

# Critique and recognition: the struggle for identity in media culture<sup>1</sup>

## *Crítica e reconhecimento: lutas identitárias na cultura midiática*

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the controversial interactions about the film *Vazante* and the play *Gisberta*, in which minority groups, pertaining to black and transsexual people, respectively, criticized the way they were represented in those works of fiction. According to the theory of recognition in Axel Honneth, it aims to understand the emergence of those forms of social struggle in media culture. The paper analyzes the collective semantics that unites the groups and the way in which it expresses the feelings of injustice regarding the narratives. This struggle highlights different claims, referring to both cultural inclusion and the autonomy of fiction, proposing relations between narrative and society that challenge current media criticism.

**Keywords:** Recognition, cultural criticism, collective identity

### RESUMO

Este artigo analisa interações polêmicas sobre o filme *Vazante* e a peça *Gisberta*, em que grupos identitários, vinculados a pessoas negras e transexuais, respectivamente, criticaram o modo como foram representados nessas ficções. A partir da teoria de reconhecimento em Axel Honneth, busca-se compreender a emergência dessas formas de luta social na cultura midiática. Para isso, examinam-se a semântica coletiva e o modo como ela organiza e expressa os sentimentos de injustiça em face dessas narrativas. Os embates evidenciam diferentes reivindicações, que se referem tanto à inclusão cultural como à autonomia da ficção, e propõem relações entre narrativa e sociedade que desafiam a crítica midiática atual.

**Palavras-chave:** Reconhecimento, crítica cultural, identidade coletiva

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## INTRODUCTION

IN SEPTEMBER 2017, the film *Vazante*, directed by Daniela Thomas, which addresses gender and race oppressive relations in a 19<sup>th</sup> century rural community, was criticized after being exhibited in the 50<sup>o</sup> Festival de Brasília do Cinema Brasileiro. Among other aspects, it was criticized for not developing the subjectivities and perspectives of black characters, for using slavery as a temporal marking for a plot of white protagonists, reiterating the dominant historiographic perspective that silences black people. For the writer Ana Maria Gonçalves (2017), who contributed to the debate in the on-line publication *The Intercept Brasil*, the main problem is that, in the film, slavery had been turned “frame, backdrop, with black characters without voice, without name, without depth, without development, serving as supporters for the white characters”.

In January 2018, the play *Gisberta*, directed by Renato Carrera and interpreted by Luis Lobianco (known for acting in the Brazilian humor group *Porta dos Fundos*), was the target of protests in social media and in the theater itself, situated in Belo Horizonte. Individuals and groups related to the transgender movement accused the play, which retells the trajectory of Gisberta Salce, a Brazilian transsexual tortured and murdered in Portugal in 2006, was accused by individuals and groups related to the transgender movement of operating the erasure of the group by having as sole actor a cisgender<sup>2</sup> man, despite having the film honor a symbol of transgender resistance. Moreover, as argued by Duda Salabert (2018), NGO TransVest’s president, the play would silence “the transgender perspective”, since it was written by cisgenders and, according to her, had no transsexuals working in the production of the film. “Diga não ao #transfake” [Say no to #transfake] e “Chega de #transfake” [#transfake no more] were some of the expressions circulating in social media. Users sometimes compared the fact of a cisgender actor interpreting a transgender character to the practice of *blackface*.

While the differences between the two movements as well as the criticisms revolving those narratives and provoking counterarguments can be approximated by the fact they currently constitute struggles for recognition (Honneth, 2009) in our cultural environment. In them, individuals and groups related to identity issues oppose the ways in which they are represented in fictional narratives. They report what they identify as symbolic violence and demand the composition of thicker and non-stereotyped characters, the expression of perspectives from subordinated groups and more representativeness in the spheres of cultural production. Therefore, there exists an awareness that cultural forms of fiction and entertainment are important to construct and circulate representations that end up affecting the way we relate to each other in everyday life (Silverstone, 2002). As Judith Butler (2017) exposes, recognition, being of Hegelian origin and representing an intersubjective and

<sup>2</sup> Cisgender is the term used to refer to an individual who identifies with the biological sex of birth and the cultural and historical aspects attributed to this gender.

reciprocal act, cannot be achieved without the conditions that precede it, and they encompass categories, conventions and norms that movement the subject to be recognized by their rights and properties. The representations in media culture circulation can contribute to the creation of those conditions.

Claims by identity movements of representations considered more fair in Brazilian media culture did not begin in this century<sup>3</sup>, but was intensified with digital social networks. Djamila Ribeiro (2017b) states that “even with all its limitations, the virtual space has been a space of narrative disputes, people from historically discriminated groups have found there a place of existence” (p. 86). Those increasingly recurring conflicts have made a columnist of *El País* (Sá, 2017) to elect *treta* (*fuss*) as word of the year 2017, and Francisco Bosco (2017) write an essay about what he calls the emergence of a “new Brazilian public space”, marked by identity struggles “against power and recognition” in digital social networks, which sometimes incur into “lynching”. According to Bosco, “lynching bombs must be disarmed” (p. 14). The author was promptly contested in social media by voices such as the feminist Manuela Miklos (2018), in the review “O crepúsculo do esquerdomacho” (The twilight of the left male), and, in the press, by Djamila Ribeiro, who pointed out, among other aspects related to the privileged social place of the white intellectual, the impropriety of the use of the term “lynching”, originating from Lynch’s law that executed slaves. “What they [white men] call lynching is the need to confront their own privileges, which they thought were providently fixed and not the fruit of oppression from other groups” (Ribeiro, 2017a, p. 37).

The main idea of Axel Honneth’s study (2009), a thesis published in 1992, is that the struggle for recognition acts as a driving moral force for the ethical progress of social life. For Honneth (p. 257), social conflicts arise from forms of disrespect in the fields of legal relations and community of values, which hurt individuals whose painful experiences of refusal are interpreted as belonging to a whole group, thus constituting a collective identity.

If we consider, in accordance with Silverstone (2002), that everyday life is permeated by technological mediations that are central to the proposition of meaning frameworks and “their capacity to provide the symbolic resources and tools for making sense of the complexities of the everyday” (p. 762), it would be correct to affirm that the dynamics of struggles for recognition is also strongly mediatized. Since what is experienced and what is represented are intertwining concepts in the media culture (Silverstone, 2002), identity movements constantly make the criticism of the circulating objects, such as the soap opera, audiovisual series, music videos, the theater, etc. In addition, the way criticism is produced and circulated obeys the circumstantial touch of social media. Those debates quickly lead to engagement, but also, with the same ease, disengagement. In addition, as we

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the confrontation that occurred between black movements in 1994, led by SOS Racism of São Paulo, and Rede Globo, after the exhibition of the soap opera *Pátria Minha*, by Gilberto Braga. In one of the scenes, a businessman character named Raul Peregrino (Tarcísio Meira), villain of the narrative, humiliates the character Kennedy Lopes (Alexandre Morenno), the maid’s son, accusing him of having opened a safe. The movements criticized the submissive demeanor of the character Kennedy, who did not match the attitude of black people in modern times. After conflicts, the authors included a scene in which the question was debated among black characters, affirming their consciousness and the need to react to acts of racism.

will see, such arguments are not always well developed or considered as a function of a counterargument. The controversies often have a certain immediacy, being replaced by others in a very short time, although the paradigm of recognition can persist in the new debates. As Bosco's study shows (2017), the crucial issues of identity struggles are constantly resumed in social media through new objects, and virtual social media carry out that movement of controversy renewal.

This article will analyze, two contemporary fields of polemic interaction that involved the aforementioned narratives, *Vazante* and *Gisberta*, based on the theory of recognition by Honneth (2009). Those fields, which put voices and texts into debate, develop actively in social media and criticize narratives by means of an approach that favors issues related to identity struggles. Those compounds comprise, in the cases analyzed, the criticism of cinema and theater, voices from the cultural production sphere as well as from public and organized identity groups. They seemingly make an arena emerge—or a “new public space”, according to Bosco (2017)—where those voices are possibly laid in a more direct and horizontal relation. The diversity of those critical complexes leads to conversation texts of different qualities, which previously, before de-emerging from social media, circulated in their own niches.

Amossy (2017) defines controversy as a set of antagonistic interventions present in public interactions as a form of discourse circulation. Controversial discourse has a dialogical character, since it refers to antecedent discussions and implies the engagement between two or more competing opponents requesting adherence to discordant viewpoints. In this article, we aim to identify and analyze the main demands of the criticisms that activated those controversial fields, the forms of recognition refusal pointed out by them, the collective semantics that sustain them, and the social place proposed for fiction. In addition, we investigate counterarguments to criticism or cultural actors who reaffirm political positions and artistic values related to such works. In those debates, which articulate controversial interactions in digital and face-to-face social media, issues related to representation, representativeness and different conceptions of the narratives' political character emerge. These demands are not exhausted in those controversial fields, because once organized and verbalized, they are very likely to inform and exert inflows on future creations.

## RECOGNITION IN MEDIA CULTURE

The theory of recognition, as developed by Axel Honneth (2009), presupposes the social struggle is a moral medium. This struggle is constant and demands institution and expansion of an ethical and solidary community. Honneth sustains,

based on Hegel, that the experiences of intersubjective recognition constitute individual and group identities. The individual has no identity in isolation, only when he is placed in relation to another and recognized in his capacities and properties, does he start to know the constituent aspects of his particularities, which lead to an understanding of his individuality and self-recognition. Within this relational perspective, “man is necessarily recognized and is necessarily a person who recognizes” (p. 86). Social life and its relations of recognition thus impart pressure for reciprocity, in which the subjects, in their interactions, recognize themselves as precarious and vulnerable beings who find constant reassurance in the other. Thus, lack of recognition can movement damage to the identity of a person who experiences situations of disrespect and feelings of demotion, with emotional reactions such as anger and shame.

Honneth (2009) presents, again based on Hegel and now also on Mead, three forms of reciprocal recognition, which refer to different relational domains and that only in a summarized way can be resumed in this article. The first refers to the emotional bonds present in primary sociability, such as love in the family and in the group of friends, which “prepares the way for a kind of self-relationship in which the subjects mutually attain an elementary trust in themselves” (p. 177). Another way is that established in the rights sphere; through legal relations we get to understand our rights as we face, in a community, the rights of the respective other. Only when we recognize the other as someone who has rights, “[can] we . . . also understand ourselves as a person of rights, in the sense that we can be confident of the social fulfillment of some of our pretensions” (p. 179). Legal recognition confers on individuals the property of deserving the respect of other community members, which makes them also develop self-respect. Lastly, Honneth describes social esteem, which “applies to the particular properties that characterize humans in their personal differences” (p. 199) and make individuals feel worthy and prestigious as their achievements and contributions to the community are valued.

Those three forms, when refused, have their equivalents in types of disrespect, which, as Honneth well observes, are commonly compared to sick states of the body. There is the concept of Psychic Death, pertaining to the case of tortured and violated individuals; “social death”, pertaining to those deprived of their rights; and *vexation*, which, etymologically, may mean disturbance or shock to situations of cultural revival.

Experiences of disrespect may be, according to Honneth (2009), engines of social struggles, defined by him as practical processes in which the offense suffered by an individual is understood and taken collectively as a referential for the whole group, generating claims and action plans for broadening the social recognition of the collective. “In this aspect, individual engagement in political



struggle restores the individual a little of his lost self-respect, as he demonstrates in public exactly the propriety whose disrespect is experienced as vexation” (p. 260). In order for a bridge between individual disrespect and social struggle to exist—which mobilizes collective identity—it is necessary to articulate that refusal in an inter-subjective framework, shareable by the identity group and sustained by a subcultural “collective semantics”. This semantics is a common language field that organizes and appoints concepts and moral values capable of standardizing and expressing feelings of injustice as well as demands for recognition.

With criticism of the paradigm that places recognition at the center of social policies in more modern times, Nancy Fraser (2003) defends the thesis that the known demands for redistribution, in situations such as economic marginalization and material deprivation, should not be replaced, but contemplated and articulated in a general way in the social struggle. As Fraser argues, social divisions based on gender and race are bivalent, as they possess distributive and recognition components. Even with a question such as that of sexuality, apparently one-dimensional and more predominantly linked to recognition, for example, and the fact gays and lesbians have been denied rights and are subject to stereotyped representation in the media, Fraser (2003) believes that there are also adjacent distribution aspects, which need to be faced in the field of economic equity. According to her, for practical purposes, “virtually all real-world axes of subordination can be treated as two-dimensional” (p. 25), albeit not in the same form or degree. The predominance of a spectrum, however, in relation to elements of economic disadvantage or lack of recognition, should be verified empirically in each case.

Thus, through our object, the issues of recognition as a comprehensive moral category, from Honneth’s perspective, seem to us as more productive for the understanding of the critical complexes around *Vazante* and *Gisberta*. Those debates emerge from the identification of cultural injustices, related to what the groups identify as symbolic domination, patterns of representation and acts of erasure and disrespect—issues related, according to Fraser herself, to paradigm of recognition, in the way it is popularly associated with the identity movements that aim for symbolic and cultural change. However, the claim for representativeness and of participation in the cultural economy does not cease to aim at some kind of economic restructuring.

Media culture has been, at least since the 70’s, one of the main fields of struggle for recognition by the evident fact that representations circulate in it, in a more or less massive way, and they involve identity formation, especially when pertaining to social esteem. Two film documentaries, *A negação do Brasil* (2000) [The denial of Brazil], by Joel Zito Araújo, and *Eu não sou seu negro* (2016) [I

am not your negro], by Raoul Peck, narrate how it is to grow as a black individual in societies in which the sedimentary symbolism of media narratives—in the first case, the soap operas, in the second, especially the cinema—deny values to those groups, whose members generally play stereotyped roles in fiction, when they were not prevented from acting.

In the autobiography *Na minha pele* [In my stead], the actor Lázaro Ramos (2017) claims to have refused roles in which the character manages guns in a naturalized and comfortable way. In the movie *Meu tio matou um cara* (2004) [My uncle killed a guy], according to Ramos, the revolver was removed from the scene spontaneously by the director Jorge Furtado, who “understood that it is a very repeated image, that of the black person with a gun in his/her hand, occupying the place of marginality” (p. 100), without the character having a more complex and deeper development.

Groups that control the means of symbolic force and can represent themselves have more resources to make themselves recognized and propose places of stereotypes as a form of conservative ordering of daily life and maintenance of power. Honneth (2009) considers, however, that having a means of symbolic force is only part of the process, because it is also decisive for this struggle that social movements conquer public attention, exposing to society how their qualities have been devalued and neglected.

In a mediatized society, this clash, as well as the dissemination actions that seek to increase the value and reputation of the members of those groups, must necessarily go through the media. For Silverstone (2002), it is not possible to live, nowadays, outside the boundaries of media, so strongly disseminated. Characterized by the ever-transformative circulation and recirculation of meanings, mediations are dialectical (technological and social) because they include both the dominant instances of media production and the daily reverberations of texts produced in media culture, being under continuous negotiation (Silverstone, 2002). However, Silverstone (2002) points out that mediation is also asymmetric, as the power to contest the social meanings produced by the dominant media is “unevenly distributed across and within societies” (p. 762).

In Brazil, in this century, the emergence of social media, accompanied by university inclusion of individuals belonging to subordinated social groups, opened a powerful critical field for identity struggles, whose challenges are local, but tuned with a cosmopolitan thinking of the left that offers those groups a semantic field of expression. As predicted by Honneth, this struggle is dynamic and develops historically, seeking to expand the forms of reciprocal recognition, leading historically subordinated groups to express their feelings of injustice, denounce experiences, claim rights and demand the social appreciation of their properties.



For Amossy (2017), the affirmation of democracy goes through the legitimation of conflicts as a form of dissention – a term that refers to differences in the ways of seeing and judging. Amossy does not consider the absence of agreement between subjects or groups who engage in a verbal struggle indicative of failure due to lack of consensus. She proposes the valorization of dissention as a force that is at the base of revolutions and transformations. We will thus analyze the polemic fields related to the film *Vazante* and the theater play *Gisberta*, which deal with specific issues of representation, referring to their fictional nature.

### TWO POLEMIC FIELDS: VAZANTE AND GISBERTA

#### The “white fragility” of Daniela Thomas

*Vazante* explores the loneliness and relations between races and genres on the shores of Colonial Brazil. White people, native black people and newcomers from Africa suffer from ills derived from incommunicability in an imposing farm in a decadent diamond region in Minas Gerais during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Globo Filmes, 2017).

This excerpt from the synopsis of *Vazante* foreshadows points that will be triggered in the controversial interaction of the struggle for recognition. In the central narrative of the film, the Portuguese slaver Antonio (Adriano Carvalho), after the death of his wife, takes as second wife the white girl Beatriz (Luana Nastas). In the film, the role of white people and Afro-descendants is proposed under the undifferentiated viewpoint of widespread suffering among social classes – all presented as victims of decadent social and economic orders.

For analyzing the critical complex around *Vazante*, we selected videos of the debate on the film in the 50<sup>o</sup> Festival de Brasília<sup>4</sup>; criticisms by Juliano Gomes (*Cinética*) and José Geraldo Couto (the blog from Instituto Moreira Salles); Daniela Thomas’ text, in *Piauí* magazine (on-line), and Juliano Gomes’ counterpoint in the same magazine; and Ana Maria Gonçalves’ (2017) article for *The Intercept Brasil*.

The disputes surrounding the film emerged already during the post-exhibition debate in Brasília, which involved, among others, the director, actors, producers and the audience. Black spectators manifested that they felt disrespected in their collective identity. One of the points raised by the group was the absence of protagonism and density of the black characters. It was also criticized that, in the film, there was no contribution of black professionals in

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2LzHAG0>

the historiographical treatment (the consultancy was done by Mary Del Priore), which eliminated the perspective of black people and eventually reproduced the dominant narrative. Another argument also considered *Vazante* excessively aestheticized, which exposes the contradiction between its imagetic beauty and the slavery and colonialist violence that it intends to address. Those are issues of representation and representativeness that built a semantic bridge (Honneth, 2009) among debaters, allowing them to gather in a collective identity. In the first case, they refer both to the construction of the characters and to the plastic aspects of the film, judged inadequate to contribute to the identity recognition of black people. In the second, they claim participation and prominence in the film economy, although most of the cast, black people, do not lead the narrative—their characters are flat and secondary—and, according to the criticisms, they did not command the film production.

Two days after the film exhibition in Brasilia, on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Juliano Gomes, who participated in the debate, published a critical article in *Cinética* magazine (Gomes, 2017a) reflecting the feeling of indignation that permeated the discussion at the festival. He reiterated some of the points raised during that interaction. Gomes identified the director who came with the main film's proposal, pointing out that she sees herself surrounded by the place of the young "sinhá" (mistress), without taking account of her own insensitivity when assembling a scenario of slavery around a white character. He criticized the fact that the director said, during the debate, that the production had no intention of being militant. According to Gomes, this is nonsense, as it would be impossible not to think of that film politically in the first place. He identified traces of colonialism in the production, the team, the decoupage and the director's choices.

The critic also addressed other film aspects such as "slow pace", the duration of the planes and the immensity of gray tones that seems to "come by as suffocating, for being sterile" (Gomes, 2017a). For him, the immersion resources in the context of the film work as a guided tour of the colony. Still according to Gomes, the second part of the plot highlighted the relations of affection between the boss' wife, who falls in love with a young slave, Virgil, the son of another slave, which is, in turn, constantly raped by the boss himself, owner of the farm. He criticized the way in which the relationship between the white couple and the other slaves was exposed, besides the fact that the subjectivity of black people was not shown, affirming the colonialist perspective of the film. "The scene in which the white mistress eats the porridge of the black children (obviously without name, speech or individualized plan) is the evidence of a desire to produce empathy that heroicizes the good old white conscious impotence" (Gomes, 2017a).

# A

## Critique and recognition

The critic José Geraldo Couto (2017), who also attended the debate in Brasília, and described it as an environment of “barrage fire”, pointed, in turn, positive aspects in the film. He disagreed with the argument that the characters did not exist, including black ones. “They are there, revealing themselves in laconic speeches, in silent looks and in details of behavior” (Couto, 2017). He also stated that there is not necessarily an incompatibility between “plastic sense” and “the expression of violence and pain”. Even though he intended, in his criticism, to “pass off” the controversy, Couto eventually proposed a key to his understanding and for positioning himself in the debate:

The problem is that the wounds of our formation as a country are so profound that any film will be insufficient to mitigate the pains accumulated over the centuries. Perhaps some charges, no matter how legitimate they may be, could only be fulfilled by a programmatic work that showed heroic and virtuous black people beating against the dragon of the wickedness of white power. But one such work would have scarce political efficacy, exhausting itself in catarsis and null aesthetic value. (Couto, 2017).

Couto thus evidenced the importance of aesthetic value for cinema, and affirmed that Thomas chose another direction, not the programmatic one, which, for him, is legitimate. “If this reading of history is, as everything else, contingent, provisional and insufficient, that come others readings and narratives” (Couto, 2017).

The reverberation of this controversy also includes the article of the director, Daniela Thomas, “The place of silence”, and Juliano Gomes’ counterpoint (2017a), “The white movement”, both on the magazine’s website *Piauí*. In defense of *Vazante*, the director distinguished the praised reception of the film in Berlin. She recalled that at the premiere of the Festival de Brasília, the film also had a good welcome. Considering these events, the director was stunned by the next day’s debate.

In this debate, after almost two hours of violent attacks by a few people who have imposed themselves with threats or cries for the possession of the microphone, and that, when not in possession of it, signaled an absolute horror to my words, with grandiloquent gestures, punches in the chair, interjections of disgust, ironic laughter and other astonish acts, being that the mediator, also intimidated, made no movement to soothe the tempering or resume the list of debaters who had patiently written in her notebook, I finally capitulated. (Thomas, 2018)

The capitulation is related to the retreat of the director, who came to say in the debate that she would not have made the film if she was aware of the

points raised there. In the article, Thomas stated that the speech was ironic and reiterated her convictions about the work, saying that *Vazante* represents the horror vision of a time that made “Brazilians of all tones” victims. She was able to answer agendas of movements, however, placing herself in solidarity with them. “All of cinema is political, but films do not have to be machines to transform the present in order to have the right to exist and be enjoyed” (Thomas, 2018). She saved her position, claiming the film to be a representation of historical Brazil and that it feels fruit and part of the process of violent and archaic miscegenation.

Having been cited in the director’s article, the critic Juliano Gomes was entitled to a counterpoint, in which he added the notion *white fragility* to explain Thomas’ behavior. The term, proposed by the researcher Robin DiAngelo, describes the reaction of white individuals when confronted with racial issues, in moments that rupture with the armored environment in which they live. The notion also becomes part of the collective semantics in the struggle for recognition, being resumed didactically in the article by Ana Maria Gonçalves (2017):

According to DiAngelo, “white people live in a social environment that protects them and isolates them from racial stress”. This isolated environment (mediated by class, institutions, cultural representation, media, books, propaganda, dominant discourses, etc.) builds the expectation of white people to remain within a racial comfort zone, while decreasing the ability to stress tolerance movementd by the subject, leading to white fragility.

According to the concept, this fragility, although openly manifested, hides its functions, because it intends to render the positions of the white individual invisible so that they cannot be put to the test. Gomes thus criticizes the director’s strategy of putting herself as a victim in confrontation. According to him, Thomas “confuses discomfort with disrespect—typical behavior of those who occupy positions of power and privilege” (Gomes, 2017b). He understood that the fact that production is Globo Filmes already prevents the author from being silenced, since *Vazante* will have great visibility, as it was articulated by the largest communication conglomerate in the country. Therefore, the agonistic debate could not be described as a form of censorship and silencing. The critic demarked the field of censorship in another way: the attitude of the filmmaker is what indicates an attempt to control the expression of those who have less chance of being heard. For Gomes (2017b), “black people think and rethink all the time ‘how’ they must speak to be heard, not to be seen as savages, especially on occasions such as that of the auditorium”.

**Representation and representativeness in *Gisberta*: the transgender movement**

In the play where the actor Luis Lobianco stages the history of Brazilian transvestite Gisberta, murdered in Portugal, the narrative is told through a mosaic of characters (all interpreted by Lobianco), which includes Gisberta's relatives and other people who have lived with her in Brazil and Europe. The play was already about a year in the theaters, without great controversy, when the season of Belo Horizonte was announced, at the end of December 2017. Even before the premiere in the city, on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the struggle for recognition of transgender people in search of visibility and employment opportunities in the artistic environment was constituted, revolving around the play. To analyze the controversy around *Gisberta*, we mainly consider posts on Facebook from Duda Salabert, president of the TransVest NGO, and from the actor Luis Lobianco, in addition to materials and criticism on sites such as *NLucon* and *Jornalistas Livres*.

The movement of transvestites/transsexuals, led by the NGO TransVest, accused *Gisberta* of the practice of *transfake*, because its only actor is cisgender and plays transvestite roles. TransVest organized, through social media, a demonstration at the door of the theater, on the day of the play premiere, and the debate spread among internet users. During the controversy, which occurred in the month devoted to the group's visibility, the *Movimento Nacional de Artistas Transgender* (National Movement of Transgender Artists) relaunched, on Facebook, the Transgender Representativeness Manifesto, which, among other points, condemns works that report to the movement without transgender people being part of the production process. It denounces, among other things, the fact that Brazil is the country that most kills transvestites and transsexuals in the world. Early in the controversial interaction, transgender artists identifying with the movement were categorical in their positions, such as the actress Juhlia Santos, who affirmed to a site she considered the play an affront to the transgender movement, in its struggle for representation: "If there were sensitization, this cisgender actor would know that it is not his place to do so" (Lucon, 2018).

Even stating that *Gisberta* "strives for the public to understand the reality of the transgender people's life, their joys, pride, pains and difficulties", Josué Gomes and Hélio Caldeira (2018), from *Jornalistas Livres*, who covered the controversy, indicated that the participation of transsexuals in the play would be more coherent. For Gomes and Caldeira (2018), there is also the problem of the public, since the audience of the session to which they attended was composed of "white and standardized people who looked like having left a soap opera from Rede Globo". In the understanding of Gomes and Caldeira, if that "luxury environment" does not invite subordinated groups, the play staged there

could not contribute to transgender people. In her post on Facebook, Duda Salabert (2018) criticized, in addition to the absence of transgender people in the play, comic elements in the representation. For her, “the piece falls into the transphobic cliché by staging speeches and gestures linked to the transvestite culture in a stereotyped and laughable manner”.

After the demonstrations and critics, actor Luis Lobianco used his Facebook profile to post text to firming his effort to favor of affirmative actions for the LGBT public, emphasizing his strategy to establish bonds with other groups “out of the bubble”. The argument signals the effective search for bridges—the practice of *bridging* (Bosco, 2017)—which can approximate the agendas of this identity group to other sectors of society, thus avoiding the isolation of LGBT issues. Lobianco listed, in the post, different forms of distinction received by the play, among them the Citizenship Award in Respect to Diversity 2017, in the category performing arts, conferred by the Organization of the LGBT Pride Parade of São Paulo. In a dialogue wherein there was the accusation that the production of the show did not involve transgender people, the actor mentioned the collaboration of Giowana Cambrone, lawyer and transgender woman who advised *Gisberta*’s producers. Lobianco further argued that *Gisberta*’s story was practically unknown in Brazil, and that he ventured to tell it. The play, he said, was only made possible due to partnerships between friends, so the project would not have provided him any profit, only recognition.

This is exactly the point underlying the conflict: if, on the one hand, the play conferred prestige on the actor, on the other, the group of the represented movement felt violated in the right of this representation. Instead of cultivating a sense of reciprocal recognition, the play activated, in the group, the negative emotional energy of a disrespectful experience, which arose in a new form of struggle for recognition.

Another counterargument used by Lobianco concerned the charge of practicing *transfake*. For this, he brought to the debate another perspective for the notion of representation, related to the act of pretending, which sustains the theatrical fiction:

Other questions came from the group: I, a cisgender, interpreting as “transfake”, gays speaking of transgender people, *Gisberta* being interpreted. Even though I disagree with many of her views, it is up to dialogue. Wouldn’t the theater be the art of “fake”? The harmonic plan of truths and lies? In 24 years of career I’ve done fake old people, fake women, fake children, even a Scandinavian fake I’ve been! What does not fit is the comparison with the “blackface” in respect to other movements and the symbology of this practice. For all the other questions, we’re

# A

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going to need a lot of time before we're able to understand. Theater is millennial, and this questioning has only arrived in theatrical class recently. It's not math. You don't have a single answer. We will have to do a lot of plays and talk a lot. I'm available for that. (Lobianco, 2018).

According to the argument, theater is the space of fiction, a space reserved to the dramatic representations of situations embodied by other people. In this space, acting, even when the staging is based on facts, is a simulation<sup>5</sup>. Between audience and actor there is a contract, in which those conditions are guaranteed, as they are agreed upon beforehand. Lobianco also stressed that a debate with the public on the issues addressed in the play, as well as on aspects related to representation, is part of the project, happening in the theaters of the cities where the play is staged.

Finally, the actor, who is homosexual, considers himself apt to stage the story of Gisberta. He regretted the mismatch between his intentions and the problematization brought in the form of conflict. The accusations taken from the movement in Belo Horizonte led the actor to question the feasibility of engaging in other projects of this nature, since he felt attacked by those who, in his view, should be allies. However, he said he still believed in the power of art and "in dialogue, in the LGBT forces united against growing conservatism—about to elect a president in 2018" (Lobianco, 2018). At the end of the text, Lobianco appealed to the artistic class and to "sensible people" in general to act in defense of freedom of expression: "What is happening with Gisberta can happen to other artists in their projects" (Lobianco, 2018). The actor chooses therefore to take the controversy to another territory, approaching the debate of a broad defense of freedom of expression.

The controversy did not cool down after Lobianco's post. It continued being stimulated and going into directions that did not necessarily end up dialogue with the initial questions—some of them, pertaining to the status of fiction, have not been developed. *Gisberta* became an opportunity, an entry for the transvestite/transgender movement to protest, in society, about the deficit of identity recognition. The rhetoric of the agonistic discourse was maintained. What was on the horizon was the possibility of an ignored voice to be listened by intervening in a controversy (Amossy, 2017).

Other discordant manifestations were punctuated in spite of the arguments listed by Lobianco. The poet and performer João Maria Kaisen de Almeida, from the Trans-Literary Academy, reposed the position defended by all the artists in this debate. "He [Lobianco] even claims empathy for the movement, so I ask: why not empower people, why not stop with this privilege?" (Lucon, 2018). In a

<sup>5</sup> See also the text of columnist Tony Goes (2018), from *Folha de S. Paulo*, who addresses the controversy and reiterates that theater is, in principle, the "art of fake" and that every actor can play any role. Goes writes that we cannot reduce the theater to a "place of speech", as this would be curtailment of art.

debate on February 26<sup>th</sup>, at the end of the part-season in the city, Duda Salabert returned with the thesis of *transfake* (2018b). The identity movement moves against the system of signification that predominates in society. The behavior of the debaters is motivated by axiological convictions jointly elaborated and formed in the group to which it is inserted. They imply affirmation of values, thus contributing to the constitution of a common semantics, in which the grammar of the struggle for recognition is grounded. They also serve to sustain and prolong the confrontation with the other, dialogue among their own, reaffirming convictions for a collective labor cohesion under permanent construction.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to the analysis of the controversial fields generated from the film *Vazante* and the play *Gisberta*, this article describes the manifestations of criticism that is legitimated (the one commonly practiced by journalists in newspapers, magazines, and blogs) and the scopes of cultural production and identity movements. The two polemical fields were also traversed by the voices of the *common*, which have positioned themselves through social media commentary. Thus, it was possible to verify how texts that previously circulated in a more hermetic way are, nowadays, directly contrasted, putting in dialogue speeches of different orders, from specialized criticism to the evaluation and opinion of the public, through the programmatic engagement of social movements. The criticism of cinema and theater, examined here, was stimulated by these discussions, and included in its comment questions of recognition that had already arisen in previous debates. The controversies did not occur exclusively in social media, as they involved in-person interactions, such as in the debate after the exhibition of *Vazante*, in the Festival de Brasília, or in the conversation between actor, public and social movement, during the season ending of *Gisberta*, in Belo Horizonte. These passages between online and face-to-face interactions show us that, although, as Bosco points out (2017), the emergence of social media is essential to the conformation of that arena, identity struggles fought in media culture have the power to unfold face-to-face, often also recorded during confrontation, and that stimulate the controversy on the internet.

The analysis of the critical complexes evidenced that issues related to representation and representativeness are at the core of the struggle for recognition in the controversial interactions that involve those fictions. The elements of representation, most criticized in *Vazante* than in *Gisberta*, fundamentally relate to the composition of the characters. In the case of Daniela Thomas' film, the group refuses the way it was represented in fiction, through characters considered



flat, without protagonism and inner life, which reproduce social stereotypes. The issues of representation also refer to the events of the narrative and the plasticity of cinema itself. In the two controversial fields, fiction is loaded with expectation and responsibility, with regard to the possibility of it socially operating a difference, of breaking with a sedimentary and deleterious symbolism, thus contributing to the social esteem of subordinated groups.

Regarding the issues of representativeness that emerged in both cases, identity groups seek to denounce their low participation in cultural production areas. In the case of cinema, recent research by the National Film Agency (Ancine) helps to quantify the problem: from the 142 films released in 2016, 75.4% were directed by white men. None of the films had the direction or script of black women. Transgender professionals were not even contemplated by the research<sup>6</sup>. The criticism made by the transgender movement to what it considers *transfake* in *Gisberta* is also a way of claiming participation in cultural production, since the fact that they did not play the part was denounced as an interdiction that reproduces the marginalization suffered in society in general. The play received few criticisms regarding the development of the characters. Generally speaking, we can say that, in *Gisberta*, the matter of representativeness is further ahead of the controversy than that of the fictional representation. However, representativeness and representation are issues that are imbricated in the debate. For both *Vazante* and *Gisberta*, the criticism of these groups presupposes that, once having increased their participation in cultural production, other points of view will be contemplated and new forms of representation will be produced and put into circulation, with reverberation in daily life.

The defense of the autonomy of art and fiction is the main counterargument in these controversial interactions. In the case of the critical complex of *Vazante*, Daniela Thomas affirmed the political character of cinema, but, according to her, engagement does not function as an obligation. Similarly, the critic José Geraldo Couto argued that cinema should not necessarily have programmatic bias, and that this kind of militant work can even have low political efficacy and lack of aesthetic value. This clash does not bring up a new issue. Let us remember, for example, the discussion in the field of literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which a modern perspective alleged that the emancipatory and transformative power of fiction was concentrated on the aesthetic face of the work, of humanizing effect, in counterpoint to the notion of a militant literature, with its programmatic characters and plots.

The criticism made by the identity movements, however, favors this recognition, which becomes the main criterion for analyzing these works of fiction. As predicted by Honneth (2009), recognition is an expanding driving

<sup>6</sup> See the article published in *El País Brazil*, "Brazilian cinema is masculine and white". Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2UKSVnJ>

force, increasingly inclusive in relation to the agenda of subordinated groups. Christian Dunker (2017) says he expects the dimensions of recognition to contribute and, at all times, reflect how our gestures can reproduce power relations. “In our small linguistic or behavioral decisions, of consumption and style, in the field of work, of knowledge and of love, there is a game involving power” (p. 16). For him, thinking of our options provides the possibility of transforming relationships and inventing new worlds. As this attention is established to aspects of everyday life, the dynamics of recognition is also directed towards cultural objects that, although present as parentheses of immediate reality, act on our daily lives. According to this logic, for identity debate, it is no longer possible to produce a film on the issue of slavery other than a text of intervention.

In *Gisberta*, the interpretation of a transvestite by a cisgender actor was compared to *blackface* practices. But does the play actually operate a type of interdiction analogous to *blackface*? Would it not be precisely the erasure of the transvestite/transgender subject and the marginalization of those people what the play seeks to denounce and combat, using, even, the media visibility of actor and producer Luis Lobianco to reach several social groups?

In this paper, we observed the expansion of recognition, whose dynamics brings new questions about representations and representativeness, since, previously, several cisgender actors have already interpreted transsexuals without facing controversy like that. The critical complex around *Gisberta* confronts two types of rights: the right to the artifice, commonly related to theatrical art; and the right to cultural inclusion, since, in the understanding of the minority group, a play that deals with the subordination of transvestites must have them as protagonists, and not only in fiction. Regarding the many questions between that which is staged and that which is lived, representation and representativeness, political and programmatic nature, elements in both cultural criticism as well as media narratives are reconfigured. There are various intentions operating in media culture, including those of the market, which seeks to meet identity demands. Recognition articulates, in its own terms, fiction and society, updating the relation between them and challenging media criticism to reinterpret it in our context. ■

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