

Veja: The Eye and the Mind behind the Brazilian Media Discourse

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Abstract: *Among the various structural elements that constitute media communication vehicles, visual representations have an undoubtful relevance. As proposed by Kress & van Leeuwen (1996), there is a relationship between language in use and the imagery used by the media, as both are organized in a system of refraction and reflection of meanings (Bakhtin, 2009). However, conveying certain meanings can be a preference of the editor of a magazine or any informational vehicle, and readers who are illiterates in visual discourse (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) shall comply with the point of view of the publication. Therefore, the position this kind of material holds is that of representing the “rhetoric of factuality”, conjoining authority and entertainment (Fairclough, 1995). In a political campaign, authority certainly is an important aspect to be observed, as well as the equality in the representation of different candidates by media vehicles and the (un)awareness readers might have of such processes. This paper analyzes two issues of *Veja* magazine devoted to the 2010 presidential elections in Brazil. One issue bears a cover story on Dilma Rousseff, and the other on José Serra – the two best positioned candidates in various voting intention polls. The coverage may seem balanced and impartial at first, as the space devoted to each candidate is well-balanced; but a closer reading of its visual discourse indicates political tendencies, as we argue by highlighting the key elements and procedures that contribute to establish such meanings.*

Keywords: *visual discourse, political discourse, media representations, authority, interdiscursivity.*

Introduction

The year of 2010 is of major importance in Brazil’s political history, as it will stage a presidential election that has been awaited with anxiety, by both the national and international communities, especially due to the growing importance of the country’s economy. José Serra and Dilma Rousseff, the two candidates who were best positioned in the various voting intention polls conducted throughout the year, come from the two parties that have competed against each other in the last 4 elections, PSDB and PT, as

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Brazilian many voters are aware. However, they know very little about these parties, and the candidates themselves were not the ones who told the citizens about their political history, their personal beliefs and projects. As a means of disseminating information, the media has been responsible for doing this job for the last few decades, producing content to be consumed by masses. In Brazil, one of the main media roles is played by *Veja* magazine, perhaps the most influential and prominent of all textual means of consuming information. The magazine has chosen both the candidates for a cover at the moment each of their campaigns was officially announced. We intend to demonstrate differences and similarities between the two covers, in terms of visual Discourse; however, we consider that a little background information is needed in order to understand their relationship, as well as a brief overview of language and media conceptions, to help us illustrate how the words and images chosen by *Veja* to represent the candidates can be analyzed.

After Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's two consecutive terms of office – which brought about, on the one hand, the highest popularity ratings a national leader has ever achieved in the country, and, on the other, a series of scandals involving the very core of the Brazilian government – the eighth and last year of Lula as President brings up the possibility of extending PT's (Workers' party) leadership for yet another four years. As Lula himself is unable to run for presidency a third time, he has handpicked his successor, Chief of Staff since 2005 and former Minister of Energy, Dilma Rousseff. However, she was not the president's first choice. Her suddenly fierce campaign was propelled by the fall of all of Lula's men of trust – including José Dirceu, who worked in the post that would later be assigned to Dilma. Dirceu and other top-members of PT were accused of involvement with the “Mensalão” case – a serious blow on the government's stability, as it was accused of being filled with corruption.

The opposition to PT's government is, in 2010, PSDB (“Brazilian Social Democracy Party”), the same party of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Lula's predecessor, who was also a president for eight years, for the first time in Brazil – his main opponent in both elections was, precisely, Lula. On Lula's first election, in 2002, his opponent was José Serra; on the second, in 2006, it was Geraldo Alckmin, also from PSDB. In 2010, José Serra is going to dispute the Presidency with Dilma Rousseff, and the former has occupied considerably significant governmental positions in the last few years: after

having lost the run for Presidency in 2002, Serra was elected São Paulo's mayor in 2004 and São Paulo State's governor in 2006. In his last year of term, he resigned in order to run for President.

But there is more to the atmosphere of this years' Brazilian political campaign as this brief description is capable of showing. In a general sense, a political campaign has as a main purpose that of convincing the voter that a specific candidate is more well-prepared than the other(s), showing his or her projects in a manner that transmits confidence, authority and knowledge, among other features. The election of a leader is, by definition, a means of organizing and systematizing the functioning of a society, creating a hierarchy of power. That means one candidate intends to overrule the other, attributing to him or herself a higher value and conveying that notion to the voters. For that to be possible, the candidate needs to address his voters in a very specific tone, with cleverness, always trying to preserve his image and, at the same time, to get closer to the people. That might seem like a difficult task at first, but politicians are well aware that the main form of establishing that relationship is through language.

Theoretical Basis

It is also through language that what happens in a political campaign is registered and disseminated among people, by the media. However, just as the candidate shapes his speech in order to gain sympathy, confidence and – consequently and most importantly – votes from the citizens, the editor of a magazine, such as *Veja* (or the responsible for the text / image editing) has on his or her hands the content of the candidates' speech, and will choose how to present it to the population of readers. Therefore, the editor is capable of manipulating information as to convey certain meanings – not necessarily in a negative sense, but in a literal one: on his hands (or “by the hands”, in the English translation of *mani*, from Latin) is the ability to give shape to the text, organizing the display of the content, adding new features to it, associating images to sentences, giving emphasis to certain words, referring clearly or subtly to ideas that belong to the social domain, so on and so forth. These many subtle and refined processes are extremely important to the functioning of news media, as Fairclough (1995:93) notes:

There is a range of devices within the rhetoric of factuality which are

standardly drawn upon in the production of, for instance, news stories, involving visual and aural semiotics as well as language, including the layout of the newsroom, the opening sequence and theme music of the news programme, the appearance of the news reader. One objective here has to be the creating of a sense of authority, though even in the news that may come into conflict with the pressure to entertain.

As the author remarks, there is a duality in media discourse that comes from the two different discursive patterns of authority and entertainment. As we are dealing with a matter of national/international dimensions – the choosing of leadership of one of the most important countries in the world, financial and culturally – it is fundamental that power be associated with it. It is a “big issue”, and it demands the use of “big words” – powerful words – in order to correspond to the social meaning a presidential dispute holds. However, the media cannot configure a clear force of the text, in the sense that Fairclough proposes, being “its actional component, a part of its interpersonal meaning” (Fairclough, 1992:82). That means to say that a text about the elections, the individual choice of a national leader, should not – at least supposedly – “tell you what to do”.

As our focus of analysis will be the production of imagery and its communicational effects, it is worth mentioning that the specific category of media that we are dealing with – magazines – is always interested in presenting powerful images. Moreover, these images are generally associated with a history of imagistic representations, and bring their meanings back at the same time they create new ones. As Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) indicate, visual representations have a way of functioning that relates deeply to that of language, which brings up a very close relation between these re-creational processes of visual discourse and those of linguistic use. As Bakhtin (2009) notes, there is always something to which words refer to, historically, in a process of “reflection”, whereas the reproduction of such words, in a context which is not the same as that of their original use, changes and directs its meaning a new path, in a process of “refraction”. As the authors remark, the first to see such a relationship between the instances of the verbal and the visual was Roland Barthes, who argued the latter was always under the influence of the first. They will advocate another reading to this phenomenon: one that sees visual language as an independent means of

representing the world.

Fairclough (1992) proposes a series of definitions of Discourse which can help explaining the relationship between word and image: firstly, it is “dialectical” – in simple terms, there is a speaker and a listener, but they do not, necessarily, occupy just one of these positions at a time. In Fairclough’s words: “On the one hand, discourse is shaped and constrained by social structure in the widest sense and at all levels (...) on the other hand, discourse is socially constitutive.” (Fairclough, 1992:64) As we are analyzing both verbal and visual discourses, and that in the context of politics, which also has a specific structuring and functioning which configures an order of discourse (cf. Foucault, 1981), we are looking at a more complex event. Fairclough then proposes the concept of “interdiscursivity” to explain such happenings: it is “the complex interdependent configuration of discursive formations”, which presupposes, in a closer analysis, a plurality of meanings for a single word, and its presence in an infinite variety of contexts.

Political discourse, however, holds properties that can illustrate how such a variety is not determined by chance, being organized by a well-determined hierarchy of power, not by a random setting of norms. It is also representative of a specific ideology, clearly identified by the party, as an ideological entity – to illustrate the point with elements of our analysis, Serra and Dilma are not candidates “on their own”: each of them brings the ideals of their parties, which are historically determined. According to Fairclough (1992:67):

Discourse as a political practice establishes, sustains and changes power relations, and the collective entities (classes, blocs, communities, groups) between which power relations obtain. Discourse as an ideological practice constitutes, naturalizes, sustains and changes significations of the world from diverse positions in power relations. As this wording implies, political and ideological practice are not independent of each other, for ideology is significations generated within power relations as a dimension of the exercise of power and struggle over power. Thus political practice is the superordinate category.

If we think of political discourse as a superordinate category, in the sense that it

represents the power of a leader and his speech – most of the times, not fully understood by common people – we will find similarities with the theories of visual discourse. According to Kress & van Leeuwen (1996), the comprehension of visual communication is not as studied by the general population as much as the comprehension of written communication. The authors state: “The skills of producing texts of this kind [visual texts], however important their role in contemporary society, is not taught in schools” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996:15). If there is no emphasis in developing this type of communication, no importance whatsoever is given to the interpretation of visual texts. “In terms of this new visual literacy, education produces illiterates” (ibid). For this reason, the media is able to use visual aids as manipulation tools in a way that is subtler to the eyes of the public than it would be in a written text.

Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) conclude that in countries which are not centered culturally and politically, the media has difficulty in reaching the population as a whole, due to its diversity and the need of addressing different audiences in different ways: “For a message to reach, in this context, the whole population, it had to be adaptable to a variety of cultural and ideological constructions” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996:27). This can be a very complex task when using written communication, for it tends to be more direct in meaning, and then again, we are enabled by school education, to interpret this type of text more easily. The authors note that these countries “no longer have a ‘common culture’, (...) instead, they have become complex, diverse and discursively divided, and therefore in need of new forms of communication” (ibid). Into the category of “new forms of communication” one can include visual texts, as they represent the establishment of a closer relationship between word and image. This can certainly be applied to the reality of the Brazilian media. A country of continental dimensions, and a culture that can be so diverse even inside a small town, provides the media with a challenging problem to solve, when trying to communicate a message to be understood by the masses in a homogenous way. An answer to this problem may be the wider use of visual communication, and whether it is a coincidence or not, magazines, newspapers, advertisements and other medias have never relied as much on images in order to convey their messages as in recent years.

The levels of traditional literacy configure another important aspect that has to be taken into consideration by the mass media. It is a cliché to say that Brazilian people

do not read and do not enjoy reading. Brazil still has a considerable parentage of illiterates, and part of the population that is able to read, does not have the custom of reading anything much longer than a headline. Having knowledge of such cultural context – which seems to apply to nationwide dimensions, despite the great regional differences – is, therefore, extremely relevant to the media, and has a great influence in the importance that visual means of communication have had in recent years.

Veja's covers

The analysis conducted here had as *corpus* two editions of *Veja* magazine featuring the candidates on the cover. The issue that brought Dilma's photograph had a story and an interview done by the journalists of *Veja*, in addition to an article written by José Serra; in the other edition, Serra's cover story and interview was followed by Dilma Rousseff's article. When observing how the magazine tried to develop the coverage of the two candidates, we should first observe that *Veja* was careful in the attempt of maintaining some kind of non-judgemental tone regarding the election. The two candidates were given an equally distributed amount of space in the magazine: in both issues, Dilma received a total of 12 pages and 9 pictures, while Serra had 14 pages and 7 pictures; each candidate had their photograph on the cover, a cover story and an article written especially to be published in *Veja*. In that sense, there is an apparent balance between the distribution of physical space that the two politicians received in the magazine. Such a concern, however, seemed to be forgotten, at least partially, on other aspects of the elections' coverage, as we shall observe.

When taking into consideration the importance of visual elements to convey meaning, it is impossible not to interpret the aesthetic choices made by *Veja* as an intrinsic part of the portrayal of the two candidates. We can go even further and say that it would be naïve not to see the covers as attempts to relate the effects of these aesthetic elements to the candidates.

Dilma's edition was published first, on the week of February 24th, 2010¹. Firstly, the entire layout of the cover seems to be more traditional, or antique: a black and white photo, a red frame, a quotation and three small paragraphs.

¹ The cover pages are reproduced at the end of the paper.

The choice of color is an important aspect of the composition of the page: black, white and red are colors that create a more austere feeling and reinforce the sensation of being the portrait of an old-fashioned, even reactionary, individual. The combination of colors and layout creates a cover page that reminds us of old magazines. Moving on to the photograph itself, it is not clear if it was posed or not, but even a brief comparison between the two covers would reveal that Serra's representation makes him look more prepared than Dilma's; she is not staring at the photographer, but is rather looking over her shoulder with apparently pursed lips. Her expression and head position give an impression of suspicion and uneasiness. There is actual intervention of the magazine on the picture – not only is it black and white, but also the pendant on the candidate's necklace was replaced by a red star, the symbol of her party, that is also present as the markers to the headlines.

José Serra's cover was published nearly a month later, on the week of April 21st, 2010. The contrast between the portrayal of the two candidates is immense, especially if we take into consideration that this issue was published afterwards, so the public did have the opportunity of seeing Serra's cover in opposition to Dilma's from the start. This edition has an obviously much more modern layout: it is simpler, the photo was clearly taken with the help of professional lighting, there is no framing, no topics, no symbols of his party – fewer elements in general – and even the *Veja* logo is hollow.

The entire cover, in its lack of elements, seems to emphasize the features of the photograph of the candidate: it was obviously posed, taken in a close focus and it shows an expression of informality and amiableness in Serra's face, looking straight at the photographer – a pose that can easily be encountered in models in cosmetic advertisements, or children in family photographs.

As it has already been said, these elements are fundamental in the representation that the magazine wants to establish of the two candidates, and more importantly, of the image *Veja* expects its readers to take with them to the booth on Election Day. Looking at both covers, the portrayal of each candidate seems to emphasize the image of the other – Dilma's expression appears even more distrustful in contrast to Serra's relaxed and staged photo. The fact that Dilma's picture might have been taken without her knowledge could also send a subliminal message to the public:

while the photographer may have caught PT's candidate off guard, Serra was prepared for the picture, which is stressed by the quotation "Eu me preparei a vida inteira para ser presidente".

A feature that is of extreme importance in Serra's cover is the absence of symbols of his party: special attention was given to create an image of PSDB's candidate so to appear that he is running for the Presidency as a free individual, as if there was no pressure or any strong connection between him and his own party, and the ideological beliefs that PSDB might entangle. The complete opposite is seen in Dilma's cover: the red color of her party frames the page, and the symbolic red stars of PT are a part of the layout of the paragraphs – one was even added to her chest. It becomes clear that there is the intention of creating a strong connection between the candidate and the ideology of her party.

After observing these aspects of the coverage that *Veja* is developing of the Brazilian election, it does not seem to be an exaggeration to assume that the magazine is trying to create a positive image of José Serra, while doing the opposite to Dilma Rousseff. By using the visual effects that have already been described, before even reading the magazine, just by looking at the cover, the public can be influenced into agreeing with the view *Veja* has of the two candidates. This is of extreme relevance to the objectives that the magazine might have of somehow influencing the results of the election, because, by having such a clear agenda expressed right on the cover, it might even reach and sway people who are not readers of the magazine and will not even see the inside pages, but are exposed to the content of the covers in newsstands and advertisements. The connection the magazine attempts to establish between itself and PSDB's candidate is expressed in many ways, but it can be visually apprehended in José Serra's cover, especially in the hollow *Veja* logo: the choice of a transparent logo, just with borders, results in its filling by the photograph of the candidate. In other words, *Veja* and Serra are visually represented as one.

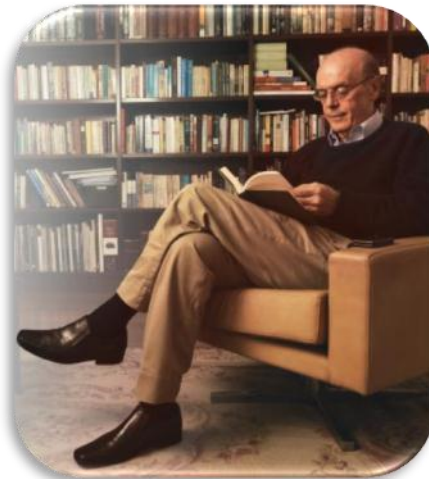
The inside pages



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3



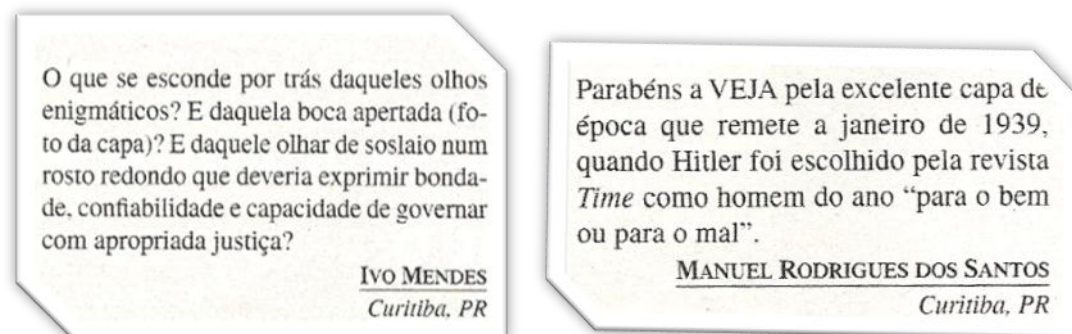
Picture 4

The pictures above were taken from the two editions of the magazine that we are analyzing; numbers 1 and 2 are from the issue that bears Dilma on the cover; 3 and 4, from the other issue. Picture 1 is from *Veja*'s story on Dilma, picture 2 from the article written by Serra. Picture number 3 is from the piece about Serra, and number 4 from the article written by Dilma. By looking at these pictures, we have clear examples of the image that *Veja* is trying to create of José Serra: in both photos he is in an office, evidently put together for a photo shoot, expressing the idea of someone who is an intellectual, serious and prepared. Dilma, on the other hand, is in an informal position in both pictures. In picture number 1, in worker man's clothes that greatly contrast to

Serra's suit, if we take a closer look, we are able to see that Dilma has lipstick on her teeth². In picture number 4 Dilma seems to be unaware that a photo is being taken, the result being that she appears in a strange posture, a not at all flattering photograph. The choice of the background, a strong red that clears into a lighter pink, from bottom to top, is a visual representation of what the captions on the bottom of picture number 1 say: "Radical no discurso, mas quase sempre pragmática na ação, a ministra da casa civil, Dilma Rousseff, joga para a platéia sem assustar o empresariado".

Responses, interpretations and references

As a way to discover if the public had indeed interpreted the covers and the articles as we had anticipated, we have checked the Reader's Letters (part of the magazine) on the weeks that followed the release of both issues and observed people's reactions to the candidates – and some very interesting comments were sent to the magazine. Two excerpts of letters about Dilma's cover story, published in *Veja* on the week of March 3rd, 2010, are reproduced below:



The first letter, by Ivo Mendes, shows the complete acceptance on the part of some readers to the image of Dilma Rousseff that was portrayed by the magazine cover. Not only that, but this particular reader seems to believe that the visual effect that the picture of the PT's candidate had was a direct indicator that this is what she is in real life: if she doesn't "express goodness, reliability and the capacity to govern with the appropriate justice" in the photo, she will not be able to perform these qualities when

² A small detail, yes, but elections have been lost on account of details such as this – it is a widely famous story that the reason for Richard Nixon losing the election to John Kennedy was the sweat from his upper lip on a TV debate – and this fact would be known by the journalists of *Veja*.

the time comes. The letter sent by Manuel Rodrigues dos Santos is interesting, firstly, because it reiterates what we have been discussing about the old-fashioned impression we get from the cover, but most importantly, it relates this to a cover from *Time* magazine, that featured Hitler.



The similarity between the two covers is perceptible through many elements. Firstly, the red frame, that until today is a part of the covers of *Time*. They are both in the same position, looking over the shoulder. The picture in *Time* is an oil painting; a contemporary equivalent is a black and white photograph. At last, Hitler bears the symbol of his party in his arm, and *Veja* placed Dilma's in her necklace. A very strong statement, but definitely truthful, the commentary of the reader indicates how deeply *Veja* wanted to create a negative visual image of Dilma, so that the public, consciously or not, would associate the PT's candidate with one of the most cruel and detested dictators in history. Even if the layout of the page just coincidentally resembles so much the cover of *Time*, the fact that the magazine chose to print this letter seems to be a recognition of guilt: if the association had not been made yet, now it is clear and the magazine supports it by publishing the comment.

The choice of publishing these statements is an important aspect in understanding how the magazine attempts to control the apprehension of the meaning of the two covers. In none of the issues that followed both covers was there a negative comment published on the reader's column; all comments agreed and praised the magazine's coverage.

The week after Serra's cover, there was a small note (reproduced on the left), below the

table of contents of the magazine that is an extreme example of *Veja's* attempt to control the reception of the cover story. The note claims that the photograph of José Serra, “sorri-dente e descontraída”, was so popular that people spontaneously sent pictures of themselves, online, posing as Serra did.

The overall tone of the piece is positive: people were imitating the picture because they enjoyed it, not because they were making fun of it. By looking at the pictures alongside with the text, one might assume that what is being told is true; however, by searching the Internet responses to the cover, what we find is something completely different.

Firstly, the accusation on many sites that the cover of *Veja* featuring Serra was

a copy of *Times* magazine cover with Barack Obama, when he was still a candidate and the magazine announced that he would probably win the election. The resemblance between the two is unbelievable, and is evident that *Veja* was trying to identify Serra to the extremely popular now president of the United States.





Secondly, on the part of the public, the general response to the cover was not positive – at least on social networks online – and, of course, led to jokes. As it often occurs online, the picture was changed and played with, as shown below.



The retouched photo creates the same effect as caricatures do, by exaggerating certain physical features of a person: that of humor, which is generated in the assimilation between the vampire Nosferatu and the presidential candidate. In addition to the visual representation, small changes were applied to the text: “o Brasil pós-Lula” becomes “anti-Lula”; “Eu me preparei a vida toda para ser presidente” becomes “Preparei-me a vida toda para sugar o sangue dos brasileiros”. This image does not resemble at all the ones published on *Veja* following the cover: the tone is definitely not positive, as the magazine implied. The “sorridente e descontraído” Serra is here replaced by a bloodsucking vampire, the complete opposite of what the magazine intended.

As argued in this brief analysis, *Veja* displays an open attempt to influence the results of an election. However, such a clear positioning has been displayed in previous moments of the magazine’s history. A remarkable example is the plebiscite held in 2005 that gave the population the choice of passing a law that could prohibit the sale of firearms and ammunition in the entire country.



Veja then published a cover story called “Seven reasons to vote NO”. The message could not be more explicit, as the magazine was directly telling its audience what to vote for. It is, therefore expected that the magazine will be clear in its opinion of who is the best candidate for this year presidential election, taken into consideration the importance of this particular year – the completion of 8 years under a left-wing government, when *Veja* aligns with the right – but also the knowledge of how the magazine was influential in the past.

However, this time the magazine chose a subtler, yet not less effective method. The use of visual communication conveys the meaning the magazine desires in a way that is not as direct: the cover of this year’s *Veja* did not read the words “Seven reason to vote for Serra”, but this meaning was there. This strategy can be even more persuasive than the first one. When a magazine explicitly tells you what to do, you are easily aware that your opinion is being influenced by the content, and the same may not happen with the use of visual communication. One might be deeply manipulated by the covers of these two magazines, and be completely unaware of it – the information is internalized, and readers can feel that they have gotten to these conclusions by themselves, when actually *Veja* was acting upon their perception all along, by its choosing of astutely placed visual elements.

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Attachments



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