is not sovereign and is subject to variations in the interpreting mind, the sign is not self-absorbed: it is made for (the idea one has of) someone or for an interpreting community. Eco says that “[...] every text is a lazy machine asking the reader to be part of its work” (1994, p. 9). This is also what can be thought of as the imagetic sign: there is intention.

The image with the multiple exposure technique on the cover of *Folha* will have these virtual intentions updated – “will make sense” – when consumed: 1) by showing that the news the photo seeks to illustrate is about the President of the Republic it portrays; 2) by relating the attacks on January 8 to the work that Lula would have at the beginning of his term; and, 3) no less important, by creating a shocking image to attract attention and circulate through networks based on the contained controversy.

Given these considerations, speculation arises: did *Folha* intend to make the portrayal of the event bigger than the event itself portrayed on that Thursday?

## 4 Event

The image printed by Folha embodies the problems raised by the complex relationship between the event and journalistic mediation. If our access to the world occurs through the undeniable mediation of signs, it is in this way that events affect us – even if we have direct contact with them, at the level of what Peirce understood as secondness. There will always be an interpretive layer that is already present in our perception devices (Henn, 2022). Erving Goffman (2006) postulates that when an individual recognizes a particular event, frames of reference or interpretative schemes are activated in their mind, which are also referred to as frames. “They are the result of social processes and promote interpretive directions: we give meaning to things through the action of these frames, which are diverse and can generate even antagonistic meanings for the same event” (Henn, 2022, p. 7).

Thus, the event can receive distinct, and even distorted, translations. These dynamics, evidently, are part of the journalistic activity, in its institutional and business endeavor to mediate between events and society. It is postulated that there is a subtle difference between what is designated as reality and what is understood as real. Reality would correspond to what is given to us from the world (the absolute realm of Peircean secondness). In this sense, events would be in the realm of reality. They emerge from the natural, social, political, and cultural world: in some way, they affect us. A fact of the world that is perceptible, and as it affects us, we give meaning to it. And it is in this elaboration between the impact of reality on our lives and the way we attribute meanings, giving significance to this reality, that the possibility of access to the real is configured, which exists independently of our mind and transitions between firstness and secondness. In other words, the real only becomes possible through the reality constructed by us<sup>9</sup>. Considering that we are subjects of language, automatically, we give meaning to all things that affect us, that mobilize us, both on the physical and symbolic levels.

This operation has an important semiotic foundation: to the extent that there is a process of construction, there can be a difference between things themselves and how we represent and interpret these things. The sign is always something that represents another but is different from that other thing, including what forms photographic images – a basic principle of semiotics that underlies the



entire idea of language. Journalism is one of the socially constituted instances that perform this operation of reality construction. This does not mean that things are necessarily false. On the other hand, not everything offered by these framings can be received as absolute truths. At the same time, framing reality does not necessarily mean being fallacious about reality; this points to another process.

It is in these operations of translation and framing that the fact is configured. If we consider the event located in the logical place of the dynamic object, it presents itself to the experience from this connection. Through it, it is translated into signs and establishes possibilities of meaning, which broaden the experience itself: when converted into a sign, the event becomes a fact. (Henn, 2022, p. 9).

Maurice Mouillaud (2002) understands that the fact is configured as the shadow of the event and, in the same way, functions as a device that gives it meaning. For him, the fact is the universal paradigm that allows describing the event. "Events explode on the surface of the media on which they are inscribed, like on a sensitive membrane. But it resonates with the meanings inscribed on it" (Mouillaud, 2002, p. 50). Thus, the fact is established, projecting the event. Lúcia Santaella (2020), reflecting on the phenomenon of fake news, recalls the lesson contained in Michelangelo Antonioni's movie *Blow Up* (1966), which dialogues with the perspective proposed here.

In the movie, casually strolling through a park, a photographer, in the act of his function, takes a photo. The narrative revolves around the attempt, bordering on violence, to make him hand over or destroy the negative of the photo. The developed photo then underwent a process of enlargement (blow-up) until it was able to expose the existence of a crime. Therefore, one of the great lessons of the film is to reveal, along with the photo, the fact that, without the record, the event would not exist, or at least would remain concealed. (Santaella, 2020, p. 12).

For Quéré (2005), the event has an inaugural component and stores within itself its own possibility of meanings; therefore, the event becomes a revealing device, as it produces affectations in its propagation. The image by Gabriela Biló, in itself, through the repercussion it caused, ascended to the status of news and projected a multitude of possible meanings about the tumultuous early months of 2023. From this, the photo published by *Folha* became an event in itself.

## 5 Intent and responsibility, tension and irresponsibility

If we look again at the cover of *Folha de S.Paulo*, making an effort to suspend the information brought up to this point and focusing only on the impact caused by the image, we will notice that with or without montage, this crack in the glass is at the height of Lula's chest, in a lethal location. We can roam our eyes and notice his smile, his hand adjusting the tie, and his well-fitted suit, and then understand some tranquility, but still, the crack remains at the height of his chest. When scanning the rest of the cover, we realize that the headline does not explain the image next to it. The supporting text below the headline is not dependent on the image.

If we do not know that it is a montage, we immediately believe that Lula is behind the pierced glass – even though this snapshot was not captured by the camera, it is a photograph that does not seem unlikely. Even if it were not a montage, the crack would still be at chest height. The angle of this hypothetical non-montage photograph would already be suggesting the search for the hole at chest height. It is only possible to understand that it is not a single snapshot when reading the information below it. Only then, in relation to the image, do we have an explanation that tries to deny the appearance of the most prominent element in the scene: the photograph.

Anchored in the image, information about multiple exposure occurs after the immediate shock caused by the image, which is at the level of secondness. However, the explanation will only be sought if one wants to discover something more in what the image appears to be; if one wants to go beyond the element chosen by *Folha* to sell its product – the cover image. If there were no multiple exposure in the photograph, would the image be less criticized? Or less open to criticism? Possibly, the criticism could not use the term montage, which carries the weight of possibly deep manipulation of the image, but the choice of the hypothetical angle would be open to criticism for the same reasons. The meaning suggested by the hypothetical photographer – that the Planalto resists despite the attacks – would be the same. The intention would be the same. The divergent reading, interpreting Lula as a target, would still be possible.

The problem, we can then think, would not be in the montage itself but in choosing an image constructed through montage with the potential to incite violence to be on the cover of a newspaper at a time when photo tempering is used as a form of political, semiotic, and

moral dispute. The press seeks to legitimize itself as the place where facts, amidst so many deceptions and lies, would be guaranteed; its detachment and impartiality would ensure credibility in the face of so much self-interested information circulating in other media. There is also a shock because of what is found in a place where one would expect moderation and conviction amidst so much sensationalist and exaggerated information. If, in the largest showcase of the Brazilian print media, there is no pursuit of some pillars of journalism and informational ethics, campaigns against barbarism are useless.

On November 1, 2022, Folha announced that it would return to its traditional motto: “A newspaper in service of Brazil”, which had been used since 1961. On June 28, 2020, the slogan was temporarily changed to “A newspaper in service of democracy”; there, an advertising campaign began to praise the government system preferred by 73% of Brazilians, seeking to refer to the Diretas Já campaign, which Folha de S.Paulo claims to have led in the name of democracy and individual freedoms in the 1980s<sup>10</sup>. Just like a photograph, a motto, and its respective change also function as signs that concentrate intention, context, and reading expectations. In light of this, we can inquire about the meanings that emerge from this operation.

In the role of a sign, the revival of the motto raises some speculations. The newspaper that was “at the service of democracy” returned to being “at the service of Brazil” immediately after the election which chose Lula as President of the Republic. Does democracy no longer matter with the new president? Was November 1st chosen because it is the eve of All Souls’ Day – the national mourning holiday? Is Folha in mourning? And what Brazil is that for which the newspaper is at its service? The one interested in the photo with the cracked glass on Lula’s chest? The one that wants the president to be targeted?

Even though they might “make some sense” due to contextual elements, the insinuations above are deliberately unfounded: precisely because an interpretation is not free – what guides it is the author’s intention; not everything can be said. Eco (1994) understands that there is a reader model anticipated by the author. The reader can complete the raw material of the text – what is said and what is not said. This interaction does not occur in the text itself but in the reading – based on an intention. The author’s intention can be captured from what he envisions as the reader model: a set of reading

instructions that will guide interpretation. Pugliatti (1989, pp. 5-6, as cited in Eco, 1994, p. 22) says: “Created with the text – and trapped in it –, reader models enjoy only the freedom that the text grants them”. We take the liberty of extending these considerations about the interpretation of a text to the interpretation of an image.

Did Folha, which, as mentioned at the beginning of this text, perceive that there was an anti-Bolsonaro atmosphere, and did it embrace many of its causes – that is, it caters to this audience, meets this discursive demand –, not have a readership model? Or does it not know its readership? Or does it know enough to be aware that this image would generate repercussions on social media? Or is it also aware of the dynamics of social media, understanding that for an algorithm, there is no negative engagement – a praising share, a depreciative comment, an ironic mention, or a curious click all generate blind metrics that will help spread the content in the same way?

The main question might be to consider whether Folha did not envision a different interpretation from the one Gabriela explained or if it did not anticipate divergence in the interpretation of the image. It is from this authorial and editorial intention that we can reflect on whether, in the ambition for visibility that the cover image seeks, there was concern and responsibility regarding what the chosen product could connote – based on the relationship the newspaper tries to establish with democracy.

Folha can claim that it did not intend to suggest attacks on the president, as the cover image provides an alternative interpretation that supports its initial intention. It would not be possible, therefore, to accuse it of having conspired against democracy – as if it were a ventriloquist controlling puppets that would carry out its commands without revealing the fingerprints of the hands above their heads. However, it could still be held accountable for its second intention, not related to what the image intends to convey but to the repercussions it may have – which is equivalent to winding up a toy that can walk on its own.

As Flusser (2011) says, there was a time when a newspaper would bring an image to illustrate a text; the image was read in relation to the text. For some time now, however, a text exists only if there is an image to justify it; the image is what motivates the text that is next to it – or in tow. In this episode, the image generated several texts about the case: not only in Folha itself but mainly in texts across

other media outlets, all referencing that image. The shock caused by the photograph itself and its nature as a montage partially explains this semiotic dispute; the controversy contained in it and the external environment also encourage the dispute over its meaning.

In the ideal of impartiality, journalists seek to make themselves as invisible as possible to try to bring transparency to what they tell – textually or imagetically – through their devices – technical, artistic, and institutional. Even without this discussion focusing on the materialities of communication, it is possible to perceive the frame of the media, of the medium. As much as *Folha*, Gabriela Biló was attacked on social media for the overlay of images she performed and was called upon to defend the institution responsible for the multiple exposures in which she found herself. A newspaper, which in its modern ideal of the “fourth estate” is the overseer of the other three, is the critical stone ready to be thrown at what happens in the public machine, the glass house of democracy. By granting this authorization, the people expect maximum transparency in the lenses of journalism. However, in this case, the medium became a glass – not for having acted transparently but for having become the target itself; to defend against criticism, the institution used its employee as a shield.

The work of the photojournalist, instead of being translucent, became more opaque, so much so that she had to reveal the photo to the public, “de-black boxing” her technique – multiple exposure – and her intention – capturing the president at ease, even under attack, for he would be shielded, according to her. Her arguments relied more on permissions that photography as an art form would allow – subjective criteria – than on procedures that could be defended based on journalistic deontology – objective foundations that are recognized by the public.

The conversation on social media acted in part as a “fifth estate” and circulated classical ideals of the *ethos* of a profession that has been undergoing significant changes. Communication outlets promote within themselves the image of “guardians of democracy” – historically and currently. The criticisms make it clear, in part, what the public expects from the press and what the press can expect from the “reception”. The mismatch between expectation and action has become a fundamental part of this event.

A linear explanation, provided in a text, is no longer enough after a circular, imagistic sense of secondness has been activated. As

we know, there is no way to “unsee” an image. Once a piece of wood has been thought of as a lever, every piece of wood comes to be seen with this virtual meaning that can be updated for it (Flusser, 2013). It was not enough for the newspaper and the photographer to say that there was no intention to harm the image of the president for the discussion to be closed: this would only close the dispute over the authorial intention but not over editorial responsibility, which is the main attribute expected of a newspaper that positions itself “at the service of Brazil”.

## 6 Other considerations

In this reflection, a problematization of some principles of journalism and, especially, photojournalism has been formulated, at a time when the activity is undergoing a systemic crisis accelerated by processes that accumulate between digital networks and platforms. One of the crucial points of this crisis focuses on the expansion of contemporary misinformation, as the specific materialities of the digital environment and the hyperconnectivity of contemporary systems have given an unprecedented shape to the problem, to the point of being identified as a trigger for an informational disorder (Wardle, 2018). The question that arises in the face of this phenomenon, currently addressed as an infodemic or information pollution (Phillips & Milner, 2021), is what responses journalism could provide. The discussion around the image that *Folha* published on its cover, in a way, provides clues so that, beyond the controversy itself, the issue can be addressed within the complexity inherent to it.

The assumption here is that journalism forms a highly complex system that gains public materiality in the condition of language. Or, better said, journalism is a language system mobilized by codes of various natures. Thinking about journalism from this perspective implies investigating the interstices of the connections established in processes that are usually dynamic. The news and images posted on portals, published on printed pages, or conveyed in audiovisual forms, among other possible formats, constitute the most visible points of this semiotic materiality; within these signs, a universe of relationships, not always visible, acts decisively. This action is driven by a teleological engine activated by what would be the “heart of journalism”: the mediation between events and society

through specific narratives. The photo, on the screen, in the condition of transforming itself into an event, ends up revealing many of these layers and exposes wounds that journalism needs to confront in this critical environment.

## NOTES

- 1 Translation: Folha de S.Paulo. Since 1921. A Newspaper in Service of Brazil. Photo taken with multiple exposures shows Lula adjusting his tie and damaged glass in an attack. Year 102. No. 34.259. Thursday, January 19, 2023. BRL 6.00. In Lula's focus, military presence in the Planalto reaches a record. Until November, there were 1.231 members of the Armed Forces assigned to the Presidency; 13 were dismissed from the Institutional Security Office, a target of suspicion. Subject to criticism from Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (PT) after the attacks on the 8th, the military ended 2022 with a record presence inside the Planalto Palace. According to official data, until November, 1.231 active-duty members of the Armed Forces were requisitioned and assigned to the Presidency. The number is 20% higher than the contingent in November 2018, under Michel Temer (MDB), and reflects Jair Bolsonaro's (PL) strategy of relying on uniformed personnel for various government sectors. Retired military personnel, assigned by the former president even in ministerial leadership roles, are not included. The Planalto Palace dismissed 13 military personnel from the Institutional Security Office, responsible for protecting Lula. Another 40 who worked at the Alvorada Palace had already been dismissed. Politics A4. Former Minister Anderson Torres remains silent during testimony to the Federal Police.
- 2 Olympic champion for the Brazilian volleyball team, attacker Wallace Souza, posted a poll on his Instagram profile asking if "someone would shoot Lula in the face with a shotgun". Retrieved on March 13, 2023, from [www.instagram.com/p/CoHpwOnJtnh/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CoHpwOnJtnh/).
- 3 Retrieved on March 13, 2023, from [www.instagram.com/p/CnmAr-zAUPd/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CnmAr-zAUPd/).
- 4 Translation: Folha de S.Paulo. Since 1921. Thursday, 19. Year 102 No. 34,259. Gabriela Biló/Folhapress. marciatiburi "What does @folhadespaulo intend with this montage? Incite hatred against Lula? Suggest that he be shot in the heart? The person responsible for this montage must be summoned to explain! This

is a criminal montage as it suggests a shot to the heart. The most basic semiotic analysis leaves no doubt. This is a very low form of coupism. #lula". tdgermano "Multiple exposure'. It's not like the photo is behind the window. And they think explaining the technique eases it. Sad". gabriela.bilo "Good morning. I've already been 'summoned' to explain about".

- 4 Retrieved on March 13, 2023, from [www.instagram.com/p/Cnl0exIMLvT/](http://www.instagram.com/p/Cnl0exIMLvT/).
- 6 Translation: yanto\_ "How absurd this cover is! You are suggesting that Lula should be shot, and you know it. You study semiotics, you study how to construct narratives through images, there's no innocence here. This is a crime, and those responsible should be punished immediately. There are no half-words for this. By the way, Bolsonarism only became viable in Brazil after years of anti-PT propaganda done by you and part of the media. Haven't you learned the lesson? The casualties of the pandemic are also your responsibility!" danilovazcurado "How irresponsible the cover is. In a serious moment of an attempted coup, making a cover of this nature is indeed a paper, not a newspaper". bitucassunde "This absolutely tacky and violent montage says a lot about this editorial team! Not to mention the dishonesty with Brazil and Democracy! You always manage to outdo yourselves!"
- 7 Lilia Schwarcz associated "montage" with "fakery" to discuss "visual effects, generally not very truthful". Retrieved on March 13, 2023, from [www.instagram.com/p/CnmWGUrOgey/](http://www.instagram.com/p/CnmWGUrOgey/).
- 8 Retrieved on March 13, 2023, from [www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2023/01/foto-de-lula-com-vidro-trincado-mostra-que-planalto-resiste-apos-barbarie-em-brasilia.shtml](http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2023/01/foto-de-lula-com-vidro-trincado-mostra-que-planalto-resiste-apos-barbarie-em-brasilia.shtml).
- 9 For Peirce (1977, p. 319-320), "the real is that which is not and that we may eventually think about it, but that is not affected by what we may think about it (...). Something outside the mind, which directly influences sensation and, through sensation, thought, because it is outside the mind, is independent of how we think about it and is, in short, the real. This is a conception of reality".
- 10 Retrieved on March 14, 2023, from [www1.folha.uol.com.br/opiniao/2020/06/democracia-nunca-menos.shtml](http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/opiniao/2020/06/democracia-nunca-menos.shtml).
- 11 According to Vilém Flusser (2011), technical images give the



impression of objectivity, as if there were no coding within the complex formed by the apparatus + photographer; by perceiving only one input (the captured image) and one output (the meaning), this undeciphered process would be a “black box”.

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