

Art And Print Culture In Brazil's 2018 Elections: Spaces Of Democracy In The Age Of Media Politics

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Abstract: *A young democracy, a little more than a hundred years old, Brazil went through a re-democratization process since 1985, when presidential elections first took place again after a period of 21 years under a military regime, initiated in the 1960s (1964-1985). Last October 2018, a very polarized and divided country decided its future presidency and government in an election whose new mediatic forces and strategies were absolutely new and overpowering.*

Our aim is to present and discuss the roles of art and print culture in the 2018 presidential elections. Using examples from the expected "correct" uses of printed photos and digitized data which were nonetheless employed in the fabrication of widely spread manipulated visual (mis)information – such as doctored photos and all kinds of technologically "artistic" fake news, we'll discuss how part of this new form of political campaign was to a large extent based on the very fabrication of images (mediatically spread by the millions to individual voters), themselves used or misused as a main resource in defining the future of the world's "fourth-largest democracy": which would end up choosing based on technologically enhanced and constructed images – and thus electing, in fact, a mostly unknown and far-right populist, in the country's biggest political shift since the end of its military dictatorship period.

In the intercurrent, we'll explore the space opened by the arts in such a scenario, and the whole new agendas and democratic means that were quickly created and developed in this socio-political context, in the struggle for the defense of freedom of expression, democratic participation, inclusion, solidarity and the extension of human rights values through artistic and cultural empowerment – constituting a fierce and strong tool in a new and specific information society based, to a large extent, on shallow information and "realities" built on doctored, falsified and oversimplified images.

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Elizabeth L. Eisenstein described the advent of printing (referring to post-Gutenberg developments in the West) as a powerful agent of change and a communications revolution in the fifteenth century that would bring decisive implications in western culture and civilization in early modern times, from the Renaissance and Reformation to the rise of modern science. Printing, according to her, "altered methods of data collection, storage and retrieval systems, and communications networks used by learned communities throughout Europe" (EISENSTEIN, 1993)¹.

As the reproduction of written materials shifted from the manuscript book on the copyist's desk to the printer's workshop, all forms of learning and enterprises (economic, philosophic, artistic, political, etc.) were subsequently influenced and impacted by the great and novel power of the printing press. From the early celebrated printed Bibles and its many translations, calendars and indulgences, an early pharmacopeia, reference guides, manuals, accountancy books, etiquette and cookbooks for women, followed by the spread of literacy and a continuous path from retail to a wholesale industry, print culture allowed for a whole new distribution and consumption of printed products, promoting deep changes and new mental habits. Not only written texts, but also images (previously used as mnemonic devices, whether replacing them or not) were spread in this new print culture, reinforcing existing tendencies and values.

In this presentation we aim at discussing specific roles of print culture, written and imagetic, in the 2018 presidential elections in Brazil. In our age of widespread technological access, as we'll see, a very young

¹ Preface to *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, 1993, xiv.

democracy² - a little more than a hundred years old, has drastically decided its future led, to a great extent, to brand new political experiments in media culture, based on information society's high tech print culture.

Quoting Eisenstein (1993),

*Because very old messages affected the uses to which new medium was put and because the difference between transmission by hand copying and by means of print cannot be seen without mentally traversing many centuries, I have had to be (...) elastic with chronological limits.*³

we will make use of a brief socio-historic perspective, whenever necessary, to understand the range of certain social meanings and values associated with Brazilian past and present.

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A former colony of Portuguese rule in colonial times, Brazil has lived most of its "civilized" life as a monarchy (1500 - 1889). Following seven decades as a republic under a democratic regime, the country went through a re-democratization process starting in 1985, when presidential elections first took place again after a period of 21 years under a military regime initiated in the 1960s (1964-1985). After the succession of four general elections won by the Workers' Party (PT), a series of coalitions and the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, in 2016, a very polarized and divided country chose its future presidency and government last October 2018, in an election process whose new mediatic forces and strategies were absolutely new and overpowering.

Our aim in this exposition is to briefly present and discuss the roles of both art and print culture in the 2018 elections. Using examples from the expected "true" uses of printed photos and digitized data which were nonetheless employed in the fabrication of widely spread manipulated visual (mis)information – such as doctored photos and all kinds of technologically "artistic" fake news, we'll discuss how part of this new form of political campaign was to a large extent based on the very fabrication of images (mediatically spread by the millions to individual voters), themselves used or misused as a main resource in defining the future of the world's "fourth-largest democracy": which would end up voting based on technologically enhanced and constructed images – and thus electing, in fact, a mostly unknown and far-right populist, in the country's biggest political shift since the end of the military dictatorship period.

In the countercurrent, we'll explore the space opened by local and national artists in such a scenario, and the whole new agendas and means that were quickly created and developed (whether individually or collectively) in such a socio-political context, in the struggle for the defense of freedom of expression, democratic participation, inclusion, solidarity and the extension of human rights values through artistic and cultural empowerment – which constitute a fierce and strong tool in our new and specific information society based, to a large extent, on shallow information and "realities" built on doctored, falsified and oversimplified images.

A mediatic election

Brazilian 2018 presidential election, set in two rounds, was marked by an unprecedented and massive use of print messages and media technology. Also called "the zap election", it was decided in a context in which thousands of doctored images, memes and imaged fake news of all kinds were deliberately spread to millions of people in the country, mostly by Whatsapp, by media companies hired to massively deceive and induce voters.

As the leading presidential candidate, Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, sat in jail and was barred from running for office, Jair Bolsonaro, an explosive right-wing candidate from a minor party, rose on the polls, amid a scenario of severe corruption accusations and investigations. While the vast majority of deputies named in *Lava Jato* investigations ("Car Wash Operation") ran for reelection, social media ran a decisive role in the country's electoral outcome.

As former president Lula's party (Partido dos Trabalhadores - PT), the Workers' Party, due to his incarceration, supported a new leftwing candidate - Fernando Haddad, former São Paulo mayor and a university professor, controversial and far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro rose as what was often seen in comparisons as something like "the Donald Trump of the tropics". Though denying links to Steve Bannon (in a partnership publicly announced by one of the candidate's own sons, who published pictures of their meeting on social media), and stating to have no means to pay for such a campaign strategist, Bolsonaro seemed to clearly imitate Trump's strategies. According to Brian Winter, editor-in-chief of *Americas Quarterly*,

² After the colonial period ruled by the Portuguese Crown, Brazil became a republic in the year 1889.

³ *Idem*, xiii.

Bolsonaro was “openly copying aspects of the Trump strategy” and (Winter) believed it could prove a winning formula. “Donald Trump got elected saying that crime in the inner-cities was out of control, that the economy was a disaster and that the entire political class was corrupt ... All three of those things are indisputably true in Brazil. So if Trump could get elected, imagine what is possible in a country like Brazil right now.”⁴

In an extremely polarized election scenario, fraught with political and economic crisis and several complex and difficult questions, in a terribly violent country in which a rising figure of over sixty thousand people are murdered every year⁵ (most of them poor and black, living in urban slums) alongside an exponential raise in the number of (alarmingly under-reported) rapes among women/ girls⁶ and hate crimes tied to gender, the former army captain and current president in office was named and considered by part of his electorate as “the Legend”, due in part to a recurrent and sardonic publicly demeaning of women, African-Brazilians (and black people in general), native indigenous and black (*quilombola*) communities, LGBT people, foreigners/immigrants, and human rights defenders and leftwing “marxists” in general. In order to put the country back on its tracks again, recurring to conservatism in all areas of life, the far-right candidate was thus viewed as a man “with a strong hand and pulse”, who advocated for gun support, discipline, male superiority and even torture and dictatorship, claiming to be able to definitely banish corruption, crime and crooks from the nation.

His stronger opponent, on the other hand, was a candidate coming from a leftwing party that had been slowly shifting to center, involved in intricate coalitions, that had had its last president impeached and the former one imprisoned in highly controversial trials; a party much discredited, long and consistently attacked by mainstream television and print media, defending minorities and proposing a much more progressive agenda.

In this difficult and polarized context, in a vast and unprecedented laboratory of marketing experimentation and technological manipulation, print culture was strategically (mis)used as the great and shiny bait aimed at unsuspecting citizens, mostly conservative or alienated voters who were extraordinarily duped with millions of virtually shared fake news, customized and fabricated especially for electoral means. In that sense, Teodoro draws a close parallel between such a profile and Steve Bannon’s spread of misogynist, racist and xenophobic contents as well as fake news:

“Cambridge Analytica had access to Facebook data from millions of users’ accounts all over the world. All kinds of data stored by Facebook: likes, comments, private messages. Owning such information, through the use of algorithms, this company could establish detailed individual psychological profiles (...) which were used to find which people would be more susceptible to believe in conspiracy theories (...) and thus change their behavior”. (TEODORO, 2018).

In a context of a “cultural” battle of “education versus gun power” (a professor versus a military), “gender variations versus family values and decency”, “poverty versus vagrants”, “liberated women versus abortion”, “God above all, versus society’s evils - usually seen in sexual undertones” and the like, the villains “cultural Marxism”, “communists”, leftwing supporters, educators and (progressive) artists were picked and specially blamed for supporting and spreading a sort of diseased cultural depravity that had its apex in the so-named “gender ideology”, possibly the strongest among the dissolute, great “sins” that helped in fact to elect a “legend” president.

Tardáguila, Benevenuto and Ortellado warned, in October 2018, of a poll revealing that 44 percent of voters in Brazil used WhatsApp to read political and electoral information. Even more alarming, PASQUINI (2018) revealed in *Folha de São Paulo*, one of the country’s main newspapers, that a study found that 90% of Bolsonaro’s voters believed in fake news. While Facebook and Google were to a small extent able to debunk falsified, fake or maliciously misleading videos, links and images, WhatsApp, based on hard to verify encrypted personal conversations and chat groups, was used to disseminate dirty campaigns:

⁴ Quoted in Phillips, 2018.

⁵ A total 61,597 homicides were registered in 2016, after several years below 60,000.

⁶ 22.918 rape crimes were registered in 2016 (about 62 per day, or one every 2-3 hours), 50,9% of which against 13 year-olds or younger victims, according to the *2018 Brazilian Atlas of Violence*. See rates and figures at <http://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/geral/noticia/2018-06/atlas-da-violencia-2018-50-das-vitimas-de-estupro-tinham-ate-13-anos>

It is difficult to establish to what extent these misinformation campaigns are affiliated with political parties or candidates, but their tactics are clear: They rely on a combined pyramid and network strategy in which producers create malicious content and broadcast it to regional and local activists, who then spread the messages widely to public and private groups. From there, the messages travel even further as they are forwarded on by believing individuals to their own contacts. (TARDÁGUILA *et alli*, 2018)

As immediate remedial actions, the authors proposed that the company restricted forwards, limited the number of contacts to whom a user could broadcast (in Brazil, a WhatsApp user is allowed to send a single message to up to 256 contacts at once, which implies that a small, coordinated group can easily feed a large-scale disinformation campaign), and limited the size of new groups – all of which were not taken, allegedly due to lack of time⁷.

Concerning the contents of these malicious messages, there were all kinds of topics and distortions⁸. False news spread by Fernando Haddad's and PT's supporters tended to exaggerate data, distorting Jair Bolsonaro's positions on taxes and the minimum wage, or promoting conspiracy theories (right after he was stabbed on Sept. 6, one could find "shared pictures of the candidate entering a hospital smiling, suggesting he had staged the attack. The image, however, was taken before the stabbing". Bolsonaro's supporters, on their turn, would share images portraying politicians, even those from the center-right, as "communists":

The most widely shared image from our sample was a black-and-white photo of Fidel Castro and a young woman. The description accompanying the picture claims the woman is former President Dilma Rousseff, and the text accompanying it suggests Ms. Rousseff was Castro's pupil, a "socialist student." The young woman in the photo, however, is not Ms. Rousseff. The picture was taken in the United States in April 1959, when Ms. Rousseff was only 11. Yet such images are effective in smearing Ms. Rousseff and the Workers' Party — of which Mr. Haddad is a member — in a country where there is much antipathy to communism among the middle class. (IBIDEM)

But the images in the messages go way beyond these aforementioned. In a rough presentation, one could easily point the following⁹: Very short text signs, bearing quotations or impact phrases; Comparative charts; objective data and information; Graphs, tables, statistics; Cartoons and comic strips by little known or renowned artists; Caricatures, memes; mixed photograph-drawing montages; Pictures with sayings or quotations superposed; Short videos I: excerpts of foreign or national news programs; intellectuals' interviews; testimonies; official political propaganda; street scenes; Short videos II: songs, illustrated with images.

A list of recurrent themes includes, but is not restricted to: Election: Political debate (lack of)¹⁰; Teaching, education; bullets versus books; Hitler; Nazi regime; torture; violence; nepotism; Solidarity; inclusion; vulnerable communities; human rights; (Pope Francis); Military repression; Brazilian dictatorship; victims' testimonies; Women's rights; misogyny; domestic violence and rape laws; feminism; (e.g. Simone de Beauvoir); Brazilian flag and national symbols, venerated, damaged or spoiled; Art and artists; celebrities' testimonies; art as resistance; culture legislation; Specific attacks: offense to Haddad's family; ex-president Dilma Rousseff portrayed as stupid, incompetent; Workers' party portrayed as corrupted; feminists portrayed as dirty; Barbie dolls, associated with white upper and middle classes/ privileged class; Religion: Jesus Christ's blessings; religion attacked; human devils; "wicked" religions; (mostly African-Brazilian); PT: thieves and corrupted; free Lula; Lula in prison/ robber/ liar/ corrupted; Racism (e.g. Martin Luther King); equality; Pink Floyd; Roger Waters' show in Brazil; U2 show's mentioning Bolsonaro among Duterte, Trump and others; Family and friends disagreements due to the elections; Gender issues; LGBT and violence; gay-kit; erotic bottles; Violence; gun control or support; state violence; human rights defending criminals; Activist Marielle Franco (previously assassinated, inconclusive investigations); Environment; Amazon forest; hunting license; Indigenous people;

⁷ According to the authors, "This year, after the dissemination of rumors on WhatsApp provoked lynchings in India, the company put restrictions on the number of times that a message could be forwarded. Globally, the number of forwards was reduced to 20, while in India it was reduced to five. WhatsApp should adopt the same measure in Brazil to limit the reach of disinformation." Likewise, they argued that, "In India, it took only a few days for WhatsApp to start making adjustments. The same is possible in Brazil" (TARDÁGUILA *et alli*, 2018)

⁸ See further examples of fake news in Alessi, 2018.

⁹ Image samples will be shown and discussed in the exposition.

¹⁰ Candidate Bolsonaro did not show up in any of the several debates in the second round.

MST communities; Vandalism; street demonstrations as criminal acts; Doctored photos: naked people or orgies inserted in street manifestations; tattoos and junkie characterization in leftwing candidate Manuela D'Ávila's body images; vampire features in president in office Michel Temer.

In common, they usually possess a very strong visual appeal (except perhaps for some text-only signs) and short written text or data (if any). Comic, frightening, accusing, authoritarian, violent or serious in tone, these files that were spread through WhatsApp could also be light-hearted and strongly positive.

With the advent of print culture, the advent of engraved images became more abundant, tells us Elizabeth Eisenstein. While some (as certain Protestants) assumed that the illiterate should not be given engraved images but rather be taught to read, Protestant propaganda “exploited printed image in no less than printed word – as numerous caricatures and cartoons may suggest” (EISENSTEIN, 1993: 36).

In our own virtual reality age, images (still or in motion, eventually accompanied by music) seem to take over the space previously granted to written text (and logical thought) – reduced, in these our election examples, to a drastically small amount of letters, if any. If printing once eliminated the need of more tangible images – “*Ceci tuera cela*”, says a scholar in Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris*, gazing at his first printed book, “while gazing at the vast cathedral, silhouetted against the starry sky...” (IDEM) – considering the cathedral here in its familiar romantic theme as “an encyclopedia in stone” – if such monuments could be somehow replaced with a figurative engraved image, it is frightening to wonder, in the so-called post-truth political age, what can be eliminated through the massive spread of deliberately misleading fake imagetic news - perhaps the new “books” of the technology versed, yet illiterate.

While it is at the same time astonishing to see the possibilities engendered by the arts and artists in the same context and situation: while all sorts of montage, collages of pictures, texts and artificial images, more or less creative and intelligent, were effusively composed and spread, a significant number of artists turned to the streets – collectively dancing, singing, testifying, talking to people about democracy and political options, shouting for freedom of speech, expression and for equal rights to all. And, with few and honorable truly artistic exceptions, this urgent expression, spread through true, real life videos, could overcome the blurred sea of lies, manipulation and indetermination that have been thoughtfully, artificially imposed to a whole society.

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