GHOSTS AGAINST NECROPOLITICS: SPECTRAL EFFECTS IN POLICE BRUTALITY VIDEOS

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ABSTRACT: This article examines how videos of police brutality in Brazil – specifically the Favela Naval scandal (1997) and the murder of Genivaldo Santos (2022) – produce spectral rather than merely evidentiary effects. Drawing on Derrida, Avery Gordon, Hilan Bensusan and Denise Ferreira da Silva, it argues that the power of these images lies not in visibility or transparency but in their capacity to evoke the ghosts of slavery and dictatorship, destabilizing hegemonic narratives of justice, empathy, and race in Brazil's necropolitical order.

INTRODUCTION

In March 1997, six years after Americans were shocked by the brutal scenes on the infamous Rodney King tape, it was the Brazilians' turn to deal with the exposure, on national television, of the unbridled violence of their own police force. There were plenty of similarities between the two cases. A video shot from a distance. The nocturnal acts of police officers, unaware of the camera. An amateur cinematographer calling for justice. The video's stark intrusion into public space, exposing state violence against vulnerable and racialized individuals – a shadowy power that society either remains ignorant of or chooses to ignore. Much like the beating of Rodney King, that tape "touched a raw nerve" by displaying the brutality against black and peripheral communities[1], calling on ghosts of the past to demand a "something-to-be-done"[2].

[1] John Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Redwood: Stanford University Press, 1995), 248.

[2] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), xvi.

The incident became known as Favela Naval, after the region where it occurred, located on the outskirts of São Paulo. Over three days, hidden in a shack, an amateur cameraman filmed police officers torturing, extorting, and even killing residents. The battalion would set up a fake checkpoint, stopping cars and pedestrians – always at night, always in the same place. Brazil's largest television network, the powerful Rede Globo, aired the footage on its main newscast. Such cruelty triggered an unprecedented crisis within the police institution, historically supported by a society with a deep-rooted fear of crime.

Much like the Rodney King case, these scenes from Favela Naval did not depict an isolated incident. A mere glance at national statistics would confirm the extent of the violence perpetrated by the Brazilian police, one of the deadliest forces in the world. Nonetheless, the press coverage offered a noticeable tone of surprise. According to Neves and Maia[3], the rhetorical impact of amateur images then rare on broadcast TV magnified the Favela Naval scandal. Aired on prime time, such strange visual matter struck a chord in the collective consciousness, creating a rift in the traditional narrative about the police, and rallying human rights advocates beyond the usual progressive bubble. Could the video itself and its aura of secrecy explain why this routine brutality erupted into a scandal with such extraordinary repercussions?

The historical context was undeniably favorable, which partly explains the magnitude of the event. Late 1990s Brazil was enveloped in an atmosphere of optimism. Following a decade of hyperinflation, economic stabilization had fostered hopes that Brazil would finally join the ranks of developed democracies—where security institutions that freely torture and execute suspects would no longer have a place. Additionally, the 1990s saw a series of scandals involving police violence, each echoing the previous one, like an ever-returning specter.

Could the combination of eloquent visual evidence and adherence to public opinion be the key to understanding why some incidents become widely publicized scandals? How crucial is the existence of videos—and why do some go viral while others remain unnoticed? Why did the murder of George Floyd

[3] Bráulio Neves and Rousiley Maia, "Astonishing images: TV news and accountability processes". *Brazilian Journalism Research.* v. 2, n. 1 (2009).

spark global outrage, while the deaths of a thousand other people at the hands of American police in the same year did not? Was it the shocking footage captured by Darnella Frazier? Let us not forget that other major scandals, like the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014, lacked visual evidence, which underscores the challenge in establishing a causal relationship between videography, public reaction, and the pursuit of justice.

Aware that no formula can fully elucidate or predict the public's response to events, I argue in this article that the impact of such cases hinges less on the explicit display of violence – a notion tied to a metaphysics of presence and an ideology of transparency – than on the *spectral effect* evoked by videos and by the discourses that circulate around them. In other words, contrary to common assumptions, the power of raw footage in these contexts does not lie in its capacity to render atrocities visible in real time, but rather in the interplay between the visible and the invisible, the known and the unknown, the present and the past – an interplay capable of summoning memories and specters that exceed the event itself. The promise of total visibility that underlies witness videos within a regime of visual surveillance – indeed, the very opposite of a spectral visuality – ends up generating haunting precisely because it frustrates that unattainable promise. As we shall see, it is above all in what remains obscured, and in the reverberations of prior violences, that the mnemonic and spectral force of these images ultimately resides.

My method involves the analysis of specific political-media scandals with a cross-sectional approach, linking references from spectrology with image theories, as well as elements of historical, social, and political reality. The focus is on Brazil, a world leader in police killings. In addition to the Favela Naval scandal mentioned, this essay examines a recent occurrence whose widespread impact is also inseparable from the impressive footage. In 2022, after a traffic stop, two police officers confined Genivaldo Santos in the trunk of their car and, to subdue him, discharged a large volume of tear gas, resulting in his death by suffocation. This occurred in front of numerous witnesses, who recorded the event and shared it on social media. The footage quickly went viral, accompanied by the hashtag #gaschamber – triggering a historical resonance that heightened the public's outrage, as discussed further.

VIDEOPOWER VERSUS NECROPOLITICS

Police killing and torturing of citizens is so widespread in Brazil that we can consider it an unwritten security policy. According to the Annual Report by the Brazilian Forum of Public Security[4], an independent NGO, police executed 6.243 people in 2024. This figure is nearly six times higher than in the US, despite the American population being 50% larger. The statistics also reveal the racist nature of the phenomenon: 82% of those killed by Brazilian officers were Afro-descendants, who make up 54% of the total population. Equally alarming is the growth in these numbers, confirming the expansion of necropolitics in Brazilian society. Police homicides have almost tripled since 2013, rising from around two thousand to over six thousand in ten years, an increase of nearly 200%.

Favela Naval allegedly revealed videography's potential in confronting this necropower that operates amidst public denial and complicit silence[5]. The almost intolerable scenes created a rupture in the conventional discourse about law enforcement. Unlike dominant narratives that typically portray police officers as heroes, these videos exposed them as torturers. What made these images so distinctive?

As previously mentioned, the context was well-timed. Brazilian society glimpsed the potential for long-awaited economic and social development[6]. In 1994, a new monetary plan[7] brought stability to an economy ravaged by hyperinflation since the early 1980s. The prolonged crisis had plunged the country into a climate of widespread pessimism. Not even the return of democracy in 1985, after 24 years of military dictatorship, was enough to lift the spirits of a population that saw prices rising weekly. Economic stabilization triggered an atmosphere of optimism, amplified by the media, which supported

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[4] Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública. *Anuário Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2025*. São Paulo: FBSP, 2025. https://forumseguranca.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/anuario-2025.pdf

[5] Some reports on the Favela Naval case are available on the Rede Globo website at the following link: https://memoriaglobo.globo.com/jornalismo/coberturas/favela-naval/noticia/favela-naval.ghtml

[6] The notion that Brazil, with its abundant natural resources and vast territory, will eventually become a developed nation has been circulating since at least the early 20th century. This prophecy was further popularized by Austrian writer Stefan Zweig in his 1941 book, *Brazil: a Country of the Future*.

[7] In February 1994, the Itamar Franco administration launched an economic program that ended the prolonged cycle of hyperinflation. The success of the Real Plan propelled the then Finance Minister, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, to be elected president later that year.

the neoliberal policies of then-president Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Cardoso, an opponent of the dictatorship who went into exile shortly after the coup, also launched Brazil's first national human rights plan in 1996, following a UN guideline for all member countries. This plan and its global integration reinforced the anti-authoritarian turn in news coverage.

During that decade, the country had already witnessed several human rights scandals. In 1992, the police killed 111 prisoners during a prison riot in São Paulo, an event known as the Carandiru massacre, named after the prison where it occurred. In 1993, a group of shooters, including undercover policemen, fired on homeless children sleeping in front of the Candelária Church in Rio de Janeiro, killing eight teenagers and injuring dozens more. In 1996, a year before the Favela Naval incident, there was the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre. Security forces in the state of Pará, northern Brazil, murdered twenty-one people and injured over seventy when they invaded a farm occupied by landless workers. A TV crew on the settlement captured the battalion firing into the crowd.

These unsteady television images, framed from a distance, resemble the scenes captured by the amateur tape of Favela Naval. In the Carandiru and Candelária massacres, despite the absence of visual witnessing, photos and footage taken after the fact hinted at the brutality against defenseless victims. Thus, one unifying element in these incidents—and, if we look closely, in most police brutality scandals—is the explicit cruelty. Prisoners summarily machine-gunned inside crowded cells. Hooded vigilantes shooting orphaned teenagers in their sleep at night. A battalion opening fire on hundreds of unarmed peasants. Police officers torturing and killing during a fake blitz. Some of these cruelties were exposed by video itself, while others were narrated by witnesses or survivors to journalists, prompting the audience to mentally reconstruct the horror scenes.

There is a resonance among those tragedies that magnifies their sole effects. As Alicia Richardson notes, "every new victim of police brutality joins a long, mythical chain of previous martyrs."[8] They are like ghosts from the past that reemerge with each new savagery, extending the impact beyond the immediate. The cruelty of slavery, the long history of violations against Blacks and the poor,

[8] Alicia Richardson, *Bearing Witness while Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest #Journalism* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2020), 144.

the disappearances during military dictatorship – all contribute to a collective memory of state violence. Brazilian society's debt to the memory of the state's victims is glaringly evident. No military personnel involved in the crimes of the dictatorship have been prosecuted or tried. Despite the exorbitant rates of deaths due to police intervention in Brazil, only a small number of officers have been convicted of murder in recent decades. In Bensusan's terms[9], the reverberation among these different events generates a dynamic in which each new addition gives rise to a memory assemblage that interacts with already established ones, all evoking in their own way the specters of slavery, the brutality of urban peripheries, and the military dictatorship, forming new assemblages of memory and additions, whose effects remain unpredictable.

One approach to understanding police brutality scandals is the presence of a spectral effect that exceeds the event itself. Beyond the immediate outrage for the victim, high-profile cases carry haunting elements capable of affecting a broad section of society. The clamor for justice and transformation extends to challenging the power structures responsible for the persistence of such violence. Avery Gordon[10] insists on the specter's capacity to appear in various forms, often perceptible only to the most discerning observer, even if it is not necessarily visible. In the cases I'm analyzing, haunting manifests through video witnessing, which promises transparency. However, the spectral effect is not limited to the evidentiary nature of the images and their ability to screen the aggressions as they actually happened. There is something beyond the forensic evidence – a force located between the visible and the invisible that unbalances the cognitive arrangements defining reality.

As noted above, the complaint stems from a video recording. The usual take on the scandal would link the images to its capacity to reveal brutality through visual technology. From this perspective, the power of the Favela Naval tape would lie in the presentation of facts in a linear, precise, and incontestable manner. A crystal-clear document open to inspection, scrutiny, and dissection. Within journalism and the media, it is often taken for granted that visibility possesses intrinsic value. Transparent knowledge of reality – in this case, shedding

[9] Bensusan, Hilan. *Memory Assemblages: Spectral Realism and the Logic of Addition*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024.
[10] Gordon, 63.

light on social and geographical segments invisible within the public space – is thus imagined as inherently just and aimed at achieving justice in various spheres (legal, social, political, etc.).

However, my analysis highlights crucial aspects of the *Favela Naval* case whose effects arise not from transparency or presence, but from the complex interplay between the visible and the invisible, the transparent and the opaque, vision and the other senses. The power of the VHS images from *Favela Naval* lies less in their evidentiary value than in their spectral effects. Derrida[11] has underscored the spectral dimension inherent in every act of filming or photographing reality, especially the human body. Once transmuted into images, actions, people, and things acquire the capacity to return endlessly, even after death.

> As soon as there is a technology of the image, visibility brings night. It incarnates in a night body, it radiates a night light. [...] We are already specters of a "televised." [...] once it has been taken, captured, this image will be reproducible in our absence, because we know this already, we are already haunted by this future, which brings our death. Our disappearance is already here. We are already transfixed by a disappearance[12].

To analyze spectral effects within images, it is important to distinguish between the concepts of specter and haunting and the notion of trauma, widely applied in studies of atrocities. Trauma refers not only to the lasting physical and psychological effects of painful experiences, but also to a type of repressed memory that cannot be fully articulated in words or images. In the Freudian tradition, as the residue of experiences untamed by language, it is structured through return and repetition. A symptom that resurfaces ephemerally in individuals and collectives, demonstrating "the subject's failure to internalize a past event, in which something from the past emerges to disrupt the present"[13]. The dominant perspective in trauma studies frames it in terms of "loss, mourning,

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[11] Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International.* Translated by Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994.

[12] Derrida, Jacques, and Bernard Stiegler. "Spectrographies." In *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, edited by María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, 37–51. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, 38.

[13] Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock "from Introduction: The Spectral Turn" in María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 63.

and recovery"[14] concerning past events. This approach discusses memory productions that address the symptoms of unrepresentable events to achieve some form of individual and collective appeasement.

The notion of specter resembles that of trauma, as both designate an element from the past that haunts the present. However, spectral haunting also involves a call to action for future transformation. As Avery Gordon states, "haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done."[15] While traumatic memory compels a social group to collectively process a painful past that obsessively resurfaces, "the spectral return is capable of exceeding pure replication"[16]. Thus, the specter inhabits multiple temporal planes, envisioning future possibilities already contained in past events, though not yet realized.

> "In an active, dynamic engagement, [haunting] may reveal the insufficiency of the present moment, as well as the disconsolations and erasures of the past, and a tentative hopefulness for future resolutions."

The concept of trauma underlies, for instance, Roland Barthes's[17] notion of *punctum*: a particular element within an image that affects the viewer or the collective by activating traumatic memory. In touching this memory, the *punctum* gestures toward an experience so extreme that it resists full articulation in language, whether verbal or visual. The influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis on the concept of *punctum* is notorious, referring to what Lacan called the Real – an instance of subjective experience that cannot be written, spoken, or visualized, itself derived from the Freudian concept of trauma. Impervious to language, the Real can be neither represented nor expressed, literally or metaphorically. Every encounter with it is marked by absence and failure. Hal Foster[18] later coined the term traumatic realism to describe artistic and visual practices that represent not the Real itself but the recurring, failed encounter with an instance that

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[14] María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 11.
[15] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.
[16] Blanco and Peeren, *The Spectralities Reader,* 16.
[17] Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography.* Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.
[18] Foster, Hal. *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.

momentarily flashes into visibility only to vanish again. Grounded in the repetition of this near encounter, traumatic realism unsettles the subject.

Concepts such as *punctum* and traumatic realism thus converge around the idea that certain images evoke a hidden yet excessive dimension, one that confronts us and destabilizes established norms, consensuses, and discourses. This infinitesimal rupture of meaning ultimately disrupts hegemonic frameworks of signification, compelling new articulations between word and image and new ways of narrating and reconstituting memory.

Ludueña[19] produces a reversal in the conceptual framework of psychoanalysis. He asserts that the dynamics of the unconscious and its relationship with language actually describe the *modus operandi* of specters. It is the specters that dwell in a dimension beyond the human linguistic and representational apparatus. They are the ones who insist and haunt, causing objective effects on social and political relations, rather than repressed memories lodged in the unconscious of individuals or collectives. The philosopher also rejects the Western tradition that links the specter to a "form of appearance"[20], to simulacrum, to a de-substantialized double.

> The spectrology proposed here presents the specter as a disruption and an "interval" of thinking and imagining that cannot be apprehended as a material image. What thus emerges is the need for a *paraontosophy* of the specter as Voice and as a vehicle of an imaginality in which sensibility operates only *a posteriori* as the receptacle of an incorporeal *a priori.*[21]

Conceived within the horizon of modern metaphysics, images reveal little of the force of specters, essentially "protean" and "multiform," capable of assuming any appearance. Spectral interpellation may be subtle, arising from an atmosphere of haunting or uncanniness discernible only to the trained observer, as Avery Gordon suggests. It may also appeal to modes of perception beyond the visual, as in the narratives and artworks that Juliana Martínez[22] identifies with

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[19] Ludueña, Fabián. *A Comunidade dos Espectros II: Princípios de Espectrologia*. Florianópolis: Cultura e Barbárie, 2018.

[20] Ludueña, p. 98.

[21] Ludueña, p. 101.

[22] Martínez, Juliana. *Haunting Without Ghosts: Spectral Realism in Colombian Literature, Film, and Art*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020.

spectral realism. However—and this is one of the main arguments I advance here—it can also manifest through shock, through abrupt affective encounters, and through the language of trauma.

An effect produced not by the full visibility of the recorded events, a live transmission of the real stripped of shadows and opacities, but rather by the capacity to provoke a crisis within the images themselves and in their relation to hegemonic memory, establishing an anachronic temporality. The *punctum* here signals the specter: an external, objective figure that returns to demand the settlement of past debts, to call for justice and reparation. As in the operation of traumatic realism, the force of the shock lies in its ability to evoke the power of what remains hidden, opening a fissure that points to the disjunction between past, present, and future, between appearance and concealment.

In the Favela Naval footage, the haunting arises from three main factors: (i) aesthetics; (ii) content; (iii) the reflexive presence of the camera. Firstly, the impact of amateur footage contrasts sharply with the clarity of news broadcasts. The tape's blurriness, its muffled sound, dark nighttime setting, and unstable distant framing, along with the date and time in the corner of the screen, forge a visual object somewhat foreign to the 1990s television in Brazil. The realism of the amateur aesthetic[23], which heightens the perceptual shock, coexists ambiguously with the oneiric effect of the grainy, nocturnal footage. This obscure realism paradoxically possesses a "dreamlike or liminal property that makes it resonant, with suggestions of the unconscious."[24]

Thus, the very materiality of the home video, once displaced onto broadcast television, produces a sense of the uncanny. The rarity of its precarious texture reinforces the feeling of an invasion of the screen by an exogenous and deferred element – an addition that generates a new kind of assemblage in this TV report, combining the clear, high-definition images of the presenter and reporter with VHS footage of scenes recorded weeks earlier.

One can perceive, on the part of the broadcaster, a redoubled effort to control

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[23] Motrescu-Mayes, Annamaria and Susan Aasman. *Amateur Media and Participatory Cultures: Film, Video, and Digital Media*. London: Routledge, 2019.

[24] Aaron Doyle. "An alternative current in surveillance and control: broadcasting surveillance footage of crimes" in Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson(Eds). *The New Politics of Surveillance and Visibility* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 210.

the discourse generated by these raw images, images to which television was not yet accustomed. The report compiles excerpts from an amateur video, supplemented by an off-screen narration and the reporter's on-camera commentary. An assemblage in the literal sense, a kind of collage journalism. As is typical of television discourse, the narration devotes itself primarily to describing facts and actions already visible in the images, a redundant practice aimed at steering the viewer's reception of the narrative.

This heightened effort to control the meaning of the amateur footage becomes evident, for instance, in moments when the narration anticipates events that the images will show a few seconds later. When Mário José Josino appears for the first time, Resende warns: "The Gol stops. The three men get out. Look at the young man with the notebook in his hand. He's going to die." The anticipation seems intended to contain an element that is, by nature, unstable and, to some extent, uncontrollable. Yet there are moments when something escapes, an excess that becomes noticeable, for example, in the brief seconds when the reporter falls silent and lets the video play, revealing instability and openness of meaning.

The clandestine footage makes us see both too much and too little. We witness scenes of torture but often struggle to distinguish the actions. We observe the policeman shooting at the car but not the victim being hit. At other moments, violence is displayed in all its rawness. Watching the video is an uncanny encounter, presenting something familiar yet out of place. As Avery Gordon reminds us, "uncanny experiences are haunting experiences."[25]

In other words, the images bear witness to the criminal operation, yet there is something there beyond visual evidence, a force situated in the interstice between the visible and the invisible, unsettling established cognitive arrangements. Some of the most disturbing moments unfold outside the frame. Such is the case of the assault on a young Black man, the musician Sílvio Calixto Lemos, who passes by and is stopped by the police. One of the officers leads him to a secluded spot behind a wall and beats him with a baton. We can hear the young man's screams as he repeatedly begs the officer to stop. Then, the sharp

[25] With the concept of the uncanny, Freud described something simultaneously strange and familiar that evokes a blend of horror, anxiety, foreignness, uncertainty, and eeriness. For him, these experiences involved the return of repressed complexes and unconscious memories. See Gordon, 55.

crack of a gunshot tears through the soundscape, and the screams fall silent. At that moment, even Globo didn't know what had happened to Sílvio Lemos – only later did the press clarify that he had not been hit. At the time the report aired, the outcome remained open: no one knew where the shot had gone.

The predominance of sound throughout this off-screen scene evokes the aesthetic principles of spectral realism, centered on multisensory representations. According to Martínez, "as vision becomes increasingly obscure and unreliable, sound plays a greater role in shaping the atmosphere that permeates these works."[26] Sound is at once more invasive and ambiguous. It appeals to haptic perception – almost wounding us – but it avoids the ocularcentric regime of factual truth. The suspense triggered by the sound of the gunshot persists like a puncture, an eloquent absence within a journalistic discourse that vows to reconstruct the fundamental details of events.

The victim's screams echo across time, conjuring the scenes of subjection from the enslaved past and its continuity in Brazil's necropolitical present. Sílvio Lemos, musician, citizen, pedestrian on an ordinary night, free and supposedly equal before the law, suddenly captured and beaten by a police officer. Time unravels, out of joint. We are in 1997, but also in the nineteenth century. The cry and its spectral quality intensify this anachrony. It is like Dana, the protagonist of Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred*, trapped in her return to the antebellum South of the United States.

Denise Ferreira da Silva[27] draws on the example of Dana to emphasize how the Black body, as signifier, still retains the subjugated condition of slavery, when Blackness inhabited the interstice between the human and the thing. A condition that authorized and continues to authorize total violence. The persistence of racial brutality also reveals the fragility of modern notions of freedom and equality. This continuity undermines the very foundations of the subject understood as autonomous and self-determined and calls into question the ethical, legal, symbolic, and metaphysical pillars of a supposed liberal democracy.

In dialogue with Ferreira da Silva, Fred Moten, and Saidiya Hartman, Bensusan[28] notes that the ambiguous position of the Black body forecloses white

[26] Martinez, 28.
[27] Ferreira da Silva, Denise. *Unpayable Debt.* London: Sternberg Press, 2022.
[28] Bensusan. *Memory Assemblages.*

identification with the other. There is no possible empathy before a subject who unsettles the very structure of the modern subject tied to the metaphysics of presence. At the same time, this violated body is a specter that acts upon the cognitive pillars of the contemporary subject, for it is capable of revealing, in Ferreira da Silva's words, the post-Enlightenment onto-epistemological architecture that authorizes the continuity of racial violence[29].

Thus, the torture scene of the musician Sílvio Lemos, audible but not visible, conveyed through raw images tinged with the oneiric, forms an memory assemblage that conducts the viewer to a space-time where past, present, and future coexist. Like every act of denunciation, it bears a demand for justice, amplified by the spectral quality of this anachronic experience.

Mário José Josino, the mechanic murdered by the police in this case, was also Afro-Brazilian. Yet we neither see nor hear his body at the moment of the killing. The tape shows only the instant when Officer Rambo fires toward the car where Josino sits, the vehicle already beyond the frame. The victim had appeared earlier, when the officers forced him out of the car along with two friends. The driver, Jefferson Caputi, a white man, was beaten by the police in front of the camera. It is a scene of explicit brutality: the officers strike him repeatedly with batons. The death, however, takes place off-screen. Rambo shoots into the void, and thus both death and the deceased remain absent from the image. The television report does not even display a photograph of Josino, a faceless specter. He is portrayed as a worker, a subjectivity opposed to that of the criminal in the binary imposed on the peripheral subject, but one that nonetheless recalls another duality intrinsic to Blackness, as Ferreira da Silva[30] argues, between the human and the thing that produces value.

Most of the police's victims are white, a detail that deepens the exceptionality of the scenes. As mentioned earlier, the violence against the two Black men takes place off-screen, with the spectral effects already discussed. The display of brutality against young white men creates an interplay between the visible and the invisible that heightens the sense of haunting. It is the white men who are seen being beaten within the frame. Thus, another factor that disrupts consensus

[29] *Apud* Bensusan. *Memory Assemblages*.
[30] Ferreira da Silva. *Unpayable Debt*.

and heightens astonishment is the positioning of the various characters involved in this testimonial experience: the police officers and victims within the scene; the amateur cinematographer, whose presence is felt through the camera movements; and the audience, who act as distant co-witnesses. These subjects are out of their expected places, disturbing the "us" vs. "them", "me" vs. "other" axes that structure subjectivities in Brazilian society. The displacement of each character leads to a chain reaction, unsettling the projections that construct social identities and revealing to each subject the phantasmatic nature of their own self.

The camera's angle from inside a house on the outskirts of town creates a clandestine, denouncing gaze that beckons the viewer's complicity. The middle-class audience finds itself surprisingly close to the favela, a space they mostly know through media representations that paint the peripheries as dangerous territories. Brazil, a former colony with the largest number of enslaved Africans in the Americas, remains divided by a schism that, in Frantz Fanon's definition, distinguishes between two "species" of human beings[31]. The racist subjectivity of the elites is anchored in a sense of superiority over the supposed inferiority of lower classes. For Achille Mbembe, this kind of segregation is driven by a fantasy of separation typical of the privileged classes, who project a fictional mask onto the peripheral other, with whom "they will not be able to truly maintain relations of reciprocity and mutual involvement"[32]. Just as in the South African apartheid, the center-periphery structure of Brazilian urban spaces (mirroring the elite-poor relationship) "naturalizes the strangeness in the relationships between one and the other"[33].

The Favela Naval victims defy this label, denaturalizing the naturalized perceptions. They drive cars—an expensive and often inaccessible product for most low-income Brazilians. They are well-dressed. Most of them are white. The police force young men in elegant shirts out of their cars and torture them indiscriminately. One victim is beaten thirty-four times on his back and foot. Another not only endures a beating but also watches as the police destroy his car – his property. In short, the middle-class audience tends to automatically identify

[31] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 2005), 25.
[32] Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*. Translated by Steven Corcoran. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019, 78.
[33] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 78.

with these tortured subjects, whose appearance creates a specular effect, a fuller identification than the dialectic of fear and pity usually directed at peripheral victims. An unsettling effect arises as the affluent audience is faced with, instead of oppositional Others, a reflection of itself.

On the other hand, the police, an institution primarily tasked with controlling the outskirts that frighten the elites, distributes gratuitous cruelty. The guards' demeanor is nonchalant: they wear their caps backwards and laugh amongst themselves while their colleagues torture. A scene irreconcilable with the image of disciplinarian officers rigid in their protocols. To paraphrase Richardson and Schankweiler's analysis of the Abu Ghraib photos, "it is not simply the content of the images in a symbolic or representational sense that gives them their force, but rather the way in which they capture affective dynamics in their arrangement of faces, bodies, and environments"[34]. The interactions among the bodies reveal a power play that is both sinister and banal. A guard strolls and hands a baton to his colleague – the one used against Sílvio Lemos. The other policemen chat in a festive mood, not bothering to look at the spectacle of torture.

This triangulation between perpetrators, victims and an amateur cinematographer produces an affective intensity that challenges the audience. It generates indignation and empathy with the victims but also alludes to the tacit pact of cruelty that has always sustained the use of force against the marginalized. The middle classes are particularly shocked to recognize their own "tolerance of illegal violence," this "deliberate crossing of a threshold of violence and cruelty" that is the legacy of colonial terror[35].

Seeing themselves, instead of an Other, the white elite experiences a momentary collapse of its own subjectivity. There is a glimpse of the mythological nature of the relationship between the dominant and the dominated, which justifies brutality against this peripheral subject – an Other whose dangerous trait results from an invention, a "hallucinatory circle"[36] with brutal consequences in reality. The veil lifts, revealing the cruelty inherent in security institutions with which the audience sitting on the sofa is usually complicit. This revelation, made

[34] Michael Richardson and Kerstin Schankweiler, "Affective witnessing" in Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve (eds.), *Affective Societies: Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 172.
[35] Mbembe, 33.
[36] Mbembe, 78.

visible at the surface level yet combined with the eluded and multisensory elements — screams, torture, and the death of a racialized man — lies at the root of the spectral effect of the *Favela Naval* images.

ECHOES OF PAST GENOCIDES

The murder of Genivaldo Santos took place twenty-five years later, in May 2022[37]. Although relatively close in historical terms, the incident inhabits a different visual regime. While the raw video of Favela Naval emerged in 1997 as a rarity, the brutal images of Santos' death circulate in a context of abundance. The ubiquity of camera devices has led to an explosion of images of atrocities worldwide, most recorded by ordinary people. Citizen journalists use social networks to instantly distribute photos and videos, bypassing traditional media. The contours of a "new visual culture of witnessing"[38] stood out in events such as the Arab Spring, the Syrian War, and the 2011 Tsunami in Japan, all filled with images captured by amateur cameramen, media activists, victims and non-human devices such as security cameras and drones. Although video witnessing is not entirely new, it has acquired a new scale that redefines the experience of direct and mediated testimony. When "everyone [is] a potential witness at any given time" and "the former temporal and spatial division of witnessing and testifying increasingly dissolves," the act of witnessing becomes a pillar of one's own subjectivity[39]. Everyone can now photograph and film events and watch recordings from all around the world. "Globalized media technologies make witnessing an almost commonplace mode of relating to the world."[40]

Brazil's political landscape in 2022 is also quite different from 1997. Led by president Jair Bolsonaro, a prominent figure of the global far-right, and former army captain who longs for the military dictatorship, Bolsonaro has always opposed the human rights agenda. He champions a conception of public security

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[37] Several international news outlets have reported the murder of Genivaldo Santos. Below are two examples:
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/26/brazil-mentally-ill-black-man-dies-gas-police-car
https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/27/americas/brazil-police-car-gas-intl/index.html

[38] Schankweiler, Kerstin, Verena Straub, and Tobias Wendl, eds. *Image Testimonies: Witnessing in Times of Social Media.* New York: Routledge, 2019, 5.

[39] Schankweiler, Straub and Wendl, 5.

[40] Richardson and Schankweiler, 168.

based on violence against suspects. The recent surge of the far-right in politics carries a militaristic ideology as a core tenet. However, the focus extends beyond the Armed Forces. As the sociologist Gabriel Feltran notes, "police autonomy is a central demand of the political movement led by Bolsonaro"[41].

The rise of the extremist movement appears to be a key factor behind the surge in police killings over the past decade. Although Bolsonaro only took office in 2019, police institutions have gained power since the early 2000s – a stark contrast to the 1990s, when they were weakened in their relationship with governments and suffered reputational damage[42]. Violent methods, long approved by a significant portion of society, have expanded as forces have become wealthier and more autonomous. Bolsonaro's election further emboldened these battalions, despite the fact that police forces are subordinate to state governments rather than the federal. Concurrently, criminal organizations have grown in size, power, and sophistication, justifying a harsher approach to the infamous "war on crime."

In a regime of hypervisibility, footage depicting police violence inundated social networks. Most videos do not escalate into political-media scandals. Some merely circulate on social media, while others are shown on the news without sparking public debate. A saturation of violent content may have led to a normalization of atrocities. In the case of Genivaldo Santos, multiple videos from bystanders capture the brutality from various angles, a common occurrence in urban incidents.

It's not difficult to understand why Santos' homicide has garnered such attention. News stories highlight the officers' cruelty, who locked him in the trunk, poured gas, and left him there for eleven minutes. He was murdered in a "gas chamber," a term frequently used in reports about the murder and widely shared as a hashtag on social media. The banality of the situation adds to the shock. Santos was riding a motorcycle without a helmet when the cops[43] asked for his

[41] Feltran, Gabriel. 2021. "Polícia e política: o regime de poder hoje liderado por Bolsonaro." *Novos Estudos Cebrap*, June 27. Translated by the author. Accessed [date you accessed it]. https://novosestudos.com.br/policia-e-politica-o-regime-de-poder-hoje-liderado-por-bolsonaro/#gsc.tab=0.

[42] Feltran, 2021.

[43] The agents involved – William de Barros Noia, Kleber Nascimento Freitas, and Paulo Rodolpho Lima Nascimento – were dismissed from the police force and are currently in prison awaiting trial for homicide.

driver's license. He refused to comply, leading the officers to handcuff him and lock him in the car. The family later reported that Santos had been diagnosed with schizophrenia years earlier, which would explain his unexpected reaction. He resisted, tried to break free, and attempted to get out of the trunk, prompting the policemen to use pepper spray and tear gas. The available videos vividly capture this dantesque scene: Santos locked in the car with only his legs visible and a cloud of gas rising from within. The medical report confirmed death by asphyxiation.

Like Favela Naval, the spectral effect transcends the routine violence inflicted upon racialized and vulnerable subjects. Santos, an Afro-Brazilian living on the outskirts of Sergipe, in the northeast of the country, was a typical victim of necropower. However, the images and the term "gas chamber" evoke an event distant in both time and space: the genocide of the Jews by the Nazis during World War II. On social media, countless profiles drew parallels with the extermination camps. Michel Gherman, a professor at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and a progressive leader of Brazil's Jewish community, stated: "It doesn't resemble Nazism; in terms of the practice of murder, it is Nazism".[44]

The Holocaust is widely regarded as the emblematic example of absolute dehumanization. It remains a recurring theme in literature, cinema, and other media. Furthermore, "the Holocaust survivor-witness played a central role in canonizing testimony as the subversive idiom of oppressed and subaltern groups and as the primary medium of moral sensibility towards victims of atrocities"[45]. The scene of Brazilian officers gassing a man with a mental disorder has a resonance[46] with images of the Second War death camps. In a media-witnessing age, when viewing atrocities from a distance shapes subjectivities, the Holocaust stands as one fundamental event that mediates and, to some extent, universalizes the ethical response to brutality[47] – even in countries with their own histories of

https://g1.globo.com/se/sergipe/noticia/2024/06/19/caso-genivaldo-justica-federal-nega-nulidade-de-processo-e-mantem-decisao-que-leva-reus-a-juri-popular.ghtml

[44] "Asfixiado pela PRF: morto por gás, Genivaldo foi abordado por não usar capacete", RDNews, May 28, 2022. Translated by the author. Available at: https://www.rdnews.com.br/nacional/conteudos/159924

[45] Richardson and Schankweiler, 147.

[46] Richardson and Schankweiler, 172.

[47] I am not asserting the Holocaust's exceptional status in comparison with other genocides committed against different peoples throughout history. In my opinion, there is no sense in establishing a hierarchy of

genocides, like Brazil.

Genivaldo Santos, a faceless man trapped in a gas chamber by officers behaving like Nazis: a haunting scene that once again disrupts the entrenched "us" vs. "them", "me" vs. "other" dichotomy that underpins racial and class hierarchies in Brazil. It echoes the Favela Naval incident in its power to elicit stronger identification from the middle class – there, due to the whiteness of most of the tortured youth; here, through the lens of the Holocaust. In Brazil, Jews are perceived as white despite a history rife with anti-Semitism.

The gasified and consequently universalized victim no longer belongs to the group of "torturable classes"[48]. If only momentarily, Santos becomes a fellow human being, one of "us" for the elites. The effect is both specular and spectral, enhanced by the view of the police as absolute evil – the same institution that serves the elite in its mission of social control. The executioner-guards suddenly become "them", while "us" now encompasses the entire community of media witnesses who identify with the victim.

What is haunting about these incidents is not merely the violence, which is omnipresent on screens today, but the disruption of social labels, short-circuiting the representational regime underlying power hierarchies. It's neither black criminals robbing whites, as crime journalism narrates daily; nor the officers torturing Afro-Brazilians and poor individuals as part of the alleged war on crime. Instead, we witness a cruel police force attacking a suddenly universalized subject[49], drawing empathy from all strata of a segregated society and invoking a call for justice. By recognizing the victim as a fellow human being, the elite confronts its own sadism, the carte blanche given to "torturers who are always on

suffering. My point concerns the Holocaust's centrality within the field of studies on testimony and the representation of atrocity, as well as the abundance of cultural – and even entertainment – productions devoted to the Nazi extermination camps. For a discussion of these questions, including the ethical limits of representing suffering, see Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*. Translated by Shane B. Lillis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

[48] Pinheiro, Paulo Sérgio. 1991. "Autoritarismo e transição." *Revista USP*, no. 9, 48. Translated by the author.

[49] It is important to note that this event took place before the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent genocide of Palestinians in Gaza perpetrated by the Israeli government, an event that has intensified public debate about the persecution of Jews in the past and the forms of violence committed in the name of Zionism.

the spot, ready to enter the scene and clean up the garden"[50].

The interplay of race, class and empathy underlying the Favela Naval and Genivaldo Santos scandals also emerged to explain the impact of the photograph of a two-year-old Syrian boy found dead on a Turkish beach in September 2015. The image of Aylan Kurdi lying lifeless on the sand became a symbol of the refugee crisis in Europe. A professor at the University of London, Nadine El-Enany asks:

> What is it about Aylan Kurdi's photo that has so stirred European public opinion on the refugee issue? Aylan Kurdi was by no means the first child to drown on his way to Europe. [...] How did white Europeans suddenly manage to humanize the body of a refugee and, above all, the body of a Muslim? Perhaps it was the innocence evoked by the body of a light-skinned child that allowed the temporary and fleeting awakening of white Europeans to a refugee movement that long preceded the media prominence of that photograph."

El-Enany wrote these lines a year after the tragedy, when the photograph had vanished from the headlines and the outcry over the refugees had seemingly dissipated. "Who remembers Aylan Kurdi now?" he provocatively asks in the title. Although the boy's specter initially unleashed active reactions, the treatment of immigrants did not improve. Instead, xenophobia has only intensified in Europe since then, with Aylan now entirely forgotten. A similar phenomenon prevails in Brazil, exemplified by the cases of Favela Naval and Genivaldo Santos. Despite the legal, institutional, and political repercussions, the call for change has failed to curtail the violent police culture. The necropower machine continues to operate at full throttle, claiming more and more lives while the dead still wait for something to be done.

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[50] Batista, Vera Malaguti. *O Medo na Cidade do Rio de Janeiro.* Rio de Janeiro: Revan, 2003. 105. Translated by the author.

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