

Creative lines in a history class: the paradox of thinking faced with the dispositif of banality*

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Abstract

This article discusses history class as an opportunity to consider and problematize time, based on the creations of teachers. This opportunity is constructed in mediations with youth and their cultures, with historic knowledge and with sentient issues. In times when common public opinion appears to have an important position, when attacks on history classes multiply and when there is a deliberate process of devalorization of thinking and scientific production, particularly in the field of history, we propose to problematize what we call the dispositif of banalization, based on ideas from Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault. Our objective is to reflect on history classes, using scenes of practices of student teachers and literature from the field as sources for research and producing knowledge. For this article we have selected a class that problematizes imaginaries constructed about Ancient Egypt. The connection that we establish is that, while the dispositif of banality produces and reproduces perspectives, readings and relations in society in general, the history classroom creates a refuge for thinking by opening a space “between” the past and future – a space of imagination that allows the creative re-encounter with others.

Keywords

Teaching history – thinking – Dispositif of banality.

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Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought?
Arendt, 1978, p. 5

Introduction

We have recently dedicated ourselves to thinking about how history teaching and classes can be inserted in a quite delicate debate concerning a devaluation of disciplinary narratives and of scientific production in general. This process appears to be linked to an opposing effect, which is an excessive valorization of common public opinion, creating what we are calling a dispositif of banality². In the wake of this movement towards banality, we propose to consider how historic narratives³ and traditional narratives (MEINERZ; GASPAROTTO, 2018) can create expressive strategies to reveal historicity and problematize denialist discourses (as well as discourses of hate) that constitute the materiality of the banal and which have inhabited both society in general as well as classrooms.

This essay conducts an anthropophagic⁴ reading of two concepts: the banality of evil and thinking, using concepts from Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt (1999, 2009). The objective is to question this dispositif of banality that has been instituted, disseminating discourses and constituting subjectivities in Brazilian society and in history class. Our presumption is that this takes place through processes of banalization and of a regression of thinking, in such a way that banalization and thinking are considered to be foreign and opposed to each other, incapable of simultaneously constituting spaces for creation and liberty. We intend to dialog with some of the literature from the field of history teaching and with an experience produced by student teachers of history from the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), which in our understanding revolutionize how time and clichés have been addressed in classrooms, seeking forms of promoting the history class as a free moment for creation and dialog.

About the dispositif of banality, the banality of evil and thinking

It is always useful to consider Hannah Arendt (1999) and her important comprehension of how fascist societies and totalitarian governments are constituted. When she proposed to cover the trial of Adolf Eichmann, in Jerusalem, for The New Yorker magazine, she created the concept of the banality of evil to give meaning to a process in which it is difficult to find meaning: extermination, murder and extirpation of the life of others as banal, justifiable attitudes produced by a chain of command and respect for hierarchy.

2- The concept of dispositif of banality refers to the concept that is part of the literary production and thinking of Michel Foucault.

3- By historic narrative we refer specifically to historic knowledge created in the realm of academic research and promoted by scientific publications. The idea of narrative in history was problematized by various theoreticians, including Paul Ricoeur, in the trilogy *Temps et récit* [*Tempo e Narrativa* (2010)].

4- The idea of anthropophagic reading of concepts comes from Carla de Moura's use of the term anthropophagy in her master's dissertation, defended at the UFRGS in 2018, in the "Professional Master's in History Teaching", by revealing the use of concepts of European thinkers in a study that considered the potentiality of intersectional history teaching in a school in the periphery of the city of Porto Alegre.

Her reporting on the trial, from the perspective of a political thinker, was registered in the book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil*, published in 1963. “Banality of evil” is, therefore, a concept created by the author not precisely to explain or create a theory about the phenomenon, but to produce a lesson, based on the attitude, behavior and words used before the court, by the person who was responsible for the logistics of sending millions of people to concentration and extermination camps. In Arendt’s understanding, Eichmann’s attitude was different.

First of all, the indictment for murder was wrong: “With the killing of Jews I had nothing to do. I never killed a Jew, or a non-Jew, for that matter – I never killed any human being, I never gave an order to kill either a Jew or a non-Jew; I just did not do it,” or, as he was later to qualify this statement: “It so happened...that I had not once to do it” – for he left no doubt that he would have killed his own father if he had received an order to that effect. (ARENDR, 2006, p. 49).

For Arendt, Eichmann appeared to not have any motivation for his principal mission, nor does he perceive what he did as malign. This is the most terrifying element of the banality of evil: the lack of motivation and the lack of a sense of responsibility that leads to an ethic and a policy that requires thinking. Evil, from Arendt’s perspective, is not an element from the religious or mythological fields, but of ethics and politics, or of activities of thinking, wanting and judging, in such a way that one can think of a policy of evil that leads to a rationality (BAUMAN, 1998) that produces death and decimation. The structure of the Nazi death machine inserted Eichmann at some point of the mechanism, and from that point he promoted a logistics that sent millions of people to their death. Yet, after all, if there is guilt to be expiated, it is in the structure, the hierarchy, the need for the inexistence of the other, for the erasure of the other, of its way of life – which in this case is considered to be noxious by the ideology of the party and the state. The absolutely incomprehensible element is precisely this moral irresponsibility, which turns a common person – who loves his children, practices charity, goes to church on Sundays – into a murderer, incapable of blaming himself and of considering the effects of his actions. The banality of evil produces this type of subjectivity, which is distanced from the very reality which created it and of which it is the material point of reproduction of evil. This distancing, a certain disinterest, is what constitutes how evil can be part of daily life, of common life, of common people. It is intriguing to suppose that people are capable of realizing any act that causes destruction and death without this being supported by a malign motivation, but as an inexorable part of their daily life.

The banal is, paradoxically, scary. Its most significant mark is the denial of thinking. It does not even suppose that it is possible to think. To the contrary, it disdains thinking, research, sciences and even reasons or arguments. Anything that implies conceptual activity, in the context of common sense, becomes an attack on the opinion which, within the dispositif, acquires the character of absolute knowledge. Thus, since evil can be made banal to the point that a common person could establish a conviviality with concentration and mass extermination camps, any field of life can equally be tormented by banality.

Surely, what is taking shape in the world and in Brazilian society is the composition of a dispositif of power that imposes a new status to common opinion, leading to the extreme the banalization of affirmations and conceptions distanced from any form of scientific research, analytical method or even the use of evidence and of an empiric foundation. The banal becomes “the measure of all things” and is through it that common sense is produced. It is a dispositif that produces knowledge that becomes crystalized and that establishes a living and pulsating paradox to which we are subjected: opinion becomes converted into a right in relation to any other forms of knowledge or learning under the argument of freedom of expression. At the same time, in a magical step, this same opinion that is inserted in the open and plural field of freedom of expression becomes transformed into truth, consensus, common sense, and is seen as obvious and is therefore irreparable and free from opposition or criticism.

This is what can be seen and said based on a dispositif of banality. Through a series of material points, ways of speaking and seeing constitute this dispositif, constructing a diagram that produces lines, creating behaviors, modes of being, enunciations, imaginaries and a significant quantity of subjectivities that pronounce and enunciate an articulated set of cliches about a wide variety of themes of human life. A dispositif, in Foucault’s reading (1988), is a network that includes discursive and non-discursive elements, enunciations, institutions, images, moral regulations scientific or political proposals, or laws. A dispositif therefore encompasses a limit of seeing and speaking. Agamben (2005), in a lecture that analyzes the concept of dispositif in Foucault, affirmed that “dispositifs are precisely what in Foucaultian strategy occupies the place of Universals; they are not simply this or that security measure, this or that technology of power, and not even a majority obtained by abstraction: but rather, as he said in an interview of 1977, ‘the network (le réseau) that is established among these elements’”. The idea of network implies supposing that a dispositif includes a group of models, modes of doing or being, producing standards and norms that regulate the functioning of a society.

In the case in question, the dispositif of banality constitutes a well-known movement, which silences language and any creative process in name of the arrogance of cliches. Provided by the dispositif of banality, cliches become jabber that paradoxically silences and erases the complexity of things in exchange for a banal opinion – this includes a quite significant series of social and imaginary practices that transit through physical and symbolic violence to limitations on (censorship) of conceptual creation and thinking. History teaching has coexisted with this standard of normality of evil, because it is in this space, in which opinions appear to want to predominate over the knowledge and information, that we seek to produce a criticism and interpretation of time and temporalities. The devalorization of history classes and of the historic narrative itself is found residing within the upper echelons of government institutions, and in social movements that question knowledge and concepts produced, and with which historical analyses operate, and in the diffusion of opinions that come to be part of daily history classes.

The disdain for academic and scientific knowledge, based on a criticism of university life, through facile and banal discourse about a supposed communist conspiracy, appears to be a forceful idea that raises the influence of opinion in detriment to complexity and thinking. It is important to recall that at various historic moments when fascism or

dictatorships gained strength, the common enemy constructed was precisely a supposed communism. In many cases, it was an imaginary enemy, even composed without basis in empiric reality and on the political forces at play in each moment, or on the historic interpretations available.

History classrooms can be territories sensitive to the dispositif of banality, but at other times, can cause to appear abysses that allow the creation of lines of flight, which allow events to unfold and provoke the displacement and deviation of banality. Thus, classrooms that nourish and heed various forms of knowledge, from youth, different communities, peoples, and social movements, and place them in dialog with historic concepts, are one of the few places where complexity resists and can have effects on the life of youth and their ways of creating new worlds. This is the reason that thinking is the central concept of this article. By serving as spaces for thinking, history classes make themselves spaces for creation, and therefore of escape from the dispositif.

We believe that coexisting with what we are calling the dispositif of banality involves a certain type of learning that involves both a reaction to cliches (which inform about what is true and acceptable) in a time of opinion, as well as the element of creation that, being exterior to the dispositif, can expand students' expectations for the future, offering imagination and ethical and aesthetic values that allow living as a "work of art"⁵. To dig a moat around this dispositif is to also create various modes of living and experiencing. Thus, the violence of thinking and the provocation of happenings in classrooms are necessary.

Thinking and its paradoxes

For Hannah Arendt, the absence of thinking (a phenomenon that she identifies in Eichmann) is not synonymous with an absence of formal knowledge, and does not signify a forgetting of what was learned in life, of the rules of civility. In "The life of the mind", which was partially published for the first time in 1971, Arendt begins with her understanding about the banality of evil and the abuse of cliches that protect reality, and simultaneously impede creation of the new. In this sense, Arendt's hypothesis, in her final and unfinished work is:

Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually "condition" them against it? (ARENDR, 1978, p. 5).

A first reflection on thinking is related to its relative autonomy in relation to the sentient world. For Arendt, to think and know are distinct activities. There is no direct relation between obtaining and producing scientific knowledge and not doing evil, that is: people very well trained in their research fields can, paradoxically, be incapable of thinking, given that cognition promotes an encounter with truth, but only thinking seeks

5- The reference that we make to life as a "work of art" is from Agamben (2005).

meanings, which are always provisory and susceptible to new contradictions. Nevertheless, the autonomy of thinking in relation to the sentient world is only related due to two main aspects. The first is that human existence is mundane, that is, we are because we appear in the world for others and we constitute our identities as a function of others. The activity of thinking, in this first analysis, consists in a provisory distancing from the world of the senses. But the production of meanings requires their communication with others, which is done through metaphors, given that it is impossible to precisely express what we think and how we think.

In this sense, it is by means of thinking that we choose the ways that we want people to see us. This means, on the other hand, that thinking also has limits, or rather, what Arendt calls “semblance”: things appear to be true due to the limits of the place that the thinking being occupies (2008, p. 38). The manipulation of semblances can lead to illusions, that is, to having others believe to be true something that only appears to be. To reveal an illusion is valid, but this movement does not necessarily reveal the sole truth, the immutable appearance, the authentic. From this can be concluded that the activity of thinking also does not guarantee irrefutable securities that can guide will and action.

For Arendt, the thinking being is not the cause or the foundation of thoughts, because thought is pure activity and experience, a movement that is not based on relations of cause and consequence with the sentient world. It involves much more the “condition of a living being that, though itself part of the world of appearances, is in possession of a faculty, the ability to think, that permits the mind to withdraw from the world without ever being able to leave or transcend it” (ARENDR, 1978, p. 45) and it is this condition of sharing with common sense that prevents that thinking be identified as an activity that is exclusive to special individuals, who have greater abilities than others. The suspension of the sentient world, is therefore, only apparent, and is closer to a lapse or the invisible, as in the example of the roots of plants: we do not need to see them to know that they are there.

And it is in this tension between the visible and the invisible that Arendt characterizes thinking of evocations of that which is not visible, through concepts or imagination, rearranging and freely recreating what is not – momentarily – dominated by rules of the tangible, including memory and projections for the future. To synthesize the paradox: “all thought arises out of experience, but no experiences yields any meaning or even coherence without undergoing the operations of imagining and thinking.” (ARENDR, 1978, p. 87). In this cycle, thinking can even destroy itself to be able to continue thinking. There is no eternal and unquestionable point of arrival, and perhaps what derives from this is the ineffability of thinking, which as we mentioned previously, expresses itself, for better or worse, through metaphors. For Arendt, the most suitable metaphor for thinking is that of life, as a circular movement in a search for meaning - like Greek gods, who were pure energy and activity.

What motivates us to think – Arendt affirms based on Socrates – is surprise in relation to that which is close and known, something similar to bewilderment, which leads to the sensation of dizziness and awe. Denaturalized thinking, avoids torpor and invites the sharing of meanings.

It is in this invisible element's nature to undo, unfreeze, as it were, what language, the medium of thinking, has frozen into thought—words (concepts, sentences, definitions, doctrines) whose “weakness” and inflexibility Plato denounces so splendidly in the Seventh Letter. The consequence is that thinking inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements of good and evil, in short, on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics. These frozen thoughts, Socrates seems to say, come so handily that you can use them in your sleep; but if the wind of thinking, which I shall now stir in you, has shaken you from your sleep and made you fully awake and alive, then you will see that you have nothing in your grasp but perplexities and the best we can do with them is share them with each other. Hence, the paralysis induced by thinking is twofold: it is inherent in the stop and think, the interruption of all other activities (...) and it also may have a dazing after-effect, when you come out of it, feeling unsure of what seemed to you beyond doubt while you were unthinkingly engaged in whatever you were doing. (ARENDR, 1978, p. 175, emphasis in the original).

Therefore, to stop to think does not guarantee the immediate application of pre-established rules of conduct. To come even closer to her central problem, that is, the activity of thinking as an antidote to the banality of evil, Arendt explores the places and times of thinking. Primarily, she establishes (with Plato and Socrates) that the activity of thinking consists in a dialog of each person with him or herself, in which the internal coherence, the amity with the self, appears to be a clue to making ethical and moral decisions. In the lines of Kant and Espinosa, Arendt defends that the absence of thinking does not automatically make someone good or evil, nor more or less intelligent: this person only does not put herself to the test of an encounter with herself⁶. And if thinking is like the movement of life, refusing to think is like refusing to live. The moral effects of thinking are, therefore, only tangential and will only be activated in that which Arendt calls, supported by Jaspers, “boundary-situations”, that is, when we recognize contingency and we seek to broaden the limits of immediate time and space, which has a political consequence.

When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join in is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action. In such emergencies, it turns out that the purging component of thinking (...) is political by implication. For this destruction has a liberating effect on another faculty, the faculty of judgement, which one may call with some reason the most political of man's mental abilities. (...) The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this, at the rare moments when the stakes are on the table, may indeed prevent catastrophes, at least for the self. (ARENDR, 1978, p. 192-193).

Thinking has no time or place, it interrupts and is interrupted. Thinking is chaos moving between what no longer is and what has yet to be, that is, the now. The now is the starting perhaps the mobilizing point, but the sense of thinking is not determined by

6- This explanation by Hannah Arendt recalls the character of Scarlett O'Hara, who, when trapped by the contradictions of her choices, repels an encounter with herself to plunge into thought: “I can't [...]. I'll go crazy if I do. I'll think about it tomorrow.” (MITCHELL, s.d., p. 960).

the past, nor does it influence the future, because it is always in an “in-between” space, in which we can destroy certainties, reformulate questions and always create new answers. And, in times of emergency, the free wind of thinking can “prevent catastrophes”.

What we learn about banalization and about thinking are very significant forces for reflecting on what is happening in Brazil today – and in history teaching – because a fascist society is not built overnight. There are small movements and measures that prepare the ground for creating, if not a fascist and authoritarian state, a society that does not think, and makes everything banal, even evil, as we mentioned at the beginning. We do not ignore that all these movements have important connections, but we are interested here in reflecting on the responsibility of history teaching at a time that appears to us to be marked by “boundary-situations”, in which the winds that blow from paradise demand revolution, because the ruins of the catastrophes created by capitalist modernity do not stop to accumulate at our feet (BENJAMIN, 1987). Perhaps it is time to brush history teaching against the grain, and not only history.

In moments of emergency, temporal relations, the airing of time – which is also the airing of utopia (JACOBY, 2007) – can have a greater implication in practical life, in decision making. The idea that knowing about history helps to make ethical decisions, to not do evil to others, can also not be banalized, although it frequently is in the literature in the field in various places. Veronica Boix-Mansilla (2000), for example, guided her studies by the premise that youth who conduct comparative historic thinking, working with themes linked to human rights, can have more empathetic relations with others and perhaps struggle for more social justice in the world.

In a similar manner, Joan Pagès (2015) has defended throughout her work and in the efforts of the Research Group in Social Sciences Teaching (Gredics, in its Catalan initials) at the Universidade Autònoma de Barcelona, the importance of constructing lessons and curriculum that are based on practical questions from the present time, and which propitiate conceptual studies and return with proposals for direct interventions in daily life. The work of Pagès and her partners challenges productions in the didactics of European history that usually seek to maintain a distance from contemporary polemics, although the educational legislation on the old continent in the past 25 years has sought to involve the school with democracy.

In all cases the school is asked for a militant attitude towards the construction of a democratic civil awareness that allows advancing in constructing a more just and egalitarian society and world. It considers that democracy is not a final state, but a never-ending process that involves experience, knowledge and commitment. (PAGÈS, 2015, p. 19).

Education for participatory, critical and transformative citizenship, as inspired by Paulo Freire and John Dewey, receives a central focus from Pàges, whose work has been increasingly influential in Latin America, including Brazil (JARA; SANTISTEBAN, 2018). The theme of *Questões Socialmente Vivas* (QSV) [Socially Alive Questions] or *Problemas Socialmente Relevantes* (PSR) [Relevant Social Problems] exemplifies this dialog between history teaching and urgent current needs. The manual by Yannick Mével and Nicole Tutiaux-Guillon (2013) dedicates a chapter to the so-called socially alive questions,

demonstrating their insertion in the French *histoire-géographie* curriculum and polemics over politics of memory. The discussions raised by the authors demonstrate, however, that socially alive questions are nearly independent from official discourses, considering that they are born, to a large degree, from the participation of students themselves in the classroom. In Latin America, the dossier organized by Juliana Alves de Andrade, Carmem Zeli de Vargas Gil and Juliana Pirola Balestra presents the strength of this debate.

History in the school space has avoided delicate, controversial and sensitive themes because it involves the violation of rights and can reveal the disparities between what is assumed as public memory and what is discussed internally in spaces of sociability. In some cases, it is hesitant to take a position in political issues and to deal with unfinished processes that involve living people who are active in the political and social arena. However, the current context has challenged the school and curricular component of history to take a position towards social injustices and inequalities experienced by children, youth or their families. And in a certain way, history teaching has become a place of resistance by confronting the challenge of educating for the defense of human rights. The role of history teaching is to teach conviviality with diversity and to take a position in the world. (ANDRADE et al., 2018, p. 4-5).

In Brazil, since the 1980s it has been possible to identify (and certainly before then as well) the interlocution between the construction of democracy, history teaching and the constitution of teacher identities. One example is the article by Déa Ribeiro Fenelon (1982, p. 7), which began with questions such as: “of what reality are we speaking when we say that history is important because it teaches us to analyze reality so that we can transform it?”. There appears to be a certain tradition in the field of history education, in linking the reasons and the methodologies of the field to a notion – which is more or less diffuse – that it is necessary to intervene in the world, through historic knowledge, to be able to improve it.

Nevertheless, qualitative studies concerned with the thinking of history teachers demonstrate that this connection is not immediate, or utilitarian. It does not involve affiliation to political parties, or to specific social movements (although this may be present). Religion, family trajectory, theoretical references, or professional experiences, and examples set by teachers appear to be more relevant for history teachers. When asked to explain their utopias, they identified them as simultaneously political and educational. Their statements reveal two aspects that escape academic discourse: the first is a concrete reference to students, their worlds, yearnings, cultures, strengths and weaknesses; the second – which is derived from the first – is prudence, that is, a careful and respectful approach to the lives of students in relation to the emancipatory objectives of history teaching (PACIEVITCH, 2016). What is noted is that, as much as academic tradition in the field emphasizes a certain activism, teachers who participate in these studies filter these requirements before the eyes of their students and are wary, with reason, of the affirmation (perhaps banal?) that those who study history must automatically have critical thinking and a commitment to a more just future for all. This distrust, however, does not mean that they completely disdain the premise. We return to the paradox of thinking and ethical choices.

Lines of creation in a history class: resistance to dispositifs

We believe that history classes can conduct delicate operations that provoke thinking, violate the standards and models of the dispositif of banality, and in this way, offer doubt and curiosity as elements that are constitutive of a hypercritical spirit (VEIGANETO, 1995). In this sense, forgetting is an important ally, it causes the history class to be less reactive and more creative. To demonstrate a class that momentarily forgets the injunctions that impede thinking we highlight the experience presented below.

The teacher slowly closed the classroom door. There, a forgetting of the identities that the dispositif of banalization imprints on each one of us as history teachers, allowed a conceptual learning, moved by curiosity, imagination and exteriority. The idea was to provoke effects on the imaginaries that we produce about the past, about peoples and their notions of times. Without referring to the content of the class, Vinicius Bondarencu Beulk⁷ quickly presented two videoclips, one by the late artist Michael Jackson, and another by the current artist Katy Perry. Each referred to the same time period, people and territory: Ancient Egypt. The first was the song: "Remember the time", and the second the song "Dark Horse".

The students were excited by a history class that immediately began with two US and international pop icons. In the students' reading, it would be absolutely improbable that in 2019 a history class could be inhabited by the king of pop, Michael Jackson, and someone no less celebrated by millions of fans worldwide, Katy Perry. The curiosity may have been part of it, but the desire to see the videos and hear the songs – many sang along with Katy Perry – was much more instigating. The two videos appear to have created a distance between the environment and the current period loaded with political questions, scripts and struggles, which at that moment, remained outside the classroom, after all, in these times of "emergency", in which we live, we reaffirm that "the free wind of thinking can 'prevent catastrophes'". So much so that there was certainly no attempt made to record the class and send it to the Ministry of Education, to denounce a history teacher who was teaching about the cursed Cultural Marxism, an obsession of the dispositif of banality.

The objective of the teacher Vinicius was much higher than the students could suppose: he cunningly placed in that class uses of the past, imaginaries that we create about others, the concepts of representation, structural racism, the imagined Egypt and finally, a historic Egypt, the result of a historiographic and narrative production. All of this was done within a single 50-minute class, with the use of two videoclips. And it was in this way that thinking was introduced at the exact moment when the respite from daily life, the inactivity offered by the music was the same as that inserted in an "in between", in a temporal break, and that the element of the dream dominated the eternal vigilance of the present, that the videos and the provocative talk of the teacher produced the moat needed to escape the marks, the models, the stereotypes, and the clichés that the dispositif causes to circulate through the daily lives of those students. It was at the bottom of this moat (at the "in-between" of thinking, in the activity of the music)

7- Vinicius Bondarencu Beulk was a student in the history teacher certification program, in the semester 2019/02, at UFRGS, and a student teacher in the middle school of the Instituto de Educação, in Porto Alegre.

that the clip by Katy Perry filled in the imaginary of a white and not African Egypt, because the characters that represented the Egyptians were all white or blue. The attention was focused on the problem, inserted by the teacher's provocation, when at the end of the Michael Jackson video it was possible to find that all the characters were black. The plunge into the imaginary creation that the present conducts in the past led to a profound violence to what the students were accustomed to seeing about themselves and about Africans. This sparked an intense battle between the ways that we have created images about the past, the way that we crystalize representations about Africa, and above all, the way that racism structures our ways of being, looking and relating to each other. It would have been equally problematic to insert an image of Elizabeth Taylor in her role as Cleopatra, in a 1963 film directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, which influenced how Egyptians were imagined by the Western world for many years. This means that we construct, through music, and in this case film, television and even the school, an imaginary about Ancient Egypt. And the central element of this imaginary is a non-African Egypt, a non-black Egypt. At the final bell of the class, the teacher presented African authors and began a phase of accumulation of erudition about an African, black Egypt.

In a complex interplay between the events in the classroom and the urgencies that limit the freedom of thinking, insinuating to impede creation, was the creative and eventful element of the relations that are not at all banal between historic concepts, youth cultures, imaginaries and uses of the past that pushed themselves outside the dispositif, producing a place of thinking.

We know well that it is the responsibility of the teacher to respond to the demands of the present time and to react to the banality of evil. Perhaps what we have learned is that the traditional commitment of history teaching to the transformation of the world gains strength if we look to the lesson offered by Arendt, which rests on a paradox: thinking combats evil precisely through its capacity to implode the immediate and allow the imagination and creation of the new, without ever leaving aside communication with others, because it is from thinking that new meanings emerge. Perhaps the moment in which we live is a good time to live this paradox, allowing the responses to the dispositif be driven by the problematization of the memories that it produces and that some inactivity and lack of interest towards the present can situate our classes in an exteriority that makes them sheltered spaces of refuge from a certain tendency to merely react. This is the space that we need for thinking.

On one hand, the concern for the cruelties committed in history leads us to the criticism produced by White, when he reminds us that our “vainglorious ‘civilization’ owes its merits and benefits to the peculiar types of cruelty committed by humans against their own species” (2019, p. 12), as if the very idea of civilization – which for a long time the historic narrative led us to celebrate – was constructed on structures of evil and that these structures, which are at times architectural and at times symbolic, appear to be part of a daily life that ignores or banalizes them. And, in the arms of the ingenuity or banalization that dispense with thinking, we are sucked into a responsibility to forget so radical that it makes us familiar with evil, and with all “cruelty committed by humans against their own species” (WHITE, 2019, p. 12).

On the other hand, the history class, through another form of forgetting, sparked by the brilliant provocation, the inactivity of a song or the immodest beauty of creation and thinking, induces us to an unsuspected passivity, forged by fragments of time that, provocative and problematizing, is offered as a source and violence that lead to thinking. More than a reaction, this thinking is a mode of creating new worlds and unpredictable futures. As the class that used the videoclips of Michael Jackson and Katy Perry reveal, thinking is installed through this exteriority in relation to the immediate, which allows shifting from a present that requires constant attention. This is not to say that this inactivity and lack of attention are not weapons needed to problematize our world in a more sophisticated way. The class about Egypt has a surprising ability to problematize the images that we create about the past, about peoples, and about others. It inspires us to think about how we use the images and histories that we write about our human brothers and how these images and writings define, shape and above all limit and silence. Using the realm of memory and history to define the other (like a white and not African Egypt), impedes new generations from playing with the chaos of nature and with the movement of the real. Each “stopping point” created by the image of an Egyptian queen on the body of a white actress, each reconstruction, in the context of a videoclip, of an Egypt where white people reside, govern or relate, usurps the excess that is called Egypt, removes the qualities of diversity, plurality and multiplicity. The history class thus produces stopping points, elaborates explanations and creates narratives that establish limits by proposing concepts and setting temporal limits. But a history class does much more than this, it offers itself as space of this excess that is Ancient Egypt and that, as excess, allows the interplay of narrative creation based on an exterior place that provokes thinking and leads to doubt about the previously created stopping point (imaginary and written histories). And all of this implies a very sophisticated form of combating, without simply reacting to, the dispositif of banality, and the banality of evil.

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