

Street art, poetics of mourning and political memory in a semiotic landscape in São Paulo, Brazil

Arte urbana, poética de luto e memória política em uma paisagem semiótica em São Paulo

Arte urbano, poéticas del luto y memoria política en un paisaje semiótico de São Paulo

ABSTRACT

This study reflects on producing an artistic-activist intervention on a public staircase in São Paulo, Brazil, dedicated to honoring Marielle Franco. The action on the public space is meant to assemble an urban semiotic landscape linking social movements advocating for the crime to be solved and denouncing the policies of death directed against peripheral populations. Methodologically, the research undertook an empirical approach, encompassing site visits to the staircase and the compilation of an archival corpus. Theoretically, the text builds a framework of discussions, exploring the concepts of landscape (Jaworski; Thurlow, 2010; Zukin, 1991), monument (García Canclini, 1995), montage (Pignatari, 1981) and heterotopia (Foucault, 1986). The ensuing analysis delves into the following aspects: a) monument as heterotopia and its indexicality of place; b) the pragmatic and visual-spatial montage; c) inscriptions and the confluence of times; d) signs of mourning and political struggle on the monument and in the performance of activists.

Keywords: Marielle Franco Staircase; semiotic landscape; popular memory; collective mourning; heterotopia.



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ARTIGO

RESUMO

A proposta deste estudo é refletir sobre o processo de produção de uma intervenção artístico-ativista em uma escada pública em São Paulo, em homenagem a Marielle Franco. A ação sobre o espaço público é interpretada como a montagem de uma paisagem semiótica urbana que tem vinculação com movimentos sociais que reivindicam a resolução do crime e denunciam as políticas de morte direcionadas contra mulheres e populações periféricas e negras. Metodologicamente, a pesquisa empreendeu um trabalho empírico de visitas à escada e de formação de um corpus documental. Teoricamente, o texto trabalha com noções de paisagem (Jaworski; Thurlow, 2010; Zukin, 1991), monumento (García Canclini, 1995), heterotopia (Foucault, 1986) e montagem (Pignatari, 1981). As análises exploram: a) a relação da paisagem com o ambiente em que se insere por parâmetros de indexicalidade de lugar; b) o processo de produção da paisagem em perspectivas diacrônicas e sincrônicas; c) a confluência de tempos como efeito comunicativo da intervenção urbana e d) as marcas das disputas na materialidade do monumento e nas performances ativistas.

Palavras-chave: Escadão Marielle Franco; paisagem semiótica; memória popular; luto coletivo; heterotopia.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio es reflexionar sobre el proceso de producción de una intervención artístico-activista en una escalera pública de São Paulo, en homenaje a Marielle Franco. La acción en el espacio público se interpreta como el montaje de un paisaje semiótico urbano que se vincula a los movimientos sociales que reivindican la resolución del crimen y denuncian las políticas de muerte dirigidas contra las mujeres y las poblaciones periféricas y negras. Metodológicamente, la investigación emprendió un estudio empírico de las visitas a la escalera y la formación de un corpus documental. Teóricamente, el texto trabaja con las nociones de paisaje (Jaworski; Thurlow, 2010; Zukin, 1991), monumento (García Canclini, 1995), heterotopia (Foucault, 1986) Y montaje (Pignatari, 1981). Los análisis exploran: a) la relación entre el paisaje y su entorno a través de parámetros de la indexicalidad del lugar; b) el proceso de producción del paisaje desde perspectivas diacrónicas y sincrónicas; c) la confluencia de tiempos como efecto comunicativo de la intervención urbana y d) las marcas de las disputas en la materialidad del monumento y las performances activistas.

Palabras clave: escalera Marielle Franco; paisaje semiótico; memoria popular; luto colectivo; heterotopía.

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INTRODUCTION

This article's starting point is the following question: "How can popular memories be inscribed in the urban space?" I address this issue through a reflective analysis of an artistic-activist intervention in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, which is considered here as an urban semiotic landscape: The Marielle Franco Staircase. This is a public staircase appropriated through street art as a kind of "vernacular monument" in honor of the activist and Rio de Janeiro councilwoman tragically murdered in 2018.

The aim of this study is to reflect on the production process of the staircase monument as a semiotic and poetic dimension of the political action of people who are fighting for justice and democracy in contemporary Brazil. The urban intervention on the public staircase is closely related to social movements claiming for the clarification of the crime and the condemnation of the politics of death directed against women, marginalized groups and black people. The main strategy identified in the actions of these movements is to give public visibility to individuals who have been erased from hegemonic social imaginaries. This transformative act serves to redefine the political meaning of "life," similar to movements with larger international impact such as Black Lives Matter.

The tragic murder of Marielle Franco is considered a defining event in Brazil's recent political landscape. Marielle Franco, a black and lesbian human rights activist from the Maré favela complex in Rio de Janeiro, was elected to the city council and was committed to issues of racial justice, public safety, gender and sexuality politics, the rights of marginalized groups and the democratization of political participation. On March 14, 2018, Marielle Franco was fatally shot together with driver Anderson Gomes in downtown Rio de Janeiro. This crime triggered a profound and nationwide wave of popular mobilization. This article contextualizes the intervention actions on the stairs in São Paulo as part of these movements that emerged and evolved in response to Marielle's murder.

This article presents part of the findings from a larger research project aimed at studying the (auto)biographical formations of groups and subjects from the peripheries.¹ Among the selected "life trajectories," Marielle Franco was chosen specifically to explore various forms of collective construction of a biography. Throughout the research process, it became evident that a collective memory about Marielle has been formed mainly by activist and mourning practices, such as inscribing her name, her face, and an idea of a black and marginalized legacy in urban settings.² These reflections on the occupation of the staircase began with a collaborative work that led to a presentation at an event (Palma; Silva, 2023) that focused on the activist achievements in the production of the intervention. After this collaborative phase, I worked individually to interpret these

¹ "Trajectories of peripheral lives: violence between the ordinary and the extraordinary in (auto)biographical narratives and poetics". São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP), Brazil under Grant 2021/02618-8.

² There are several popular and official initiatives for the urban placement of images of Marielle Franco in the form of posters, graffiti, banners and sculptures, as well as the inscription of her name on thoroughfares, squares, libraries and cultural centers.

practices as the creation of spectralities (Palma, 2024). In turn, this text aims to take more nuanced perspectives and explore the ways in which memory is shaped through the construction of urban semiotic landscapes in the actions of activists and artists.

The empirical research for this study was conducted through eight visits to the staircase, which took place between June 2022 and January 2024, to produce photographic and textual documentation (field diary). In addition, a corpus was curated containing images and texts about the staircase published on social media and press publications.

The basis of this article rests primarily on theoretical concepts discussed in the following sections of the article, relating to landscape (including semiotic landscape), monument, heterotopia and montage. The analysis explores the relationship between the landscape and its surroundings, its production process in diachronic and synchronic perspectives, the communicative effects resulting from the clash of temporalities in urban interventions, and the signs of contestation in the materiality of the monument and in activist performances.

1. URBAN SEMIOTIC LANDSCAPE AND POPULAR MONUMENTS

The concept of landscape is a complex notion that has been formulated in disciplines such as geography, art (painting and photography), urbanism and architecture. It has been taken up repeatedly in sociology, history, linguistic and semiotic studies, literature and anthropology. In this study, landscape is understood as a central construct for understanding spatial transformations that are the product of social construction processes.

John Berger (1972) considers the landscape genre in oil painting as part of modern technologies of spatial mediation. Berger contextualizes these landscapes with the historical development of “ways of seeing” that evolve within dynamics structured around power relations. Throughout history, landscapes have played a role in shaping our social perception of spaces, from those that we inhabit on a daily basis to those that are embedded in our collective imagination and memory. The notion of landscape thus encompasses space (or a portion of space) by characterizing physical environments as a stage “for human action and socio-political activity, while at the same time a symbolic system of signifiers with wide-ranging affordances activated by social actors to position themselves and others in that context” (Jaworski; Thurlow, 2010, p. 6).

In the processes of urbanization and city administration, the construction of landscapes is interwoven with the political control of space. This includes the establishment of norms of order, hygiene, safety, traffic and morality as instruments of social discipline—what Michel Foucault (1983) called a pastoral power that lends itself to modern forms of governance—and of the economy, rationalizing territorial occupation through the logic of production and consumption.

Sharon Zukin (1991) describes the landscape as a frame of power that imposes itself on the vernacular. She describes urban landscapes as embodiments of physical materiality interwoven with

an official or hegemonic symbolism of space and characterizes them as “landscapes of power.” The vernacular dimension, on the other hand, corresponds to the influence of the people on the landscapes. The idea refers to the dynamics of culturally diverse social relations affecting the physical urban structure, which the author characterizes as the “expressive vernacular of the powerless” (Zukin, 1991, p. 16). In the semiotic understanding proposed here, the concept of vernacular landscape can be seen as a language through which the dispossessed communicate their relationship to the spaces of power. The vernacular action of the powerless has the capacity to act creatively to reshape grassroots memories of space. Often perceived as an obstacle to socio-economic development and urban order, popular practices oppose the landscapes of power. As a result, the urban landscape becomes a palimpsest of overlapping conflicts and is in constant (re)constitution: elements of vernacular intervention have the capacity to integrate landscapes through appropriation practices (such as “unauthorized” graffiti) or even through involvement in economic and political landscape projects, as in gentrification processes.

The vernacular serves as a critical marker that establishes the distinction between space (in the objectifiable sense) and place (based on the social relations of everyday use and their meaning) and is central to contemporary epistemological currents that re-theorize space and are interested in the “social construction of place and people’s ‘sense of place’” (Jaworski; Thurlow, 2010, p. 7). The proposition of a semiotic landscape would participate in these theoretical movements, moving beyond a mere interest in space to an in-depth exploration of the dynamics of spatialization, which Jaworski and Thurlow define as “the different processes by which space comes to be represented, organized, and experienced” (Jaworski; Thurlow, 2010, p. 7). The idea of “place” is fundamental to creating a sense of multiplicity in space. It enables an understanding that the processes of identity formation and subjectivities (individual and collective) are imbued with our relationship to geographical places, which we know and experience “both sensually and intellectually through semiotic framing and various forms of discursive construction” (Jaworski; Thurlow, 2010, p. 7).

Based on this conceptual framework, my interest in studying the construction of landscapes lies in the endeavor to interpret human action (in the case of this study, human action with distinctly political contours) in spaces as semiotic practices that, in interaction with dominance, produce “discourses in place,” as Scollon & Scollon (2003) put it. The research seeks to observe how the language of politics that has emerged in the activist experience of demanding justice, democracy and equality in contemporary Brazil is anchored in the materiality of the urban social world.

The performances of semiotic and symbolic appropriation of a public space are understood in this study as political activities that create a popular monument of memory in the urban landscape. Monuments, typically seen as landscapes where historical memory is inscribed in public space, are usually located at a level of cultural memory (Assmann, 2008) that is diglossic in nature, more stable and legitimized by institutional action. However, monuments do not have a static function in the urban landscape, as García Canclini (1995) notes when discussing some processes of cultural

transformation in Latin America. Functions and meanings corresponding to modern urban ordinances are constantly transgressed in everyday urban life, so that monuments, as part of this dynamic, enact semantic struggles “between the market, history, the state, advertising, and the people's struggle for survival” (García Canclini, 1995, p. 222). Unlike museum objects, which can be frozen when they are subtracted from their own history, public monuments remain in the flow of urban life.

As “discourses in place” (Scollon; Scollon, 2003), monuments seamlessly integrate with their environment (text and context are indistinguishable), participating in the contradictions and instabilities of everyday life, being “happily exposed to their being inserted into contemporary life by graffiti or a popular demonstration” (García Canclini, 1995, p. 222). In everyday life, the meaning of monuments also works in collaborative regimes beyond physical territories, extending into technological environments: a “circularity of the communicational and the urban” (García Canclini, 1995, p.212) that produces memory of communicative consistency, which is more unstable and formed in social interactions (Assmann, 2008).

Conceptualizing monuments as living social texts, vernacular practices may re-signify sculptures, mausoleums and other types of public works invested with historical character within landscapes of power. However, they can also create what we call “grassroots monuments” (Palma; Silva, 2023), on any physical urban structure. As for the public staircase in São Paulo, activist performances have appropriated and transformed it into a memorial for Marielle Franco. Processes of self-construction are implicated in the production of this type of landscape, understanding that in popular practices of city use, residents “build not only their own houses, but also frequently their neighborhoods... not in isolation... and typically escap[ing] the framing of official planning” (Caldeira, 2017, p. 3). Therefore, self-construction can be understood as popular agency over the functions and meanings of the city and always implies gestures of appropriation and transformation of landscapes of power in vernacular spaces.

The study also recognizes the growing visibility of symbolic and political controversies surrounding public monuments. Movements calling for the destruction or removal from the cityscape of statues that pay homage to figures associated with slavery and colonialism have attracted worldwide attention (Fuentes, 2021). The production of memories of the city's public space is a very important area of contemporary political activism, both through the demand for heritage policies that recognize sites as *lieux de mémoire* that relate to experiences that shape the formation of ethnic identities or experiences of collective trauma, and through the erection of monuments and public tributes, whether through official or popular actions.

2. LANGUAGES, TIME AND PERFORMANCES

Every public monument can be understood as a composition of signs acting on the city, and also as a confluence of temporalities. Thus, for the study of a grassroots monument in the production of a semiotic landscape, I interpret it here as a laminar formation of times, spaces, language modalities and discourses. Theoretical and methodological reflections on this intricate complexity are guided by two concepts: Heterotopia and montage.

Michel Foucault (1986) correlated time to processes of crystallization of versions and space to the flow of transformations and diversifications. Thus, contemporaneity would be the time of space: “We are in the epoch simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed” (Foucault, 1986, p. 22). Complexification based on contemporary transformations in modern society calls for a departure from objectifiable notions and rigid classifications of space. The phenomenology, as in Bachelard ([1958]1994), had understood space as a product of perception and imagination, who points to the poetic dimension of spaces in the formation of memory and subjectivities. Heterotopia emerges as a concept that Foucault developed to think of the space outside individuals as a sphere made up of conflicting multiplicities. The author defines heterotopia as a construct for dealing with spaces “that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (Foucault, 1986, p. 24).

If utopia has no real corporeality (in the material sense), heterotopia has a physical place of concrete existence in the world, capable of embodying utopian (and dystopic) potential. Heterotopias can juxtapose in their composition many times (historical and social) and “other spaces” (absent spaces and time in the present space). Foucault points out that these spatial formations have been present in all cultures around the world and throughout history, but without universal models, but with different characteristics, functionalities and modes of operation that are constantly changing. Heterotopic functioning refers to ruptures with traditional forms of temporality that allow for the accumulation of time (such as in a museum). Heterotopia also provides an understanding of time as a fleeting and precarious aspect of existence, not oriented towards eternity—and this idea of transience can point to a performative force. From Foucault's point of view, heterotopias can serve both exclusion and control as well as radical freedoms. In previous work, I discussed how a spectral dimension—manifesting mainly in the ideas of legacy and ancestry—permeates practices and discourses with peripheral marks in Brazil (Palma, 2024). I thus understand that the heterotopic dynamics in this urban intervention semiotically engage some of these peripheral resistant forces, echoing not only the crime against Marielle, but many of the ghosts of violence and exclusion in Brazil's colonial formation.

The notion of heterotopia helps to think about a space loaded with contradictory features as a grassroots democratic monument created by a peripheral political force on a piece of public space

of social and symbolic centrality. In these considerations, the idea of heterotopia helps to conceptually validate the notion of “place” as a product of popular practices, as it allows space and time to be de-objectified. The staircase monument is understood here as a heterotopic palimpsest capable of juxtaposing “in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault, 1986, p. 25) and presents different times.

To explain this palimpsestic formation of heterotopia, the production of the vernacular monument is understood through the lens of montage, emphasizing the landscape as a semiotic presence in the city and the process of self-construction as the handling of communicative resources by artist-activists and users of public space. The concept of montage can have a broad meaning, encompassing different ways of communicatively affecting the world by assembling fragments, excerpts and elements, which can have different consistencies and origins, through additions and accumulations, juxtapositions or superimpositions. Montage is a system that operates in the regime of parataxis, and Pignatari (1981) points out that it can be thought of at syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels. Texts of any semiotic consistency can simultaneously establish juxtaposition or addition and subordination relations.

Paratactic logics create texts that are constantly evolving, subject to new additions, deletions, exclusions, changes, recompositions, etc. The dynamics of montage open up the possibility of texts that are constantly changing and have a strong performative character. In an attempt to read this urban intervention semiotically as a heterotopic palimpsest, the staircase is seen as a large visual and pragmatic montage on the physical structure of an urban public space.

In this study, the term montage is used not only for the composition resulting from the juxtaposition and superimposition of visual elements on a surface or support, but also for the cultural, social and political process of landscape production, which includes social actors, performances, political poetics, contentious discourses, practices of appropriation and recontextualization. It is worth noting that montage is a very common poetic strategy in street art interventions, which helps to reinforce the sense of authorship (by incorporating the idea of a multiplicity of sources and references) and build the effect of a living text (or a landscape in the making) in the flow of daily life.

Geosemiotics provides a valuable framework with analytical parameters that support the methodological path for this work of reading social action in the semiotic matter of the city: social actor, interaction order, visual semiotics and place semiotics (Scollon; Scollon, 2003). These parameters should run through the analyzes that articulate the semiotic visual layers of the landscape under study (but without being used as schematic labels in interpretive work), such as the urban and social environment in which it is embedded, the subjects represented and involved in the symbolic contestations in the context in question and their political and semiotic performances, and the intersection of discourses in the production of landscape, as in practices of de- and recontextualization (Bauman; Briggs, 1990).

3. CONTEXT AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 The staircase and its environment

Rua Cardeal Arcoverde, on the stretch between Hospital das Clínicas and Avenida Dr. Arnaldo, is a not very wide, one-way street with a large flow of cars and buses, on the western side of São Paulo, Brazil's largest city, home to approximately 11 million inhabitants.² At street level, we see an area of mostly commercial establishments, but if we look up, we can see several old residential buildings that continue to serve as homes. Pinheiros, the neighborhood in which it is located, is predominantly white middle class and offers upscale residential areas, a wide range of services (health, education, popular and luxury stores, financial activities, corporate spaces, etc.), parks, many nightlife options, and a public transport network (it even acts as a hub between the central region of São Paulo and the outlying neighborhoods and municipalities in the western part of the metropolitan region).

Two public staircases connect Rua Cardeal Arcoverde with the higher cross streets, one with Rua Alves Guimarães, the “Escada das Bailarinas (‘Ballerina's staircase’),” and the other with Rua Cristiano Viana, called “Marielle Franco Staircase.” Both were used as street art spaces - a common phenomenon in many public staircases in São Paulo.

The “Marielle Franco Staircase” is a visually striking scene for those walking along Cardeal Arcoverde due to the creative power of the artistic interventions: a large street poster with a black and white photo portrait of a smiling Marielle Franco, colorful graffiti, posters or paintings with inscriptions. It is a zigzag staircase with large, exposed walls and lampposts, flanked by residential buildings. At the bottom of the stairs (next to Cardeal Arcoverde) you can often see mattresses, clothes and other items belonging to homeless people who live there. All these elements, as well as street signs and other items of street equipment (traffic signs, lampposts, power lines, advertising panels etc.), contribute to what, from a Geosemiotics perspective (Scollon; Scollon, 2003), can be considered elements of the indexicality of a place.

Figure 1 - Marielle Franco staircase, seen from Rua Cardeal Arcoverde, São Paulo, Brazil.



Photo taken on January 9, 2024.

The composition of the landscape of the staircase in honor of Marielle Franco in this neighborhood produces an effect that transcends territorial boundaries. It positions the periphery in an urban environment that represents or comes close to central spaces of power in the Brazilian social imaginary. Through this concept of the periphery permeating the center, the staircase, in the form of a popular monument to the memory of the black, lesbian and peripheral activist in the middle of the upscale neighborhood of the great metropolis, acquires a heterotopic force, a sense of place formed by a complex semiotic system with multilayered meanings in constant transformation. In a previous study (Palma, 2024) I dealt with the peripheral force inherent in the monument, expressed in the figure of Marielle (through her face and her name). She is able to project, in the arrangement of street art, the biography of a life trajectory that has been “displaced” from its place of origin (i.e., the activist and councilor from Rio de Janeiro) and that becomes a symbol of a broader meaning of exclusion within a political imaginary of national dimension.

3.2 Marielle's image

The most important element in the staircase landscape is the large street poster with the portrait of Marielle Franco. The image of Marielle's face is not only the central component in the physical arrangement of the monument, but the narrative about this intervention begins with its placement (Globo, 2018). One might think, then, that the portrait is both a temporal indexer of the monument's history and functions as the organizing core of the staircase's visual montage.

Figure 2 - Poster with the portrait. Marielle Franco Staircase, São Paulo, Brazil.

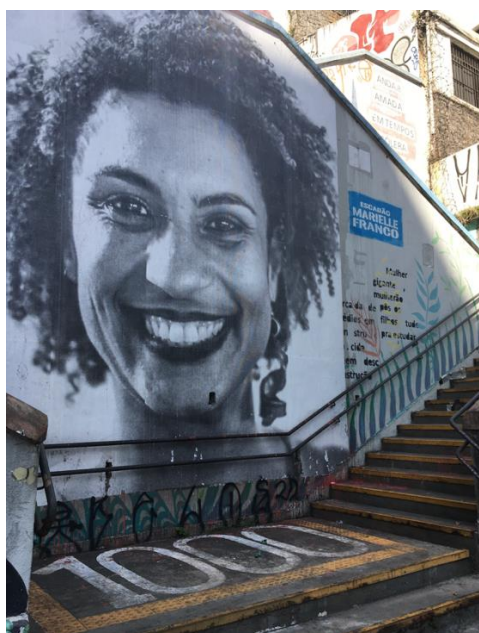


Photo taken on June 21, 2022.

On a pragmatic-diachronic level, the poster with Marielle's image serves as a component of temporal persistence in the staircase montage. The activist intervention in that public space began in 2018, shortly after her tragic murder, and it is narrated with mythical contours. On March 20 of that year, the staircase "dawned" covered by the poster with the portrait, as reported by an activist on a Twitter profile (@luduvico): the political performance without an individual subject of the action (Luduvico, 2019). This narrative formula does not make the subject of the political action explicit and it is reproduced in many accounts of the intervention on this staircase. Anonymity recurrently marks street art practices, putting on stage much more than an individualized social actor, a subject shaped through collective agency, capable of indexing in the urban space both habitus (a multiplicity of habitus, in fact, with peripheral references) and "the sociocultural and sociopolitical structures among which we act" (Scollon; Scollon, 2003, p. 15).

Since its beginnings, the staircase has undergone numerous changes, characterized by a constant process of construction, dismantling and reconstruction, shaken by various disputes—which we will discuss further in this article. The element that remained firmly anchored in the landscape of the staircase through all these changes of configuration was precisely the poster with the portrait. Thus, if it is possible to trace the passage of time in the making of the space through the different configurations of the elements and their arrangements on the staircase, the large face of Marielle, placed on the most visible wall of the building, marks a presence.

This enduring presence encourages the transgression of time and space in the production of meanings through the popular monument. One of the most important meanings I see in relation to the creation of spectralities (Palma, 2024) is the idea of confrontation from the perspective of the viewer of the landscape with the ostentatious appearance of Marielle's face in the midst of the urban

environment. The photographically represented face that appears in the city refers to an absence (the lost body, the dead body) and also establishes an ethics of relation to otherness (the center looks at the periphery). In the visual encounter with the face of another person, we are confronted with the singularity and unconditional humanity of another person (Levinas, [1961] 1979). Since in this case it is a face that refers to a particular life and at the same time symbolizes collectivity and process, this confrontation with otherness can give rise to even more complex meanings (such as the fusion of present, past and future, which will be addressed in the next subsection of the text). I believe this confrontation with a face in the midst of urban circulation can also be thought of in terms of orders of interaction and juxtaposition of visibility and invisibility, as I discussed previously (Palma, 2024). Although this is not a typical situation of direct interaction, the effect of the presence of the photographic portrait in the context of activist practices of mourning allows me to understand this encounter or vision as an event in the “face-to-face domain” (Goffman, 1983, p. 2). The ethical dimensions of the encounter with the figure of otherness, embodied by Marielle's face in the portrait pasted on the public staircase, is imbued with multiple layers of meaning triggered by different orders of non-verbal communication, representation (visual, social, etc.) and interpretation. The production of collective memory is the product of social interactions, as defined by Maurice Halbwachs ([1952]1992), so that a space endowed with memorializing capacities fosters different kinds of contact relations.

On a visual-spatial level, the poster with Marielle's face when you look at the memorial also plays an important role in organizing the syntax of the landscape. The portrait is the organizing core of the vernacular monument around which the various arrangements have gathered over the course of the activist action on the stairs. In the first landscape (2018), the portrait appeared surrounded by graffiti and posters (Luduvico, 2019). The most striking statements in the arrangement of elements on the walls of the staircase were phrases calling for mobilization and against authority figures (politicians, police): “There will be struggle” (“Vai ter luta”), “The crime of those who legislate is the law” (“O crime de quem legisla é a lei”), “Impunity wears a uniform” (“Impunidade veste farda”). The term “struggle,” just above Marielle Franco's head, was very central to the composition of the staircase landscape. In Portuguese, there is a frequent interplay between the words “struggle” (“luta”) and “mourning” (“luto”) in the composition of an activist trope: most popular political struggles are the result of collective mourning processes.

In the contemporary version of the staircase, various graffiti depicting the faces and bodies of Black and Indigenous women encircle the portrait of Marielle. This arrangement of women in the bright graffiti colors around the main image of the montage articulates a narrative that has been built since her death, namely that “Marielle Franco is the living face of an increasingly influential collective movement in Brazil, that of black feminists,” as journalist Eliane Brum (2018) summarizes.

Marielle's face is a ghostly presence that functions as a symbol for many Brazilian collectives of black women, a kind of organizing sign for an entire discursive order of political resistance that

can inspire hope and inspire action. The presence of her smiling face in the urban environment is in dialog with the activist narrative that metaphorizes her symbolism in the flower that breaks through the asphalt and germinates new seeds: “[a]s this flower, Marielle, began her journey, she broke through the asphalt in the city and made the strength of living in the favela present in people. No one could have imagined the strength she would leave behind, especially for all the black women around the world” (Franco, 2020, p. 73). The idea of multiplying Marielle Franco's political legacy is realized in the montage of the staircase in the mosaic of pictorial representations of women from the periphery, who also appear in the landscape and assert their presence in the city.

3.3 Past, present and future

The manipulation of time proves to be a fundamental strategy in the production of the vernacular memorial (I assume that, in a broader sense, every practice of memory is an action that allows us to deal with time in the fabric of our lives). The relationships to space created by the dynamics of the monument-staircase arrangement condense and activate different temporalities, helping to create the heterotopic force.

To enter the stairwell from Rua Cardeal Arcoverde, I stand directly in front of the large poster with Marielle's face, my feet stumbling over the painting on the floor: 1000. The numerical inscription on the floor was placed in December 2020, when 1,000 days had passed since the murder of Marielle Franco, 1,000 days of mourning, 1,000 days of mobilization for the investigation of the crime and against the politics of death against black people, marginalized groups and women's bodies. The ground thus becomes a graphic-numerical marker that represents the temporality of the crime not only as an event in the relatively recent past (from which we move temporally away each day), but more importantly as a residual force, in the sense that the residual, according to Raymond Williams, “has been effectively formed in the past but is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present” (Williams, 1977, p.122). If we understand the residuum as a contemporary presence, we can read the painting of the number 1000 as a semiotic sign with an indicative character in the construction of the staircase landscape, which places the murder of the black activist as a catalyst for a current form of political mobilization in the Brazilian peripheries that materializes in the action on the stairs in the Pinheiros neighborhood.

The inscription of the number one thousand is not only directly related to the portrait of Marielle, but also to another inscription that was applied several times to the walls of the stairs using the stencil technique: “Who killed Marielle?” (“Quem matou Marielle?”). This questioning sentence has been repeatedly reiterated by activists mourning Marielle and demanding justice and can be read on walls, in social networks, on demonstrators' banners, on T-shirts and in public speeches. The statement that is (re)quoted in the “Staircase” installation has a similar effect to a mantra that

can be mobilized through constant repetition. Within the staircase, the mantra manifests itself through numerous repetitions of the inscription in the use of the stencil, a mural technique that is widely used politically precisely because of its ability to quickly repeat the same graphic message. The use of the stencil technique thus makes it possible to graphically generate the sound effect of the proclamation in the form of an echo and a cadenced repetition that can create a contemplative state for the mobilization of the long process of collective mourning for the death of Marielle Franco.

Figure 3 - Stencil inscription: “Who killed Marielle?” (“Quem matou Marielle”). Marielle Franco Staircase, São Paulo, Brazil.



Photo taken on January 9, 2024.

The counting of days and the evocation of crime in the inscriptions that accompany our walk down the staircase take on the role of a temporal guide, indicating the passage of days in the process of assembling and the meaning of the staircase monument itself, emphasizing the idea of the landscape as a living text. These painted inscriptions quantify and express the sense of outrage at the wait for the crime to be solved and for justice to be served that characterizes the work of collective mourning. With each day and each new visit I pay to the staircase, the counting of the “1000” days becomes anachronistic and this anachronism reinforces the heterotopic complexity of the time-space relationship: the graphic inscriptions on the staircase visualize the many times associated with death, the continuous performances in the making of the staircase and the “now” of the use of this space.

The time of waiting not only recalls the specters of loss and dispossession, both individually and collectively, but also projects an idea of everyday life as a period in which hope can reside. The sense of hope adds a temporality to the future, an idea of the dream of justice and social change. The future is also triggered by the idea of legacy (heavily used by the movements of Marielle's bereaved), which is understood as a symbolic force that goes beyond the individual and becomes an example for future processes of (self-)recognition and an impetus for change. The idea of legacy is materialized in the intervention by Marielle's face surrounded by the faces of other peripheral and racialized women, by the fixing of her name in a visible and recognizable way and by the replication of poignant quotations such as the phrase “I will not be interrupted” (“Não serei interrompida”) replicated on a poster pasted at the top of the stairs. The quote refers to a statement made by

Marielle Franco in response to an interruption that resulted in a supportive outcry for a torturer associated with the dictatorship. This incident occurred during her speech on International Women's Day, March 8, 2018, at Rio de Janeiro City Council. This statement is widely echoed in movements composed of individuals mourning Marielle and adopting collective configurations characterized by the expression “none of us shall be interrupted.”

The artistic-activist montage orchestrates a confluence of times to produce the sense of legacy, which brings together both evocations of the past and permanence (Marielle is a symbol and part of a legacy) and hopes for broader changes in Brazilian society.

3.4 Landscape in time and in dispute

As is repeatedly emphasized in this discourse, the popular monument in honor of Marielle Franco is a living text in constant flux. Throughout the period in which I visited the staircase for this research, the installation maintained its general design without any changes to the main elements that make it up. However, this should not be misunderstood as a stabilization of the landscape. Over the course of about a year and a half, graffiti, scribbles and doodles appeared and were erased, as was the pasting of posters, which were sometimes subsequently torn down, leaving only a few pasted fragments. The traces of time can also be seen on the supports and materials: the colors are fading and the paper of the posters is beginning to crumble.

Since 2018, the archival materials I have collected document cases that are interpreted as attacks on the popular monument, which were usually followed by interventions by activists to restore or redesign the monument. These attacks were mainly directed against the face of Marielle on the poster. Shortly after the first intervention in 2018, red paint was thrown at the portrait. Then there was an action by activists in which a copy of the portrait in a smaller format was initially pasted over the large vandalized face until the portrait was completely replaced and more posters with militant slogans were put up, forming the first landscape composed with the composition of various elements on the staircase (Luduvico, 2019). Later that year, a new intervention changed its characteristics: The large portrait remained in place, the previously white walls were colored, posters with quotes from Marielle, a poem in her honor and words in Yoruba (referring to Marielle's black ancestors) were added and the monument was named “Escadão Marielle Franco” by activists (Luduvico, 2019).

The following year, the walls of the staircase were whitewashed by order of the city council, which claimed at the time that it needed to be made barrier-free. During this official intervention, the posters with the inscriptions were removed, but the portrait of Marielle remained (Corrêa, 2019). Afterwards, there was another intervention that gave the landscape the general arrangement that remained until this research was carried out: the large portrait that was maintained on the central wall, the inclusion of graffiti with representations of women, flowers and mantras of the mourning movement such as “Marielle lives!” (“Marielle vive!”), the poster with the quote “I will not be

interrupted,” the poems written on the walls and paintings simulating street signs with the designation “Escadão Marielle Franco.” As already mentioned, elements are frequently included and removed from the montage, some of which are interpreted as attempts at looting (attack on the monument and the memory of Marielle), others as part of the dynamic use and integration of the landscape into everyday social life. I cite it as an example a small mosaic with a stylized representation of a vaccination syringe that was placed during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, the monument suffered an attack, which had several repercussions in the press and on social media, when the inscriptions “Viva Borba Gato” and “666,” a drawing of a phallus and several spots of red paint symbolizing blood were graffitied over Marielle's face (Tempo, 2021). This attack was allegedly a response by far-right political groups to the attempted destruction of a statue of the bandeirante Borba Gato in São Paulo, a character linked to slave violence in the colonial period of Brazilian history, which occurred a few days before the graffiti on the staircase, by a group called Peripheral Revolution. On the same day as the graffiti on the staircase, another monument in honor of the Brazilian guerrilla who resisted the military dictatorship, Carlos Marighella, in a different part of the city, was covered in red paint (Globo, 2021).

The attacks on the monument in Pinheiros, especially on the central portrait, are linked not only to the retaliation of neo-Nazi groups for the attempted destruction of the Borba Gato statue, but also to the negative reactions of some more reactionary sectors of society to the symbolism that has built up around her figure since Marielle's murder. In several Brazilian cities, many signs related to the process of public mourning and remembrance of her have been systematically attacked and destroyed.³ On the staircase in São Paulo, Marielle's face, depicted in the large portrait, has gained so much strength as a living presence in the landscape—a face that confronts and smiles—that it has become a prime target for some of these destructive impulses through the actions of some conservative groups. The work of artist-activists continually reassembles the vandalized portrait, constructing a sense of resistance and permanence of the body materialized in the photographed face. The public appearance of the face has the power to establish an ethics of responsibility for otherness that extends to the care of the portrait on its support (poster) as the presence of the absent body.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The symbolic spaces in urban landscapes are constantly reclaimed by social movements and lend themselves as public sites for the (re)inscription of the memory and struggles of marginalized groups that are invisible in the symbols that define public policies for landscapes.

³ At least 14 works depicting Marielle were vandalized or erased between March 2018 and March 2023 in the states of São Paulo (4), Paraná (3), Rio de Janeiro (3), Minas Gerais (2), Ceará (1), and Rio Grande do Norte (1), according to a survey by the “Art Censorship Observatory” (“Observatório de Censura à Arte”). Marielle's face was often blacked out or graffitied, and the acts of vandalism were anonymous (Seganfredo, 2023).

This study looks at the self-construction of a popular monument dedicated to a black Brazilian activist from the periphery, pointing to the construction of a semiotic landscape through appropriation and intervention—using the means of street art—as a creative political tactic for the social appearance of historically marginalized groups that have been erased from hegemonic historical memory.

These phenomena have the power of a spectrum that promotes the convergence of spaces and times in an urban semiotic landscape. The portrait of Marielle Franco on the street poster shows us her face and constantly looks at us. Beyond the immediate visual scene, Marielle's gaze also extends to the city, haunting the political present. Marielle's gaze embodies the periphery through the concept of legacy, which echoes Jacques Derrida's thoughts on the weight of heritage: "We all live in a world, some would say a culture, that still bears, at such incalculable depth, the mark of this inheritance, whether an indirectly visible fashion or not" (Derrida, 1994, p. 15).

In theoretical and methodological terms, the study emphasizes the importance of dealing with complex (non-linear) temporal trajectories in the study of semiotic landscapes. It also recognizes that space is extended and interrupted by quotations (which make the absent present) and montages (which formally and pragmatically transform the semiotic landscape into a complex lamination of visual and verbal meanings). Fundamentally, this study assumes that semiotic landscapes can be read as living social texts with poetic patterns that are capable of forming chains of recontextualizations and thereby inscribing alternative affiliations within the prevailing orders of interaction.

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